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# **Levels of dual-mode status in the same institution: Implications for access and the development and use of study materials**

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## **Introduction**

This article uses the University of Namibia (UNAM) as an example to show that different programmes represent different models or levels of the dual-mode status of an institution. Most dual-mode programmes, such as the BEd, have students on and off campus, taking courses offered residentially and through the distance mode. Most single-mode (single distance mode or single residential mode) programmes in a dual-mode institution still represent levels of the dual-mode status. These levels depend on a combination of the types of student they serve and the type of collaboration between programmes in the delivery of the courses. The increasing use by full-time students of study materials developed primarily for distance mode means that different levels of the dual-mode status imply different levels of influence of the distance mode on the teaching on campus. Having established tools for analysing these various levels of dual-mode status, the article goes on to suggest two important, though not necessarily linked, outcomes of the introduction of distance education into a previously conventional university. The first is on access to university education generally and the second on the quality of teaching and learning provided by the university.

## **UNAM as a dual-mode institution**

The University of Namibia (UNAM) consists of faculties and centres. One of its centres, the Centre for External Studies (CES), is responsible for the provision of programmes housed in the faculties to the university's off-campus students, through the distance mode. In 2002/3 four such programmes were housed by the Faculty of Education, namely the Bachelor of Education (BEd), the Diploma in Education: African Languages (DEAL), the Diploma in Adult Education and Community Development (DipAdEd) and the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE). The CES administered two other programmes: the Bachelor of Nursing Science (BNSc), housed by the Faculty of

Medical and Health Sciences, and the Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA), housed by the Faculty of Economics and Management Science.

This collaboration between CES and the faculties that house the programmes makes UNAM a dual-mode university, but also raises questions about what is meant by 'dual-mode institution'. It can be argued that an institution such as UNAM is only a dual-mode university as far as those programmes that are offered to both residential and off-campus students are concerned. One of the purposes of this paper is to find a way of examining UNAM's dual-mode status, taking into account even those programmes that are not offered through the distance mode.

A programme consists of a number of courses, which are units of teaching and assessment. The best example to illustrate this hierarchy of terms at UNAM is the BEd. This is an undergraduate teacher education degree programme aimed at preparing teachers for senior secondary level. On graduating, the student teacher should be able to teach two subjects. A number of courses conform to the objectives of teacher education for each school subject. A student teacher who will graduate as a teacher of English and geography, for example, takes a number of English courses and a number of geography courses, in addition to so-called core courses with didactic and/or study/life skills components.

The BEd is also an example of a programme offered to both on-campus and off-campus students. The BNSc, on the other hand, is taken only by off-campus students, the advanced nurse population of Namibia that the nursing profession cannot afford to release for half a decade of full-time study. Most of the self-study materials are written by full-time academics in the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences (FMHS) almost as part of their faculty workload, as opposed to an additional part-time assignment. A number of courses taken by the students are written by academics outside the FMHS. Nursing education includes components of psychology and sociology, for example, which are the input of two departments in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (FHSS). So, while the programme belongs to a certain faculty, the teaching of the courses that make up the programme is not the sole responsibility of that faculty. This is how, through inevitable collaboration, the student is ultimately the product of the whole university, which owns the qualification, and not only of the faculty that houses the programme.

The two programmes described in some detail so far imply two dual-mode models or levels. The BEd is a dual-mode programme taken by both on-campus

and off-campus students. The BNSc is a dual-mode programme taken exclusively by off-campus students, but developed with the same collaborative effort as the BEd by academics from various departments of different faculties. This means at least two other things. First, students of other programmes on campus also take some of the components of the courses taken by the BNSc students. Second, many of the university's full-time academics who write the courses take part in the support component that complements (or supplements) the self-study materials in the form of face-to-face tutorials, telephone tutorials and interactive video conferencing.

The Diploma in Education represents a different dual-mode model or level: African languages (DEAL). This programme, which is aimed at upgrading, training and giving a qualification to teachers of Namibian indigenous languages, started in the mid-1990s as part of a donor-funded project. The project, named NLCP (Namibian Languages Competency Project), was initiated by the then Ministry of Education and Culture. The idea at inception had been to train a little more than a hundred senior educators in multiplier posts, who would then become trainers of teachers in the various Namibian languages. This professional upgrading programme had to be sanctioned by an academic qualification. For this reason it was felt that the university was the appropriate partner in the project, for the purpose of accreditation.

The DEAL programme has two major components: a language analysis component and a didactic component. The expertise for the language analysis component in curriculum, syllabus, course design and tutoring is coordinated by the Department of African Languages, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (FHSS); and for the didactic component by the Faculty of Education. The curriculum was approved and the running of the programme monitored by a steering committee with members from the Ministry, the two faculties and the CES.

The end of the donor-funded phase of the project came at the time that the number of graduates reached that which the project had envisaged. By then, the programme had outgrown its initial purpose. DEAL, a two-year diploma, was a way to a teacher qualification that also gave serving teachers a salary notch above the one held at the time of enrolling on the programme. A programme/project evaluation decided that DEAL would continue as a normal university distance education programme.

## **Programmes affected by distance education**

Like the BNSc, DEAL has only off-campus students. But, unlike the BNSc, DEAL does not offer students any course that is offered to on-campus students.

Different programmes therefore represent different models or levels of the dual-mode status of an institution such as UNAM. These levels refer to the extent to which a programme has the dual-mode characteristics defined by both Moran and Nyirenda.<sup>1 2</sup> The first is whether the programme serves both on-campus and off-campus students. The second is whether the same academic staff who are involved in teaching on-campus students are involved in the production of the study materials for and the face-to-face teaching of off-campus students. In table 1, which plots the three programmes that have been analysed in some detail so far, the second characteristic is replaced by whether the courses that make up the programme are all taken residentially and through the distance mode.

**Table 1**

|            |                                  | Students       |                   |                 | Courses        |                   |                 |
|------------|----------------------------------|----------------|-------------------|-----------------|----------------|-------------------|-----------------|
|            |                                  | On campus only | On and off campus | Off campus only | On campus only | On and off campus | Off campus only |
| Programmes | BEd,<br>PGDE,<br>DipAdEd,<br>BBA |                | ++                |                 |                | ++                |                 |
|            | BNSc                             |                |                   | ++              |                | +                 | +               |
|            | DEAL                             |                |                   | ++              |                |                   | ++              |

Table 1 illustrates the six programmes administered by CES, because the PGDE, the DipAdEd and the BBA share the characteristics of the BEd. The double plus sign (++) representing exclusivity, and the single plus sign (+), representing non-exclusivity, reveal the following features, most of which have already been referred to:

### ***The BEd, PGDE, DipAdEd and BBA***

These programmes have both on-campus and off-campus students, hence a double plus sign (++) under students on and off campus. In each programme both groups of students take the same courses, hence a double plus sign (++)

under courses on and off campus. The study materials used by off-campus students are written or reviewed by the same academic staff who teach the on-campus students. The support component for off-campus students is carried out by the same staff who write the materials or by part-timers approved by the faculties.

### ***The BNSc***

As mentioned above, the BNSc only has off-campus students, hence the double plus sign (++) under students off campus only. Most courses are therefore written only for the distance mode, but some courses, for example the sociology, the psychology and management components, are written by academics from the FHSS and the Faculty of Economics and Management Science (FEMS) who teach similar courses to students of different programmes on campus, hence a single plus sign (+) under courses offered both on and off campus, and another single plus sign (+) under courses offered only off campus. The courses taught both on and off campus are equivalent in the sense that the subject matter is essentially the same and they are pitched at the same level (they are degree courses), although the materials are made specific by targeting in-service nurses.

### ***DEAL***

This programme only has off-campus students, hence a double plus sign (++) under off campus students only. Although staff who teach internally write the courses, they are pitched at a different level from any similar subject matter components in courses taught internally. These components are found in degree courses on the internal BEd for student teachers whose teaching subject is an African language. The courses on the DEAL programme are diploma courses and a double plus sign (++) is used under courses offered off campus only to show that there are no equivalent courses on campus.

The six programmes administered by CES therefore represent three levels of UNAM's dual-mode status. The BEd, DipAdEd, PGDE and BBA are the most dual-mode programmes, while DEAL is the least dual-mode programme. DEAL is the most single-mode (distance mode) programme, while the BNSc takes a position between the two levels.

Now we can extend the table so that it accommodates two fully residential programmes, namely the BA and BSc. The BA is a programme in the FHSS and the BSc in the Faculty of Science.

**Table 2**

|                            | Students       |                   |                 | Courses        |                   |                 |
|----------------------------|----------------|-------------------|-----------------|----------------|-------------------|-----------------|
|                            | On campus only | On and off campus | Off campus only | On campus only | On and off campus | Off campus only |
| BEd, PGDE,<br>DipAdEd, BBA |                | ++                |                 |                | ++                |                 |
| BNSc                       |                |                   | ++              |                | +                 | +               |
| BA, BSc                    | ++             |                   |                 | +              | +                 |                 |
| DEAL                       |                |                   | ++              |                |                   | ++              |

### **The BA and BSc**

The BA and BSc have on-campus students (++) only and therefore CES is not involved in the delivery of these. As far as these programmes are concerned, UNAM is just a conventional residential university. However, some of the courses taken by BA and BSc students are also taken by on-campus and off-campus BEd students, hence the single plus sign under courses offered on and off campus (+) beside another single plus sign (+) under courses offered on campus only. For example, BA and BEd students take the courses contributing to the objectives of teacher education for the school subjects of English, geography and history. Both BSc and BEd students take those for the school subjects of mathematics and science.

Through their courses, the BA and BSc can be accommodated in table 2, together with the programmes administered by CES, and feature as a distinct level of the dual-mode status of UNAM. These two programmes can be considered the most single mode (residential mode), but DEAL (a distance education programme) is more single-mode than they are. This is why in table 2 the BA and BSc are placed between the BNSc and DEAL. DEAL is still placed in the bottom row.

Having suggested a means of measuring these different levels of dual-mode status as they apply to different programmes offered by UNAM, what is their importance? Let us now examine how the dual-mode status of some of UNAM's programmes, and these different levels, affect two important

considerations in university education in a country such as Namibia: their impact on the expansion of access to university studies; and their impact on the quality of teaching and learning that takes place, for both external and internal students.

### **Levels of dual-mode status and increased access to university education**

In a country with the population of Namibia (under two million), access to university education can be increased by bringing elements of the distance mode into an existing conventional university, rather than setting up a single-mode distance education university, or by increasing the number of institutions. The programmes offered by UNAM through CES make it possible for adults in the workforce, especially teachers and nurses, to access university education. Therefore the number of programmes offered through the distance mode and the number of students in each programme embody increased access to university education. A working person who wishes to take a BA or BSc at UNAM, for example, must simply leave his or her job and study full time on campus.

A student enrolls on a single programme towards a qualification, but takes courses that belong to different programmes, as the models illustrated in table 1 and table 2 (above) suggest. It is therefore worth mentioning the capacity of individual courses to increase access to university education. According to Dhanarajan (1996), students from one institution and from one programme can 'undertake work from several institutions in different parts of the world and will, in time, bring these diverse learning experiences together to make up coherent credentials'. In other words, besides collaboration between faculties in the same institution, referred to earlier in this paper in relation to UNAM, there are cases of collaboration between institutions. Namibian students enrolled in South African institutions may be asked at some point to take a course or two at UNAM in order to complete their curriculum, for example where the provision of a local language subject is a requirement. And that involves different institutions. Coming back to courses in the same institution, a more sizeable number of cases involve students who have studied at UNAM on campus and have started working after completing their course work in all but one or two courses which they require before they can graduate. The distance mode then becomes the only helpful option, without which the job would have to wait. This is also an aspect of increase in university education, as it relates to completion rates.

## **Levels of dual-mode status, quality and the study materials**

According to Dhanarajan,<sup>3</sup> 'distance education ... has always attempted to draw a distinction between teaching (what is to be taught) and learning (ways in which it can be learned)'. This distinction can be useful when discussing parity in dual-mode systems, that is, the extent to which the courses offered to full-time students on campus and those offered to students studying through the distance mode are equivalent. This question again presupposes that both groups of students study towards the same qualifications and this implies that the programmes are equivalent. This is why discussing levels of dual-mode status necessarily calls for a discussion of programmes, and the quality of the teaching and learning to which they lead, because such a discussion would not make sense in an institution that offers some programmes exclusively to full-time students on campus and other programmes exclusively to off-campus students. Such an institution would still be a dual-mode institution, of course. In other words, UNAM would still be a dual-mode institution if all programmes offered through the CES were like DEAL. Table 1 and table 2 (above) show why DEAL is the most single-mode (distance mode) programme. To discuss the distinction between what is to be taught and ways in which it can be learned, we have to bring into the discussion the study materials, the primary equivalent of the teaching that takes place on campus. There is a need to begin again with teaching in the most dual-mode programmes, that is, programmes such as the BEd.

### ***The BEd, PGDE, DipAdEd and BBA***

These programmes have full-time residential students and students studying at a distance who are taking the same courses, as shown in the tables, but this hides crucial dissimilarities between the two groups of students. At UNAM full-time residential students on the BEd, DipAdEd and BBA are essentially young Grade 12 graduates (though not all of them), most of whom are fresh from secondary schools. The first requirement for enrolling on these programmes through the distance mode is two to three years of working experience in the appropriate field, that is, as a teacher for the BEd, an adult educator or community activist for the DipAdEd and in some kind of business for the BBA. This difference in the target groups means that although the names of the courses are the same and the main topics and subtopics have to be the same (what is to be taught), the specific learning objectives require the development of the study materials to take into account the working adults. This has a lot to do with the ways in which the courses can be learned.

The increasing use by full-time residential students of study materials developed primarily for distance mode is one of the most important developments in dual-mode systems. The distance mode influences the teaching on campus through carefully designed materials, while, in principle, the teaching on campus should have different objectives. For example, where the learning in the distance-mode BEd should take place through the student's reflection on both his or her own teaching practices and his or her experience as a learner, the full-time residential BEd students have only their experiences as learners to reflect on.

The PGDE, being a postgraduate programme, attracts many unqualified teachers with non-teaching degrees, such as the BA or BSc, that they received some time in the past. Many students take their courses for this programme on a part-time basis on campus. These students are not different from those taking the courses through the distance mode, the only motivation for the choice of mode being the geographical distance between the campus and the school where they work. Here, it makes more sense that the two groups should take exactly the same course, using the same study materials.

### ***The BNSc***

This programme has only one type of student: adults in the nursing profession. We therefore cannot discuss any cross-fertilisation between the residential and the distance mode in the main nursing components of the study materials. However, the various examples pertaining to nursing in the sociology and the psychology components are bound to influence teaching on campus on the BA. Similarly, examples pertaining to nursing in the management components influence teaching on the BBA (both residential and distance mode). A course called Introduction to Government Studies, taught by the FEMS Department of Politics and Public Administration, was first written for the BNSc. By the time the study materials were needed for the BBA, they had to be de-nursed to accommodate business examples. At least one cohort of BBA students used the study materials as originally written for the nurses. The topics and subtopics are the same, and this is a case where the influence of the distance mode (BNSc) on the residential mode (BBA residential) has gone through another step in the distance mode (BBA off campus).

### ***DEAL***

This programme has off-campus students only and courses offered exclusively to those. The study materials are written by academic staff who teach similar

topics, for example in language analysis, at another level (degree courses). DEAL can be said to be influenced by the residential mode through the writing of the materials. However, because the names of courses on the DEAL programme do not correspond to any on the degree programmes, the materials are not used for any significant learning on campus. The most distance-mode programme at UNAM has little or no opportunity to influence learning on campus.

### ***The BA and BSc***

Some courses on these residential programmes with full-time residential students only are not translated into self-study materials. These are the most single-mode (residential) programmes. As shown in the tables earlier, however, the residential BEd students take some courses together with the BA or the BSc students on campus. Since the study materials for these courses have to be developed for the BEd taught through the distance mode, the BA or BSc students get to use these study materials. For many of these courses, it would seem at first that the BEd students just join their colleagues in the BA or BSc. In other words, the BEd students are guests in the FHSS or the Faculty of Science.

The academic staff who teach those mixed groups on campus also write or peer-review the self-study materials for off-campus students. Although these materials are primarily written for in-service teachers taking the BEd through the distance mode, they are increasingly used by full-time on-campus BEd students and the BA or BSc students in the same groups.

### **Conclusion**

The dual-mode status of an institution such as UNAM is embodied in its various programmes, and not only in those programmes delivered through the distance mode. Programmes such as the BA and BSc, which are not offered to off-campus students, share courses with dual-mode programmes such as the BEd. Through those courses the fully residential programmes (the BA and the BSc) can become more dual-mode than distance programmes such as DEAL, which do not share courses with internal programmes. The level of dual-mode status relates to the opportunity of cross-influence between the residential mode and the distance mode. In the most dual-mode programmes, such as the BEd, what is taught in the courses on campus influences the content of teaching for the distance mode, while the study materials used for off-campus students influence the way learning takes place on campus. The self-study materials for the BEd also influence the teaching of the BA and BSc. The self-study materials

for the DEAL programme, however, do not have the opportunity to influence the teaching on campus.

This article has been mainly about finding tools for measuring different levels of dual-mode status and commitment of different university programmes. Issues of quantity and equity (how do universities give higher proportions of their target audiences access to their programmes?) and the quality of what is offered (what impact does distance education have on the quality of the programmes offered both internally and externally?) are crucial issues for the future of university education in developing countries in general and the use of open and distance learning for its provision in particular. The article has tried to illustrate the impact of these different levels of dual-mode status on both of these issues, at least from the standpoint of one particular university.

## Notes

- 1 Moran, L., Distance Education: Deakin Style. In *Distance Education: A Spectrum of Case Studies*, edited by B. N. Koul and J. Jenkins (London: Kogan Page, 1990).
- 2 Nyirenda, J., 'Organisation of Distance Education at the University of Zambia: An Analysis of the Practice', *Distance Education* 10(1)(1989).
- 3 Dhanarajan, G., 'Convergence of Distance and Conventional Education: International Perspectives'. Paper presented to the Cambridge International Conference on Open and Distance Learning 'The Convergence of Distance and Conventional Education: Patterns of Flexibility for the Individual Learner'. Cambridge, England, 23–26 September 1997 [online]. [Available at <http://www.col.org/speeches/cambridge97.htm>]

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# **What is wrong with lecturing? A case for – and against – lecturing**

*Stanley Mpofu*

## **Introduction**

To many tutors of distance education programmes, the traditional approaches to university teaching are generally seen to be inconsistent with distance education. Consider the following concerns that were expressed by tutors affiliated to the University of South Africa (UNISA):

Tutor 1: 'Most learners prefer the traditional way of things . . . they prefer to be lectured.'

Tutor 2: 'A great number of students do not want to do work given to them . . . Mostly they just want to be lectured.'

Tutor 3: 'They prefer to be taught like they have been taught at high school'.<sup>1</sup>

Many distance education tutors in Southern Africa share these sentiments. A committee appointed to conduct a general investigation of teaching in the Centre for Distance Education at the University of Zimbabwe found that most tutors lamented that most of their students expected them to teach.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, tutors in the Distance Education Unit at the University of Botswana constantly complain about the lack of initiative in their students, a situation that forces them to teach.<sup>3</sup>

The message from these tutors is very clear: merely by enrolling in a distance education programme, one is expected to become a 'field independent' learner. The term 'field independent' learner is used by Witkin<sup>4</sup> to refer to a self-directed learner, who is more comfortable in the absence of a mediator and a structure, as opposed to a 'field dependent' learner, who prefers highly regulated settings with a teacher in attendance all the time. This also implies that the traditional approach to teaching is anathema to distance education.

This article seeks to show that self-directedness is not automatically bestowed on one on enrolment in a distance education programme and that the traditional lecture is a stimulant of distance education, and as such, should never be discarded.

## **Self-directedness in distance education**

### ***The problem***

Distance education tutors in the above institutions expect their students to be self-directed for three possible reasons. First, all distance education students are considered mature because of their adulthood. Knowles<sup>5</sup> attested to this assumption when he theorised that as people grow up they increasingly become self-directed.

Mezirow<sup>6</sup> subscribes to this assumption when he says that self-directed learning is a function of adulthood. Distance education students are, in most respects (legally, biologically and socially), considered adults. Second, they have chosen this mode of learning and this is often construed to mean that they have 'psyched' themselves for independent learning and are therefore ready for the responsibilities that are associated with distance education. Self-directedness therefore represents a combination of Dickinson's<sup>7</sup> concept of autonomy (a positive attitude toward the learning task), and Holec's<sup>8</sup> concept of the same term: the ability to take charge of one's learning. Third, and perhaps more important, distance education tutors are recruited to facilitate learning rather than lecture in the traditional way. Most are full-time workers elsewhere. For example, in the previous three academic years (1998/99, 1999/00 and 2000/01), the tutoring of all five courses of the Certificate in Adult Education programme (offered through distance education) at the University of Botswana has been handled by part-timers.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, to most, tutoring in distance education is a form of moonlighting. Being part-timers, they do not see it as their business to instil self-directedness into their students. They expect to find them ready for independent learning. Their lament about the lack of self-directedness among their students is, in fact, directed at their employer, the distance education institution. They are pointing out to the institution that, contrary to its assumption that its students are field independents, they are field dependents. Clearly they are appealing to the institution to do something about this.

Evidently distance education institutions orient their tutors to facilitate rather than lecture. Apparently they do not orient their students to be field independents. Hence they expect to be taught. Why? How can distance

education institutions fail to orient their students accordingly? The answer is possibly that in Southern Africa distance education has failed to shake off the legacy of correspondence education, its forerunner.

Nipper<sup>10</sup> distinguishes three generations of distance education. The first is no more than correspondence teaching featuring a single media. Students are given a reading list plus a set of assignments to be submitted to correspondence tutors. Correspondence tutors mark the assignments and return them to the students. There is no human contact whatsoever between the tutor and the students. The second generation is characterised by the use of multi-media, predominantly print, broadcasting and cassettes for teaching. Feedback is provided via correspondence by tutors through marked assignments and the occasional face-to-face tutorial. The face-to-face tutorial is largely a student-support activity rather than a forum for instruction. Finally, the third generation features advanced information technologies such as telecommunications, computer conferencing or networking, and audio and video conferencing. Students' access to advanced information technologies enables them to gain easy access to institutional support services, and it enables the institution to organise and provide regular lectures for them. Regular lectures, particularly through video conferencing, are regular features of the third generation of distance education.

The first two generations of distance education are advanced forms of correspondence education and, as such, do not provide for face-to-face instruction. They are premised on one assumption about the learners: that if they are self-directed enough to enrol for a distance education programme, then they are ready for independent study. Hence, first and second generation distance education institutions feature, in various degrees, all the distinctive characteristics of correspondence education, such as correspondence teaching, correspondence study, independent study, external study and home study. They can be likened to what Moore<sup>11</sup> described as 'an educational system in which the learner is autonomous and separated from his (her) teacher by space and time, so that communication is by print'.

In Southern Africa, distance education has barely advanced beyond the second generation, hence its provision hardly features face-to-face instruction. The University of South Africa (UNISA), which started as a correspondence institution in 1946, did not experience a major shift in paradigm till 1996.<sup>12</sup> This is clearly articulated in the work of Gultig, Van Heerden and Dockel. Gultig<sup>13</sup> describes UNISA's delivery mode at the time as being guided by a

rigid, hierarchical and authoritarian philosophy that placed too much emphasis on the use of technology. From a comparative analysis of a pre-1996 course and a similar course that was prescribed for 1996, Van Heerden<sup>14</sup> concluded that UNISA had turned over a new leaf in its provision of distance education programmes.

The new course reflected a moral commitment (to the task at hand) that had not existed in the past. The institution's new moral commitment to the provision of education is clearly underscored by Dockel,<sup>15</sup> who observes that UNISA 'wants to maintain standards of excellence by developing more flexible access and delivery systems ... [through] modularised and semesterised system(s), interim qualifications, course design and development, access, student support and flexible management'.

But it can be argued, on the basis of this, that UNISA has barely entered the third generation of distance education. The 'flexible access and delivery systems ... student support and flexible management' constitute an acknowledgment on the part of the institution of the importance of student-support services and flexibility in the management of distance education programmes. In practice, however, UNISA is still a correspondence college that is still characterised by a teacher-centred rather than a student-centred approach. Van Zyl<sup>16</sup> reported on attempts by UNISA to produce student-centred rather than lecturer-centred material. And, according to Barnard and Venter<sup>17</sup> the process of developing student-oriented materials would benefit from 'information on student profiles in their social contexts', something that seems to be missing in most distance education providers in the region.

If UNISA, a pioneer distance education university, is still largely a correspondence college in practice, the situation is certainly worse for the other distance education institutions in the region. Most have barely entered the second generation of distance education. They are no more than large correspondence schools. As such, they are still working on the premise that a person who takes the big step of enrolling with a distance education college is ready for independent study.

### ***Self-directedness is acquired rather than ascribed***

There is no evidence to suggest that adults automatically become self-directing on attaining adulthood. Self-directedness is not a function of age; it is a function of exposure to experiences that require one to be self-directing.<sup>18</sup> This implies that the key to the development of self-directedness in people lies in the attitude

of those in whose custody they are in the formative years. It also implies that the process of becoming self-directed is transformative. It is something that a person learns gradually over a period of time. Classical studies on child development suggest that the process of becoming independent and autonomous can begin as early as two years,<sup>19</sup> and continues in most cases till 11 or 12 years.<sup>20</sup>

If self-directedness or field independence is acquired over a period of time, so is field dependency. The current generation of distance education students, by virtue of earlier experiences at school (learner-centred education has yet to take hold in schools), are largely field dependent. It is therefore presumptuous of tutors to expect them to operate as field independents when they are field dependents, by training.

Constructivists<sup>21</sup> contend that over a period of time people will have evolved certain learning strategies that work for them. From research on children, constructivists have concluded that by the time they go to school, children have already evolved certain strategies. Hughes found that pre-schoolers developed many strategies of their own that they used to confront problems that were facing them. For example, they would often use their fingers to count. Also, they developed different strategies for adding smaller and larger numbers. Hughes found that these strategies would be resistant to the teacher's efforts to change them.

In a different study, Driver<sup>22</sup> found that pupils tend to regress to their previously acquired learning strategies anyway. It therefore makes good educational sense that teachers become aware of these strategies so that they use them, at least as a starting point. As Sutherland observes:<sup>23</sup> 'Why should a child be denied the use of a strategy that really works for him (her)?'

The same phenomenon seems to be at work in the adult years. Most, if not all, distance education students were, at some time in the past, students at a formal education school where the teacher had full responsibility for making decisions about:

- What will be learned.
- How it will be learned.
- When it will be learned.
- If it has been learned.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore distance education students are products of teacher-directed education, where the role of the teacher was that of purveyor of information,

while theirs was that of receivers and recorders of what the teacher had to say. Transmittal techniques, particularly the lecture method, became frozen in their minds as the backbone of any educational activity. Now that they are back at school they, almost subconsciously, revert to the conditioning of their previous school experience, where they sat back and listened to the teacher because the teacher knew it all. Accordingly, they sit back and expect the teacher to take responsibility for the education process. Naturally, because of their earlier conditioning, they become extremely anxious when the teacher, suddenly without warning, expects them to operate in a self-directed manner.

Evidently, when confronted with a need to learn something, people tend to regress to their previously acquired learning strategies. What are the implications for the provision of distance education programmes? First, it means that tutors must stop taking their students for granted. They must, at the outset, ascertain what the students already know, and the rules of learning that they possess, and plan the education programmes accordingly. Prior knowledge, in the eyes of progressive educationists, is inseparable from learning strategies. To Piagetians<sup>25</sup> prior knowledge became the logical structures of thought that a child is capable of performing. To White and Gagne<sup>26</sup> (1974) prior knowledge constitutes the skills that a learner brings to the learning situation. Earlier Gagne<sup>27</sup> referred to prior knowledge as 'pre-requisite skills' that learners already possess. Constructivists have used different terms to describe prior knowledge. Barnes<sup>28</sup> talks of 'action knowledge', Solomon<sup>29</sup> of 'life world knowledge', and Gardner<sup>30</sup> of 'embedded thought'.

Nevertheless, they all seem to agree that prior knowledge constitutes a 'framework' of learning. This suggests that it is easy to acquire knowledge that can be meaningfully linked to past knowledge and experience. It also suggests that new knowledge can easily be absorbed if its acquisition does not require a re-organisation of the existing framework and structure of learning. Therefore educators must be aware of the learning strategies and conceptual frameworks of their learners so that they build their instruction around them.

To determine what learners already know, and the learning strategies that they have mastered over the years, the learner must be part of curriculum design and planning. While it is not always easy or desirable to involve the learner in curriculum planning, efforts must be made by distance education institutions to develop some kind of profile of the learner before the commencement of the programme.<sup>31</sup> On the basis of the profile, the programme could be amended accordingly to take into account prior knowledge and learning strategies. In the

meantime, distance education programmes must not be ashamed to mount traditional face-to-face lectures for distance education students.

There is, then, in view of student expectations and previous educational experience, clearly a strong argument in favour of the traditional lecture as an initial form of delivery to distance education students. There is adequate theoretical and empirical evidence to suggest that the current crop of distance learners expect it as a form of delivery. From earlier school experiences, it is the only form of education they know. The lament by UNISA tutors, among others, is testimony to this. Nevertheless, it would be folly to adopt the traditional lecture as the mainstay of delivery for distance education.

### *A case against lecturing – as the mainstay of distance education delivery*

While there is a strong case for the face-to-face lecture as an initial strategy, it cannot be adopted as the major strategy for distance education for two reasons. First, to do so would negate the very essence of distance education. Second, this would, in the long run, create a feeling of dissonance among distance learners. Why? Because the majority of distance learners can be characterised as 'mature' in many respects. Most distance learners are people who are self-directing in every other aspect of their lives. Therefore, spoon-feeding them would create a conflict between their need to depend on the teacher and their deeper psychological need to be self-directing.<sup>32</sup> This implies that distance learners are already self-directing in most respects, but owing to earlier conditioning they do not believe their self-directedness has a role in school. Therefore they need to be shown just how resourceful they are. Hence what is suggested here is that educators must create situations in which distance learners are helped to make a gradual transition from dependent to self-directing learner. If the transition is too sudden, the adult learner who associates school with a place where one is taught, rather than a place where one learns, will feel very anxious. In Knowles'<sup>33</sup> words, most adult learners (that is, most distance learners) have learned how to be taught, and not how to learn. It is therefore incumbent upon distance education institutions to sensitise tutors accordingly, and to equip them with the knowledge and skills that will enable them to help distance learners to gradually make the necessary transition from dependent to field independent learners.

The most effective way to do so would be to involve them in some aspect of the planning of educational programmes that are intended for them. Involving the intended beneficiaries in the planning of an educational programme constitutes

the first step towards showing learners just how resourceful they are. Slowly people begin to realise that they are able not only to determine their learning needs, but to take responsibility for their learning. Involving learners in planning provides the educational planner with plenty of opportunities to show the learners that they are capable of organising some aspects of their learning. Gradually learners are sensitised to the concept that being self-directed (which they are in all other respects) is an asset rather than a liability in a learning situation.

It is not always easy or desirable to bring together the tutor and the learner, who in most cases will not have been recruited yet, at the planning stage of distance education programmes. Hence, more often than not, there is a big gap between the institution and the learner – when they meet for the first time at the implementation stage. How does this gap come about? Distance education institutions hire tutors and others to do the planning for them. They certainly do not expect them to seek the opinions of the would-be-learners in the process. They look at educationists as specialists in their fields and, as such, as quite knowledgeable in their subject areas. Their ability to handle adult learners is not considered of paramount importance. On the other hand, because they are not part of the planning process, learners do not view themselves as partners in the teaching process of the programme. The educational programme is not their product. It is the product of institutional planning. For this reason, they look at it as the tutors' personal project, and as such, expect the tutors to occupy the driver's seat in its delivery. Naturally, they believe that those who planned it know how to implement it. Hence, they become confused when soon after registration they are told that they are on their own.

Efforts must be made to bridge the gap between the institution and the learner at the very early stages of implementation. An attempt must therefore be made to incorporate the views of the learners at the implementation stage in order to give them a sense of ownership and belonging. This will ensure the learners' commitment to the programme as they will regard it as their own.

New enrollees in distance education are apprehensive about two things. First, most are returning to school after many years of absence. They do not know what to expect, how they will be received, and how other learners will perceive them. Second, they are not quite sure what distance education entails. They are doubtful about their ability to cope, given that most have other responsibilities. They are hoping to gain some assurances from the institution. The distance education tutor's initial role must therefore be to allay any fears that the new

distance learner may have about distance education. This constitutes the very first step in the process of bridging the gap between the institution and the learner.

Lecturing is not sustainable in the long run as the major delivery mode for distance education for another very important reason. Unlike children in a formal school, distance learners are not likely to have the same previous experience and capabilities. When children first come to school, they are generally similar in many respects. Because they come from more or less similar neighbourhoods, they have common knowledge, interests and capabilities. At any rate, they have not had much experience. The teacher can safely assume that they have much in common, and prepare lessons accordingly. It would be folly to assume commonalities among adult learners. They have had many more life experiences, different kinds of experience, and differently organised experiences from those of youth and children.<sup>34</sup> There is clearly a need to take into account individual differences in planning an educational programme for adults. Hence, there is a need to individualise learning in distance education. Lecturing is inappropriate because it assumes some fundamental similarities among the learners, something that is almost impossible to obtain among distance learners.

However, distance learners must be slowly prepared for individualised learning. Asking them to take charge of their learning on arrival is tantamount to throwing a person who has just enrolled for basic swimming lessons into the deep end. This is likely to make the person very anxious and probably very fearful of swimming. The process of moving from the shallow end to the deep end must be slow and deliberate. This is possible only if distance education institutions heed Robinson and Wali's<sup>35</sup> advice that distance education should aim at, among other things:

- placing the learner at the centre of the learning system, as far as possible, and building around his or her needs
- supporting the individual learner through a variety of means (including interaction with others who may be tutors, group leaders, fellow-learners, or materials developers)
- having the goal of assisting the learner to become self-managing, competent and critical in his or her approach to learning.

### **Lecturing as a stimulant for learning**

In spite of all that has been said about the need to create and facilitate independent learning among distance learners, there remains a very good case

for using the traditional lecture in distance education, especially in the early stages. For this reason, the phasing-in of self-directed learning as the mainstay of distance education should not in any way preclude the occasional face-to-face lecture in distance education. There is still, in the writer's opinion, no alternative to an enjoyable face-to-face lecture as a stimulant for learning. The lecture remains the single most acceptable form of delivery of instruction. As Eble<sup>36</sup> aptly observes, 'human beings remain responsive to all forms of intercourse with other consenting humans'. For this reason the book and the television have failed to sweep out the lecture. The book and television lack 'face-to-face confrontation with other talking gesturing, thinking, feeling humans'.<sup>37</sup> Besides, as a means of imparting ideas and knowledge, the lecture is just as effective as other methods of teaching.<sup>38</sup>

A good live lecture, despite its shortcomings, is very attractive to students for three reasons. First, it is still the shortest way to gain information. Simply by sitting through a lecture and jotting a few notes one can learn something new. Second, it is the simplest means of gaining some knowledge on a particular phenomenon. No sophisticated gadgets are involved. All that is needed are paper and a pen. Third, and perhaps more important, it creates a 'sense of expectation'. A handbook for effective instruction<sup>39</sup> contains the apt observation that while adults enrol in educational programmes for a variety of reasons, all adult learners possess a 'sense of expectation'. This simply means that all adult learners enrol in a programme with the expectation that something pleasant is going to happen. The 'sense of expectation' is particularly relevant to our argument that the traditional lecture is a stimulant of distance education, and, as such, it deserves more attention.

Three basic laws of learning, namely the law of effect, the law of primacy, and the law of intensity,<sup>40</sup> appear to have a direct bearing on the 'sense of expectation'. The law of effect states that people will accept and repeat responses that are pleasant and avoid those that are unpleasant. People who find the programme in which they are enrolled enjoyable are more likely to keep on attending than people who find the programme unpleasant. Learners who are occasionally exposed to mentally and morally invigorating discourses cannot wait to return for more. Highly competent face-to-face lecturers will not only convey information to an audience (with some expectation that the information is being received), they are also likely to stimulate students to pursue specific or related learning on their own.<sup>41</sup> This implies that a good face-to-face lecture provides the impetus for independent learning.

The law of primacy emphasises that first impressions are vital and long lasting. The first encounter with distance education for students is a very crucial one for sustained learning. If the first meeting is interesting and stimulating, students will look forward to the next meeting. Knowles<sup>42</sup> contends that 'what happens in the first hour or so of any learning activity (course, seminar, workshop, institute, tutorial, etc.) largely determines how productive the remaining hours will be'.

He goes on to say that 'what happens at the opening session will do more than anything else to set the climate for the entire activity'.<sup>43</sup> The opening session sets the tone for the educational activity.

The first meeting (between tutors and distance learners) often includes some kind of orientation to the learning activities that are in store for the participants (Smith and Delahaye 1987).<sup>44</sup> The orientation often includes:

... staff and participant introductions, an explanation of the objectives of the programme, clarification of programme requirements (such as attendance ... assignments, instructor and participant expectations), and basic administrative information (for example ... who should be contacted for assistance/problems).<sup>45</sup>

What is often left out is an introduction of the subject matter. Instead, the tutors wash their hands of the learning process. They emphasise that students are on their own. Students view this as an abdication of responsibility. They begin to wonder why they should attend future meetings if these do not involve any teaching.

Based on how they are received and on what transpires at the first meeting, participants formulate opinions on the nature of the distance education institution, the nature of the personnel and the general atmosphere that prevails in the institution. These opinions tend to serve as bases for what to expect and, perhaps, the level of seriousness that they ought to pay to the whole educational activity, hence the importance of setting the right climate on that first occasion. A powerfully and competently delivered face-to-face lecture on the subject matter, as part of the orientation proceedings, goes a long way towards instilling hope and confidence in the institution on the part of the students. It reassures them that they made the right choice by coming here, as opposed to registering with another institution. It stimulates their interest in the subject matter at hand. It provides surprise and arouses curiosity, and thus encourages students

to seek more information on their own on the issue at hand. A good lecture that is evidently the culmination of serious scholarship sets high standards, and thus challenges the learner to strive towards scholarship. Scholarship on the part of the tutor breeds scholarship on the part of the learner. In a world where books and other resource materials are becoming increasingly accessible, the only thing that will separate distance education institutions is the quality of the occasional lectures.

Finally, the law of intensity states that a vivid, dramatic learning experience is more likely to leave an indelible mark on the students than a dull or boring one. An interesting powerfully presented lecture is an appetiser for learning. Lecturers who are able to bring their subjects to life create an appetite for learning among their students. A lively vigorous lecture not only holds the audience's attention, it also generates interest and enthusiasm.<sup>46</sup> Its engaging manner serves as a stimulant for learning.

## Conclusion

Distance education essentially means education by distance. In its ideal form students assume greater responsibility for their education. Apparently it is very difficult to achieve the ideal in the Southern African region because of one major problem: distance education institutions are still largely correspondence colleges in character, and as such, do not consider it their role to transform their students from field dependents to field independents. Instead, they assume that people who enrol in a distance education programme of their own volition are self-directed enough to take charge of their own learning. Accordingly, they orient their tutors to expect self-directed learners in their programmes. But distance education students expect to be taught, because over the years they have learnt how to be taught, rather than how to learn. There is enough theoretical and empirical evidence to suggest that self-directedness is an acquired rather than an ascribed trait. From earlier school experiences distance education students have become used to highly structured education environments. It is the responsibility of distance education institutions to help them move out of this 'groove'. To this end, distance education institutions must sensitise and equip their tutors accordingly.

The process of helping students make the necessary transition from field dependents to field independents begins from what the students expect – the face-to-face lecture. Lecturing must become incorporated in the early proceedings of distance education. However, lecturing should not become

the mainstay of distance education, because this would be contrary to what distance education stands for and seeks to achieve. Also, this would inevitably create dissonance in the adult distance learner, who is self-directing in many other respects. Be that as it may, lecturing is not anathema to distance education. Besides being just as effective as other methods in the delivery of instruction, it provides the necessary interaction between distance education students and their tutors. There is still no substitute for human intercourse in education. Also, the good traditional lecture is a stimulant for education. It challenges the student to seek further information on issues raised. The occasional face-to-face lecture also shows that the institution is moving alongside the student in the quest for more knowledge on the subject matter at hand. Above all, a good traditional lecture is an enjoyable experience. There is a positive correlation between learning and enjoyment. Distance education programmes that are devoid of traditional lectures are essentially devoid of enjoyment. To deny distance learners such lectures is tantamount to condemning distance education to solitary confinement and undirected group discussions.

Nevertheless, the traditional lecture must move with the times. It need not be face-to-face all the time, as this would require learners to assemble at some central point for it: a problem that distance education seeks to eliminate. The advent of video conferencing enables distance education institutions to mount the occasional traditional lecture to all students, irrespective of their location. Thus video conferencing enables distance education institutions to intersperse independent study with regular human intercourse. Through video conferencing distance education programmes can retain the human touch (for which there is no substitute) and at the same time champion the cause for open access to education, which is, undoubtedly, the hallmark of distance education.

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# **Some environmental factors negatively affecting the academic performance of rural distance students of The University of Namibia**

*H. A. Beukes*

## **Introduction**

This article addresses some environmental factors that negatively affect the academic performance of rural distance students of the University of Namibia. It reports on these students' views on certain factors that influence their academic success. The objective of this research was to identify those factors under discussion in order to recommend ways to improve student support to rural distance students. To have a clear picture of the research subjects, the rural distance students were compared to their fellow students in the urban area. The article is based on and summarises the research carried out and the conclusions reached as part of my PhD thesis, under the same title, for the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, 2001.

The research was undertaken in 1998 to identify environmental factors that negatively affect the academic performance of the rural distance education students of the University of Namibia (UNAM). The reason for the focus on rural distance students was that a higher proportion of rural distance students drop out or fail than fellow students in the urban area. Apparently there are factors that have negative influences on the academic performance of UNAM's rural distance students that do not affect the urban distance students. To obtain a clear picture of the research subjects it was important to compare them to their counterparts in the urban area. This comparison was necessary, since I assumed that urban distance students study under circumstances that are more conducive to successful learning than rural distance students. According to the information gained from the respondents 88,7 per cent of UNAM's distance students live in the rural areas. Information from the administrative officers of the Centre for External Studies (at UNAM) revealed that at the time of the study 70 per cent of failures in the examinations are rural students. Therefore the problem of poor academic performance among rural distance students is discussed, as well as what the students themselves perceive to be the

factors that contribute to this situation. The outcome of this research was to recommend ways of applying a more effective student support system for the rural distance students. Though the research was carried out on students many of whom were enrolled for courses which have since been phased out, I am convinced that the findings are equally true for students enrolled in other teacher education courses who are based in rural areas.

### **Research approach and methodology**

The research approach adopted in this research was descriptive since it involved the collection of data to test the proposal and assumptions concerning the current status of this research's subjects. In this research the descriptive method dealt with the analysis and interpretation of data that have been gathered for a specific purpose, the understanding and solution of a significant problem (the high failure rate among rural distance students of UNAM). According to Best,<sup>1</sup> knowledge of present status is the first step in problem solving. In the light of Best's statement this research attempted to gain knowledge of the research subjects to solve their problems regarding their academic performance. Gay<sup>2</sup> stated that a high percentage of reported research studies are descriptive in nature and it is useful for investigating a variety of educational problems. Best and Kahn<sup>3</sup> show that descriptive research can be divided into two broad categories: quantitative research and qualitative research. In my research I combined qualitative and quantitative research (called triangulation) to obtain a clear picture of the research subjects.

The methodology used in this study combined multiple methods. These included a variety of tools, for example a questionnaire, interviews, and my own experience, in order to gather as much information as possible about the research subjects. To obtain a profile of the research subjects the first part of the questionnaire included biographical questions. The second part was general in nature and dealt with the subjects' study environment, since the study environment is a factor in any student's life and studies and assuming that a supportive environment is a key factor to successful studies. The third part of the questionnaire addressed issues about study time as a factor in academic performance and the fourth part addressed study facilities that were available to the subjects. The penultimate part investigated problems with administrative support from UNAM, and the questionnaire ended with some academic issues such as information about the courses, counselling, understanding the assignments, and the submission of assignments that might contribute to the academic performance of rural distance students.

To enable a more objective and detailed comparison of the results of the questionnaire, structured interviews were used. Some of these took place in my office, whereas for others I had the opportunity to visit some 70 rural distance students in their homes. In addition, every month the heads of the regional entres submit reports to CES about the activities at their centres, student complaints and administrative matters. From these reports I was able to gather information about the problems experienced by rural distance students. Finally, it is my view that the experience of researchers in distance education is one of the most neglected tools in distance education research. It was in this light that I included my personal experience as part of the research methodology for this study.

### **Analysis of data**

Once the information had been collected it was statistically reduced in order to draw conclusions from it. The aim of the analysis was to provide evidence for judging the validity of the proposals of the research. The responses of the respondents were calculated and presented in tabular form. The discussion that follows is based on this analysis, which is summarised below, but not presented in detail.

### **Discussion of findings**

For the purpose of this article only a few factors affecting the academic performance of rural distance students will be discussed, because a discussion of all the factors would not fit the prescribed length of an article. The focus will be on the rural students only. Before I discuss the research findings, it is necessary to provide the readers with a brief profile of the UNAM distance students among whom the research was carried out so that they are able to form a broad perspective of these students.

According to the data it is clear that:

- Most of the distance students are from the rural area (88,7 %).
- Female students constitute the dominant group (72%).
- These students are adults.
- The largest group speak Oshindonga as their mother tongue (40%).
- Most of the respondents are in possession of Grade 12 plus at least a two-year qualification.
- Students with more than five years' teaching experience constitute the largest group (82%).
- Most of the respondents (86,5%) study to improve their qualifications.

After identifying the research subjects, attention was given to the living environment of these students, since that it is where most of their studying takes place. Most of the rural respondents indicate that they live in their own house (58%). The data indicated that a significant minority of the respondents (37,5%), that is, more than a third of these students, have more than three children of their own. Besides taking care of their own children, most (57,5%) of them have to take care of more than three other children. This means that many of them take care of more than six children. One student, a single mother, whom I visited at her home, takes care of nine children, which means that her studies are competing with her responsibilities *inter alia* as mother. Only 8,5 per cent indicated that they have a study where they study, while the rest study in the kitchen (3,5%), bedroom (24%) or dining room (11%), and 43 per cent indicated that they study at other places (for example in a classroom, library or even under a tree). The data indicated that some rural students (29,5%) study in the evening by electric lighting, while the rest study by candlelight (19%), paraffin lamp (48,5%) and gas lamps (1,5%).

Apart from the housing situation, an issue of critical importance to students studying through the distance education mode is isolation. Most of the time rural distance students are isolated from their tutors, institution, post office, library, regional centre and fellow students. Twenty-one per cent of the respondents indicated that they are between one and ten kilometres from the nearest library. Forty-one per cent indicated that they are more than fifty kilometres from their nearest library. Six per cent indicated that they are more than one hundred kilometres from the nearest library. Sixty percent of the respondents indicated that they are more than fifty kilometres from the nearest UNAM regional office. In fact twenty-one per cent indicated that they are more than one hundred kilometres from their regional office. Most of the respondents (51%) indicated that they are more than twenty kilometres away from their nearest post office. Allied to long distances is means of transport. Most of the respondents (80%) do not have their own vehicles and are dependent on taxis (39,5%), friends (16%) or even a canoe (1,5%).

Research into factors affecting the academic performance of distance students highlights insufficient time as the factor most frequently cited for unsuccessful studies.<sup>4</sup> Sixty-seven per cent of the respondents of this research indicated that they do not have enough time to study.

Additional factors affecting the academic performance of this research's rural respondents include the following issues:

- Study group meetings. To rural distance education students, isolation is a major problem, because the institution is faceless and voiceless. Apart from the physical absence of the marker-tutor, the distance education student is not among fellow students with whom he or she can socialize. Therefore UNAM encourages its distance education students to form study groups. Study groups guarantee human contact with fellow students, and academics may help to maintain motivation and overcome study problems. Unfortunately distance is the most problematic aspect when these students want to form study groups. Verbal responses from respondents revealed that domestic responsibilities prevent them from attending study group meetings. Some of the respondents stated at interviews that they learn most effectively when they have the opportunity to interact with fellow students and nearby academics. Many students become demotivated and are not interested in their studies when they cannot interact with other students. Such a situation results in poor academic performance. Only 18 per cent of the respondents indicated that they attend study group meetings.
- Language of instruction (English). The official language of Namibia is English. The medium of instruction at UNAM is also English. It is important to note that only a few (0,5%) of UNAM's rural distance education students have English as a home language. This could be the reason that the majority (58%) of the respondents indicated that they find the language of instruction difficult. One reason that rural respondents find English as medium of instruction more difficult than urban respondents is that they are not as much in contact with English as urban respondents.
- Working hours. Only 9,5 per cent of rural respondents indicated that working hours are never problematic to them during their studies. Fifty-four per cent indicated that working hours are regularly a hindrance during their studies. Many schools in the rural areas lack well-qualified teachers. As a result, qualified teachers in the rural areas, especially in schools with large student numbers and few qualified teachers, have to teach in the mornings as well as the afternoons. Consequently they do not have enough time for their studies.
- Workload. Most of the respondents (83%) indicated that a heavy workload is a hindrance during their studies. This factor coincides with the previous one, since a heavy workload and working hours go hand in hand and finally affect study time and academic success.

- Weather circumstances are factors that are cited regularly (10%) and occasionally (52%) (for example moving cattle to greener pastures, or rivers preventing them from getting to the nearest post office).
- Transport. Only 16 per cent indicated that transport is never a problem during their studies. This means that most respondents experience transport problems. Long distances, bad roads, transport charges and not owning a vehicle are aspects that affect rural respondents more than their counterparts in the urban area.
- Social contact. Owing to isolation, distance education students need social contact with fellow students and friends. Lack of social contact with fellow students is regarded as a hindrance during studies (37,5% regularly and 52,5% sometimes) and this feeling of "loneliness" may affect academic performance. This view is supported by Simpson,<sup>5</sup> who reported that the most important single form of support for distance education students is outside institutional support (for example support from family and friends).
- Motivation. One of the needs of distance education students is emotional in nature and includes motivational needs. Distance education students, who study in isolation from their institutions and tutors, need motivation for successful studies (even more than face-to-face students). Most of the time, they depend on self-motivation, because they have limited contact with their tutors and fellow students. Twenty per cent (regularly) of the rural respondents indicated that lack of motivation is a hindrance during studies, while 57,7 per cent (sometimes) regarded lack of motivation as a hindrance.
- Postal system. Distance education students are heavily dependent on the postal system in Namibia. If they have to rely on an ineffective postal system, it can only result in failure or withdrawal from a study course. Students complain that it takes too long for mail from the institution to reach their nearest post office, post offices return mail too soon to the sender (UNAM), and mail gets lost in the post. Consequently 61 per cent of the respondents experience the postal system in Namibia as problematic during their studies.
- Counselling prior to studies. Currently UNAM does not provide counselling services for its distance education students. The lack of counselling proves problematic, because students do not know what to expect in the world of distance education. They need to know about

sacrifices, time management, the support they will receive, as well as administrative matters. Most (74,4%) of the respondents did not receive prior counselling to their studies.

- Counselling during studies. Most (65,5%) of the respondents did not receive counselling during their studies. Counselling during studies is as important as counselling prior to studies. UMAM's distance education students come from varied educational backgrounds and distance education imposes strains on them that arise from isolation. Many combined factors (domestic, study environment, work and social life) can be barriers to academic progress, and students may become de-motivated and then need counselling to proceed in their studies.
- Daily access to a telephone. Sixty-five per cent indicated that they do not have daily access to a telephone. Although many people may consider the telephone "old" technology and it does not attract the same attention as new technology, in Namibia it is still very useful. Where transport is not available, especially in rural areas, the telephone may offer the most practical support during studies. Unfortunately not everybody has the privilege of daily telephone access during his/her studies.

In the analysis of this research's subjects' responses to the items included in the questionnaire, it appears that the factors affecting the academic performance of UNAM's rural distance students, could be divided into the following categories:

- Personal
- Environmental
- Institutional
- Academic
- Study facilities
- Study time
- Administrative factors

## **Implications**

Students in distance education study in isolation, especially those in the rural areas. Initially these students had little detailed information on what the course would bring them, or what study via the distance education mode entails. This means that there are certain implications for the institution (UNAM) and its distance students. In its attempts to prevail over the barrier of isolation, UNAM, its distance students and the tutors have irrefutable responsibilities towards one another.

## **Implications for rural distance students**

From my own experience in the Department of Distance Education at UNAM as well as reports from regional centre heads it can be stated that most of UNAM's distance education students expect UNAM to provide all imaginable support once they have paid their fees. To them, it is UNAM's responsibility to see them through their studies in order to obtain their qualification. Currently UNAM provides services through its nine regional centres in the country. For a variety of reasons (bad road conditions, long distances, lack of telephones and long working hours) many rural distance students cannot make use of the current facilities at their disposal. How much energy do these students put into efforts to use these facilities? Communication between any distance students and their institutions is vital to successful studies. Twice every year UNAM provides voluntary face-to-face sessions (one week each) for distance students. Many rural distance students do not use this opportunity to communicate with their institution and tutors. These students should realise that they too have responsibilities regarding their studies. More energy, devotion and creativity from their side are needed in order to taste academic success.

## **Implications for UNAM**

It is common knowledge that effective student support in distance education is an expensive exercise. Although it is the university's intention to provide as much support as possible to all its distance students, it is currently not in a financial position to do so. Distance students are scattered over the whole of Namibia, and many are very far from telephones, post offices and the regional centres. At some of the regional offices there are tutors who assist rural distance students over weekends. These tutors are not involved in marking assignments and examinations. Unfortunately (at the regional centres) there are not tutors for all the academic subjects offered by UNAM. Improving student support calls for increasing tutor involvement at the regional centres, which implies more financial input from UNAM's side. This means that the regional centre heads should be more accountable for student support in their regions.

Obviously improvement in its student support services will have financial implications for UNAM, whether it is in the quality of study material, staff capacity at head office or regional centres, or marker-tutors. The planning and organisation of effective student support services cannot be executed without the services of competent devoted and qualified staff. The structuring of a student support unit should set up mechanisms that make it possible for contact between the institution, tutors and students. Relationships between the student

support unit/department should be strengthened by merging the student support and administration sections of the current Centre for External Studies.

Currently the Centre for External Studies experiences problems regarding the services rendered by the full-time marker-tutors (who are members of the various faculties), for example in the submission of study material on due dates and absence from tutorial classes. UNAM should consider including distance education work in the job description of full-time staff members.

### **Implications for tutors**

Currently UNAM uses two kinds of tutor. Marker-tutors are situated in Windhoek (the capital city), because the marking of assignments is centralised. These marker-tutors are responsible for tutor-marking assignments, writing feedback letters, setting examination papers and marking the scripts, face-to-face tutoring at vacation schools, interactive video classes and telephone tutoring. The second kind of tutor comprises those who assist students at the regional centres over weekends. Their sole responsibility is to help students understand subject content. For UNAM it is important that all tutors should become more personally involved in the studies of its distance students, particularly the rural distance students. Obviously more tutor involvement will result in an increased workload. Increased tutor-student involvement could result in improved academic performance of the rural distance education students. Before tutors are appointed they should be well informed about their roles as tutors. If they lack experience in distance education, they should be willing to be trained, they should know their students, and should show empathy with, interest in and understanding of their students. They should also adhere to the responsibilities stated in their agreements with the Centre for External studies.

### **Recommendations**

In this section I would like to list a few executable activities by UNAM in order to support its rural distance students in their studies. My intention is to list recommendations that are realistic and reachable. To my mind, implementation of the following recommendations will improve UNAM's student support to its rural distance students:

- The human element should be stronger. For example, include a photo of the marker-tutor and a brief profile in the first letter to the students, include an audio cassette on which the marker-tutor welcomes his/her students in

his/her own voice, and information on when the tutor is available for visits and telephone calls. The first assignment should consist of a student profile by the student and this assignment should be weighted to emphasise its importance.

- Carefully planned induction strategies for new students should be offered. These should include attending a few days session at the main campus to give the students a sense that they belong to UNAM. This will enable students to meet fellow students, to explore all the resources at their disposal and to meet staff members.
- The director/head of department should send out congratulatory letters to those students who obtain good results. This will demonstrate that UNAM is serious about its students and will act as a way of motivation.
- Appoint conscientious, concerned people as counsellors to help and support distance students. If possible, try to appoint (on a part-time basis) previously successful graduates as counsellors at the various regional offices to assist the rural distance education students. It is also recommended that the university appoint a full-time person to oversee counselling, particularly to respond to the individual student's needs. The unequal situations/opportunities of women in comparison with men should be taken into consideration and receive special attention. Personal engagement with individuals is an opportunity to achieve the affective goals of UNAM's student support services, which will help to reduce academic failure.
- Staff in the student support unit should be personally involved in planning and organising study group meetings, especially in rural areas.
- Continuous research regarding distance students should be a priority every year.
- It should be a priority for student support officials to visit as many distance students as possible at least once per year.
- In preparing study material the writers should know the clients they are writing for. I am thinking of the language level and the type of assignments the clients should do.
- Where possible inter active video conferencing, telephone tutoring and lessons on videotape should be used.

- Since that female students constitute the majority of UNAM's distance education students, it is vital that research should be conducted into female issues (for example are courses/curricula in line with their needs and living conditions).

Considering the preceding recommendations it is clear that UNAM should utilise all available opportunities at its disposal to support its distance students, especially those in the rural areas.

### Closing remarks

The problem of high failure rates among UNAM's rural distance education students gave rise to this study. The data in this article give a picture of the world of UNAM's rural distance education students and indicate possible factors that affect their academic performances. The aim of this data gathering process is to recommend ways of rendering more effective student support to distance education students, particularly those in the rural areas of Namibia. With the growing demand for education and increasing interest in the distance education mode the question arises as to the kind of student support that should be implemented to best serve the distance education student. The choice of media (for example print, audio, video, telephone and computer) is closely related to this question. In considering the most appropriate media for effective student support, research and the knowledge of experienced distance educators should be part of the decision-making process.

### Notes

- 1 J. W. Best, *Research in Education*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970).
- 2 L. R. Gay, *Educational Research. Competencies for Analysis and Application* (New York: Macmillan International, 1992).
- 3 J. W. Best and J. Kahn, *Research in Education* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1989); J. W. Best and J. V. Kahn, *Research in Education* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1994).
- 4 D. Kember, *A Model of Student Progress* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications, 1995); W. J. Fraser and C. J. S. Van Staden, 'Students' Opinions on factors influencing drop-out rates and performance at distance education institutions', *Opvoedkunde* 16(4)(1996).
- 5 O. Simpson, *Supporting Students in Online, Open and Distance Learning* (London: Kogan Page, 1999) 121.

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# **Improving the quality of student learning**

*Delvaline Lucia Möwes*

## **Introduction and background**

### ***Objectives of the study***

The provision of effective student-support services is probably one of the most important responsibilities of a distance education institution and certainly one that can have the greatest impact on learners – and make the difference between success and failure. Paralleling this, Paul and Brindley<sup>1</sup> maintain that with the evolution of distance education in both theory and practice, institutional research has shifted its focus to understanding individuals better: what and how they learn and how they can be encouraged to develop more independence. As a result, the vision of learners as passive and somewhat invisible receivers of knowledge has given way to one of learners being much more actively involved in the learning process. These authors stress that within this dynamic, distance educators have been challenged to reconsider the role and purpose of support systems. There is growing recognition of the central role of support services in making distance education more responsive to individual learners.

This study attempts to analyse the effectiveness of the student-support system at the Centre for External Studies (CES) at the University of Namibia from the perspective of the distance student, by focusing on the following questions:

- What resources are available to students (study hours, study facilities and conditions, access to university centre, access to media)?
- What reasons do students identify for choosing to study through the distance mode?
- What factors do students identify that hinder the quality of their learning?
- What strategies do students identify that would improve the quality of their learning?

### ***The Namibian context***

There can be little doubt that distance education and open and flexible policies have done much to extend accessibility to higher education throughout the world. In South Africa in particular Glennie<sup>2</sup> provides evidence that the

distance education sector is becoming a very significant part of higher education provision. She states that approximately one-third of the national teaching corps are involved in distance education programmes. Moreover, South Africa's White Paper on Education<sup>3</sup> identified distance education as an essential mechanism for achieving its goals. Similarly, Möwes and Siaciwena<sup>4</sup> state that the University of Namibia's (UNAM) first five-year development plan<sup>5</sup> committed the university to continuing and expanding its distance education services. One of the key objectives and goals in this plan was to address some of 'the relics of colonial regimes' and it stated that many Namibians from formerly disadvantaged communities who were already in employment needed to have their work skills upgraded and sharpened without having to leave their jobs.<sup>6</sup> The plan noted that such people were scattered throughout the country, especially in regions that had previously been designated 'homelands'. Therefore 'one of UNAM's key goals and responsibilities was to reach out to people and to assist them to continue with their education, through the University's CES'.<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, the plan specified that the principle objective of CES 'is to contribute to the mission of the University, and of the Ministry of Education and Culture, of extending higher education to people outside the walls of the University, and beyond the city of Windhoek'.<sup>8</sup> The mission of CES, which is a sub-statement of the mission statement of the university, is therefore to make *quality* higher education accessible to adult members of the community by providing open learning through distance and continuing education programmes.

### ***The need for student-support services***

One important means of measuring and analysing the effectiveness and quality of the learning experience in a distance education system is through an analysis of the student-support system.<sup>9</sup> 'Support systems contribute to the "process" of a course as do the learning materials';<sup>10</sup> and support systems, developed in recognition of student needs, help the distance learner become competent and self-confident in learning, social interactions and self-evaluation.<sup>11</sup> Wheeler<sup>12</sup> substantiates the impact of the provision of student-support services and contends that distance learning is not just a move away from learning within the classroom. It is a complete paradigm shift – a change in the fabric and culture of education. When delivering learning materials outside the classroom across any distance, it is important that technologies and techniques support learners and improve communications between students and tutors. In addition, Paul<sup>13</sup> argues that the overwhelming experience of distance educators has been an

increasing recognition that part-time adult learners, especially those at a distance, require all the personal support they can get if they are to succeed.

The distance learner's need for a variety of student-support services can be well justified. In the literature on student support, many researchers<sup>14</sup> express their conviction that learner-support services can personalise and humanise distance education systems. While course/materials writing and development tend to focus more on content, support services tend to focus on facilitating each student's full development.<sup>15</sup>

Each learner and each class is unique. Never is this more apparent than in a distance-learning environment. Each learner brings a different level of preparedness for the class, and we must be prepared for each learner.<sup>16</sup> It is the conviction of this researcher that the provision of student support is an attempt to be prepared for each learner. Sewart<sup>17</sup> stressed the need for preparedness through student support in his keynote address to the 16th World Conference of the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE) (1992) when he stated that:

The objective of a distance institution ... is the production of successful students ... Students will not easily achieve success if course materials are of poor quality. Nor will they achieve success if they are not dealt with individually through the student support subsystem.

It is clear that the purpose of student support is based on the belief that learner-centred support services are essential for real learning at a distance to take place, and are pivotal to learner completion.<sup>18</sup>

Distance education has rightly been recognised and acclaimed for its ability to 'open doors' for large numbers of people who have no other access to further education and training.<sup>19</sup> A critical question, however, is whether this access leads to success for the majority who enter the open doors? Studies internationally indicate that withdrawal has many different causes.<sup>20</sup> In support of this, Rae<sup>21</sup> found that learners with higher educational qualifications tend to do better than those with poorer qualifications. Those who find it difficult to reconcile the conflicting demands of their jobs, family and studies tend to do less well, as do those who find it difficult to direct their own learning.<sup>22</sup> According to Candy,<sup>23</sup> adults are powerfully affected by aspects of their backgrounds – including family and prior education – in ways that limit and constrain their ability to be self-directing in certain learning situations. He is of

the opinion that even though it has been argued that the ability to master the basic 'codes' of a task or subject is dependent in part on the learner's existing intellectual capabilities, in part on past education, and in part on his/her intentions and purposes, the combination may vary from situation to situation, and therefore a learner's autonomy is likely to vary from one context to another. Consequently, educators must avoid the automatic assumption that simply because a person has successfully learned something in the past, either in an instructional setting or outside it, he or she will be able to succeed in a new area. Orientation, support and guidance may all be required in the first stages of a learning project. Paul<sup>24</sup> introduces a strong note of realism when he argues that the notion advanced by earlier adult educators of the self-directed independent adult learner is largely a myth to anyone who has had the experience of working closely with students in a distance education environment. Brookfield<sup>25</sup> elaborates on this myth and sees methodological contradictions arising because most studies of self-directed learners have used subjects from middle-class, educationally advantaged backgrounds. He states that it is simply not possible to generalise from these studies. As such, Candy<sup>26</sup> points to the wealth of literature that suggests that many adults feel far from self-directed. He then argues that there is little or no evidence that self-directed approaches compensate for differences. Such an approach may accentuate disadvantage, if allowed. Self-direction benefits those students who are able to deal with it, but places those who are less confident at a relative disadvantage. In addition, Candy stresses that research has failed to demonstrate that any enjoyment derived from being allowed control over learning has increased enthusiasm for the subject matter itself, or improved achievement. Also, for students who have had unhappy experiences of learner-controlled instruction, motivation could be decreased by learner-control, leading to feelings of frustration, inability and eventually failure.

Similarly, Burge<sup>27</sup> concludes that:

We need not so much an andragogical system which encourages and reinforces self-directed learning, but a neo-andragogical approach – one that recognizes the realities of adulthood, not the myths. We need not so much self-directed learning as much as self-responsibility for learning. We need not so much to admire the independence of learners, as we need to facilitate the interdependence of learners and the collaboration of educators.

Candy<sup>28</sup> also argues that although it is possible for a person to become autonomous, and that such an attainment may be a central part of being an

adult, it cannot be assumed to be a unidimensional and once-and-for-all attainment. He explains that often a person will exhibit qualities of intellectual autonomy, but not moral or emotional (and vice versa). In addition, it is not uncommon to find a person who behaves autonomously in some aspect of his or her life (for instance at work), but seems very dependent when it comes to other aspects (for instance in a learning situation). It is not a single once-and-for-all attainment, but a constantly renewed and situationally variable attribute. In addition, Candy notes that no one ever becomes fully self-directed in any final sense, but in certain circumstances, or at certain times, people may behave more autonomously than at others.

It is my opinion that those of us who work in distance education institutions in Southern Africa can identify strongly with the arguments of the above authors. Adult distance learners in this context do need particular forms of support, since they constitute a socially and educationally disadvantaged majority. Nonyongo<sup>29</sup> notes that learners who had completed their studies were adamant that without the university support services they would not have succeeded in the face of the various pressures in their lives. According to her, the specific needs of distance learners from educationally and socially disadvantaged communities in Southern Africa include:

- the need to develop and maintain self-confidence, in the face of an unfamiliar learning process
- the need to understand the vocabulary as well as the discourse of a particular subject/course
- the need to unlearn rote learning as a way of 'learning' and to learn to become autonomous learners
- the need to develop time management skills, in view of long working hours and/or long hours spent travelling, discharging multiple responsibilities, etc.
- the need to have access to tutors and tutorials
- the need to study with other learners in order to engage in 'conversation' and develop a 'community' of fellow learners,<sup>30</sup> which affirms what is culturally true of many African learners in Southern Africa.

From the literature<sup>31</sup> on learner support in open and distance learning, it was concluded that:

- Learner-institution contact, such as regular contact with support staff, appears to have a positive effect on learner performance and persistence rates.
- Factors that correlate positively with course completion rates include the use of course assignments, early submission of the first assignment, short

turn-around time for giving learners feedback, pacing progress, supplementary audio-tapes or telephone tutorials, favourable working conditions in the learner's context, the quality of learning materials and reminders from tutors to complete work.

- Learners value contact with support staff and other learners, though they do not always use the services provided; learners most often report a preference for face-to-face tutoring rather than other media, though where face-to-face tutorials are not possible, other forms of contact are considered valuable.
- Personal circumstances and lack of time are the commonest reasons that are given for poor academic performance.

## **Methodology of this study**

Because this study is designed to provide a broad base of data supporting future improvements in the student-support system, a quantitative study was undertaken, using a questionnaire as the primary data collection method.

At the 1999 May and August vacation schools, questionnaires were administered to 750 distance education students who were enrolled in courses offered by CES. Of these, 423 were returned, a response rate of 56,4%. Responses were received from the main campus in Windhoek and the northern campus in Oshakati, about 700 kilometres from Windhoek, indicating a representative return. About half of the country's population live in the north-central part of Namibia and 15–20% live in Windhoek, the capital city and areas close to it. The remaining population are scattered over the rest of the country (Dodds 1996a). The four north-central regions, in which about 45% (715–500) of the country's population live, are served by the northern campus of the University of Namibia.

In accordance with the purpose of the study, the analysis of the responses was primarily descriptive, using means, frequency and percentage distributions to compare the proportions of respondents who responded in different directions. The chi-square test was utilised to determine whether there were significant relationships and/or differences amongst the variables.

## **Results**

The characteristics of the sample used in this study are as follows: 32,4%; 59,2% and 8,4% of those who responded to the questionnaire are students enrolled for the Diploma in Education – African Languages (DEAL); the Bachelor of Education (BEd) and the Bachelor of Nursing Science (BNSc)

degree respectively; 74,5% are females and 25,5% males; they are aged from 20 to 60 years, with a mean age of 35; 99% have full-time jobs and 39,9% part-time jobs; and they are distributed across the nine regional centres (see appendix A).

### ***Resources directly related to quality learning***

Resources directly related to learning include the hours that are available for study, study facilities, study conditions, access to the nearest university centre, telephone, television, radio, video-cassette recorder, audio-cassette recorder and a computer as well as the presence of other students living nearby and doing the same course. According to table 1 (see appendix B), a very significant minority of the students, that is, nearly a quarter (23,2%) reported that they have only 35 study hours available per week. Nearly 60% of students say they have 11 or fewer hours per week to spend on their studies; just over 30% spend between 11 and 20 hours on their studies; and less than 10% spend more than 20 hours per week studying. Regarding the question on their actual number of study hours, similar results were obtained. Further analysis of the data revealed no significant difference regarding students' gender and the number of study hours available.

Results indicated that 39,3% of the respondents use their bedroom as a study facility. Other study facilities include a study room (27,9%), living room (13,7%), under a tree (11,9%) and a kitchen table (7,2%).

More than two-thirds (67,9%) of the respondents reported that they have private and quiet study conditions (see table 2), while half (50,3%) of the respondents said they do not have electricity for studying. Results also showed that significantly fewer students from the Oshakati centre than students from the other centres have electricity for studying (see table 3). Contrastingly, significantly more students doing the BNSc degree have electricity for studying (see table 4).

Analysis of data showed that only 29,2% of the students stay 020 kilometres from the nearest university centre, while nearly 20% (19,3%) stay more than 100 kilometres away; and the remaining 51,4% stay between 20 and 100 kilometres from the nearest centre. From more detailed analysis, significantly more students doing BNSc stay closer to a university centre than students doing BED and DEAL (see table 5).

Regarding transport to the nearest university centre, 45,3% of the students use a taxi or bus to travel to the centre. However, again from more detailed analysis,

significantly more students doing BNSc use their own cars to travel to the university centre (see table 6).

Table 7 shows that only 38,1% of the respondents reported that they have their own telephone. However, a majority of 47,6% of students indicated that the nearest telephone is 020 kilometres away (see table 8). Interestingly, significantly more students doing BNSc have their own telephone and have approved access to their work telephone. Significantly fewer students from the Oshakati, Rundu and Tsumeb centres have their own telephone than students from other centres (see table 9).

All the BNSc students indicated that they have their own TV, which is significantly more than students doing BEd and DEAL. No significant difference was found regarding the availability of a radio and 97% of the students reported that they have their own radios. A significant difference was found when students were asked whether they have a video-cassette recorder, when significantly more students doing BNSc indicated that they have a video-cassette recorder.

According to detailed analysis significantly more BEd and BNSc students than DEAL students have their own audio-cassette recorders.

The majority of students reported that they do not own a computer, while 91,5% reported that they do not have access to Internet and e-mail facilities either (see table 7).

Chi-square analyses revealed that significantly more students from the Gobabis, Tsumeb and Khorixas centres reported that the number of students living nearby and doing the same course is in the range of 14. Seventy-five per cent (75%) of the students from Swakopmund reported that no students live near them or are doing the same course, while two-thirds of students from Katima-Mulilo reported that more than eight students live nearby and are doing the same course (see table 10). Table 11 shows that significantly more students doing BEd and DEAL than students doing BNSc indicated that no students live nearby or are doing the same course.

### ***Mode of study***

As expected, significant difference existed in the reasons given for studying through distance mode, with the BNSc students reporting that their course is not offered full time, while more BEd and DEAL students cited lack of time or

money for full-time study, the demands of a full-time job and too many responsibilities as reasons for studying through distance mode (see table 12).

### ***Analysis of open response items***

The open response items ought to provide additional insight into the perceptions of distance students of the effectiveness of the student-support system relative to significant factors that hindered the quality of their learning. The study also elicited student suggestions for improving this system. Of the 423 respondents, only 23 students (5,4%) did not respond to the open-ended items, indicating considerable interest in contributing to system improvements. The next two sections deal with their responses.

### **Significant factors that hindered the quality of learning**

The majority of students (43,6%) responded that their study material is not received on time; 13,2% indicated that their modules lack information; and 11,8% said they live too far from the university centre to be able to collect their study material. Other problems are reference/prescribed books not being available (6,2%); marking of assignments being of a poor standard and assignments not being returned on time (3,6%); study material being too difficult (4,1%); and prescribed books being too expensive (1,9%). Twenty-three students (5,5%) reported that they experience no problems with their study material. Significantly more BNSc students indicated that reference/prescribed books are not available and that such books are too expensive ( $\chi^2 = 86,6$ ;  $df = 16$ ;  $p < 0,05$ ) (see table 13). In addition, 24,7% of students cited poor administrative support as a factor that hinders the quality of their learning. Other factors include insufficient student support (7,3%); limited time for attending tutorials and tutors not being well prepared for vacation schools (1,2%); inadequate physical facilities, especially classroom facilities (1,2%); the Oshakati centre is not inadequate to serve all students in the northern regions of the country (1,7%). Moreover, significantly more BNSc students reported that tutors do not provide their names on assignments, while significantly more BNSc and DEAL students than BEd students, indicated that they do not experience problems that hinder the quality of their learning ( $\chi^2 = 80,43$ ;  $df = 22$ ;  $p < 0,05$ ) (see table 14).

### **Strategies to improve support for students**

Students (24,2%) discussed the importance of more regular contact and referred specifically to face-to-face and telephone tutorials. Many students

urged CES's administration unit to send study material directly to them and not via the university centres, so that they might avoid travelling long distances merely to be told that study material is not available. Significantly more BEd students suggested this strategy, ( $\chi^2 = 89.9$ ;  $df = 22$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) (see table 15). Students from Oshakati suggested that more university centres or mobile centres should be established in the northern regions of the country, since many of them live more than 200 kilometres from the Oshakati centre, which currently serves all students in the northern regions of the country. Other strategies included prompt administrative feedback (9,3%); the timeous distribution of study material (11,1%); prompt distribution of information circulars (5,6%); a debit order system to be introduced for payment of class fees (0,5%); more patience and motivation from tutors when study material is not understood (3,8%); tutors to provide more helpful comments on assignments (1,0%); improved library support and centres and libraries to be open on Saturdays and after working hours (3,8%); tutors to be better prepared and to assist students in a more constructive manner (1,0%).

## **Discussion and conclusions**

### ***Discussion***

In their objective responses, students believed that their families, jobs and other commitments exerted significant influences on the number of study hours available as well as the conditions under which they study. Many students stated that they do not have privacy when studying and they have to organise their studies within the bounds of family and other ongoing commitments. It appears that there are two levels of contextual frames. The student brings with him or her a set of frames such as family responsibility and commitments, job and social responsibilities. Once he or she becomes a student, another set of study-related contexts come into operation in the form of relationships with university staff and dependency on university facilities. Although the data suggest that the personal frames that relate to the student's life circumstances remain of paramount importance, students emphasise their need for student-support services. Library services are a prime concern for students and many opportunities exist to bridge the gap between the campus library and the distance student. Countrywide library networking and inter-library loan services should be a system priority. Students also stressed the importance of more regular contact and interaction with tutors and fellow students, which in my opinion could become a reality through the implementation of teleconferencing tutorials. Moreover, the difficulty of long-distance interaction can be cured through this option. Other options that should be explored include the

establishment of a mentor-system, whereby graduates assist students by forming study groups so that they are able to have discussions and interaction concerning the study material and assignments. The ability to interact via teleconferencing is of utmost importance, since it is through this interaction that students explore, probe, debate and clarify misunderstandings. Weston and Cranton (1986) suggest that interactive strategies, including class discussion, discussion groups, group projects and peer teaching are most effective for supporting analysis, synthesis, and problem solving skills. A system in which interaction is discouraged forces its participants to rely on teacher-centred strategies such as lectures that focus on information learning at the expense of higher-order learning. To adequately serve the learning needs of the society, interaction must be an opportunity provided by a student-support system rather than a barrier. Although the students gave the tutors a high rating overall, analysis of the open-ended items uncovered some evidence of inferior tutoring. The students emphasised the importance of effective interpersonal communications between student and tutor. Training should not only focus on the use of the particular mode of study, but should also emphasise the communication process, encouraging the tutor to assume a more active role in communicating with the distance student.

### ***Conclusions***

The data provided by this study support the conclusion that effective student-support services are imperative for improving the quality of student learning. However, data also confirmed that influences on distance students' learning are related to the personal constraints of their life circumstances. It is therefore evident that the profile and needs of distance learners justify the provision of individualised support if they are to complete their studies and develop into critical learners with appropriate competencies.

There is need for further research on the way students organise and execute their studies within the personal contextual factors that they have identified as barriers. In addition, the current climate of increasing interest in distance and open learning in Namibia makes it an opportune time for educators to examine some of the major factors that influence why and how students study in this mode. What is needed is a body of empirical evidence about the situational and intellectual contexts in which distance students work. This study provides some useful indicators for the direction of further research.