

HOME TRUTH: Post-school institutions need to expand Internet access for students

Regular and easy access to the Internet is an increasingly important tool to assist students to seek information and learn to write and do research. *Lizzy Maboja* and *Andrew Paterson* analysed findings from the 2011 Census and found disturbing evidence that the overwhelming majority of black African students are highly disadvantaged in this regard.

Importance of Internet access

Without access to the Internet students will have fewer knowledge resources at their disposal, be less experienced in how to deal with an oversupply of information, and possibly fall behind with their course requirements. They will also be underprepared for making the move from the education system to the workplace. In the current economic climate, computer-based skills (beyond keyboard literacy) are vital for graduate employability in the labour market. With this in mind, we addressed the following questions: How do post-school students from black African households access the Internet, Through what medium; and How are these patterns of access conducive to learning?

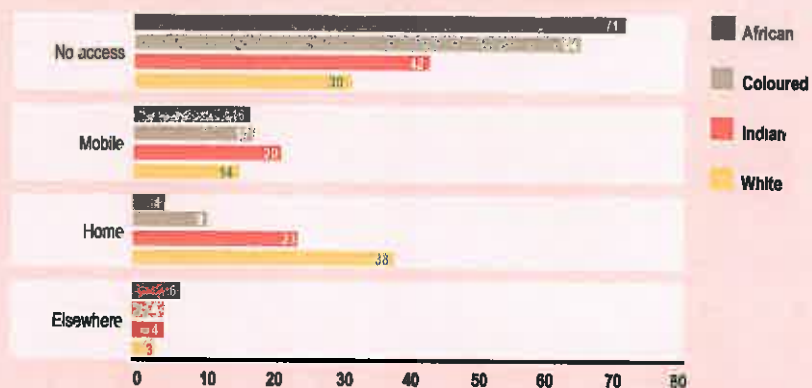
We assume that access to the Internet at household level includes access for all members of the household, including the post-school students on whom we are focusing

Finding answers

According to the 2011 Census, African students are highly disadvantaged in terms of Internet access, with 70.6% of African headed households having no access at all. Only 3.9% of African headed households have Internet service on a home computer

In a relatively high percentage of African homes (16.4%) Internet access is via a mobile phone. Mobile phones are convenient, portable, and provide instant access to the Internet, and are especially useful in meeting personal information needs. This technology can, for example, be used by post-school students for communicating with their faculty and, importantly, for job searches

Figure 1: Household access to the internet by population group of head of household'



The mobile phone screen, however, is restrictive when compared to the screen of a desktop computer or laptop, thus limiting its utility for extended periods of online browsing, search, reading text, interactive learning and research purposes. Mobile phones are thus not the most practical mode of Internet access for educational purposes

It may be argued that the tendency to resort to mobile phones, despite their limitations, is not reflective of free choice as it can be partly ascribed to poor servicing of African residential communities by land-line service providers

African-headed households make proportionally the greatest use of a mix of external Internet facilities, including Internet cafes, public libraries, kiosks, post/telecommunications service providers (e.g. Postnet) and educational institutions. Access from these facilities involves costs including travel, time, and Internet service charges. Moreover they are available only at specified times and even then may not have free workstations.

Responsibility for providing post-school Internet access

Ideally, post-school students should have good quality, convenient, and affordable access to the Internet for learning purposes. Therefore, sufficient Internet access to support students in extracting full value from their post-school course of study would be either at home, or at their educational institution. But the data presents a dismal picture: fewer than four in every 100 African-headed households have a computer with Internet access.

Post-school institutions therefore have an important responsibility to provide sufficient access to computers linked to the Internet, for all students irrespective of their place of residence.

Note 1: Totals do not add up to 100 because head of household's access to internet at her/his workplace is not considered

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