

Market Study of South Africa and Online Classes

South Africa Statistics: The Internet, Education, and Online Classes

South Africa has a population of over 55 million people. Many different languages are spoken there, and a variety of religious beliefs are practiced. South Africa's economy is one of the most developed on the continent, and while its GDP of 294.8 billion USD was down from the all-time high of 416.4 billion USD in 2011, its economy grew 0.3 percent. Internet penetration in South Africa is increasing at a more rapid rate. Online classes provide an alternative to traditional classroom environments. Can a market for online classes thrive in South Africa?

While sources differ on the percentage, South Africa's population is becoming increasingly more connected to the Internet. A study by World Wide Worx cited that Internet penetration

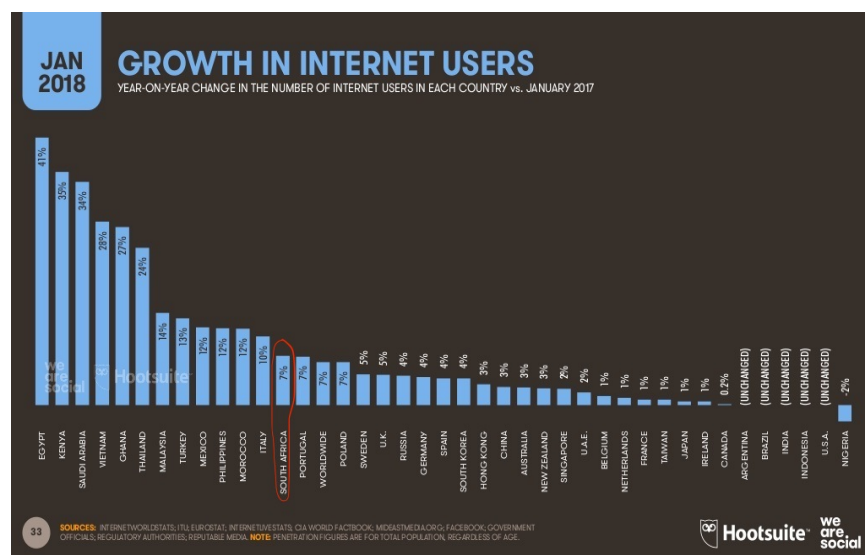


Figure 1: We Are Social's data on Growth in Internet Users by Country
(emphasis mine)

would reach 40 percent, or 22 million people, in 2017. We Are Social reported that South Africa's Internet penetration was at 54 percent. Despite the difference, it is clear that the number of Internet users in South Africa is rising. As seen in Figure 1, We Are Social's data puts South Africa's growth in Internet users at 7 percent.

In terms of the South African education system, apartheid had a significant impact on its quality, as the Bantu Education Act of 1953 denying black schools access to the same curriculum of white South Africans shows. Educational inequality, a product of that apartheid government that fell out of power in 1991, persists. Rural schools in South Africa, some lacking basic educational resources, are generally less effective than their urban counterparts. The variety of spoken languages in South Africa, and rising tuition fees, further complicate matters. Despite the government spending approximately 19 percent of its budget on education in 2014, a figure higher than the worldwide average, the quality of education in South Africa still suffers. As Figure 2 shows, however, more and more people are able to get a higher education. Online classes are one way to increase educational accessibility.

Headcount Enrolments in Public Higher Education by Race, 2008-2013							
	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	POPULATION 2013
African	515,058	547,686	595,963	640,442	662,123	689,503	42,284,132
Coloured	51,647	55,101	58,219	59,312	58,692	61,034	4,766,172
Indian	52,401	53,629	54,537	54,698	52,296	53,787	1,329,302
White	178,140	179,232	178,346	177,365	172,654	171,927	4,602,386
Total	799,490	837,779	892,943	938,200	953,373	983,698	52,981,991

Source: Council on Higher Education

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Education in South Africa, www.wes.org




Figure 2: World Education Services' South African Enrollment in Higher Education

A basic Internet search reveals numerous online classes to take in South Africa in a variety of different subjects already: theology, remote engineering, electrical engineering, business risk management, financial management, digital marketing, graphic design, and technical writing are some examples. These already-existing online courses are not segregated to any particular level of education, either. These weeks-long, months-long, and even years-long programs can be for undergraduates as well as those students getting their PhD. A market for online classes clearly exists.

South Africa and Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions: Individualism and Power Distance

Looking at South Africa and online classes through the lens of Hofstede's cultural dimensions model, one can begin to speculate how these online classes are received by South Africans generally, and how a new online class might be received. Some of Hofstede's dimensions are more relevant here than others, specifically the cultural dimensions of Power Distance and Individualism vs. Collectivism.

Hofstede's cultural dimension of Power Distance measures relative dependence relationships in countries. He defines it as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (Hofstede 61). On the Power Distance index, South Africa's score is 49, placing it on the lower end of the spectrum. Generally speaking, this would mean that power in South Africa would be diffused. Superiors can be questioned. Teachers in South Africa would also be allowed to admit that they do not have all the answers. This would apply to teachers both in the classroom and online. Conversations online can take much different shapes than conversations in-person, and are often more informal. There is more flexibility in dealing with superiors in lower Power Distance societies. Thus, generally speaking, there is more room for the South African student to engage with an educator in an online context, meaning that the online class structure can indeed succeed.

Hofstede's cultural dimension of Individualism vs. Collectivism measures how individualistic or collectivist a country is. Collectivist cultures generally prioritize the group over the individual, and individual cultures are the reverse. On Hofstede's Individualism Index, South Africa's score is 65, making it a more individualistic society. Generally, the country values autonomy and independence, personal goals over the group's, and has fewer obligations to others (Ferraro 101). The aim of education in an individualist society's context is to enable individuals

to succeed, and not to serve one's country. Students in individualist societies expect to be treated fairly regardless of status. According to Hofstede, teachers from a more individualist culture who move to more collectivist cultures notice that their new students do not speak up even when asked a question (Hofstede 117). Therefore, students from individualist cultures generally do not have problems those same problems speaking up. In an online class, much of the communication is done online, and students typically do not meet each other face to face. The collective group of the online class is, by definition, much less of a collective than a class being taught in a classroom is. Students in an online class are separated from their fellow classmates and their teacher by a barrier in the form of their screens. Individualist countries, therefore, would be generally more receptive to such an educational environment.

Before this study goes much further, it must address the limitations of using Hofstede's cultural model to examine South Africa and online classes. First of all, Hofstede's research looked at only a small subset of each country's population, focusing exclusively on people employed by IBM. Second, Hofstede's data was originally compiled in the 1960's and 1970's. Not only have the scores shifted since, but apartheid rule was still intact in South Africa at this time. Third, in South Africa's case, Hofstede's findings were concerned with only the white population at IBM.

While Hofstede's research looked at a tiny percentage of a country's population to get his scores, he got his data from the same group of people in every instance. Because of that, Hofstede felt confident in comparing their answers to assign values. His findings were also replicated by other future studies, and while there have been shifts in the data, Hofstede cites that they all shifted relatively the same rate. However, the focus on white South Africans in an apartheid governed South Africa limits how effectively one can apply Hofstede's cultural

dimensions to diverse South Africa. Figure 3 displays South Africa's position on a graph charting Hofstede's individualism and Power Distance scores. In a modern educational context, one can see how South Africa generally displays individualistic and lower Power Distance tendencies well-suited for the development of online classes.

An Online Class in South Africa

In 2013, Sharita Bharuthram and Carolynn Kies wrote an article on the challenges and their experiences introducing an online class to the University of the Western Cape. When writing about apartheid inequality and literacy levels of students

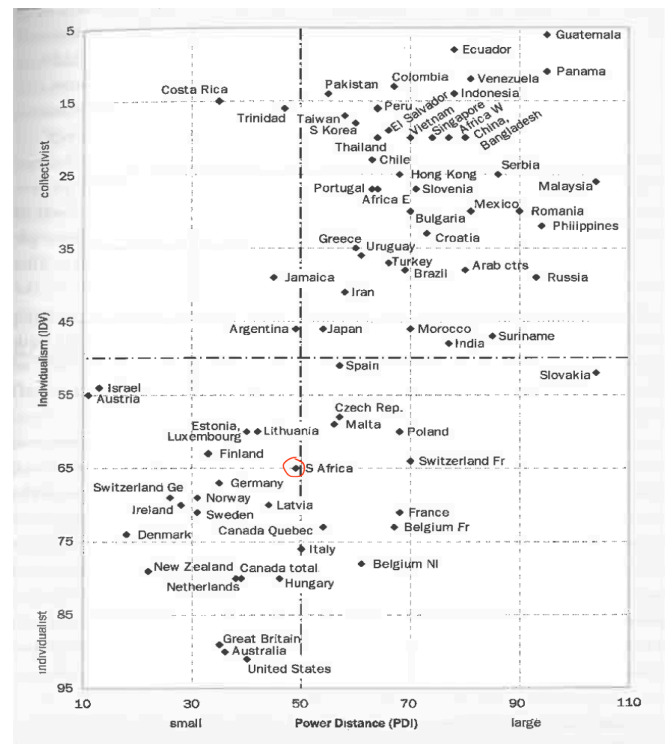


Figure 3: Hofstede's Measurements of Individualism and Power Distance (emphasis mine)

entering higher education, they cite that “unevenness between the advantaged and disadvantaged institutions still exists despite the continuous efforts of South Africa’s present democratic government” (Bharuthram and Kies 2013). Even if efforts have not been overwhelmingly successful at eliminating the apartheid-influenced disparity, these societal efforts show that South Africa is conscious of in-groups and out-groups. No matter who they are or where they come from, treating people equally, generally an individualist quality, is stressed. The teachers also asked the students to get help from a technical assistant if they were struggling, putting the onus on the individual students to help themselves.

One of the main challenges for students in the article was technological illiteracy. However, it was not always the teacher or the technological assistant who would assist the

struggling students: “many of the participants first sought assistance from their peers and only consulted the technicians/facilitators if their peers were unable to assist” (Bharuthram and Kies 2013). The blurring of student and teacher roles coincides with an environment with a lower Power Distance; roles could be exchanged more easily. Because interactions were more flexible, students felt more comfortable asking fellow students for help. Bharuthram and Kies’s online classroom highlighted both individualism and a lower Power Distance. Solutions to the online class’s challenges reveal a South African context that reflects Hofstede’s two dimensions of culture.

Moving Forward: The Market of Online Classes

Internet penetration in South Africa will continue to rise in the years to come. According to World Wide Worx, nearly a third of South Africans online use only mobile. We Are Social also charts the rise of social media users in South Africa. As technology and communication evolve, educational institutions must evolve as well. Bharuthram and Kies’s online class in South Africa was not uniformly effective, depending on the student’s technological and linguistic literacy level, but it “was beneficial as it forced all students to participate in the discussions and also led to students interacting and sharing information with each other” (Bharuthram and Kies 2013). The cultural environment supports online classes. The students are able to support each other’s individual successes and teach their peers, and have an online discourse that is, in some ways, more effective than a physical classroom. As long as their limitations are kept in mind, more online classes are needed to support this ever-growing technological landscape.

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