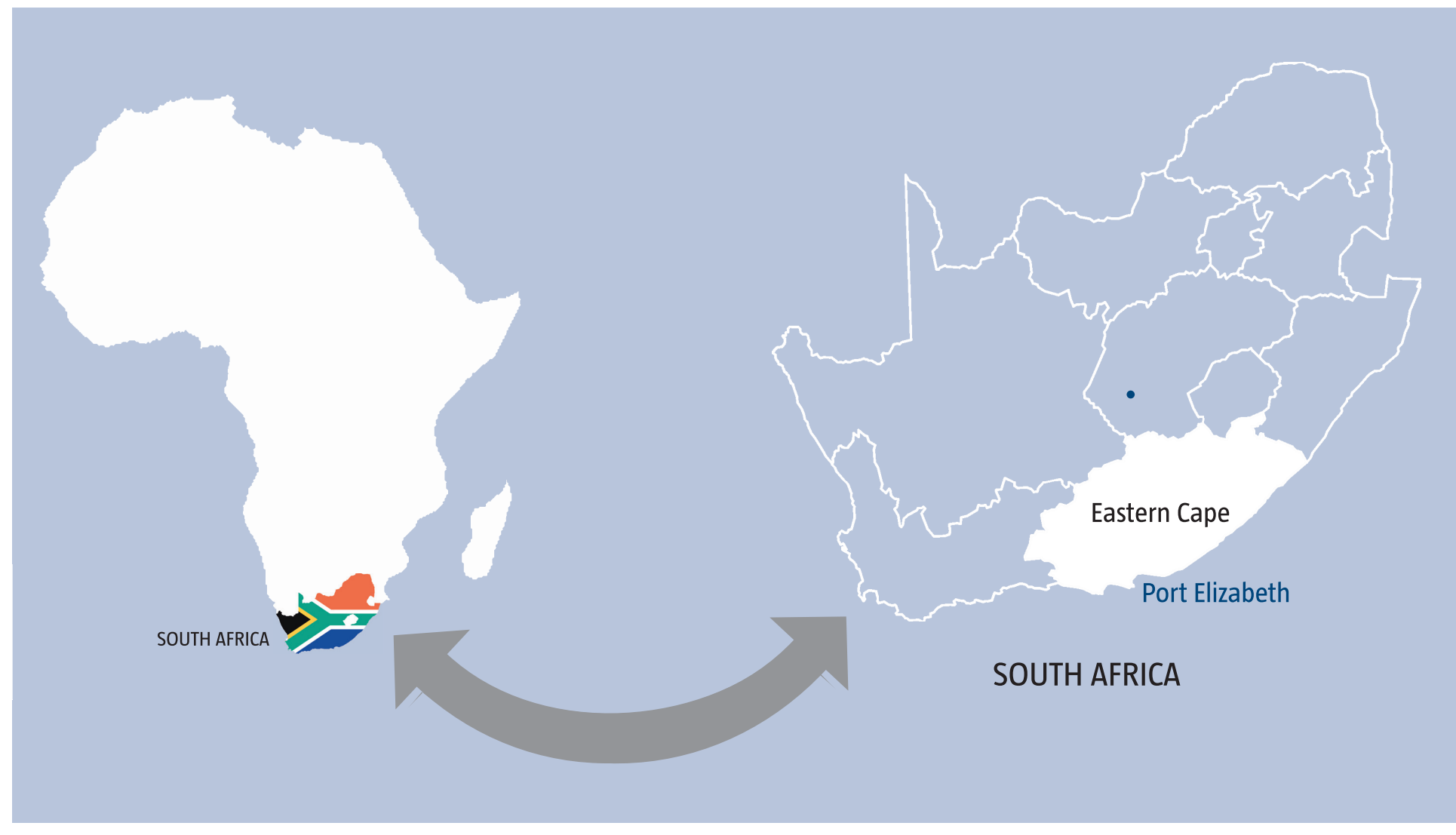


Piloting Electronic Peer-Assisted Learning With Multicultural University Students

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SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

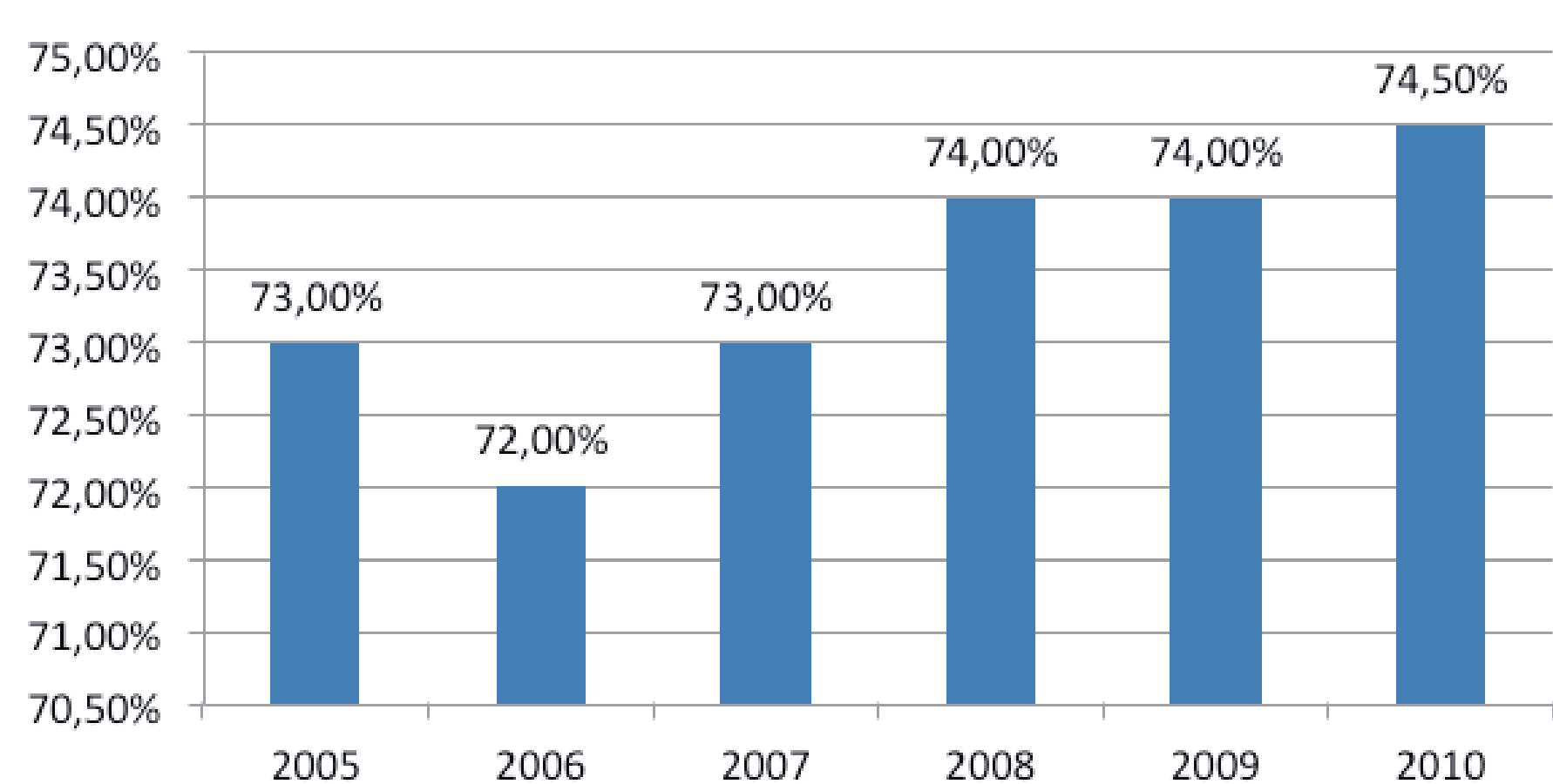
- ▶ The DoHET reported in 2010 that the average success rate across universities and universities of technology in South Africa was 74%, which is well short of the 80% benchmark that has been set
- ▶ The Department of Higher Education and Training has tasked higher education institutions to put improvement strategies in place in this regard.

NMMU LANDSCAPE

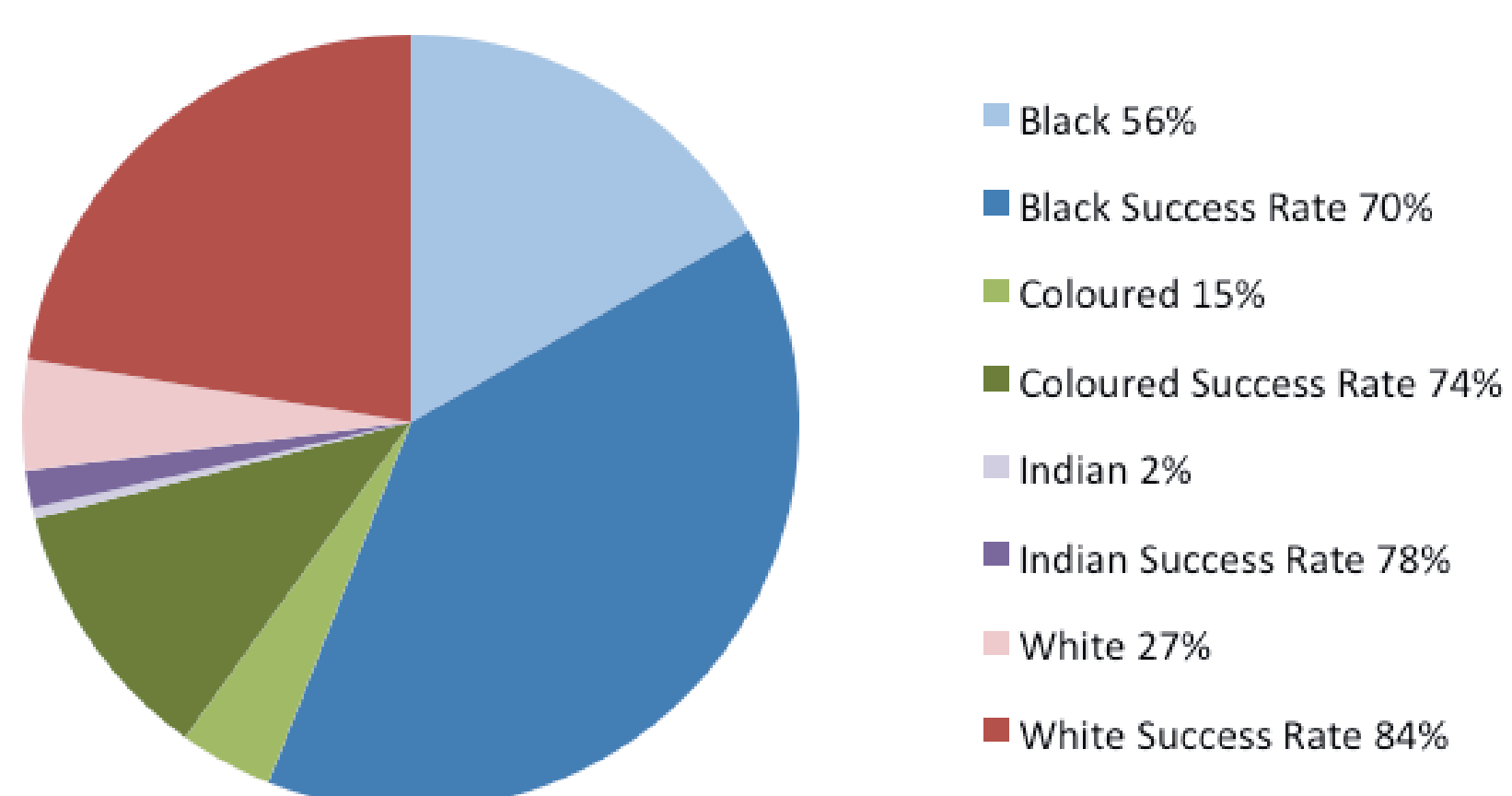
SUCCESS RATES

- ▶ NMMU enrolls about 25 500 students annually, of whom 21 500 are undergraduate students.
- ▶ NMMU's success rates are 74% on average, which is below the national benchmark of 80%.
- ▶ Only about 50% of its students finally graduate, with only about 25% graduating in the minimum time period.
- ▶ Furthermore, success rates differ across cultural groups.
- ▶ NMMU has thus prioritised the development and implementation of strategies to enhance student success and graduation rates in general, and to more specifically address the differential success rates of black, coloured, Indian and white students.

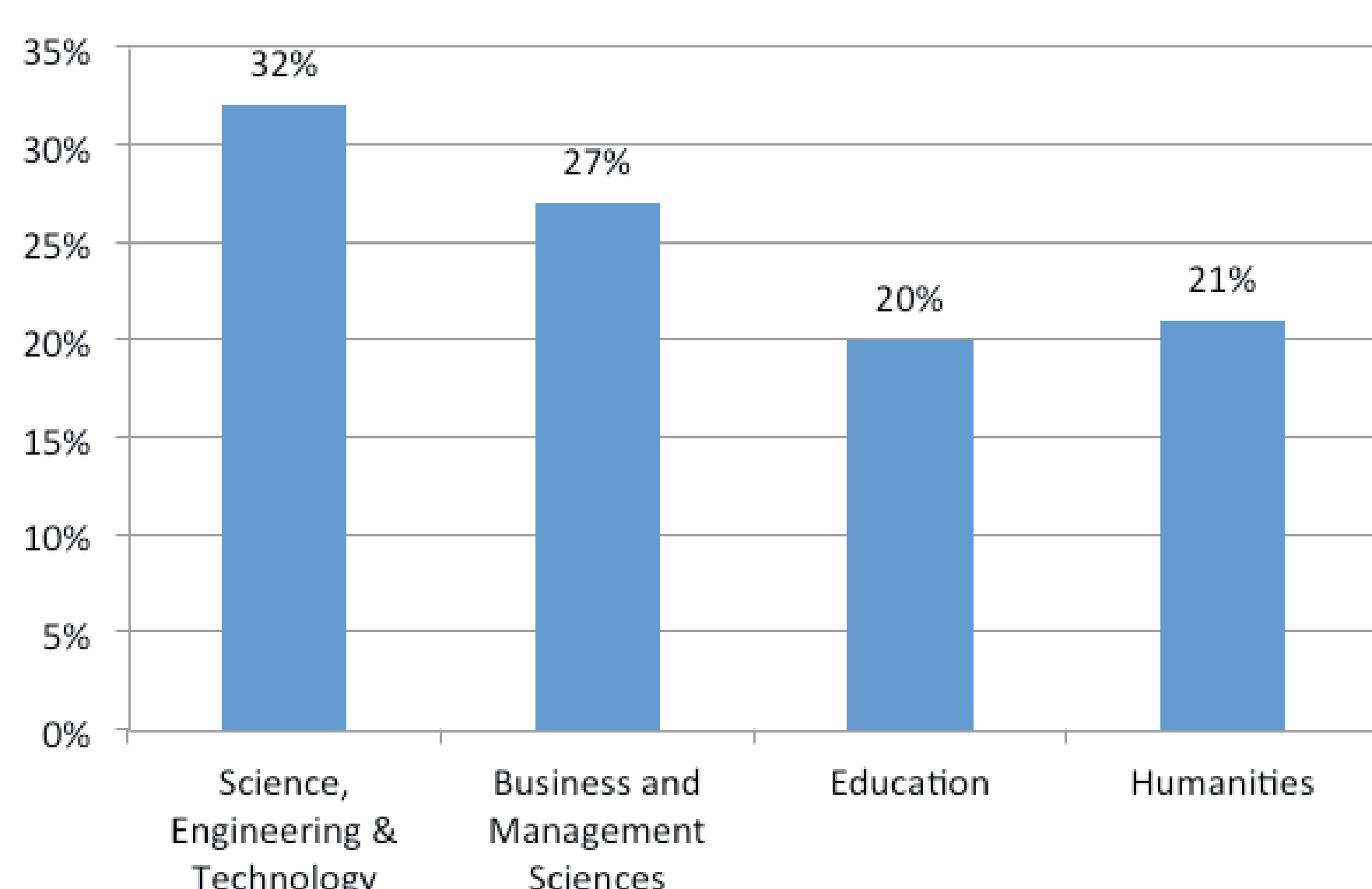
NMMU SUCCESS RATES



CULTURAL ENROLMENT AND SUCCESS RATES



NMMU FIELDS OF STUDY ENROLMENT



PEER COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

- ▶ One of the key strategies to address student development and retention at NMMU is peer-assisted learning. Various forms of peer-assisted learning are utilised at NMMU.
- ▶ Foreexample: Supplemental Instruction, Tutorials, Practicals and Mentoring Programmes.
- ▶ Peer-assisted learning (PAL) has many advantages such as:
 - Students are actively and collaboratively engaged in learning.
 - Students develop a sense of community in smaller group
 - Students learn to take increasing responsibility for their own learning and learn how to learn.
 - Peer-assisted Learning forms part of Social Interdependence Theory - Geertz, Vygotsky, Bakhtin, Doyle, and Erickson.

BLENDED LEARNING AND Y GENERATION NEEDS

- ▶ Most NMMU students are Y-generation learners.
- ▶ Consequently, they are digital natives who want information instantly and who use technology extensively to network socially and to communicate.
- ▶ To engage them actively and collaboratively in learning requires more than face-to-face lectures, tutorials, SI and mentoring sessions.
- ▶ Hence, NMMU has adopted a blended learning strategy, which combines face-to-face and technology-enabled learning opportunities.
- ▶ Lecturers, students and peer facilitators have spontaneously started communicating electronically (e.g., in our buddy programme for first year students) and there is already an online mentoring project in one module at NMMU.

E-PAL PROJECT

MODEL

- ▶ To expand opportunities for student support, e-PAL was implemented
- ▶ The online sessions make use of Moodle
- ▶ Senior students who have performed well in the modules are trained to assist the new students.
- ▶ Support is module specific and sessions are facilitated on module sites
- ▶ Real-time synchronous sessions are offered and supplemented with asynchronous support.
- ▶ Training and facilitator support takes place face to face and online on the facilitator site.

OPPORTUNITIES

- ▶ Moodle is free
- ▶ NMMU has a successful history of face-to-face student support (e.g. SI)
- ▶ Supplemental Instruction (SI) is offered in high risk modules and has proved to be highly successful in significantly raising and maintaining success rates in these modules in the 18 years of running SI.
- ▶ Strong support and buy-in from lecturers due to long-standing relationships
- ▶ Institutional readiness for blended learning due to growing need for support with resource constraints such as venues
- ▶ External grant funding



2010 PROJECT START-UP AND PILOT

2-MONTH PILOT PROJECT

- ▶ Implemented August to October 2010 in 8 modules
- ▶ 9 Facilitators
- ▶ In its 18th year of implementation SI draws approximately 35-50% of registered students and this has increased substantially over time.

PILOT EVALUATION AND LEARNINGS

- ▶ Training format and materials changes to materials needed
- ▶ Student interaction on sites must be increased
- ▶ Variety of activities needed
- ▶ Lecturer involvement essential
- ▶ More extensive marketing
- ▶ Support capacity and expertise
- ▶ Research needs to be expanded
- ▶ Implementing e-Pal is a process that takes time
- ▶ An online questionnaire conducted in September 2010 indicated that 85% of participants enjoyed the ePAL environment and found it interesting, whilst 100% of the participants found the platform very easy to use

2011 PROJECT – FEBRUARY TILL MAY

PROJECT

- ▶ Improvements to training format, materials, marketing and site activities
- ▶ Laptops acquired for training and session facilitation
- ▶ Increased to 14 modules
- ▶ 894 students enrolled
- ▶ Successfully expanded to distance campus in George

2011 EVALUATION AND LEARNINGS

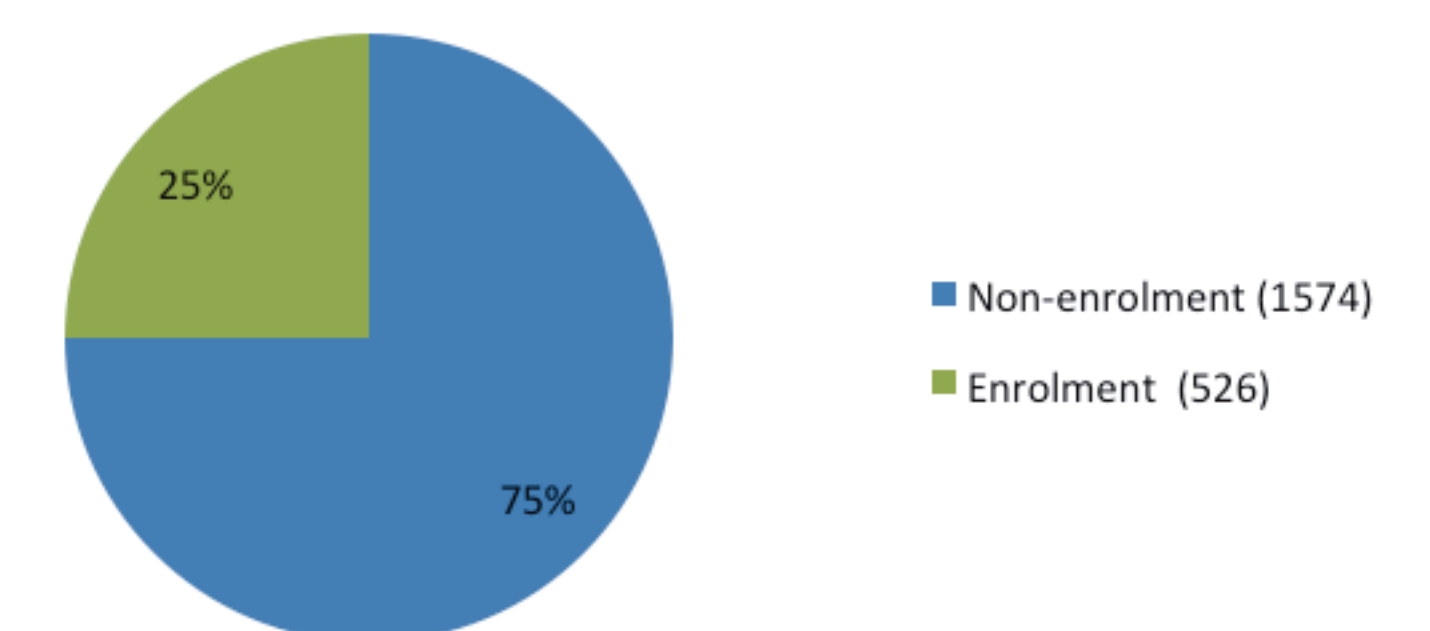
- ▶ Stricter facilitator selection criteria
- ▶ Find alternative marketing avenues to e-mail and class announcements
- ▶ Students require more training in utilising the support
- ▶ Lecturer training in Moodle essential
- ▶ Facilitator support is intensive and time-consuming, but essential
- ▶ Survey conducted on George Campus indicate that 66% of students find e-PAL beneficial
- ▶ 68% of students enjoyed the way it was offered.
- ▶ 56 % of students prefer e-PAL and face-to-face support in the module, whereas only 22% preferred only e-PAL and 19% only face-to-face.

2011 PROJECT – JULY TILL OCTOBER

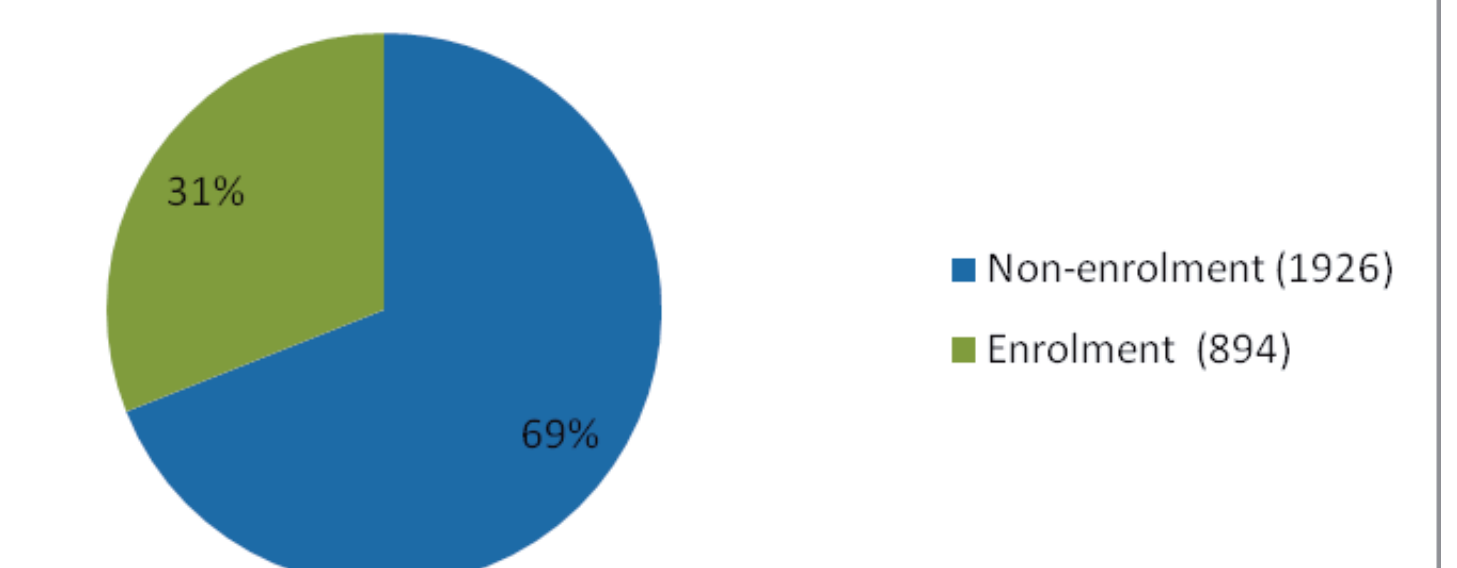
PROJECT

- ▶ Marketing will be improved by the use of video clips
- ▶ E-Pal website with more detailed explanations
- ▶ Students training and support improved by use of video tutorials
- ▶ Introduced in 23 modules
- ▶ Increased support capacity for facilitators (contract staff member)
- ▶ Appointment of project researcher

2010 e-PAL ENROLMENT (n=2100)

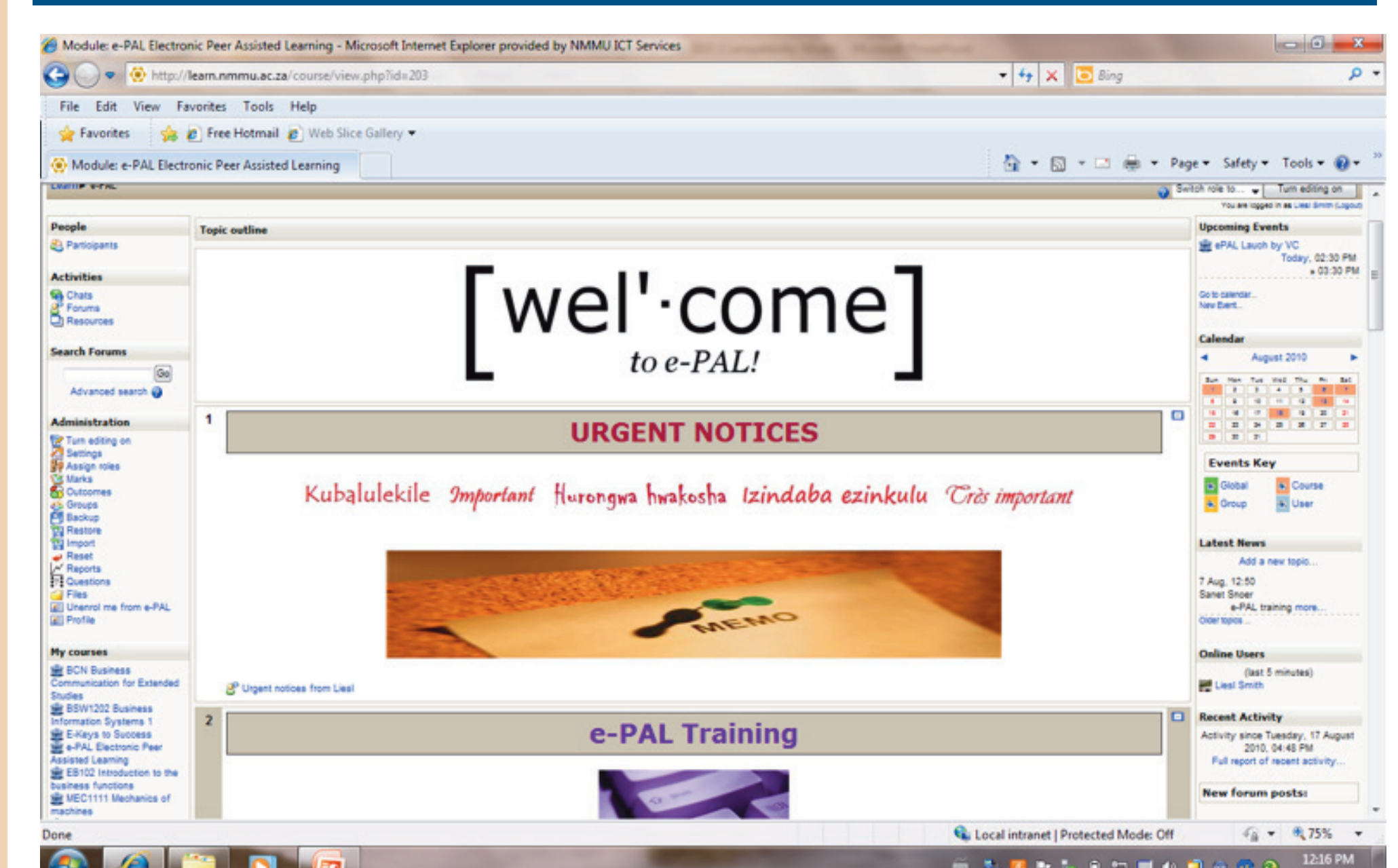


2011 FEB-MAY e-PAL ENROLMENT (n=2820)



CONCLUDING REMARKS

- ▶ As it is a new project, process that takes time
- ▶ Students are not making as much use of support as envisioned
- ▶ Assumption that all digital natives enjoy technology, have access to it and know how to use it
- ▶ Not true in 3rd world country like SA where technology is expensive (Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs)
- ▶ Students from ubuntu background prefer blended approach of face-to-face and technology
- ▶ Majority of students only have access to technology at university
- ▶ With proper support, marketing, lecturer involvement, resources and research project has potential.
- ▶ Policy implication for hybrid/blended learning models



Copy of poster and references are available on the NMMU E-PAL Website