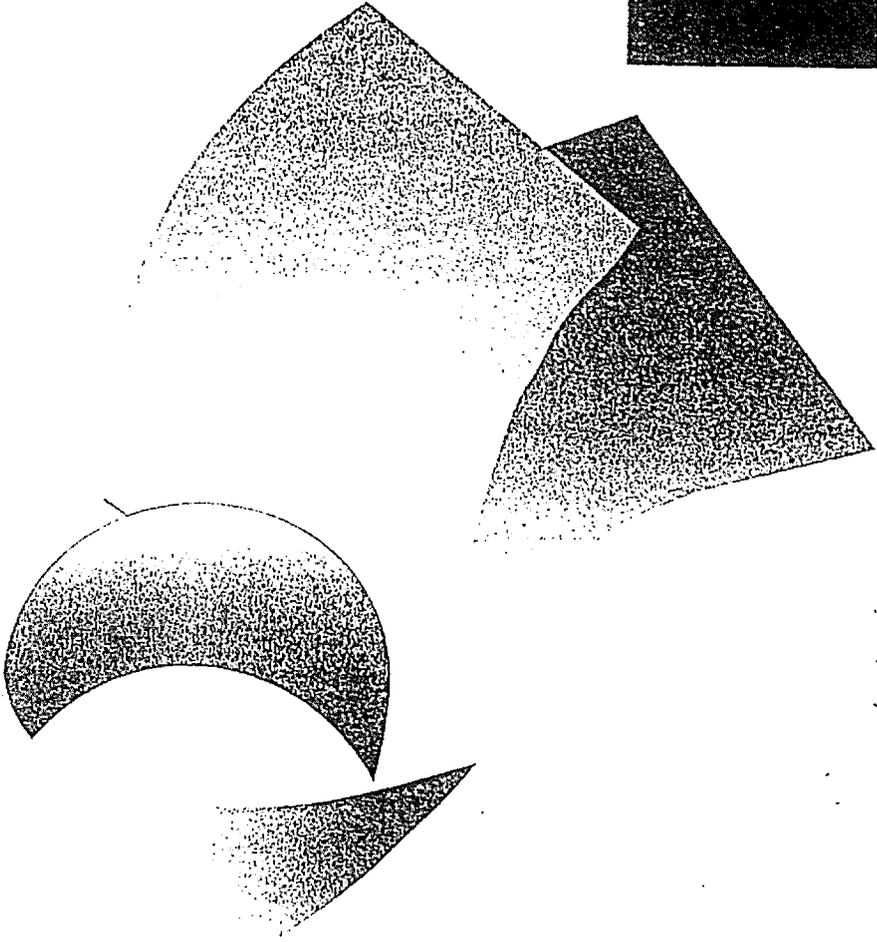


UNISA

20(1): 1998



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BUREAU FOR UNIVERSITY TEACHING  
BURO VIR UNIVERSITEITSONDERRIG



# *First-year business management at the University of South Africa: results of a student survey*

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article focuses on the results on a survey conducted among 1 060 Business Management I students at the University of South Africa. The main findings of the survey indicate that Business Management as a subject is experienced as a very practical subject; that the prescribed book and the study guide are easy to understand; that students link study content to things they know in everyday life; that they try to understand the content before answering assignments; that high marks are the factor that motivates them the most and that they would like to do old examination papers and submit them for evaluation.

## **OPSOMMING**

Hierdie artikel fokus op die resultate van 'n opname onder 1 060 Sakebestuur I studente by die Universiteit van Suid-Afrika. Die belangrikste bevindings van die opname is dat studente Sakebestuur ervaar as 'n baie praktiese vak; dat die studiegids en voorgeskrewe boek maklik is om te begryp; dat die inhoud van die vak gekoppel word met dit wat hulle reeds weet; dat hulle die inhoud probeer verstaan voordat werkopdragte beantwoord word; dat hoë punte hulle die meeste motiveer en dat ou vracstelle graag deurgewerk wil word voordat eksamen geskryf word.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Since South Africa has moved into a new democracy, various demands have been made on stakeholders. For example, businesses have to increase performance in order to survive; trade unions have to reassess their role in the new political environment; the state has to manage and allocate resources to an ever-increasing demand; and universities have to reassess their task in the light of smaller budget allocations and student profiles. One could possibly add a dozen more examples to the above list, but the principles underlying these changes are that individuals and the organisations they belong to have to evaluate their role critically in the light of new internal needs and whatever may be required to maintain standards internationally. The above changes generated the need to obtain the views on certain issues of Business Management students in the Department of Business Management at the University of South Africa (Unisa).

## **THE PURPOSE**

The purpose of this article is to report on a survey conducted among 1 060 first-year Business Management students at Unisa to obtain their views on the following issues:

- reasons for enrolling for Business Management
- clarity of the guides and prescribed work
- approaches to studying the prescribed work
- approaches to completing assignments
- variables influencing their studies
- ways in which the education package can be improved.

## **DISTANCE EDUCATION AND THE ADULT LEARNER**

The term "distance education" refers to the various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous immediate supervision of tutors present with students in lecture rooms or on the same premises but which benefit from planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial organisation (Fraser & Nieman 1995:10; Naidu 1994:23). Distance education therefore includes all the teaching methods in which the interactive and preactive phases of teaching are conducted through the print medium of mechanical or electronic devices. Students who study through distance education do so for a variety of reasons, say to upgrade their qualifications, to obtain a qualification without leaving the job environment, to study at relatively lower cost than is normally the case at residential tertiary institutions, to seek promotion, in response to pressure from employers requiring them to

register for a particular course and after drop-out from other universities (Van Schoor 1992:59).

The adult distance learner differs from the child learner (Steyn 1992:64) in various ways. For example, adults wish to know why they are learning before they start learning; they are self-motivated; they bring a great deal of experience to the learning experience; the learning environment is life oriented, task oriented and problem oriented; there is a great deal of equality between the lecturer and student; and adults take responsibility for their learning experience (Erasmus & Van Dyk 1996:77; Hayes 1990:25).

But apart from the apparent positive profile of the adult learner, Fraser (1993:32) reports various possible reasons for students' poor performance at distance-teaching institutions. They are as follows:

- the utilisation of outdated distance and contact-teaching strategies
- the use of pedagogical instructional theory for adults
- the structuring of a distance teaching package according to the didactic principles that apply to face-to-face teaching and not distance teaching
- overexposure of students to content that enhances superficial learning
- the lack of confidence in the ability to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant material, and the inadequacy of the text in guiding students in such decision making
- poor knowledge of the theory on adult learning and lack of skills in applying the theory to practice
- the poor and nonexistent in-service training of lecturers in distance teaching theory and philosophy.

Various factors have a negative influence on the capacity of lecturers to teach at distance education universities. Kilpert (1995:110) identifies the following possible reasons that lecturers at Unisa do not perform as expected. The first is the different vocational backgrounds of lecturers. Second, lecturers are uncertain and hesitant to involve themselves in training sessions focusing on instructional design because of overloaded academic programmes. Third, financial limitations make it impossible to expose lecturers to all aspects of teaching. Finally, there seems to be an inability to coordinate departmental activities with distance teaching development programmes offered by the Bureau for University Teaching.

The learning styles of students also influence their academic performance. Learning style can be defined as the way in which each person absorbs and retains information and/or skills regardless of how that process is described, and it is dramatically different for each person (Dunn in Fraser & Nieman

1995:24). A student's learning style gives rise to the preference that he or she has for a specific learning approach. Lecturers, on the other hand, may teach in the same way they were taught. According to Schulze (1995:22), various factors can influence a student's approach to learning, for example, the way assignments and examinations are evaluated. If questions focus on the meaning of the learning content, a more in-depth approach to learning is cultivated; a more in-depth approach to learning is enhanced if students perceive that in their departments the workload is not too heavy, sources are presented more informally and there is openness as regards students' views. The personality of students has a major impact on their learning approach. For example, students who are anxious when they study do not have an in-depth approach to their studies while those with an internal locus of control and intrinsic motivation tend to have an in-depth approach to their studies. Other factors that foster an in-depth approach to study are higher intelligence and maturity in students.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Target population and sample**

The target population for this study was first-year registered Business Management students for 1996 at Unisa. The total number of students was 9 042 and a random sample of 4 521 was drawn.

### **Questionnaire development and response**

The questionnaire questions were partly based on a study completed by Fraser and Nieman (1995) and new questions were developed to focus on the following main areas, namely the reasons for enrolling for the paper; understandability of the study guide and the prescribed book; approaches to study; approaches to the completion of assignments; factors influencing student studies; and factors influencing the distance educational package offered by the Department of Business Management.

The questionnaire was administered during the second half of 1996 and of the sample of 4 521, 1 060 (almost 23,5%) students responded.

### **Biographical details**

The occupations of the respondents are reflected in table 1. From table 1 it can be seen that at the time of the survey 24,2% of the respondents were working in a clerical capacity, some 8,8% were teachers, 3% were managers and 2,6% accountants. Full-time students represented 23,4% of the group

and 5,0% were unemployed. Men represented 50,9% of the sample and women 49,1%. The age group distribution was as following: 30,2% were in the age group 18 to 21; 30,6% in the age group 22 to 27; 30,5% in the age group 28 to 38; and 8,8% in the age group 39 and older. The black population group represented 46,8% of the sample, while whites, Indians and coloureds represented 38,4%, 11,2% and 3,1% respectively.

Table 1 Biographical data: occupation

Occupation	Frequency	Per cent
Accountant	28	2,6
Computer specialist	11	1,0
Engineer	14	1,3
Nurse	27	2,5
Technician	24	2,3
Teacher	93	8,8
Manager	32	3,0
Salesperson	18	1,7
Clerk	256	24,2
Full-time student	248	23,4
Occupation not classified	116	10,9
Unemployed	53	5,0
Other (eg doctor, social worker, researcher)	78	7,5
Unknown	62	5,8
TOTAL	1 060	100,0

### Statistical analysis

It was decided to use descriptive statistics such as arithmetic averages and frequencies. A factor analysis to determine the construct validity was also executed using the promax factor rotation method of the Statistical Analysis

System (SAS user's guide 1995). Six factors were identified and it was decided to group items per factor together where the factor loading was 0,30 or higher and where unique dimensions could be identified. The reliability of the questionnaire after the factor analysis as measured by the Alpha Cronbach coefficient was also acceptable, with an average of 0,78.

## **RESULTS OF THE STUDY AND DISCUSSION**

As indicated earlier, six factors were identified and the results of these dimensions will be reported, followed by a brief discussion.

### **Reasons for enrolling for Business Management I**

In this section respondents had to indicate why they had registered for Business Management I. A large group of 60,8% (see figure 1) indicated that it was the most interesting paper to register for, while 93,8% indicated that the paper would be of practical value to them in their careers. Only 9,6% were of the opinion that it was an easy paper while only 6,5% said that they had registered for the paper at their employer's insistence.

From the above it can be deduced that Business Management is viewed as a very practical subject and that it could be of practical value. It is also clear that employers generally do not insist that their employees register for the paper. This may be attributed to the fact that employers do not fully realise the value of the subject to their organisations if employees register for the paper or that students only perceive it to be of practical value but do not apply the principles in their work environment. Furthermore, only 41% agreed that it would improve their chances of immediate promotion. This shows that other factors may also contribute to the promotability of students in the workplace – which is quite realistic. This may, however, indicate that Business Management as a paper should be marketed more aggressively among the business community.

### **Textbook, study guide and tutorial letters**

In this section students were asked whether they agree with various statements about their textbook, study guide and tutorial letters (see figure 2). Students found the tutorial letters (95,8%) the easiest to understand; followed by the way the study guide is subdivided into topics and units (85,2%). They also felt that the study guide was easy to understand (82,3%) as were the learning objectives (81,3%). A large percentage (76,1%) agreed that the textbook was easy to understand and that the learning objectives could be used as a guide to study the learning content (72,1%).

Figure 1 Reasons for enrolling for Business Management I

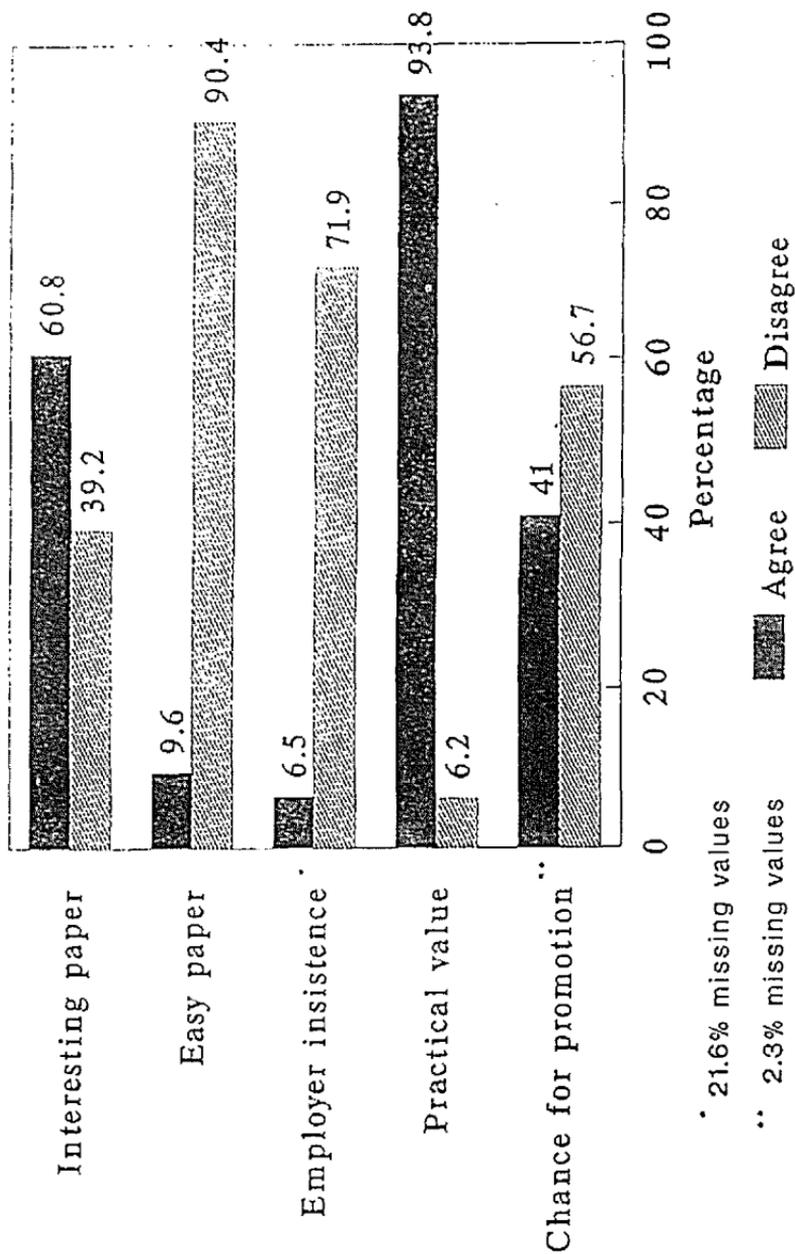
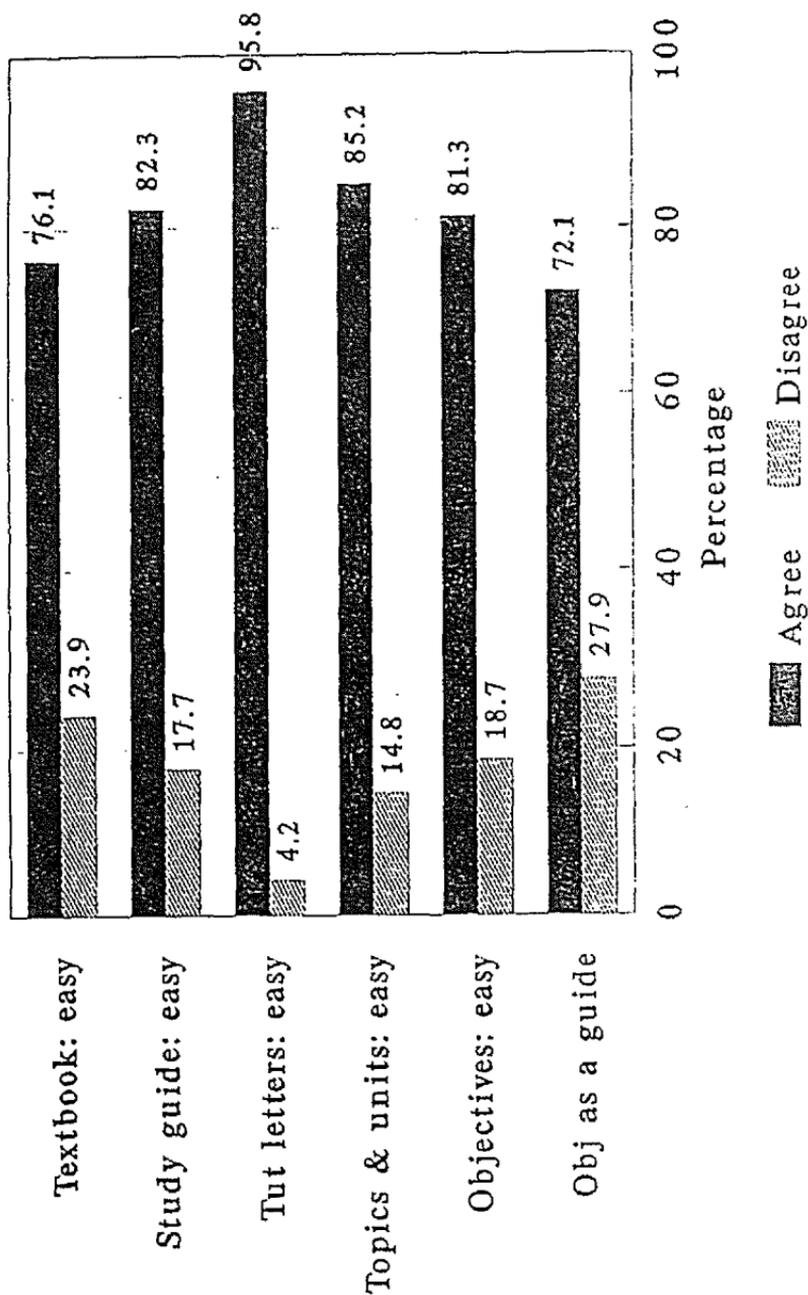


Figure 2 Textbook and study guide



From the responses it is clear that the textbook, study guide and tutorial letters as instruments of teaching for Business Management I are easy to understand. The majority of students who took part in this survey should therefore have no difficulty mastering the subject content but this does not mean there is no room for improvement. A calculated effort must, however, be made to improve the quality of teaching in the light of a constantly changing environment, new teaching methods and new technology (for example CD-ROM and the Internet).

### **Approaches when studying the prescribed work**

In this section students were asked how they approached their prescribed work when studying. A scale on which one equals "never" and four equals "always" was used (see table 2). The five approaches adopted by the majority of students were firstly to link the study content to things they knew in everyday life (86,1%). The second approach was to bring together facts that relate to each other (86,0%). The third approach was to link new information to what they already knew (historical data) (82,7%). The fourth approach was to read a part of the prescribed work over and over until it was fully understood (77,4%), and lastly to differentiate between important and unimportant information (75,2%). In these five approaches adopted by the majority of students when studying their prescribed work, the emphasis is on the applicability of the content to what they experience daily in their work environment and what they already know. This corresponds to the characteristics of adult learners. In this regard Knowles (Van Dyk et al 1997:138) reports that the adult learner brings a greater volume and quality of experiences to the learning situation. New learning is understood better if it can be linked to previous relevant experiences. Past experiences can therefore play an important role in facilitating students' own learning.

Factors that are lower on the priority list when studying the prescribed material and are therefore never or seldom used were, first, only memorising facts without understanding the content (49,6%); second, making use of notes in the study guide to facilitate learning (53%); third, comparing views on subject matter with fellow students and colleagues (62%); fourth, drawing diagrams and pictures of important concepts in order to link new content to knowledge already acquired (62%); and last, recording the content on tape and replaying it for study purposes (87,4%). The group of respondents did not appear to make use of various aids to enhance their learning experience.

Good use of learning techniques can impact tremendously on the learning

Table 2 Approach when studying the prescribed work

	Never	Seldom	Often	Always
Memorise facts only	13,0	36,6	40,8	9,5
Read over until I understand	2,6	19,8	44,4	33,0
Understand easy parts before continuing with difficult parts	11,1	19,9	36,9	31,9
Make notes in the study guide	21,0	32,0	29,00	18,0
Link new information to what I know	2,8	14,5	44,1	38,6
Know how to differentiate between important and unimportant information	4,8	19,9	53,7	21,5
Link study content to things I know in everyday life	2,6	11,2	40,3	45,8
Record on tape	75,1	12,3	8,5	4,2
Draw diagrams and pictures of important aspects	30,8	39,4	22,5	7,4
Compare my views with friends and colleagues	34,3	27,7	23,0	15,0
Bring together facts that are related	1,4	12,7	54,8	31,2
Combine information from various sources	10,4	31,7	41,2	16,7
Formulate questions	14,6	33,6	35,6	16,1

experience of adult learners, especially when a technique such as using mind maps is mastered early in the person's academic career. One approach that should be encouraged is for students to discuss the subject matter with fellow students (if possible and if groups can be formed) and colleagues. However, in distance learning students study on their own and there is generally little contact with fellow students. It would also greatly enhance students' learning experience if they would discuss the content with their colleagues without discouraging them from possibly furthering their own

studies or creating a too "academic" approach in solving daily problems. The ultimate aim would be to encourage managers in organisations to realise the importance of the subject matter in solving organisational problems and in the process assist students in their learning experience.

### Approach when completing assignments and assignments in general

As in the previous section, students were asked to evaluate their approach on their assignments on a four-point scale, in which one equals "never" and four equals "always" (see table 3).

Table 3 Approach when completing assignments

	Never	Seldom	Often	Always
Only copy facts when completing an assignment	27,6	34,6	27,61	0,2
Do assignments without knowing why	42,8	42,2	13,6	1,3
Do assignments without knowing the practical implications	41,2	44,0	13,5	1,2
Dependent on lecturers to do assignments	78,7	15,6	3,7	2,1
Assignments are personal growth experience	7,9	13,4	35,5	43,1
Understand different sections before I continue with assignment	1,7	10,7	41,7	45,8

The majority of students (94,3%) in this survey indicated that they do not depend on phoning lecturers to do their assignments followed by the fact that they try to understand the different sections of the work before attempting to do the assignment (87,5%). A large percentage of the students rejected the view that they do assignments without knowing the practical implications thereof (85,2%), do assignments without knowing why (85%); and that only facts are copied when assignments are done (61,9%). About 78,6% of the respondents felt that assignments are often or always an opportunity for personal growth and not an exercise merely to learn facts. From this section it can be deduced that this group of students know what the purpose of an assignment is when completing it, try to understand the

theoretical parts applicable before attempting an assignment and they know what the practical implications of the assignment are.

That facts are not simply copied when completing assignments indicates that some form of in-depth learning does take place during this process. The nature of the assignment questions will, however, also determine the level of the learning experience. The use of multiple choice questions as the only method of testing students' knowledge should be reconsidered. Other approaches for example self-test evaluation should also be considered.

### **Variables influencing studies**

In this section respondents were provided with a set of statements which may influence their studies. They were required to indicate to what extent they agree with the different statements. The statements which the respondents agreed had the most impact on their studies in order of priority are:

- High marks motivate me to maintain a high level of performance.
- Positive feedback from lecturers serves as self-motivation.
- Keeping to a study programme ensures success.
- Setting goals for success.
- Academic success is experienced when assignments are successfully completed.
- Completing a task within the planned time gives me a feeling of "being in control of my studies".
- I possess the necessary self-confidence to pass the paper.
- I study according to a preplanned study schedule.

Apart from the last item on the list, where only 66,6% of the respondents agreed with the statement, over 90% of the respondents agreed with the top seven. The first two statements on the list indicate that students view items in which an external source, for example a lecturer providing feedback on academic input, as a statement high on the list of priorities. Those activities which the student has to perform to ensure academic output are placed lower on the list, the lowest being study according to a preplanned study schedule. As Business Management students they should know that a proper plan is required to ensure success and that this principle also applies to one's own study programme. This approach can possibly be ascribed to the fact that this group of first-year students did not have any previous experience of learning in which an in-depth approach to study is required, and they may be more accustomed to superficial learning.

## Educational package

In this section, respondents were provided with a set of ideas on how to improve the distance education package which they had to assess in terms of statements rated according to a four-point scale in which one equals "strongly disagree" and four "strongly agree" (see figure 3). Most of the respondents (95,7%) agreed that they should have the opportunity to answer old examination papers and submit these for evaluation. Other items in which there was high agreement were the creation of accessible library facilities (88,5%), sending out videotapes on which assignments are discussed (87,8%), making lectures available on videotape (87,7%), presenting more than two discussion classes (83,8%) and appointing senior students as tutors close to the areas in which students live (80,9%).

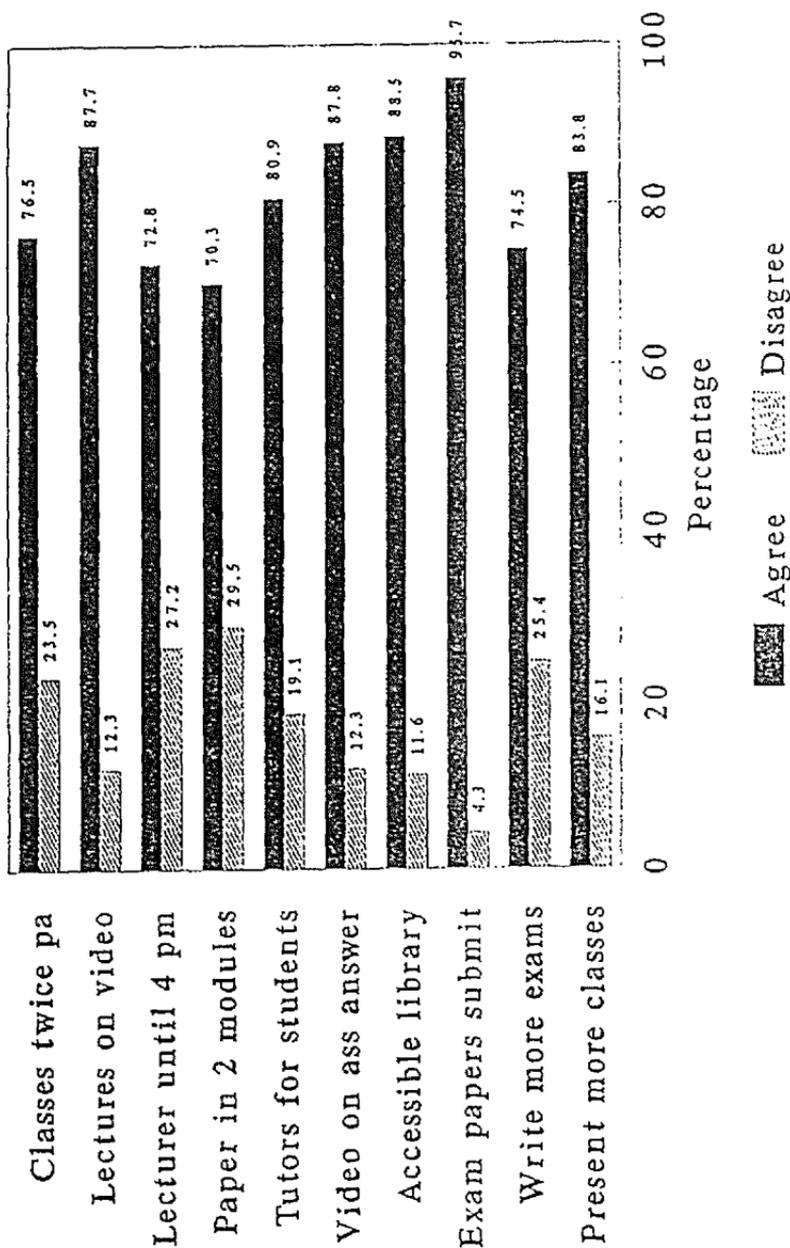
The last four items on the list to improve the educational package are as follows: offering discussion classes twice a year (76,5%); writing more than one examination in a subject during the year (74,5%); having academics available to answer academic questions by telephone until 16:00 (72%); and the lowest on the list, dividing one-year papers into two six-months modules to be examined separately (70,3%).

The item highest on the priority list of items which, according to students, can improve the study package will have to be evaluated by the Department of Business Management. One present difficulty is that only multiple-choice questions are used in the examination, and that the previous year's examination papers are not available to students.

Assignments during the year, however, provide ample opportunity for students to practise and involve themselves in the multiple-choice question method. The prescribed work used for this paper is adequate for preparing for assignments and the examination, and the great need for library facilities may not only be for the use of books but rather a need for study facilities. There is also a need to provide lectures and answers to assignments on videotape. This service could enhance the distance education package but in the present financial climate at Unisa this option will not be feasible in the near future. Respondents have expressed a need for the services of tutors, and the possibility of expanding this service should definitely be considered.

Perhaps students should be reminded that they are furthering their studies through a distance education university and that the core business of the Department of Business Management is to teach students by means of distance teaching, and this Department will provide the service within the limitations and opportunities associated with this method of teaching.

Figure 3 Aspects that will improve your distance educational package



## CONCLUSION

In this study, various issues relating to the preferences of first-year Business Management students were examined. From the results it is clear that students view the paper as very practical, that the study guides and prescribed book are regarded as understandable, that their approach to studying the content is associated with what they know in everyday life and that they try to understand the various sections before attempting to answer assignments. It is also clear that feedback provided by lecturers in academic performance plays an important role in the motivational level of students – positive feedback and high marks will probably motivate students positively. There is also a need for video material providing feedback on assignments and the content of lectures, and students should also be given the opportunity to answer old examination papers.

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## **Die "doen" van Antropologie - die Unisa ervaring**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Innovative means of training students in anthropological research methods are essential if Unisa is to produce graduates who are not mere theoreticians. Annually, since 1990, the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology has offered third-year students "hands-on" experience in host communities willing to contribute to the students' learning experience. The informal reports which students write after the event indicate that this is a meaningful initiation into "doing anthropology" which far surpasses merely reading about the process. One such report is reproduced here.

### **OPSOMMING**

Kreatiewe metodes om studente in antropologiese navorsingsmetodes op te lei is noodsaaklik as Unisa gegraduateerdes wil voortbring wat nie slegs teoretikusse is nie. Jaarliks, sedert 1990, reël die Departement Antropologie en Argeologie vir derdejaarstudente 'n praktiese ervaring binne gasheerge-meenskappe wat bereid is om tot studente se leerproses by te dra. Die verslae wat studente na afloop van die geleentheid skryf, dui daarop dat dit 'n betekenisvolle inisiasie tot die "doen van antropologie" is en wat die blote lees oor die proses ver oortref. Een sodanige verslag word hier weergegee.