

**Tutors' perceptions of effective facilitation through the use of an integrated  
tutor model (ITM) in an open and distance learning (ODL) environment**

by

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# DECLARATION

**STUDENT NUMBER: 664 215 2**

I, Cynthia Hlekwise Smangele Ntuli declare that the work on **TUTORS' PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVE FACILITATION THROUGH THE USE OF AN INTEGRATED TUTOR MODEL (ITM) IN AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) ENVIRONMENT** is my own work and that all sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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Signature

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Date

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation firstly to my husband Siyabonga Samson Ntuli, who stood by me in my journey. I will always value the support you gave me making our house to be a comfortable place for me to study and provided all e-resources needed for me to continue without any hindrances.

My children, Thabo and Khanyisile I appreciate your support ensuring that you pray for me and gave me time to be with my books when I was expected to spend time with you. I thank you.

My mother, Sphiwe Sibiya and my late father Ebenezer Sibiya who encouraged me to continue studying and be what I always dreamt of becoming.

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## ABSTRACT

Facilitation of learning through the use of tutors is a worldwide approach that is supported by most Open and Distance Learning institutions. This approach was expanded by integrating face-to-face mode of delivery and online delivery with the purpose of increasing access and participation of students at Unisa. However, the practicality of this integration cannot be overlooked and this reality led to this study. Given the background, this dissertation presents a study on tutors' perceptions of effective facilitation through the use of an integrated tutor model (ITM) in an Open Distance Learning (ODL) environment. This study sought to explore the views of Unisa tutors focusing on the success factors, challenges and the impact this model has on tutors' behaviour in terms of tutorial delivery in the implementation of the integrated tutor model in tutorial classes. This was done with an aim of expanding access and participation. A qualitative research method was conducted with Unisa Gauteng Region tutors. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews. The findings of the study showed that the level of academic staff involvement in the tutorial program is very low and there was no involvement at all in other colleges. The training and development provided to ODL tutors is highly appreciated by tutors, however, it needs to be intensified to yield the desired outcomes. Findings further revealed that the institution needs to attend to the provision of access to students. Based on these findings, recommendations were made that academic staff members need to increase their level of involvement in the tutorial program in order to support tutors who provide support to students. Practical training of tutors on the use of technology is necessary and the institution must increase access to computers and the internet for students.

**Key terms:** Distance education; Open Distance Learning (ODL); online education; interaction; effective facilitation; social constructivism; tutor.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS**

ASCs	Academic Support Coordinator
CPD	Centre for Professional Development
DE	Distance Education
DHET SA	Department of Higher Education and Training South Africa
DVD	Digital Versatile Disk
F2F	Face-to-face
HEI	Higher Education Institution
ICT	Information communication technology
IPMS	Integrated Performance Management System
ITM	Integrated Tutor Model
KPA	Key Performance Areas
LMS	Learning Management System
NICLS	Networked Information and Communication Literacy Skills
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
ODL	Open Distance Learning
PARC	Professional & Administrative Research Committee
RAC	Regional Academic Coordinator
SOP	Standard Operational Procedure
UNISA	University of South Africa

# **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

## **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

The learner support system is regarded as the heartbeat of an Open and Distance Learning institution (Tait, 2003). Most learners who enrol in institutions of higher learning expect that they will receive support that will assist them to succeed at their studies. They therefore choose to study at institutions that will provide this support. Successful distance education institutions use various strategies to support their learners. One of these strategies used by the majority of institutions is a tutor support system that is often two-fold. Depending on the profile of the students, an institution can choose to use either a face-to-face tutor system or an online tutor system, or both. The University of South Africa (Unisa) is one of the institutions that use both systems as it is guided by the profile of its students and the principles of equality of opportunity and high academic quality (Peters, 2001).

In order for the tutorial support system to succeed at Unisa, it is important to hear the views of tutors who facilitate this program at this institution. Tutors are the face of Unisa since they are the first line of staff members who interact with students in tutorial classes face-to-face or online. Tutors' views matter and they can contribute to the improvement of the support system in order for students to get maximum benefit as intended by the institution.

This study drew from the experiences of Unisa tutors and investigated their views regarding the Integrated Tutor Model (ITM) that was introduced in 2013 with an intention of expanding access and participation in order to benefit the large number of students at Unisa. This support program is intended to increase the throughput rate that is one of the challenges for institutions of higher learning. According to the annual report on the proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa (2013), throughput rate in institutions of higher learning is generally low. The graduation percentage of students in institutions of higher learning is less than 50% in South African universities. This low rate of graduation does not meet the country's economic and social needs. The Annual Report of

the Council on Higher Education (2006-2007, p. 18) also indicates that “low graduation rates, high dropout rates and general academic underperformance are central problems facing South African universities”. It is against this background that this study was carried out to find out whether the tutor program contributed to the institutional throughput rate.

The aim of this chapter is to provide the outline of the study by exploring the background against which this study was carried out, the research question and related sub-research questions, aims and objectives of the study, significance of the study, definition of concepts and the basic structural outline of the study.

## **1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

The University of South Africa (Unisa) is the largest university in the country and one of the ten largest distance teaching universities in the world (Peters, 2001). It is an Open Distance Learning (ODL) institution that seeks to provide education to students irrespective of colour, creed, race, gender and disability. “The most important factor is that the university proved itself as the only integrated university in South Africa admitting students of all races” (Peters, 2001 p. 185). According to a Unisa report on selecting a future business model (Unisa, 2012, p. 1), Unisa has, in the past, used a model that included “physical printing, warehousing and distribution of materials, physical submission and return of assignments via the post and courier services”. These support services included library, career counselling and face-to-face tutorial support. This model assumed that students did not have access to ICT hence the physical provision of services. The provision of education through the post was based on the industrial approach to teaching and learning as described by Peters (2010) as the first generation of distance education.

Institutional commitment is a crucial element in driving institutional goals. In ensuring that Unisa delivers its institutional goals as directed by the Department of Higher Educational and Training in South Africa (DHET SA), they were aligned with strategies that would promote delivery. One of the institutional goals, as reflected in the Unisa Strategic Plan (2015, p. 18), is that “Unisa needs to

establish service-oriented, technology-enhanced learner support to increase the retention and throughput rate”.

All institutional goals must be aligned to policies. According to Brown, Paewai and Suddaby (2010), policy plays an important role in redefining the political landscape in higher education. The university therefore had to revise its tuition policy in 2013 to align itself with the new business model and to meet the needs of students. The policy states clearly that Unisa “strives to provide accessible and affordable learning opportunities to all students regardless of their background” (Unisa Tuition Policy, 2013, p. 1). Over and above that, the university developed a document on the guiding principles and framework for ODL pedagogy in 2011. The document aimed at providing a shared and approved broad framework for teaching and learning in an ODL context.

For more than ten years, Unisa offered tutorial support on a face-to-face basis only because there was a need to support students in this manner. Students were expected to attend tutorials in regional service centres mainly on Saturdays in order to accommodate students who were working. However, tutorials also took place during the weekdays because there were many full time students who were studying on campus and were able to attend during the day. According to Holmberg (2005, p. 124), the profile of distance education institution students includes “adults who are employed and/or fully occupied with family life and this makes distance education a separate kind of education”. However, expecting distance students to attend face-to-face tutorial classes eliminates the main advantage of distance education, namely, flexibility (Brewer, Cinel, Harrison & Mohr, 2013).

Many distance institutions have built support strategies within the course design, however, with Unisa, the tutor system was an add-on and not part of the course design since it did not form part of the curriculum design and development as is done in other ODL institutions. This was one of the challenges of face-to-face tutoring at Unisa. In 2012, the institution decided to change the way it supports its students in order to maximise access to the tutor support program available at Unisa and remove barriers of access and flexibility in this program. It was clear

that the program did not reach as many students as it should despite the fact that Unisa established regional service centres with extended agencies to provide tutorial support to students. According to various institutional reports, it was estimated that the program reached only 30% of Unisa students and contributed very little to the throughput rate.

With the introduction and increased usage of Information Communication Technology (ICT), an opportunity was identified by the institution to integrate the existing face-to-face tutor support with online tutor support. Technology provides greater opportunities for institutions to support learners in various ways that would enhance teaching and learning, participation, engagement and provides flexibility in the learning journey (Westbrook, 2012). With the introduction of the e-tutor system, the role of tutors and the tutorial support was built into the curriculum design (Unisa Tutor Model, 2012).

Westbrook (2012, p. 1) observes that e-learning provides an opportunity to use technology to motivate students to interact with each other and with their tutors towards a common goal. Moore and Kearsley (2012, p. 20) emphasise that

the idea of distance education means that more people have access, more easily, to more and better learning resources than they could in the past, when they had to accept only what was locally provided.

The use of ICT has changed the face of distance education for the better. As Laurillard (2002) notes, there has not been any significant change in our understanding of learning and teaching for the past one hundred years and that students need to be actively engaged in the learning process. This can be done easily by the use of e-learning. Also, if one buys into social constructivism and the notion of communities of learning and practice, according to Wenger (2000), this can also be easily done with online e-learning where a group of students come together in a virtual environment, interact, do things together, negotiate new meanings and learn from each other. However, Bates and Sangra (2011) believe that, in practice, the affordances of ICT for greater student activity and interaction are not always fully employed. This was the case with Unisa, ICT was used in small percentage for instance through Video conferencing where

students and tutors had to be at a certain location at a particular time chosen by the institution.

The challenges faced by the institution in using face-to-face tutorial support included the following:

- F2F tutoring did not successfully bridge the geographical distances and not all students benefitted from tutoring program;
- F2F tutoring was an-add on construct in teaching and learning activities and was not integrated into the curriculum design;
- F2F tutoring program was student driven and not initiated by the institution;
- Tutors did not receive discipline specific training which is necessary for tutoring specific modules in their disciplines; and
- The use of technology in tutorials was too limited.

Based on the challenges listed above, in 2012 the institution saw it fit to come up with an alternative model that would try and address the challenges. According to Unisa tutor model (2012) Integrated tutor model (ITM) gives all students an opportunity to engage with instructors or tutors with an aim of ensuring success and social integration, it bridges geographical distance and allows all students to benefit from tutoring, tutoring is no longer an add on construct but the institution ensures that during the design phase, the curriculum development team includes tutoring in the design so that it is integrated with teaching and learning and aligned with ODL pedagogy adopted by Unisa, student-content interaction is built into the design of study materials and student-student interaction and student-tutor interaction is also built into the design of the LMS ( Myunisa) through discussion forums and other platforms.

### **1.3 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND RESEARCH QUESTION**

Globally, institutions of higher learning in an ODL context adopt both face-to-face and online support for students. This fast growing trend, in response to the students' demands, is embraced by many institutions, including Unisa. Braimoh (2010) indicates that it is important that institutions of higher learning do not

ignore ODL practices which, among other reasons, offer flexibility in terms of the learning environment.

For many years, Unisa has been supporting students using face-to-face tutorials as a strategy to increase participation and throughput rate within the institution. Recently, Unisa decided to change the strategy of supporting learners by implementing the new tutor model called integrated tutor model (ITM). However, there are challenges with the new tutor model. The main problem relates to students' access and participation.

This study sought to explore the following question: How effective is the integrated tutor model in facilitating teaching and learning in an Open and Distance Learning environment?

In order to answer the main research question, the study explored the following sub-questions:

- What are the success factors of the ITM implementation in tutorial classes?
- What are the challenges in the implementation of the integrated tutor model in tutorial classes?
- How does the model impact tutors' behaviour in terms of tutorial delivery?

The research will fill the existing gaps in the facilitation of learning particularly on the issues of access, participation and interaction in an open and distance learning environment. The research will also provide information regarding tutor training that would benefit the learner in ODL.

## **1.4 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

### **1.4.1 Aim of the study**

The main purpose of the study was to explore tutors' views on the effectiveness of the integrated tutor model (ITM) in facilitation of tutorials in an Open and Distance Learning institution like Unisa.

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

The objective of the study was to:

- provide empirical evidence of tutor's views of the ITM;
- identify challenges faced by tutors facilitating through the ITM;
- explore areas for improvement; and
- suggest recommendations that will enhance effective facilitation of the integrated tutor model at Unisa.

### **1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

According to the Unisa Tutor Model (2012), tutorials emphasise collaborative learning amongst students. Tutoring promotes social integration particularly at the first year level of study. Unisa provides students who enrol with a tutor who will guide them as they grapple with the many challenges that may confront students entering university directly from a school environment. Requiring students to participate in a small group provides Unisa with an opportunity to design teaching and learning that fits the theoretical framework of social constructivism for student support. Many students find this type of support valuable since it breaks the feeling of isolation and reduces dropout rates (Moore & Kearsley, 2012).

It was thus important to carry out this study in order to recommend additional strategies that would close the gaps identified by tutors in the implementation of the Unisa integrated tutor model and how these gaps contribute to tutors' performance in terms of tutorial delivery. Hopefully, addressing these gaps will result in increasing throughput rate for the institution that is one of the university's strategic goals as indicated in the Unisa strategic objectives.

The research is therefore relevant to the following people:

- Lecturers: This rich study will provide an opportunity for lecturers to review and improve the support they provide to tutors who have an advantage of interacting with students. Tutors are the first line of support at Unisa and need to be supported by academic departments.
- Researchers: The Integrated Tutor Model is very broad and this study focused on only one aspect of the model. Researchers can build on this

study by looking at other aspects of ITM implementation. This study can serve as a springboard for further research.

- Unisa: The Unisa community will be able to take sound decisions that will assist the ITM to yield good results as intended by the institution.
- Regional staff members: Regional Service Centres across South Africa are the first contact when it comes to Unisa services. Regional staff members will be able to review their practices especially on the administrative professional support provided to tutors for the successful implementation of the Integrated Tutor Model.
- Course designers: Course designers will be able to design the course in a way that incorporates the role of a tutor and ensures that this role is built into the course instead of being treated as a separate entity.
- Policy makers: This study will assist policy makers in Institutions of Higher Education to set up standards for tutor support programs.
- Tutors: Tutors will be able to reflect on their services and learn how to best facilitate learning in the open distance learning environment through the integrated tutor model and increase the throughput rate as expected by the institution.

## **1.6 DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS**

### **Distance education**

Distance education is defined as a planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, and special methods of communication by electronic and other technology as well as special organizational and administrative arrangement (Kanuka & Brookes, 2010, p. 84-85 as defined by Moore & Kearsley, 1996 p. 2)

### **Open and Distance Learning (ODL)**

A term adopted by institutions for a range of features meant to extend access to educational opportunities to people who would otherwise be excluded. The term was intended to indicate that 'openness' is dependent on much more than just delivering courses at a distance (Shale, 2010).

### Online education

This is a form of education that is delivered through a number of computer-assisted instruction methods. This type of education includes synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (anytime, anywhere) interactions (Poe & Stassen, 2002).

### Integrated tutor model

An integrated tutor model is a type of tutoring that uses face-to-face offerings as well as e-tutoring systems to support learners. In face-to-face tutoring, students and tutors are at the same location while e-tutoring bridges the geographical distance and allows all students to benefit from tutoring (Unisa Tutor Model, 2012).

### Social constructivism

This is the theory of learning which refers to knowledge that is constructed through social interaction. According to this theory, knowledge is constructed from the experiences and interactions of individuals in relation to the world and each other (Swan, 2010).

### Interaction

Reciprocal events that require at least two objects and two actions. Interaction occurs when these objects and events mutually influence one another (Anderson, 2003).

### Effective facilitation

In the context of Unisa, effective facilitation is defined as the process of providing support to students by initiating dialogue and discussion around key issues and themes in the curriculum. This takes place on a weekly basis through questions and focus as defined by the lecturer. The tutors give an explanation of key issues and problematic sections of the modules, assist students to resolve such problems, assist students to acquire knowledge and skills necessary for their learning and assist students to be independent and self-directed in their learning (Unisa Tutor Model, 2012).

Tutor

Tutors are instructors in a distance education environment who are involved with one-on-one, private teaching or instruction. A tutor refers to one charged with instruction and guidance on a given topic or subject (Haughey, 2010).

## **1.7 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS**

The study consists of the following chapters:

### **Chapter 1**

This chapter introduces the topic of this dissertation. It comprises the background against which this study was carried out, the research question and related sub-research questions, aims and objectives of the study, significance of the study, definition of concepts, and the basic structural outline of the study.

### **Chapter 2**

The chapter reviews the literature that is relevant for the study and briefly introduces the theory that informs the study.

### **Chapter 3**

This chapter will comprehensively elaborate on the scientific research process followed in this study. This includes the research design, data collection method, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

### **Chapter 4**

In this chapter, the findings of the study will be discussed in detail. The themes extracted from the raw data will also be explored and linked with the relevant literature.

### **Chapter 5**

This final chapter that follows presents an overview of the study, recommendations of the study, the limitations of the study and recommendations for further research.

# **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE RELATED RESEARCH LITERATURE**

## **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

Vithal and Jansen (2002) state that a literature review provides the summary of the existing core of knowledge on the topic under study. Guided by the research questions stated in Chapter 1, the current review will critically investigate literature about distance education, open distance learning, dealing with isolation in distance education, accessing tutorials in distance education, facilitation of learning and interaction in distance education.

## **2.2 WHAT IS DISTANCE EDUCATION (DE)?**

Mohakud and Mohapatra (2012) refer to Sharma (2007) who defines distance education (DE) as an off-campus study, home study, independent study, open education, distance learning, among others. According to Sharma (2007, p. 367) “the use and meaning of these terms denote more or less the same and this depends on the historical circumstances in various countries”. The policy for the provision of distance education in South African universities in the context of an integrated post-school system (South Africa, 2014, p. 11) defines distance education within the South African context as

a mode of provision based primarily on a set of teaching and learning strategies (or educational methods) that can be used to overcome spatial and/or transactional distance between educators and students. It avoids the need for students to discover the curriculum by attending classes frequently at a set venue and for long periods. Rather, it aims to create a quality learning environment using an appropriate combination of different media, tutorial support, peer group discussion, and practical sessions.

Moore and Kearsley (1996 as cited by Kanuka & Brookes, 2010, pp. 84-85) define DE as

planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, and special methods of communication by electronic and other

technology as well as special organizational and administrative arrangements.

On the other hand, Bullen (1995) sees DE as a formal educational situation in which a teacher and learners are separated in time and space and in which the instruction is delivered primarily by the printed word, supplemented occasionally by the telephone and other media. According to Bullen, DE does not differ from correspondence education.

The terms used for DE are “open learning” and “distance learning” (ODL). Islam and Ferdowsi (2014) assert that these terms are used interchangeably in the field of post-school education. According to these researchers, some literature proposes that there is no distinction between them (Rumble, 1989 as cited by Islam & Ferdowsi, 2014) while others are convinced that there is some kind of overlap since “distance learning is a subcategory of open learning” (Lewis & Spencer, 1986, p. 74 as cited by Islam & Ferdowsi, 2014).

Islam and Ferdowsi (2014, p. 176) indicate a difference between the two terms which is that

distance learning refers mainly to a mode of delivery (independent learning at a distance through the means of self-study texts and non-contiguous communication), while open learning includes the notion of both openness and flexibility (whereby students have personal autonomy over their studies and where access restrictions and privileges have been removed) and distance (as independence from the teacher).

Scholars use a range of terms such as m-learning and e-learning to describe distance education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when mediated by technology. As scholars began to write about DE as a unique form of teaching and learning, specific principles or characteristics were identified.

### **Distance education can be independent of time and place**

In most cases, a student can study at anytime and anywhere, on his or her own while students can be brought together virtually or face-to-face when it is beneficial to learning (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). This characteristic is one of the

key strengths of distance learning environments as it produces students who are “autonomous and self-guided” in their learning journey (Peters, 2001, p. 16). Holmberg (2005) refers to four types of students who study with distance mode to acquire qualifications and skills. The first category comprises adults who are employed, are family women/men and who have little or no contact with fellow students studying the same course. Haughey (2010, p. 61) indicates that the above category attracts learners who are already in the “workplace”. The second category consists of students who study with distance institutions for self-development. The third category consists of people who identify an opportunity with the introduction of technology that has made group work practicable. The last category is known as “home schooling” and is made up of youth and children who learn under adult supervision and are supported by adults as teachers, organisers or advisors. According to Holmberg (2005), these students are distributed across the globe and use their own individual time tables. This concept of home schooling is slowly being used in Africa.

### **Media can be used for teaching**

According to Menchaca and Bekele (2008, p. 231),

[t]raditionally DE utilized all forms of tools for teaching and learning. Some of the tools include written materials distributed by post, cable television, satellite broadcasting, phone conferencing or perhaps two way teleconferencing.

Peters (2004) indicates that DE most often utilises the written word to deliver instruction to learners who are geographically distributed all over the globe. This method of instruction dates back 2000 years during the New Testament time when Paul wrote letters to different churches to address various aspects of the Christian faith. Scholars of old also used this method to exchange knowledge and ideas on scientific aspects. This pedagogical model is referred to by Peters (2004, p. 19) as a “correspondence model”.

“The correspondence model was able to bridge the gap between teachers and students when schooling was made compulsory in different states” (Peters, 2004, p. 19). Print media dominated this era and it used the postal system. Students

and instructors used this medium to communicate (Peters, 2001). According to this researcher, print and individual study worked well for transmission mode instruction based on the premise of a body of information that needed to be learned. It is less suitable for developing critical thinking and team-based problem solving, i.e., there are limitations inherent in the medium. This type of distance education was based on the theory of industrialisation as described by Peters (2001) which characterised distance learning as a method of imparting knowledge, skills and attitudes which are rationalised by the application of division of labour and organisational principles as well as by the extensive use of technical media for producing high quality study material for great numbers of students.

As distance education continued to develop, more technologies were introduced and printed media was supplemented with radio, television, audio and video cassettes (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2010). The introduction of audio conferencing in distance education marked a second generation in distance education (Peters, 1994) which made immediate communication between teacher and students possible. According to Anderson and Dron (2011), the introduction of interactive technologies in DE marks the third generation of DE. Interactive technologies include audio, text, video, web and immersive conferencing. These media developments are described by Anderson and Dron as the three generations of DE.

This type of education is said to be open since it is open to the use of different types of technology tools. However this openness is limited and does not accommodate all types of students when it comes to criteria such as entry qualifications, computer skills and connectivity which are a challenge in developing countries such as South Africa. Furthermore, Peters (2010) states that DE relies entirely on media and if there is no media then there is no distance education. This means that developing countries need to move with the times and be on the same level with first world countries.

## **Distance education has two constituent elements**

The first is the presentation of learning matter, which is usually a kind of one-way communication from the teaching organisation to the student (e.g. printed course material that was prepared in advance of the class) and, secondly, the interaction between students and their teachers (Anderson, 2003; Shale, 2010). Contact education consists of lecturers and textbooks. According to Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2010, p. 15), the industrial era in distance education was dominated by one-way communication which was “between the course materials and the student”. This shows that there was a low level of interaction during the industrialisation era of education. The only interaction experienced by students was when they submitted assignments and received feedback from an instructor by post. During the industrial era, the focus and investments were directed to the “massification of education” in the form of study material that was distributed to students (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2010, p. 15).

Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2010) refer to Holmberg (1989) who theorised the “conversational model” of teaching and learning in distance education in order to address the absence of interaction between instructors and their students. According to Holmberg (2005), the conversational model refers to real and simulated conversations. The emphasis in this model is on the content and conversational character of the written pre-produced material package. This theory explains distance education as “a friendly conversation [fostered by] well-developed self-instructional materials [resulting in] feelings of personal relation ... intellectual pleasure [and] study motivation” (Holmberg, 2005 p. 38).

During the industrial era, there was generally a gradual shift from a teacher centred, authoritarian approach to teaching and learning towards an open learning and learner centred approach. This shift in distance education posed a challenge for a print-based correspondence model in which students worked alone to master a body of content. According to Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2010), the correspondence model was about the material and the student only. The benefit of this model was that it encouraged autonomy, self-directness and independence in learners. The correspondence period was regarded as a

heutagogical approach to teaching and learning but the challenge was that students studied in silos and were not encouraged to study in groups and learn from one another.

**In distance education**, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the introduction of interactive technologies such as telephone and video conferencing makes it possible to have **a one-to-one relationship between student and teacher** (Shale, 2010; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Swan, 2010). This one-on-one relationship is manageable in courses where enrolments are low, however, in courses where there is a high number of student enrolment, one-on-one relationships can be a challenge. In order to address this, distance institutions have employed tutors and teaching assistants on a contractual basis to ensure that students are supported and that interaction takes place between instructors and students. Increasingly, distance education is being linked with open learning to create Open and Distance Learning (ODL) which will be discussed in the next section.

## **2.3 WHAT IS OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL)?**

Distance Education cannot be divorced from Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and, in order to understand the context in which this study was undertaken, these terms will be defined and discussed.

Shale (2010) defines Open and Distance Learning as a term adopted by institutions for a range of features meant to extend access to educational opportunities to people who would otherwise be excluded. According to Shale (2010, p. 105), “the term was intended to indicate that ‘openness’ is dependent on much more than just delivering courses at a distance”. The openness of distance education refers to the “access of education through the removal of barriers, including time, place, and situational” (Kanuka & Brooks, 2010, p. 85). South Africa (2013, p. 48) uses a definition taken from the white paper on education and training (1995) by saying that

Open learning is an approach which combines the principles of learner centeredness, lifelong learning, flexibility of learning provision, the removal of barriers to access learning, the recognition for credit of prior learning experience, the provision of learner support, the construction of learning

programmes in the expectation that learners can succeed, and the maintenance of rigorous quality assurance over the design of learning materials and support systems.

According to Fodzar (2015), ODL is seen as a legitimate means through which education can be provided because, firstly, Open and Distance Learning has advantages including wider access and cost efficiency. Secondly, ODL as a delivery system offers flexible learning on a flexible time scale and provides learners with autonomy in terms of time, technology and material. Bates and Sangra (2011) assert that there is strong evidence that technology has been successful in increasing flexibility and accessibility of post-secondary education, including ODL provision. Many ODL institutions have developed policies of “openness” with regard to entrance requirements offering opportunities to learners without access to conventional institutions. ODL offers opportunities to individuals who are disadvantaged because of their location, gender or economic constraints.

ODL can deliver education at the doorstep so that learners do not have to physically leave their home environments. This assists learners in remote and rural areas to access education with limited barriers. ODL is also cost effective because it produces its teaching and learning material centrally and delivers it through media or post. Fodzar (2015, p. 11) indicates that “the cost effectiveness of ODL may be regarded as the best option for developing countries to improve their post-secondary education”. One of the challenges of distance learning institutions is their low global pass rate. According to Letseka and Karel (2015), student pass rates at ODL institutions are typically low compared to those in full-time contact higher education institutions (HEIs). One of the major reasons for this is socio-economic inequalities; therefore ODL institutions need to look at different strategies to improve students’ pass rates.

The integration of technology into ODL systems has made this type of education even more accessible for connected learners. Technology supports teaching and learning and overcomes physical distances between teachers and students, enabling the flexible delivery of education. Ice (2010, p. 145) notes that “the

practical application of this technology is that it allows anywhere, anytime usage of application” therefore it is important for learners to have access to technologies used in distance learning as this is one of the requirements of distance learning institutions.

What is common in the definitions of distance education (DE) and open distance learning (ODL) is that they need to be carefully planned. These approaches to education involve educators and learners, teaching is done through media and takes place in different geographical areas at different times (Bullen, 1995; Moore & Kearsley 1996). Students studying through DE and ODL may find themselves lonely, lost and isolated in their learning journey. The discussion that follows will explain how institutions of higher learning put strategies in place to overcome isolation.

## **2.4 DEALING WITH ISOLATION IN DISTANCE EDUCATION**

Students studying with distance education institutions often embark on this journey not knowing what to expect from this type of environment. The transition from high school to university can be a challenge especially for those who come from disadvantaged communities. For them, it is a double transition from school to higher education and from classroom to distance education. Rogers (2001 as cited by Croft, Dalton & Grant, 2010, p. 33) indicates that

students beginning distance learning programmes may feel uneasy about what to expect or the standard of work required and this may adversely affect a student’s ability to learn.

Such students are not academically prepared for higher education and find the language a challenge. This makes it difficult for them to integrate into the higher education environment. Jones, Coetzee, Bailey and Sharman (2008, p. 23), in their study regarding factors that facilitate success for disadvantaged higher education students, indicate that “difficulties in academic and social integration may lead to students feeling marginalised and alienated, impeding progression and success”. Proctor, Steyn and Goodwin-Davey (2012, p.86) point out that “students entering higher education often have difficulty adjusting to the necessity for largely independent study”. Within the Unisa context, students depend on

tutors to do assignments for them because they do not understand the role of a tutor.

Anita and Harsha (2013) indicate that distance learners may suffer from a sense of isolation as they study later in life or while working. The profile of these learners comprises individuals who are unemployed, employed full time or part time who need support from educators face-to-face or online. Some of these students are not ready for heutagogy. According to Anita and Harsha (2013, p. 193), the distance educator is expected to provide a “positive, ethical and interventionist role by helping the student to learn effectively”.

Zimmerman, Schmidt, Becker, Peterson, Nyland and Surdick (2014, p. 3) point out that “the expectations of instructors and students shape the learning environment”. Students in distance learning institutions have expectations that they will receive support from their instructors and instructors expect a distant learner to be self-regulated, self-disciplined and independent.

Students studying with distance institutions appreciate the convenience of being able to fit their study schedules around other responsibilities such as work and family commitments (Moore & Kearsley, 2012, p. 153). However, according to Westbrook (2012), distance learning can be a lonely journey for some students who feel the need for support that relieves their feeling of isolation.

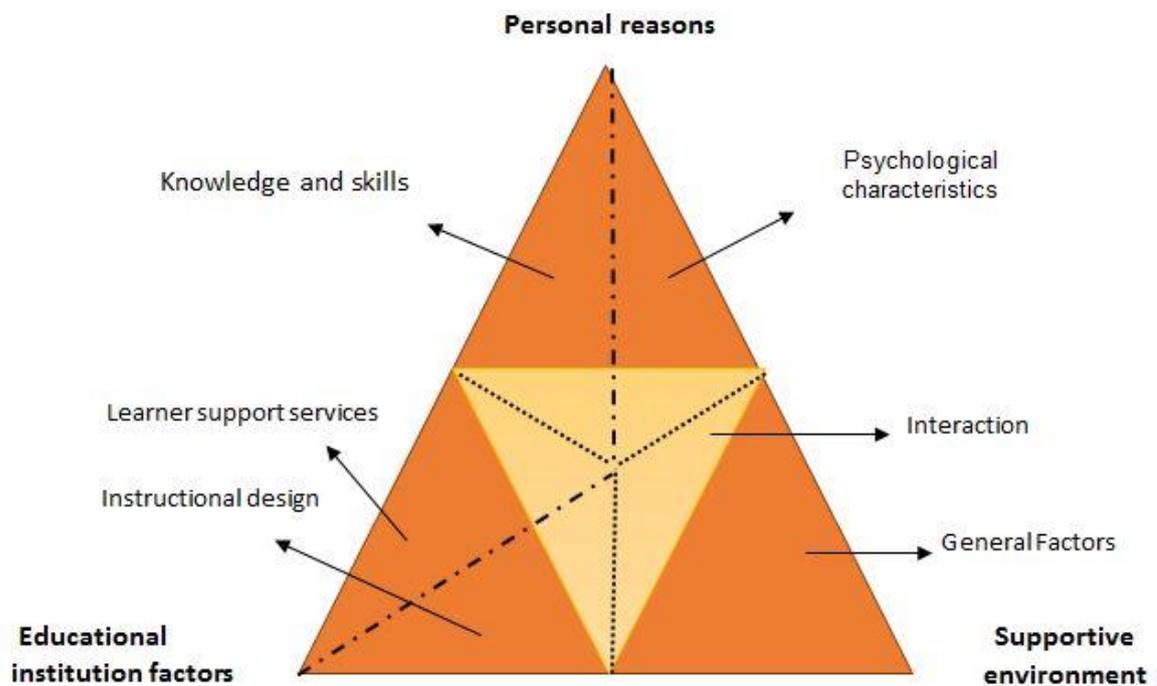
Most students enjoy interaction with their instructors and fellow students, not only for teaching and learning, but also for emotional support that comes from social contact. Some institutions promote the use of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Skype as a means of socialising (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). In this way, in face-to-face meetings and in groups where students do assignments and team projects (Islam & Ferdowsi, 2014), students can connect and support one another.

Universities like Unisa have embarked on blended learning to support their students hence face-to-face and online tutors were appointed for this purpose. This project is called the integrated tutor model (ITM) which is also attempting to reduce isolation as much as possible. Khanna and Basak (2011, p. 191) propose

an integrated distance education system which would encourage regional and cross sectorial development in the open and distance education system by sharing resources, knowledge and technologies of learning.

According to Khanna and Basak (2011), such a framework would have the objective of ensuring connectivity between the learners and the DE network to enhance students' self-learning skills and develop their capabilities for online-problem solving. This addresses isolation in DE and may also reduce the dropout rate since learners have opportunities to work together online, to socially construct knowledge and to solve problems as a group. Learners will also be given opportunities to work on group projects and help one another.

Distance learners have the highest risk of dropping out of their studies due mainly to isolation (Peters, 1992 as cited by Lee & Chan, 2007). Learners who are not adequately prepared, motivated or disciplined to study with distance education will be at a risk of attrition (Brimoh, 2010). A preliminary study on reasons for distance learners dropout and strategies to solve them done by Zheng and Hao (n.d.) refer to the Zane L. Berge Model that provides possible reasons for dropouts of distance learners.



**Figure 1: Model explaining the factors of dropout**  
(Source: Zheng & Hao, n.d.)

These reasons are classified into three categories. As shown in the model above, the first triangle denotes three elements – the learner's own factors (Personal factors), educational institutions and supportive environmental factors – that impact on distance education students' dropping out; the second inverted triangles represent the interaction among the three factors; personal factor on the top can be divided into psychological characteristics and knowledge and skills; the left corner of the educational institutions factors can be divided into learner support services and instructional design (Zheng & Hao preliminary study, n.d., p. 7).

In order to deal with dropout in distance education, Zane proposes the following strategies:

- Create a learning community and encourage students to actively participate in learning community activities.
- Teachers should take the initiative to communicate with students, and provide feedback of the students' performance on time.
- Establish a technical support team for students on a regular basis to provide technical training. This refers mainly to those students who are technologically challenged.

Motivation can be used to assist distance learners to deal with isolation in this environment and even discourage dropout. Motivation, according to Croft et al. (2010, citing Rogers, 2001) is important for all students whether studying in traditional face-to-face courses or at a distance. According to Whiting et al. (2008, as cited by Croft et al., 2010), traditional students are more likely to be extrinsically motivated and that distance learners tend to be intrinsically motivated. This can be attributed to the fact that distance learners are likely to be motivated by professional rewards from their education such as increased salary, more responsibility and better job prospects. One of the strategic support program put in place by DE to overcome isolation, increase motivation and provide flexibility among students is a tutorial program. Access to this program will be explored in the discussion that will follow.

## **2.5 ACCESSING FACE-TO-FACE AND ONLINE TUTORIALS**

Access to post schooling education continues to be an issue of concern in South Africa. Recently, the policy for the provision of distance education in South African universities in the context of an integrated post school system (South Africa, 2014) highlighted key issues for institutions of higher learning. According to this policy, universities must create open access opportunities for students who cannot or choose not to attend contact universities. The policy further states that universities should provide access that offers a reasonable chance of success. This policy indicates that the role of DE in South Africa is to provide access to a diverse student population who cannot study full time for a wide range of reasons.

DE institutions can therefore increase flexibility of provision in the structure of programs and increase access and student engagement using technology. Students in remote areas would then have an opportunity to access high quality and cost effective programs through ICT but this is not always available in developing countries like South Africa because of issues of broadband and the high cost of access to computers and the internet. The policy for the provision of DE in South African universities in the context of integrated post school system (South Africa, 2014, p. 7) indicates that increasing access to wireless connectivity and mobile technology means that “registered students can access the internet for learning purposes wherever they happen to be”. Moore and Kearsley (2012, p. 156) assert that “one special feature of distance education is the capability for an institution to provide access to education to some learners who could otherwise not have it”. This includes students in rural areas where connectivity is still a challenge. Some institutions who have embarked on blended learning offer online tutorials and face-to-face tutorials. This is done through regional learning centres where students can access face-to-face tutorials in a centre located in their areas. This is a strategy to enhance face-to-face provision and flexibility. Vaughan (2010, p. 166 citing Bleed, 2001) suggests that

blended learning should be viewed as an opportunity to redesign the way that courses are developed, scheduled and delivered in higher education through a combination of physical and virtual instructions, ‘bricks and clicks’.

According to Vaughan (2010), the ultimate goal of this approach is to create a balanced provision by combining the best of face-to-face and online features to promote active, self-directed learning opportunities for students with added flexibility. Some learners, however, may find it hard to detach from face-to-face provision of learning services, hence, institutions like Unisa provide face-to-face support as well as online support to ensure that learners acquire technology skills for online learning.

A study done by Gatsha and Evans (2010) on learning support indicates that the challenge of access is not only experienced by South African students but exists in other African countries, for example, Botswana. Students in remote areas find it difficult to access support provided by DE institutions due to a number of reasons. These challenges, according to Gatsha and Evans (2010), require political interventions.

Access to resources includes access to information and technology communication (ICT) equipment such as computers, internet and online libraries so that learners are able to access learning resources such as learning material online and interact with their instructors and other learners on the subject content. Through the provision of these resources, learners can do research in order to meet the learning outcomes of the subject they are studying. Physical libraries and discussion rooms for face-to-face discussions and tutorial classes are also needed in order to enhance the online support provided to students. According to Bates and Sangra (2011), this will only be possible if access to resources is one of the strategic goals for the institution. Betts, Cohen, Veit, Alphin, Broaddus and Allen (2013) indicate that access should be a foundational element of the institutional culture.

Students must also be taught how to utilise these resources. For instance, basic computer training is needed for students who are not computer literate and may have courses that are fully online. McPherson and Nunes (2004, p. 3) are of the opinion that access to resources is not sufficient if students are not equipped to use these resources. Students need to be provided with technical skills so that they are able to participate in discussions and meet the learning objectives of the

subjects. These skills are called “Networked Information and Communication Literacy Skills” (NICLS) and they apply to both students and tutors who need to use the same resources to deliver content and interact with students. If both parties are equipped with these skills, teaching and learning will take place successfully. McPherson and Nunes (2004) emphasise that teaching staff should also be empowered with the skills to use technology because subject matter expertise is not currently sufficient because instructors are required to manage and facilitate not only face-to-face services but also those in an online environment. Some institutions have even introduced incentives to motivate staff to use technology ( Bates & Sangra, 2011).

Access to tutorials should be inclusive. Moore and Kearsley (2012) state that distance institutions must provide its students with access to study materials since this is a special feature of distance education. This access includes all students, students with disabilities, the elderly and those who live in remote and rural areas. This means that when planning a tutorial program, it is important to consider a university’s student profile so that students who are geographically distributed across the globe should also benefit from the tutorial support program. This includes students with all types of disabilities. The inclusivity begins with the design of the tutorial program. If the program is for online access, instructors should receive training on how to design and work with students with disabilities (Betts et al., 2013). If the program is for face-to-face delivery, access to physical facilities such as classrooms should be able to accommodate students with disabilities such as students in wheelchairs and lighting in the classroom should accommodate those who have a visual impairment (Landsberg, 2011).

Institutions of higher learning are mandated to support all students including students with disabilities, however, the challenge faced by institutions is that students do not always disclose their disabilities and this makes it difficult for institutions to provide appropriate access for such students. South Africa (2013, p. 45) (White paper for post school education and training) indicates that “it is recognised that people with disabilities do not always disclose their disabilities, and this must be addressed”. It is therefore important that universities create an environment and culture that is conducive for learners with disabilities to be open

about their disabilities so that they are able to receive relevant support from their instructors, other support staff members and fellow students. Betts et al. (2013, p. 56) suggest that

[a] culture of inclusion focuses on abilities, making students feel comfortable about self-identifying and disclosing disabilities because they feel that everyone involved wants them to succeed.

The white paper (South Africa, 2013) believes that institutions of higher learning are not even certain if education and training provided to students with disabilities is appropriate and if support services and facilities made available to them are addressing their individual needs. In order to address this challenge, the white paper (South Africa, 2013, p. 46) proposes that

a strategic policy framework is necessary to guide the improvement of access to and success in post-school education and training (including in private institutions) for people with disabilities.

For ODL institutions to provide maximum support to students, learning must be well planned and facilitated. The next section will explore how instructors can facilitate learning while providing students with learning skills.

## **2.6 FACILITATION OF LEARNING**

The Commonwealth of Learning (2003, p. 62) explains that

[f]acilitating learning involves suggesting how learners can develop their own learning path or resolve obstacles to their learning. This requires tutors or facilitators to assist them to develop their own learning skills.

The definition above suggests that, when tutors facilitate learning, they should be able to provide learners with skills on how to link their existing knowledge to new knowledge in order to make sense of what they are learning and to solve problems. This process of learning is based on the cognitive theory of learning as described by Mohamed (2008) who refers to cognitive theorists like Craik and Lockhardt (1972), Craik and Tulving (1975) and Ausubel (1974) who suggest that learning involves the use of memory, motivation, thinking and reflection. These theorists see learning as an internal process and contend that the amount

learned depends on the processing capacity of a learner, the effort expended during the learning process, the learner's existing knowledge structure and the depth of processing new knowledge. The Commonwealth of Learning (2003 p. 65) refers to the research of educators and indicates that

tutors can encourage deep approaches to learning with strategies in order to help learners to integrate their existing knowledge with their new learning.

These include:

- enabling learners to make choices in their learning,
- creating a supportive learning environment,
- encouraging problem-based learning,
- encouraging reflection on the process and content of learning,
- fostering the application of knowledge through learning activities and group work, and
- Providing for learner choices in assessment tasks.

Tutors can use these strategies in encouraging learners to make sense of what is learned.

The instructor's role in a DE environment is more of a facilitator than a teacher as he/she provides resources and support to learners acting independently. Young et al. (1999, p. 13 as cited by Delaney, Johnson, Johnson & Treslan, 2010) note that "learners need to be actively involved in their learning while the instructor takes on a more of a facilitator's role". Learners learn from one another as they identify and implement solutions to challenges, problems or other developmental issues. Facilitation of learning involves helping learners to make their learning meaningful. This means that tutors need to assist learners to individualise their learning experiences so that they are meaningful for them and be able to:

- relate what they know to what they are learning from the course
- identify relevant resources
- connect with learners with similar interests (Commonwealth of Learning, 2003).

Individualising instruction refers to a systems approach in DE. According to Moore and Kearsley (2012), after a course is designed and distributed to

learners, learners are allocated to different tutors who facilitate learning, interact with them and provide individualised instruction. Tutors communicate with learners and make the course material personally relevant to them. This, however, may be a challenge for institutions with high numbers of students registered for a course that is in high demand. Strategies for making instruction individualised need to be researched and piloted in mega institutions like Unisa.

Facilitation of learning requires a teacher to be “present”, even though that presence could be virtual rather than physical. According to Baran and Correia (2009), instructor facilitation is an important indicator of teaching presence, strong enough to encourage students’ participation in online discussions. They identify strategies focusing on the role of the instructor as a facilitator. Baran and Correia (2009) refer to Mason (1991), Palsen (1995) and Berge (1995). Mason and Palsen (1995) categorise teacher’s moderation roles into three categories: organisational, social, and intellectual. Berge (1995) added a fourth category that is a technical category.

### **The organisational role**

The organisational role of an instructor requires an instructor to plan, organise, and set objectives and procedures for posting in an online environment. Kanuka and Anderson (1999 as cited by Anderson & Dron, 2011) said that the educator is a guide, a helper in the learning process. According to Anderson and Dron (2011), teaching is beyond the facilitation of learning as it requires the teacher to choose and construct educational interventions and provide direct instruction when required.

### **The social role**

The social role involves the creation of friendly and comfortable social environments where students feel that learning is possible. The tutor is expected to communicate with learners and make them feel welcomed in the course so that they are able to be fully involved in the learning process. According to McMann (1994 as cited by McPherson & Nunes, 2004), when communicating with learners, tutors need to take into consideration the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of learners by minimising offensive and disruptive behaviour from

other learners. Should tutors observe such a behaviour, learners must be reminded of appropriate etiquette governing online environments.

### **Intellectual role**

A tutor performs an intellectual or a pedagogical role of supporting and guiding learners through the process of learning (Paulsen, 1995 as cited by McPherson & Nunes, 2004). These roles may include facilitating discussions online and face-to-face, facilitating learning as per schedule provided by the faculty staff members and empowering learners to develop their own learning skills (Commonwealth of Learning, 2003). Meyer (2002 as cited by Aksal, 2009) notes that the role of tutors involves leading and facilitating groups to construct knowledge through communicating and collaborating with others. According to Meyer, this is regarded as a critical success factor of the online pedagogy and forms part of quality online learning environments.

### **Technical role**

Berge (1995 as cited by Mtsweni & Abdullah, 2014) explains that with the introduction of technology in distance education, the role of tutors continues to change. Over and above their pedagogical role, tutors are expected to perform a technical role. He indicates that tutors need to become conversant with the ICT systems and software that comprise the e-learning environment because online technologies are used as the platform for teaching, support, management and assessment of students. Prinsloo et al. (2011 as cited by Mtsweni & Abdullah, 2014) indicate that technology plays a vital role in every aspect of higher education therefore all the roles of an e-tutor are contingent on the technical role.

When facilitating learning, the tutor's initial communication with learners is crucial. How a tutor introduces himself/herself to learners sets the tone for the entire learning process. Conrad (2002 as cited by Moore & Kearsley, 2012, p. 153) says that "when students access the course material they first want to see a message from the course instructor. This message sets the right climate for learning". Moore and Kearsley (2012) emphasise that facilitation done face-to-face is different from facilitation in an online environment because facilitating online requires a tutor to humanise the learning environment. That could be done by

conducting an online conference and requesting learners to post a brief biography of themselves at the beginning of the class. Prior to that, the tutor should first post his/her biography that introduces him/her to learners so that they know who their tutor is. This interaction is known as a pre-course orientation. Farnsworth and Bevis (2006, p. 20) indicate that an introductory letter or e-mail from the tutor to learners establishes a “sense of connection”.

Some learners who enrol with DE institutions experience anxiety because they do not know what to expect. According to Moore and Kearsley (2012, p. 153), “adults who are inexperienced as distance learners may have a particularly high degree of anxiety at the beginning of the course”. The high level of anxiety may contribute to the dropout rate in DE. Moore and Kearsley (2012) advise that tutors become aware of students who are anxious and try to lower their level of anxiety. During the facilitation of learning, a tutor has an opportunity to assist learners to access course material and to navigate in an online environment before the actual course begins. This can be a strategy that could be used by tutors to reduce anxiety in learners studying in online DE.

Learners need to be supported in order to succeed. According to Qakisa-Makoe (2005), the main purpose of supporting students is to provide an environment that improves their commitment and motivation to learn. DE must therefore be facilitated to achieve the ultimate goal which is successful education. Facilitation of learning involves motivating learners to learn and enjoy what they do. Moore and Kearsley (2012) say that learners who learn successfully enjoy learning and that this is a sign of motivation. Hoskins and Newstead (2009, p. 36) explain that “students can be motivated or amotivated, reflecting the extent to which they want to succeed”. On the other hand, Simpson (2012) argues that learning motivation is an important aspect of distance student support and that the loss of motivation to learn is one of the causes for students to drop out of DE. Simpson suggests that distance instructors need to support and motivate learners and that this requires the tutors’ commitment.

According to Keller (as cited by Berridge, Penney & Wells, 2012), online learners can lose motivation if the course is not designed to stimulate their active

participation and meets their expectations. Bricknell and Muldoon (2012) assert that learners should be guided to perform their online activities. It is the duty of an instructor to motivate students, support them and empathise with them by being flexible. A conversational model can play a role in motivating students in DE.

Baghdadi (2011) indicates that instructors should allow a certain level of flexibility in the course to accommodate unforeseen circumstances such as technological problems and emergencies. Another way of motivating learners when facilitating learning is when an instructor understands the students' situation and assists them accordingly. Holmberg (2005) terms this type of approach to teaching and learning the "empathy approach". He suggests that instructors create a conducive and friendly learning environment for learners that includes providing helpful and positive comments. Bernath and Vidal (2007) also indicate that such an environment is created by providing suggestions that will encourage and motivate learners in the learning process. Holmberg (2005) asserts that instructors and material designers should ascertain whether a conversational type of interaction exists between the learner and the instructor as well as between the learner and the learning material. If course materials are not user-friendly, and students do not receive support and engagement, they may lack motivation and drop out.

Adult learners are motivated to learn when they can see the relevance of what they are learning; when they can demonstrate what they have learned and can apply it to real situations (Bricknell & Muldoon, 2012). Moore and Kearsley (2012) indicate that DE is easier for people who are able to direct their own learning and are independent. These people are self-motivated and do not rely on the instructor for encouragement and feedback. Mohamed (2008) describes these learners as having intrinsic motivation and advises designers to use intrinsic motivation features such as attention, relevance, confidence, metacognitive skills and online strategies to facilitate transfer of learning when designing courses as this will empower students to be self-driven.

Mohamed (2008) explains these features as follows:

Capturing learner's attention at the beginning of the lesson and maintaining it throughout the lesson is crucial as this is very important in motivating a

learner to stay focused in the lesson. Online learning materials must include an activity at the start of each learning session in order to connect with the learners.

Secondly, the instructor should inform learners why the lesson is relevant and how taking the lesson could benefit them in terms of applying what they learn in real life situations.

Thirdly, designers should use strategies such as designing for success and inform learners of the lesson expectations. This would certainly build confidence in learners because they know what is expected of them. Designers can do this by sequencing from simple to complex or from known to unknown. In this way, learners will be motivated to stay in the lesson because they know what is expected of them as they follow the lesson moving from what they know to discover what is new to them.

The designer should use metacognitive skills to encourage learners able to identify their own cognitive capabilities and use them in the learning process. In online lessons, learners should be given activities that would allow them to reflect, collaborate and assess themselves to see the progress of what they learn.

Lastly, Mohamed (2008) says that online strategies that facilitate the transfer of learning should be used to encourage application in real life situations that could be incorporated into the lesson. These may be in the form of projects where learners will apply the knowledge learnt in class to complete the assignment as a group or individually. This will assist learners to make sense of what they have learnt by contextualising it.

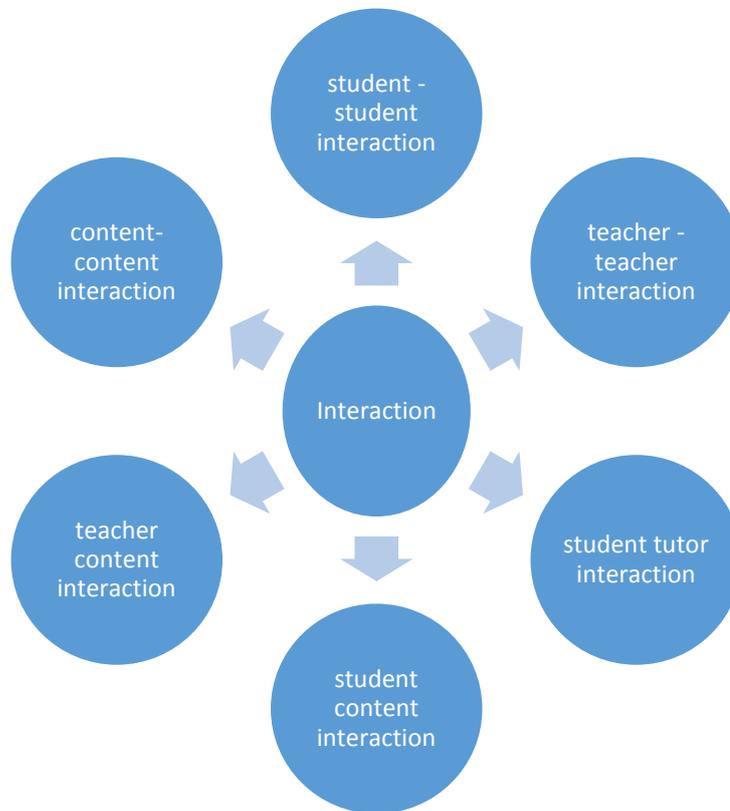
The above approach to teaching and learning is based on the theory of andragogy that is defined as a concept that refers to practical aspect of adult teaching and learning as well as the academic study of adult education (Burge, 1988 as cited by Bullen, 1995). According to Knowles (as cited by Bullen, 1995), andragogy is the model for education of adults. He describes the differences between how adults and children learn. Adults need to know why they need to learn, they need to learn experientially, they approach learning as problem solving and they learn best when the topic is of immediate value.

In his analysis, Knowles (1980 as cited by Bullen, 1995) identifies the key characteristic of adults as a self-directed, task oriented, internally motivated, life experience rich resource for learning and readiness to learn. These characteristics contribute to students' success in a distance education environment be it face-to-face or online. In Open and Distance Learning, opportunities for interaction between teachers and learners are seen to be an important building block for success. This is explored in the next section.

## **2.7 INTERACTION**

In order to understand interaction in the context in which it is discussed, terms such as instructor, teacher or tutor and learner or student will be used interchangeably. Interaction has always been a part of distance education that applies to both face-to-face and online environments. Moore and Kearsley (2012) describe three types of interaction in the distance learning environment, learner-instructor interaction, learner-content interaction and learner-learner interaction. Anderson and Garrison (1998 as cited by Anderson, 2003) describe three more types of interaction in distance learning environments: teacher-teacher interaction, teacher-content interaction and content-content interaction. All these modes of interaction must be implemented in order to benefit the students who are the point of focus in distance education.

|



**Figure 2: Modes of interaction in distance education**  
 (Source: Anderson and Garrison (1998 as cited by Anderson, 2003))

Interaction in distance education is based on Moore’s theory of transactional distance that attempts to close the transactional gap in DE. According to Moore (1993, p. 22), transactional distance is a “psychological and communication space” which can lead to misunderstanding between the learner and the instructor in distance education and that, if learning outcomes are to be maximised, transactional distance needs to be minimised.

Moore identifies three elements that need to work together in order to minimise transactional distance. They are dialogue or interaction between learners and instructors, the structure of the course (methods and strategies used to teach DE learners) and autonomy or the degree of self-directness of the learner that refers to learner-learner interaction.

Gunawardena and McLissac (2008) believe that “distance in DE is determined by the amount of dialogue which occurs between the learner and the instructor and the amount of structure which exists in the design of the course”. Greater transactional distance occurs when an educational program has more structure and less student-teacher dialogue.

Interaction in DE can take place in a formal or informal way and both can ultimately lead to learning. Anderson (2003) notes that not all interactions have a formal educational value. He distinguishes between interactions leading to learning in any informal context and interactions that occur in a formal education context. Anderson explains that informal interaction can and often does lead to learning outside of a formal education institution or accreditation process. However, interaction in formal education contexts is specifically designed to induce learning directed towards defined and shared learning outcomes. This distinction defines the quality of learning that takes place during interaction, whether it happens formally or informally. Anderson (2003) asserts that there are differences in the quality and value of interaction as a contributor to learning in both formal and informal learning contexts. Vaughan (2010, p. 171) indicates that online contact between students and teachers increases interaction and teachers reported that they “feel more connected with their students and know them better”. The connectedness referred to by Vaughan could be a challenge in institutions like Unisa which has high numbers of students in some courses. In this case, connectedness may not be possible since some students choose not to interact with their instructors. In cases where students interact, the quality of interaction between tutors and students may be compromised due to the high numbers of students allocated to the instructor.

Interaction between students and teachers or between students and students can take place synchronously or asynchronously. Swan (2010) describes asynchronous interaction as a type of interaction that occurs at different times, not in real time, for instance, through the use of e-mails. According to her, the advantages of this type of interaction are that it is flexible since information can be accessed anytime and anywhere. It also gives students time to reflect because they can provide answers when they have read and understood the

content of the topic. It also makes it difficult for any of the participants to dominate the discussion, instructors included.

Synchronous interaction, on the other hand, occurs when an exchange of information is done in real time, for example, through video conferencing and instant messaging. The advantage of synchronous interaction is that there is real time interaction and participants are able to see and hear one another as they interact in class. There is also immediate feedback. The disadvantages of synchronous technology include limited time and place constraints, making it inflexible because learners are expected to be at a particular place at a particular time. This impacts on the learning process as it provides learners with limited time to reflect on their learning. Chen, Liang and Wang (2011) are of the opinion that synchronous technology should provide flexible learning. However, their study on flexible learning reveals that synchronous technology, such as video conferencing, brings logistical inflexibilities because learners are expected to report to a fixed broadcast station and there is a need for human support, specific technological infrastructure and other resources. Management of students connected in different venues could also be a challenge in terms of control and fair interaction between the tutor and learners.

Communicating over distance can change the impact of tutors' messages to learners. If a tutor communicates in writing with learners, they do not have the visual or auditory cues of face-to-face communication. Many technologies used for communicating with learners operate asynchronously – the message is sent and received at different times. Tutors must be aware of how the chosen technology affects their interaction with learners, and plan their communication strategies with care (Commonwealth of Learning, 2003).

The concept of interaction is based on the theory of social constructivism as termed by Vygotsky (1978). According to this theory, teachers do not merely transmit knowledge to be passively consumed by learners, instead, learners are put at the centre of the learning process. Teachers assume the role of guides, shaping learners' knowledge development. Learning becomes an active process

where learners and teachers interact and construct knowledge based on their experiences with each other and in relation to the world (Swan, 2010).

The paragraphs that will follow will discuss different types of interactions as described by Moore and Kearsley (2012) and the additional three types as described by Anderson and Garrison (1998 as cited by Anderson, 2003).

***Learner-instructor interaction*** is crucial for learning to take place in an online and face-to-face environment. “Learner-instructor interaction is regarded as essential by most learners and highly desirable by most educators” (Moore & Kearsley, 2012, p. 132). When learners register at a distance institution, they have expectations and teachers have expectations from learners. Teachers expect learners to learn, be involved in class and do all activities as scheduled in the course program. At the same time, learners expect their teachers to support them, teach and guide them in their learning (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Moore and Kearsley believe that learners expect the teacher to guide, support and motivate them by creating a positive learning environment that is conducive to learning. In order to succeed, these teachers need to monitor and assess learners’ progress. Anderson (2008) warns that online communication can be overwhelming for many new teachers and that this may be due to unrealistic expectations by students who expect teachers to provide feedback instantly. Instructors may be willing to support each student by responding to their queries promptly, however, the number of students allocated to each instructor in high demand courses makes this impossible.

Communication between instructors and learners is a significant contributor to students’ learning in DE. Effective communication can act as support for the student through clear and adequate feedback that informs students of their progress and provides vital encouragement. Shackelford and Maxwell (2012) indicate that the role of an instructor in DE is to establish a communication channel that encourages active participation between and among learners and their instructors because “instructors provide counsel, support, and encouragement to each learner” (Moore & Kearsley, 2012, p. 133). Zimmerman et al. (2014, p. 15) found that “improved communication leads to better student

understanding of the roles and responsibilities of themselves and the instructor and leads to a better instructor-student working relationship”. These suggestions are possible with low enrolments, however, in institutions where there is a high number of enrolments, they could be a serious challenge as quality may be compromised. These institutions should find ways that could provide interaction between learners and instructors without compromising quality.

According to Sims (1999 as cited by Anderson, 2008, p.55) there are four functions that should be performed by the instructor during interaction in teaching and learning. These include “facilitating program adaptation based on learner input, allowing various forms of participation and communication, adding meaningful learning and allowing for increasing learner control”. These functions are also implicit in NQF level descriptors for the South African National Qualifications Framework (2012).

***Learner-content interaction*** (Zimmerman, 2012 as cited by Hilman, Willis & Gunawardena, 1994) is a time spent with course content including textbooks, PowerPoint, webpages and discussion forums. Learners interact with content on three levels, academically, technically and socially. Academic interaction is related to course content, technical interaction is related to virtual classrooms and interaction that is not content or classroom related is considered social. Swan (2012, p. 1) explains that “interaction of learner with content refers to learners interacting with knowledge, skills and attitudes being studied. It refers to learners interacting with course material”. According to Martin, Parker and Deale (2012), this is the process of intellectually interacting with content that changes the understanding, perspectives and cognitive structures of learners’ minds. This type of interaction implies that there is a need for “scaffolding” activities that provide step-by-step instructions to explain what to do in order to meet the expectations for learning (McKenzie, 1999 as cited by Bercena & Read, 2004). This could be done by means of providing user-friendly directions.

If learning is to occur, students must interact with the content. Learners can interact with content face-to-face in a traditional classroom or in a virtual classroom online. When they interact with content, they need to be guided and

supported by tutors because, for students entering distance education for the first time, academic content may be difficult to comprehend. The Commonwealth of Learning (2003) indicates that tutors need to be prepared to explain the content to students and even provide relevant examples and additional readings that can assist them to clarify further technical areas within the course content. However, this does not exonerate students from being independent in their learning.

At times it is not that the content is difficult to comprehend, rather it may be that learners are overwhelmed and have a lot to deal with in their personal lives. In such cases, learners may not be able to strike a balance between their studies and their personal lives that can affect their progress. The Commonwealth of Learning (2003, p. 62) believes that

getting assignments in on time and coping with the course workload may be unfamiliar and difficult experiences to many students especially where they are balancing learning commitments with for instance family or work commitments.

Moore and Kearsley (2012, p. 156) indicate that “even successful experienced graduate students experience fear or frustration especially when taking a distance course for the first time or when encountering unfamiliar technologies”. In order to assist students to deal with these obstacles, tutors have a duty to guide such students to identify the real problem. Tutors can guide students to develop a study schedule that would allow them to divide work into smaller sections. The tutors need empathy to motivate the learners in the process of learning. Students can also be referred to counselors within the institution to help them manage their study time.

In order for students to interact successfully with the content, they need to be empowered with learning skills. The Commonwealth of Learning (2003) refers to these as enabling skills. When interacting with content, learners need to have problem solving strategies, discussion skills and abilities to work collaboratively with others, learning with others and from them. According to Mohamed (2008), skills in learning develop confidence, competence, and autonomy in learning.

Competence refers to the specific activities a student engages in when tackling a particular learning task or a particular course.

Anderson (2003) argues that interaction between students and content is a critical component of both campus-based and distance education. Learner-content interaction results from students examining/studying the course content (Moore & Kearsley, 1996) and from participating in class activities or completing individual or group-based activities using the learning materials.

According to Gosling (2008, p. 114), most higher education institutions have adopted a student-centred approach to teaching and learning:

Part of being 'student centred' is recognising that although there is a subject content which all students must learn in order to pass, each student approaches the subject from their own perspective, their own unique past experience and their own understanding of themselves and their aspirations.

This type of approach is based on a constructivist theory of learning which gives learners the liberty to construct knowledge based on their experiences. According to Swan (2010, p. 113), this theory "shifts focus from knowledge transmission to knowledge construction i.e. from teaching to learning". Gosling (2008) explains that students need to be supported to meet their learning needs. Bates and Sangra (2011) suggest that institutions invest in virtual learning environments in order to cut costs and enable learners to construct knowledge by themselves. Students interact with content using these learning environments to find resource material that is relevant to them and that helps them to interact with the content such as podcasts, libraries, laboratories and DVDs among other interactive resources.

Mohakud and Mohapatra (2012), on the other hand, argue that students can interact more effectively with content when concepts are presented through multiple media so that they can select those which best suit their own understanding and retention, e.g., textual, audio, video or mixed-mode. This type of provision will not come without a cost, however, it will support students and create flexibility in their learning.

***Student-student interaction or learner-learner interaction*** as described by Murray et al. (2012) refers to the exchange of information and ideas amongst students as well as collaborative activities in which students engage with each other to complete course projects and assignments. According to the students, they need to engage and learn from one another in their own space and time. Moore and Kearsley (2012, p. 133) describe this form of interaction as a third form of interaction in distance education and term it an “inter-learner interaction” that occurs between one learner and other learners. Moore and Kearsley (2012) indicate that learner-learner interaction can take place within a group or between groups. This usually happens when teleconferencing or video conferencing technologies are used where students come together with a purpose of sharing information and learning together, be it online, via videoconferencing or face-to-face.

The other type of interaction is done online whereby individual students do not meet face-to-face and the group is on a virtual platform. Face-to-face interactions are commonly used in campus-based institutions where students would come together in a classroom and form groups. In all settings, Moore and Kearsley (2012) explain that students find interaction with their peers to be stimulating and motivating. A study by Shackelford and Maxwell (2012, p. 231) observes that “learner-learner interactions supports sense of community” thus helping to overcome some of the feelings of isolation which will be discussed later.

Vygotsky (1978) calls this type of interaction “social interaction” which he sees as the cornerstone of education. Vygotsky indicates that learners can often learn more effectively when they work with a more capable other, have opportunities to talk about the learning and gain familiarity with the language being used. This is echoed by Edwards, Perry, Janzen and Menzies (2012, p. 35) who indicate that “through meaningful social interaction learners become fully engaged in the culture and function of the learning community”. Anderson (2003) emphasises that when students interact, participation and engagement is enhanced which results in improved throughput rates.

Face-to-face or virtual groups can be used to organise students into project teams who are given responsibility for making presentations to their peers. “In this way students get an opportunity to think out and test content that has been presented, whatever the means of presentation” (Moore & Kearsley, 2012 p. 133).

A lot of social technology tools have been introduced that impact on the future of education. According to Kharbach (2011), some of the social tools include Twitter, Facebook, Oovoo, blogs, wikispaces, Pinterest, web-conferencing tools amongst others. Through the use of social technology tools, students are able to engage with one another, collaborate and work on projects, share resources, discuss learning materials, connect with other professional educators and share ideas and links as a community of practice. It can even be used to update parents on their children’s progress.

Many innovative ideas in terms of technology have emerged which pose a challenge to educators on how they could be integrated in teaching and learning (Green et al., 2010 as cited by Edwards et al., 2012). Moore and Kearsley (2012, p. 133) say that collaborative teaching and learning has been enhanced by the development of social networking technologies “particularly the use of blogs and wikis as teaching technologies”. Green et al. (2010 as cited by Edwards et al., 2012) suggest that, in order for interaction to take place, educators need to develop strategies that would create opportunities for interaction and communication between students. Contact North (2012, p. 1) emphasises that, for learning to take place successfully, it has to have a “social ingredient which requires observation, attention and interaction from learners”.

Learner-to-learner interaction can be enhanced through small groups. When learners engage in group activities, they are able to develop intellectually, personally and professionally (Griffiths, 2009). According to Griffiths, there is strong evidence from students that they benefit from and enjoy the experience in a range of different ways (Ruddick, 1978 as cited by Griffiths, 2009; Luker, 1998 as cited by Griffiths, 2009). Small groups assist learners to improve self-confidence, work as teams and sharpen their interpersonal communication.

Nonyongo and Ngengebule (2008) also testify that quality education is brought about through learner-to-learner interaction because, when students come together, they have an opportunity to meet other students, compare and gain information from one another.

The level of student participation and of student-student interaction can be affected by the choice of location. The room needs to be conducive for student interaction and participation (Griffiths, 2009). In an online environment, the teacher needs to create a space and a culture that encourages collaboration. Learner-to-learner interaction has its base on the social constructivist philosophy of learning as well as the theory of transactional distance by Moore.

Other forms of interaction are:

### **Teacher-teacher interaction**

According to Anderson (2008), teachers also need to interact in order to develop and sustain themselves in their profession as teachers. This could be done through a scholarly community of practice where they afford themselves opportunities for growth by sharing the latest knowledge related to their subject area. Anderson (2003, p. 6) emphasises that “teacher-teacher collaboration is critical to the current model of university based research production and evaluation”.

### **Teacher content interaction**

This focusses on the teacher’s creation of content. Teacher content interaction affords teachers an opportunity to continuously monitor, construct and update course content resources and activities.

### **Content-content interaction**

Relevant content is crucial in the process of teaching and learning hence Anderson argues that content-content interaction is seen as a new and developing mode of educational interaction. According to Anderson (2008), content is programmed to interact with other automated information sources to

refresh itself constantly and to acquire capabilities through updates and interaction with other content sources.

## **2.8 SUMMARY**

This chapter explored five key issues in Distance Learning. Key concepts such as Open and Distance Learning (ODL) which forms the basis of this study as well as Distance Education (DE) were defined. The literature revealed that these two concepts are related and often used interchangeably in the context of higher education, although it is clear that openness refers to an approach that could inform any educational provision whereas distance refers to a specific set of methods aimed at addressing a specific set of challenges. The advantages and challenges of using ODL systems in higher education were discussed. Special characteristics of DE in terms of time and space, media used to deliver education, constituent elements in terms of presenting the matter and interaction of those involved in the distance environment and theories of teaching and learning linked to the key issues of distance education were also discussed.

The literature on dealing with isolation as a key element that is contributory to student motivation was explored and how educators can best support learners to stay motivated in the learning process was shown. It was found that, for students to stay motivated, they need to be guided, supported and given access to a number of support programs like tutorials. Learners need to be trained on how to use the resources that would allow them access to study materials and many other support materials. Students need guidance and support, and educators, in order to facilitate learning, need to provide enabling skills to make the learning meaningful. Learner-instructor, learner-content and learner-learner interaction is the foundation of meaningful learning in an Open and Distance Learning environment and contributes to student self-directedness that is a very important descriptor of an open distant learner.

Literature on tutor support was explored however there is still much research to be done on models of tutor support. The Unisa Integrated tutor model sheds light and expands knowledge on the existing tutor models and contributes to the body of knowledge in terms of tutor support for ODL institutions.

The social constructivism theory, which underpins much of the recent literature on distance education and online learning, has been found to be relevant in answering the main research question and sub-questions and so will be discussed in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

Research refers to diverse types of logical inquiry. According to Creswell (2013), research is a critical and systematic search for new and useful information on a particular topic. It also involves using a range of orderly thoughts, actions or techniques. Scientific knowledge is aided by skills of inquiry, experimental design, unbiased collection of information, measurement and analysis, by interpretation and by presentation of discovery or findings (Creswell, 2013).

Chapter 2 presented a literature review of distance education and open distance education. The content of the chapter touched on critical issues in distance education such as access, facilitation of learning, interaction and dealing with isolation in distance education. These issues were guided by the research question. This chapter provides an outline of the theoretical framework against which this study was conducted. It also presents the research method used to collect data and how the data was analysed and interpreted. The data collection instrument will be described in detail and the justification for its use is provided.

### **3.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY**

The proposed study was based on the social constructivism theory of learning which is described as knowledge that is constructed within social contexts through interactions within a knowledge community. This theory was first developed by Vygotsky in the 1970s (Swan, 2010) and over the years extended by a number of researchers such as Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989 as cited by Swan, 2010). "Social constructivism acknowledges the social nature and of its creation in the minds of individuals" (Anderson & Dron, 2011, p. 84). According to these theorists, teachers do not just transmit knowledge to learners who just consume it passively. The role of the teacher has changed to be that of a guide who guides the learning process while learners create knowledge through interaction and integrate it with existing knowledge. Hence Creswell (2003, p. 8) says that, in a socially constructed setting, a meaning is typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons. Anderson and Dron (2011) explain

that the location of control within the social constructivism approach moves away from the teacher and his/her responsibility to shape learning activities and design the structure in which those activities occur. They identify three levels of social constructivism during the learning processes that are cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence.

**Cognitive presence:** Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000, p. 125 as cited by Swan, 2010) define cognitive presence as “the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through course activities, sustained reflection, and discourse”.

**Teaching presence:** This is defined as the design, facilitation and direction of cognitive and social processes to realise meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes.

**Social Presence:** is the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally as real people through the medium of communication.

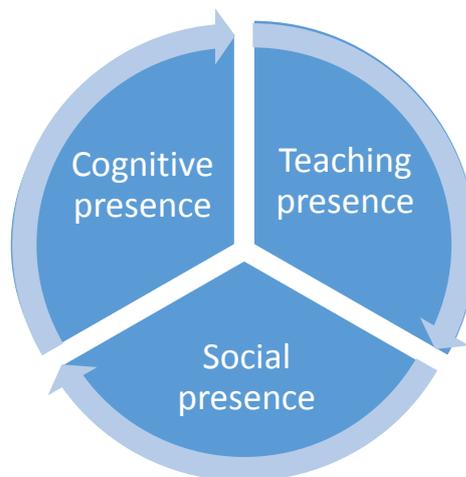
All of the above emphasise the importance of presence in the learning process. Firstly, the presence of the tutor whose responsibility is to guide the learning process and activities; secondly, the learners who interact with one another with the purpose of constructing knowledge in the process of learning; and lastly the interaction between learners and the content. These are assumed to be evidence to show that learning is taking place.

Within the Unisa context, as explained in the Unisa tutor model (2012), the abovementioned types of presence could be defined operationally as follows:

Teaching presence is defined as the design of teaching and learning materials, facilitation of learning through the use of MyUnisa and face-to-face interaction between the tutor and student. Teaching presence ensures that student-tutor interaction is focused and takes place in small groups that afford optimal participation for each student to achieve the set learning outcomes.

Social presence, in the Unisa context, requires that a tutor must create a conducive environment, both face-to-face and online, so that students can project themselves socially and emotionally through MyUnisa Learning Management System as they communicate and construct meaningful knowledge.

Cognitive presence is a way of supporting students to understand what is being taught through learning tasks thereby enabling students to develop their own independent learning skills.



**Figure 3: Different types of presence in the learning environment**  
(Source: Swan, 2010)

### **3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN**

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) define research design as a set of procedures followed to determine research subjects, sites and data collection methods that will help to answer the research questions. The research design provides guidelines on how to get evidence and analyse it so that it can be used to answer the research question. De Vos, Schurink and Strydom (1998) indicate that the research design is a blueprint of how the investigation will be conducted.

The qualitative research approach was deemed suitable for this study. Creswell (2014, p. 14) defines qualitative research as

an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the

participants setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data.

Due to the nature of this study, the qualitative research approach was relevant as it allowed the researcher to enter the participants' life world, study their experiences as tutors who are involved with the tutoring systems of Unisa and understand the meaning ascribed to their practice as tutors.

The phenomenological type of qualitative research design was adopted for this study. Creswell (2014) defines a phenomenological approach as an approach of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology in which the researcher describes lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by the participants. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010 p. 24), the "aim of a phenomenological approach to research is to transform lived experiences into a description of its essence allowing for reflection and analysis". This approach captured the essence of experiences of tutors who are involved in the integrated tutor support system at Unisa. This research aimed to analyse and understand the actions, thoughts and perceptions of tutors about the integrated tutor system used at Unisa to support students.

The process of research calls for a researcher to describe the methodology that is used to do research. The paragraph that follows will describe the site from which data was collected, the population involved and strategies used to obtain data.

### **3.4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.4.1 Research site**

The research methodology describes the population from which data is collected and the strategies used to obtain samples during the qualitative phase of the research. It also entails a description of how access to participants and to research sites was gained.

The research site for this study was Unisa Regional Service Centres that are geographically distributed in the Gauteng Region. The study involved five

Regional Service Centres, i.e., Pretoria Regional Hub, Florida Science Campus, Ekurhuleni Regional Service Centre, Johannesburg Regional Service Centre and the Vaal Agency. These Regional Service Centres were established with a purpose of providing students with access to a number of services. The university has ensured that resources and facilities are provided in the centres. Students are able to access services such as applications, registrations, computer laboratories for students to access online services, video conferencing, counselling, work integrated learning services, physical and online library services, academic literacy support workshops, Wi-Fi facilities, face-to-face and online tutorial support facilities among others.

Gauteng region is one of the largest regions and, given its proximity to the main campus, the region services the highest number of students enrolled at Unisa. According to Peters (2001), Unisa established a number of Regional Service Centres to support students, however, due to insufficient development of learner support systems in other regional service centres, students tend to congregate at the Pretoria main campus to ensure that they receive support. Peters (2001, p. 188) notes that “a considerable number of students come from those parts of the population that are greatly disadvantaged economically and scholastically” hence intense support by tutors is needed so that students can be supported wherever they are.

The research used Regional Academic Coordinators as gatekeepers. This was after seeking permission from the institutional research committee to conduct research using the institutional regional service centres as research sites (see Appendix B). The researcher presented to various stakeholders in the research project the approval letter from the Professional & Administrative Research Committee (PARC) to use tutors as participants in the study. The letter was firstly presented to the gate keepers since they have a duty to be aware of the research activities taking place within the regional service centre so that all research activities are monitored. Secondly, the letter was presented to the participants since they are Unisa contract staff members.

Gatekeepers also help to remove prospective obstacles that would otherwise inhibit investigation. The gatekeeper needs to be convinced that the research is credible and that the researcher is competent. In this case, the researcher met in person with the regional academic coordinator who is the gatekeeper and explained the research in more detail. The meeting assisted the regional academic coordinator to understand and trust the purpose of the research activity.

### **3.4.2 Population**

The participants in this study were tutors who were involved in face-to-face tutorial systems and online tutoring. All tutors were from the Gauteng region and tutored in one of the Unisa Gauteng Regional Service Centres. All participants had at least three years of experience in face-to-face tutoring and two years' experience in online tutoring within the Unisa environment. These tutors had a three-year contract that is renewable after every three years depending on their performance as tutors.

### **3.4.3 Sampling**

Every research project needs to have a sampling plan described by Tracy (2013, p. 134) as "a design for how to specifically choose sources for your data". A sampling size should be indicated in the sampling plan. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) indicate that a sample size is related to the purpose, research questions, data collection strategy and the availability of information. Purposive sampling technique was used to select a sample for this study. This sampling technique entails that the researcher selects particular elements from the population that will be informative about the topic of interest (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 38). Purposive sampling also means that the researcher purposefully chooses data that fits the parameters of the project research questions, goals and purposes (Tracy, 2013, p. 134.)

According to the purpose and the nature of this study, a sample size of six (6) tutors was found to be adequate. These selected tutors offered face-to-face tutorials and online tutorials in the Unisa environment and they were able to

provide rich information about effective facilitation using the integrated tutor model in an ODL environment. The tutors were involved in both types of tutoring, and had 2 years or more experience in e-tutoring and 3 years in face-to-face tutoring. Gauteng Region has four regional service centres and one regional hub. The researcher interviewed one tutor per centre and two tutors in the Regional hub. This was because the regional hub has a high number of tutors while other centres have fewer tutors. The regional service centres provide the same service while the student profile of each centre is different.

### **3.5 DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

#### **3.5.1 Data collection method**

Vithal and Jansen (2002) state that the purpose of a data collection plan is to give details about the strategy that will be used to get the desired information. Based on the current research questions, interviews were used to collect data. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to collect data from the six selected participants. Laforest (2009, p. 1) is of the view that “semi-structured interviews can be used to gather qualitative information”. According to her, interviews of this type are suited to working with small samples. These interviews were conducted on a face-to-face basis and they focused on the following:

- understanding of integrated tutor model by tutors,
- effects of the model on their facilitation,
- support needed by tutors,
- tutors’ coping mechanism,
- students’ access and participation,
- success factors,
- challenges of the model and
- recommendations.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Laforest (2009) is of the opinion that 60 minute interviews are acceptable as the interviewer and the participants do not lose their concentration during the interview process. All interviews were recorded using a voice recording device and participants were

informed beforehand and also before the interview took place. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010, p. 360), “tape or digital recording the interview ensures completeness of the verbal interaction and provides material for reliability checks”.

### **3.5.2 Piloting and standardisation of the interview schedule**

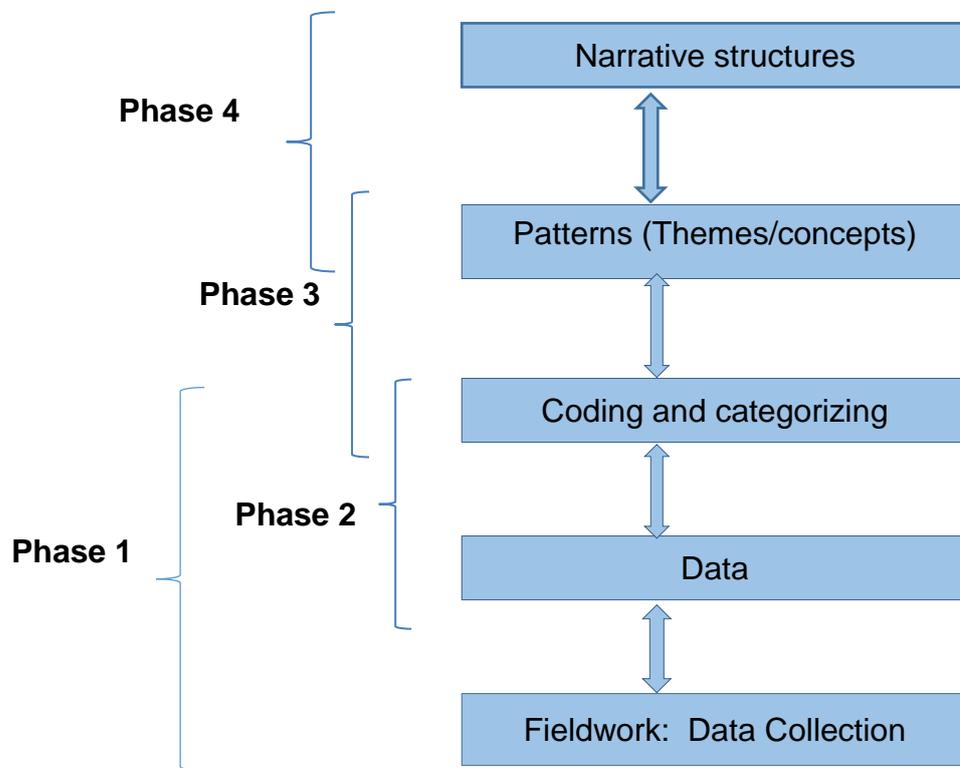
Turner (2010) suggests that it is important to undertake a pilot test of the interview schedule before it is finally used to collect data with the participants selected for the research project. According to Turner (2010), the pilot test determines if there are flaws, limitations or other weaknesses within the interview design and allows the researcher to make necessary revisions prior to the implementation of the study. The first draft of the semi-structured interview schedule was discussed with the researcher’s peers who made initial comments regarding the structure and wording of the questions. The edited version was sent to the supervisor for more comments and inputs. Further editing and restructuring was done after the supervisor’s comments. The final version of the interview schedule was used to interview two tutors who resembled the participants who were identified for the research project, as Turner (2010, p. 757) says: “a pilot test should be conducted with participants who have similar interests as those that will participate in the implementation of the study”. Results of the pilot were used to improve, revise and edit the schedule.

### **3.5.3 Data analysis**

McMillan and Schumacher (2010, p. 367) define qualitative data analysis as “primarily an inductive process of organizing data into categories and identifying patterns and relationships among the categories”. This study followed an inductive process whereby data collected from tutors was firstly organised into categories, followed by the identification of patterns and relationships among those categories. Data collected was analysed in order to get information that provided answers to the research questions.

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), inductive analysis is the process through which qualitative researchers’ synthesise and make meaning from the

data starting with specific data and ending with categories and patterns. According to them, data analysis in qualitative research is an ongoing process and can take place during the data collection stage. In this study, this took place through the process of triangulation



**Figure 4: General process of inductive analysis of data**  
 (Source: Adapted from McMillan and Schumacher, 2010, p. 368)

The research findings, related discussion and answers to the research questions were based on data collected through the aforementioned methods. The presentation and discussion of findings are guided by four themes derived from the research questions.

The first theme was based on the knowledge and understanding of the integrated tutor model by tutors and their importance in an ODL environment. The second theme was based on the success factors in the implementation of the integrated tutor model in facilitating learning. The third theme was based on the challenges in the implementation of the integrated tutor model in facilitating learning. The fourth theme looked at the impact of ITM on tutors' behaviour in terms of tutorial delivery.

The categorisation of data was guided by the social constructivism theoretical framework on which this study was based. The presentation and discussion of findings is presented in a narrative form.

### **3.6 VALIDITY OF RESEARCH**

The current study, like any other academic research study, endeavoured to understand the data and answer the research questions. To ensure that the research findings reflect the real situation, a set of strategies to enhance reliability and validity was determined and used during the research process.

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) propose a combination of 10 possible strategies to enhance validity in qualitative research. This study selected two of these strategies to enhance validity and the choice of each strategy is justified below:

**Low inference:** In an ODL environment, there are technical terms used which may be confusing to the participant. Low inference descriptors constitute a strategy that emphasises the use of understandable language when collecting data. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) indicate that low inference descriptors should be literal and stand in contrast to the abstract language of a researcher.

**Member checking:** This strategy was used as it consists of informal conversations with research participants to understand more about their realities.

To enhance reliability, all participants in the region were engaged with the same interview schedule to assess effectiveness of the integrated tutor system. The schedule was piloted on a smaller scale to ensure its reliability and validity, and to determine if it met the standard and responded to the purpose and the objectives of the study. Thereafter, a discussion was held telephonically with the participants, who participated in the pilot, to see if they had the same understanding of the items as reflected in the instrument. The discussions with the pilot group determined the accuracy of the instrument in measuring the effectiveness of the integrated tutor model and to ensure validity.

### **3.7 ETHICS CONSIDERATIONS**

McMillan and Schumacher (2010), indicate that research ethics are focused on what is morally proper and improper when engaging with participants or when accessing archival data. The guidelines for planning and conducting research in a way that will ensure protection of the rights and welfare of participants will be applied. In this case, tutors are participants in the study and their rights and welfare were protected as per the guidelines for conducting research.

The purpose of the study was fully disclosed to tutors; no information was withheld as the researcher engaged with them during the data collection process. All tutors were informed of the voluntary participation in the study and no one was compelled or coerced to participate. Tutors were provided with a full explanation of the study and openly told that, should they choose to discontinue their participation in the study, they will not be penalised in any way (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010 p. 118). Participants were also assured that they would have access to the findings of the research should they want them.

Since interviews were conducted during the data collection process, tutors were presented with a consent form to sign in which the research process was fully explained to them. The researcher read the form together with each tutor and the tutors were asked to present questions to the researcher regarding any issue that needed clarity. Thereafter, the tutors signed the form that showed their willingness to participate voluntarily in the study. Participants were reminded that they were entitled to terminate their participation during the process should they wish to do so and their anonymity in the project was guaranteed.

### **3.8 PRIVACY, CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY**

The researcher protected the privacy of tutors by ensuring that no-one except the researcher had access to tutors' responses and other restricted information. The researcher also ensured that individual participants cannot be identified from the information that has been given and, lastly, only the researcher has access to individual data or names of the participants. Over and above that, the study was

conducted in line with the ethics and research standards as set out by the Unisa Professional & Administrative Research Committee (PARC).

### **3.9 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The study is limited to Unisa tutors who are involved in face-to-face and online delivery. The tutors are tutoring in Gauteng Region and thus results cannot be reliably generalised to all Unisa tutors. However, it is anticipated that the study will raise questions and concerns that might subsequently lead to further research on a larger scale.

### **3.10 SUMMARY**

Chapter 3 provides details of the research design. The discussion in this chapter started by describing the theoretical framework on which this study was based. This discussion was followed by the research approach that was used. The research site and population was described and the sampling of participants was justified. Details on data collection methods were provided and the analysis procedure was explained. Strategies on how validity and reliability was enhanced in the study were discussed. The findings will be discussed in the chapter that will follow.

# **CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION AND PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS**

## **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter focuses on the presentation, analysis, discussion of data collected and the presentation of findings. In chapter 3, a description of the research design and the theoretical framework of the study were described. The research methodology, data collection, analysis and interpretation were also discussed. The purpose of this chapter is to present, analyse and interpret the results of the investigation carried out and thus provide answers to the research questions that guided the study. The chapter presents the results of the data analyses carried out to address the research questions. The study is aimed at systematic collection and interpretation of information that will enable the researcher to suggest guidelines for effective facilitation skills in an Open and Distance Learning environment.

An interview schedule was used to collect data from six (6) tutors who are tutoring at Unisa Gauteng Regional Service Centres (see Appendix A). Items selected to form the interview schedule were derived from the main research question and sub-questions presented in Chapter 1, section 1.3. In order to ensure reliability and validity of the instrument, the interview instrument was piloted with 2 (two) tutors who resembled the participants who were identified for the research study. Changes were affected to address the issues of questions being too closed ended, repetitive, ambiguous and to enable the researcher to administer the same questions to all 6 participants.

In the field of Open Distance Learning there are different technical terms used which may be confusing to some tutors. The instrument was designed using low inference descriptors that ensured that understandable language was used during data collection.

The interview sessions were conducted over a period of a month after having received approval from the Professional and Administrative Research Committee (PARC) to conduct research. The researcher used Regional Academic

Coordinators (RACs) as gatekeepers to enter regional service centres as research sites. The approval letter received from PARC was presented to the RACs as permission to enter the research sites. This letter assisted the researcher to remove obstacles that might have inhibited the investigation such as absenteeism among tutors on the day of the interview.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the regional service centres where tutors provided tutoring services and, in some cases, the researcher had to travel to their place of work. Interviews lasted for between 45 and 60 minutes. The researcher used probing questions to elicit specific information from the participants and their responses were recorded on a voice recorder and a laptop for a backup in case one of the tools did not operate. Participants were informed beforehand that interviews would be recorded for reliability checks. Not all recordings were transcribed verbatim. At some stage, the researcher summarised portions of the interview after searching for the highlights to transform the interview's audio recording into a written text. Saldanha (2013, p. 45) indicates that

depending on your research questions, goals, and experience, it is not necessary to transcribe the entire interview; just the highlights or what directly addresses your inquiry.

An inductive process was used to analyse data collected from tutors. During this process of analysis, the researcher read the data several times, coded it and organised it into different categories which identified recurring themes. The key words that were constantly repeated by participants indicated that there was a pattern of similar experiences. Therefore, categories were used to derive patterns and relationships between those categories. The key words were highlighted and formed a basis for converging data. Social constructivism, a theoretical framework discussed in Chapter 3, section 3.2 was also used during the data analysis. The theoretical framework referred to three levels of social constructivism, namely, cognitive presence, teaching presence and social presence.

The research findings are presented in four sections, highlighting major themes that occurred throughout the discussions. The last section will summarise the findings.

**Section 4.3** looks at the knowledge and understanding of the integrated tutor model by tutors and their importance in an ODL environment.

**Section 4.4** addresses sub-question one that deals with the success factors in the implementation of the integrated tutor model in facilitating learning. This sub-question is based on the main question of the research.

**Section 4.5** addresses sub-question two of the main research question that deals with the challenges in the implementation of the integrated tutor model in facilitating learning.

**Section 4.6** addresses the last sub-question of the main research question that deals with the impact of ITM in tutors' behaviour in terms of tutorial delivery.

**Section 4.7** presents the summary of findings as discussed in the aforementioned sections.

During the interviews, probing questions were asked to elicit further information and to clarify statements. Participants' views were organised into the following categories:

- Tutors' Knowledge, understanding of the ITM and the importance thereof at Unisa;
- Successes in the implementation of ITM;
- Challenges in the implementation of the ITM; and
- The impact of ITM in the behaviour of tutors in their facilitation of learning.

These findings will be used to improve the implementation of the ITM and enhance facilitation skills among tutors supporting students in an online as well as face-to-face delivery of tutorials in an ODL environment.

## 4.2 TARGET POPULATION

The target population for the study was six (6) participants. All these participants were tutors who were involved in both online and face-to-face tutorial delivery. All tutors were available and participated in the interview for this study. The total number of participants was 6/6 that is calculated at 100%. Table 1 gives an overview of the response rate for data collection.

**Table 1: Response rate**

<b>ITEM</b>	<b>INTERVIEW SCHEDULE</b>
Targeted number of participants	6
Actual number of participants	6
Response rate	100%

## 4.3 TUTORS' KNOWLEDGE, UNDERSTANDING OF THE ITM AND ITS IMPORTANCE AT UNISA

The data for section one is presented as a compilation of research question 1 that appears on the interview schedule. For this question, participants were requested to explain their knowledge and understanding of the ITM in their own words.

Responses from this question assisted the researcher to find out if tutors understood what an integrated model is within the context of open distance learning. Participants knew what ITM is except for one participant who initially did not understand the term. However, as the discussion continued, he was able to link ITM with what he was doing in the program and even explained it in more detail.

The themes that emerged in this section are as follows:

- keeping abreast with the changes globally
- Integration of programs
- Reaching out to students.

## **Keeping abreast with the changes globally**

Participants understood what ITM is and what the university hopes to achieve by introducing ITM as a program to support students in their learning. Most of the participants explained ITM as a combination or integration of two types of tutorial delivery systems to support students in a distance education environment.

Tutors responded to the question on ITM as follows:

*[ITM is] integration of face-to-face and online types of tutoring systems (Tutor 1).*

*It is a combination of face-to-face and online tutoring (Tutor 2).*

*This is face-to-face and online support to students (Tutor 3).*

*ITM is about bringing two types of support to students. Firstly, it was f2f and Unisa decided to bring e-tutoring to support its students (Tutor 5).*

*This is model where students are being assisted in a form of face-to-face tutoring while, on the other hand, students are assisted in a form of online delivery or online tutoring (Tutor 6).*

Participants also explained the value of ITM within the distance education context. This became evident when 3 of 6 tutors indicated that ITM is very important for maintaining competence in an Open and Distance Learning environment globally. One of 6 tutors alluded to the importance of ITM in the following statement:

*Unisa is a world-class university and through its innovation decided to use integrated tutor model which is comprised of online learning and face-to-face learning and this is a global approach to teaching and learning in distance education.*

Tutor 2 also highlighted the fact that ITM gives Unisa an opportunity to be at the same level with other institutions of higher learning. The tutor remarked as follows:

*Unisa was doing face-to-face all along to support its students and later introduced online tutorial support which requires students to access tutorial*

*support online, this assists the university to be on par with other institutions of higher learning and be able to compete globally.*

This issue of competing globally is reflected in section 2.2 of the literature review, where Peters (2010) states that developing countries need to move with the times and be on the same level as other first world countries.

Four of six participants explained that the advantage of an ITM is that it provides flexibility for both students and tutors since they are not compelled to be at a certain venue at a certain time but can access their tutorials anywhere as long as they have internet access. Tutors' views are supported by literature review as discussed in section 2.2. According to Moore and Kearsley (2012), distance education can be independent of time and place that is one of the key strengths of distance learning environments.

### **Integration of programs**

According to the participants, ITM is largely about integrating two programs, i.e., face-to-face delivery of tutorials and online delivery to support students studying at a distance. Tutor 5 indicated the following:

*ITM is about bringing two types of support to students. Firstly, it was face-to-face and Unisa decided to bring e-tutoring to support its students. Students have the latitude to engage in one of these programs or both.*

The aim of this question was to determine if participants understood what ITM is and what it hopes to achieve. What came out very clearly was that the ITM aims to provide support to students by using both face-to-face and online delivery.

### **Reaching out to support students**

What came out very strongly among participants was the fact that the introduction of ITM is a strategy used by Unisa to reach out to students who are dispersed globally. Tutor 3 remarked as follows:

*Unisa is using two ways of reaching out and supporting students, that is, face-to-face and electronics.*

Tutor 1 further indicated that

*ITM provides support to students who can use online offering and face-to-face offering to take the distance out of the distance education.*

This type of support was also alluded to in section 2.2 of the literature review based on the policy for the provision of distance education in South African universities in the context of an integrated post school system (South Africa, 2014, p. 11) which advocates for the creation of a quality learning environment using appropriate combinations of different media to support students studying at a distance. According to this policy, using a combination of media for teaching and learning is a strategy used in distance education to overcome “spatial and/or transactional distance between educators and students”.

In summary, 6 out of 6 participants understood what ITM is about and recognised its importance and relevance within the Unisa context. They recognised the value of ITM as a strategy for students to learn the curriculum using various modes of delivery and closing the spatial gap between the student and educator using technology. One of six tutors was not initially conversant with the terminology but understood the two delivery systems used by Unisa to support students and could explained them adequately as the interview continued.

#### **4.4 SUCCESS FACTORS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INTEGRATED TUTOR MODEL IN FACILITATING LEARNING**

The aim of the question on the success factors in the implementation of the ITM in facilitating learning was to determine the positive changes brought about by implementing this model at Unisa.

One of the questions asked of participants related to the support received by tutors to ensure that the implementation of this model yields positive results. In response to this question, answers were based on section 2.5 of Chapter 2 that discusses accessing face-to-face and online tutorials.

The themes that emerged in this section are as follows:

- Academic and administrative support

- Training and development
- Provision of access to students.

#### **4.4.1 Academic and administrative support**

##### ***4.4.1.1 Regional support***

Participants indicated that the first success factor of the ITM is the fact that the institution appoints qualified tutors who are determined and provides support to them in various ways to ensure that this model succeeds.

Tutor 1 alluded to the institution by saying that

*... appointment of qualified and determined tutors and staff members is one of the strongest points of ITM.*

All six participants expressed their appreciation when it came to the support they received from the institution. According to them, the support they received from the institution made their job easy as they facilitate learning. 5 of 6 tutors remarked on the support they received from the Regional Service Centre staff members citing the fact that these staff members are always available to provide service to them when they need it.

Tutor 3 responded by saying that

*regional administrative support staff is quite helpful such as Tutorial Officers who provide scheduling and constant communication on the changes in the program.*

##### ***4.4.1.2 Academic support by module lecturers***

Some alluded to the support provided by academic staff members in the colleges. For some participants, this type of support was not initiated by the lecturer; however, when the tutor initiated a conversation, the lecturer would respond promptly.

This point is captured well by tutor 6 who remarked that:

*one needs to be proactive and start the conversation. Every time I send an e-mail to them, the lecturers do come back to me however if you don't start the*

*communication the lecturer will never. I also expect academics to take initiatives since things change over time and it would be easy if they communicate their strategy and goals for the year and not wait for me to start the communication.*

Some module lecturers communicate with students about what is available on myUnisa for students to access. This is what tutor 6 has to say about this type of communication:

*Lecturer assists the tutor by posting a message alerting students of the tutor's presence in the Learning Management System discussion forum and alerts students of their non-participation and non-responsiveness.*

The importance of communication is dealt with in section 2.4 of the literature review. Communication between instructors and students is referred to by Berge (1995) as a strategy to deal with dropout rates among students. Berge emphasises that teachers should take the initiative to communicate with students.

Tutor 3 commented as follows:

*Academic staff insisted that all face-to-face tutors should have activities for students, at least 2 questions. The questions would be sent to the lecturer for quality purpose and will be sent back to the tutor to give to students and work it out with students to assess them. These efforts close the gap between the tutor and the academic staff which is really essential.*

2 of 6 tutors indicated that they would appreciate if the module lecturer would have an open communication with tutors so that they can receive guidance in terms of the module content. They would also like to be visited by lecturers who will evaluate their facilitation as well as their knowledge of the content.

#### **4.4.1.3 Support by administrative staff in colleges**

A number of support structures were established with the introduction of ITM. One of those structures was the Academic Support Coordinators (ASC) based in the colleges. These staff members provide support to face-to-face and e-tutors on a number of issues, among others, communication with students, providing technical support, monitoring work done by tutors on myUnisa platform and

providing feedback to tutors on their progress. This is reflected by tutor 1 who indicated that:

*ASCs are of great assistance as well. They are the ones who monitor activities done online by tutors and provide feedback in terms of improvements that could be done. ASCs also communicate with each and every tutor and tell them about the success and challenges of tutors and also provide recommendations and guidelines.*

#### **4.4.1.4 Tutor-tutor-interaction**

All tutors requested more pro-active support from lecturers and they also indicated that academics should initiate a conversation since they are the owners of the content and know exactly what they expect from students. This request is supported by the view expressed in the theoretical framework used in this study in section 2.7. According to the literature review, one of the six (6) modes of interaction is teacher-teacher interaction. Anderson (2003) indicates that this type of interaction is very important in ODL and needs to be implemented to benefit students. Based on this theory, tutors and lecturers need to engage continuously on content-based issues so that students can benefit.

#### **4.4.2 Training and development**

One of the key successes of the ITM is the training provided to tutors in order to ensure that they facilitate teaching and learning using ODL methods of facilitation. Some of these tutors do not have a pedagogical background and, according to them, such training develops their skills to facilitate in an ODL environment.

Tutors indicated that regional staff members, in collaboration with some academic staff members, provide them with training during tutor development workshops. The workshops focus on facilitation skills for ODL students, on how to integrate technology in their tutoring, myUnisa training skills, smartboard technology that assists them to develop material that is loaded on a myUnisa platform for students to access at their leisure.

This is what tutor 5 said regarding the impact of training received as a tutor:

*I used to record tutorial sessions on a laptop, however, with the introduction of smartboard, I can now record a live tutorial and then share the link to thousands of students and all students will benefit be it the student access tutorials face-to-face or through e-tutoring.*

In addition to tutor 5, tutor 3 made similar remarks but suggested that such training should be done practically and not just through power point presentations:

*I was orientated on how to use myUnisa platform for face-to-face and e-tutoring, however, this was a power point presentation and would like to see such trainings being done practically where tutors will go to a computer lab and navigate on myUnisa.*

Tutor 3 added:

*There is no practical training instead, it is presentations in a big venue.*

In addition to the orientation training they get, 3 of 6 tutors indicated that they would like to see this type of support being done continuously since they lose the skill if a follow up training is not done.

*This training especially on technology should be done continuously since if we do not get practice, we lose the skill.*

These responses suggest that tutors need to be trained not only once but continuously in digital literacy to enable them to integrate face-to-face delivery with online delivery. This suggestion, that teaching staff should also be empowered with digital skills in order to perform as expected by the institution, is also referred to by McPherson and Nunes (2004) in section 2.5 of the literature review. McPherson and Nunes (2004) emphasise that institutions of higher learning should not ignore the fact that some university teaching staff are not technologically literate and some even avoid technology.

A social constructivism framework requires a clear teaching presence and if tutors are not trained on how to use technologies provided by the institution, it would be difficult for them to integrate technology in face-to-face tutoring and

interact with students online as required. Proper and practical training and development is thus crucial in an ODL environment.

### **4.4.3 Provision of access to students**

#### ***4.4.3.1 Computer and internet access***

The third item that contributed to the success of the ITM was the provision of access for students. Prior to the introduction of the ITM, the institution provided a Learning Management System (LMS) called myUnisa. This is an online platform that provides students with access to their learning materials like tutorial letters, study guides and many other learning resources. However, for students to have access to the LMS platform, they must have access to a computer with internet. The institution provides resources that allow students to make use of ITM to their benefit.

Some of the respondents indicated that Unisa has succeeded in ensuring that regional centres have computer laboratories with internet for students. Tutor 3 remarked as follows:

*Unisa is serving a diverse community and other students do not have access to computers even in the metropolitan areas. Unisa has provided computer labs for them to access computers to engage with their learning activities and other students.*

Tutor 2 indicated that

*not everyone has access to internet. Those who have must book through internet cafes, book an hour or so for payment which might not be affordable to some students. An hour might not be enough since some start the work and not finish it due to exhaustion of an hour allocated to them based on the money they have paid to use the internet. However students are aware that they can access internet and computers in the Unisa labs.*

The same participant also indicated that she was aware that regional staff in the computer laboratories provide training for students on how to use computers since not every student who enrolls with the institution of higher learning is computer literate:

*Students are given orientation and supported on how to use a computer since not everyone is computer literate.*

The views of tutors are supported by McPherson and Nunes (2004) who believe that access to resources is not sufficient if students are not equipped to use them. Students need to be provided with technical skills so that they are able to participate in discussions and meet their learning objectives.

#### **4.4.3.2 Access to face-to-face and online tutorial support**

The institution provides face-to-face tutorial support for students studying high-risk modules, i.e., modules with low pass rates. These modules are offered online as well as face-to-face and students can choose a form of support that they will be comfortable with or even use both media.

All respondents indicated that the institution is providing such support since the profile of the university has changed and some of the students come straight from matric where they received traditional classes. Coming to the university might be difficult for them and such classes assist them to understand the content. Some even requested that the university should not do away with face-to-face support for students now that it has introduced online support.

This is how these participants remarked about face-to-face tutorial support:

*Students do have access to class in regional service centres on Saturdays (Tutor 2).*

*Don't phase out face-to-face tutorials, nothing will ever replace human intervention in as far as teaching and learning is concerned. I am saying this as a professional teacher (Tutor 6).*

*Students have everything when it comes to face-to-face facilities (Tutor 1).*

Participants' views are supported by section 2.5 of the literature review that referred to Vaughan (2010) who indicates that some learners may find it hard to detach from face-to-face provision hence institutions must provide support using both systems to ensure that all students will have access to support.

#### **4.4.4 Incorporation of online resources into face-to-face tutorials**

4 of 6 participants indicated that the ITM has provided opportunities for tutors to develop in the field of technology in the sense that they are trained how to incorporate online resources into face-to-face tutorials for online platform usage. This is one of the strengths of ITM and enables students to access different types of resources other than the printed material that they receive by courier, post or during face-to-face tutorials. This is what tutor 4 said about resource development for both groups of students:

*One of the successes in the ITM is that tutors are encouraged and trained to incorporate multimedia in tutorials by uploading content that has been recorded on myUnisa to be accessed by students. The tutor will then share a link with students to access the content and engage with it.*

#### **4.4.5 Acquisition of computer skills**

1 of 6 participants indicated that the ITM assists learners to be prepared, not only theoretically, but also practically since they acquire technological skills that would be useful for them in a place of work. Tutor 3 remarked that

*ITM prepares students for a world of work. Whereby a student comes out of Unisa technologically skilled as this is a requirement in all fields of work. They will not struggle when entering a world of work.*

Malcom Knowles (as cited by Bullen, 1995) supports what is indicated by the tutor regarding how adults learn. Knowles indicates that adults need to know why they learn and that they learn experientially. Therefore, DE learners have an opportunity to acquire technological skills that would be helpful to them as they enter the world of work. Those who are already in the world of work are able to improve their technology skills.

From the data presented and discussions above, it is evident that the ITM has brought about changes in the institution. The success of the ITM could be attributed to the fact that the institution supports tutors and students in various ways. One of the supports alluded to by all 6 participants is the training provided to them. The majority appreciated the fact that Unisa trains them to facilitate in

class and to use technology to delivery tutorial sessions face-to-face and online. Tutors also mentioned the support received from regional staff and academic support staff. The provision of access for students was also mentioned, however, it was not without challenges as perceived by tutors. The discussion that follows will focus on these challenges identified by tutors in the ITM.

## **4.5 CHALLENGES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INTEGRATED TUTOR MODEL IN FACILITATING LEARNING**

### **4.5.1 Provision of material for facilitation of learning**

After tutors have been appointed and activated on myUnisa for the task of facilitating learning face-to-face or online, they are expected to start working with the students, however, not all of them have access to tutoring materials found on myUnisa LMS. 3 tutors indicated that accessing tutoring material online was a challenge because academic staff must provide passwords and permission to access course material online. Tutor 3 remarked as follows:

*Not being able to access material online is a serious challenge in both modes of delivery. Tutors are expected to access tutor material online however twice already I found that the password does not work and in this case, I used the student's password to download the material online.*

*If you are a face-to-face tutor, you do not have access to materials that are loaded on myUnisa until the lecturer gives permission to access the material. However, sometimes the lecturer takes his own time and one finds that by the time the lecturer gives permission it's already late in the semester and the tutor cannot assist students as intended.*

Tutors recommended that all academic departments should have a standard operational procedure (SOP) regarding tutor access on myUnisa platform because currently every department operates differently. This standard procedure is in the best interests of the students.

### **4.5.2 Student participation and interaction**

In terms of student participation, all tutors indicated that a low number of students participate actively in online tutorials while face-to-face participation is slightly

better. Some of the tutors explained that the slight difference in attendance between online and face-to-face could be attributed to the fact that face-to-face tutors see their students and can even phone and motivate them to attend tutorials but that this is not possible with online students. Two tutors indicated that, in face-to-face interaction, it is possible to see whether students understand a concept or not. If students do not understand, the tutor can use a different strategy to explain it. In face-to-face tutorials, tutors use various methods of facilitation such as working in groups or pairs. These methods promote independence, collaboration and autonomy.

2 of 6 participants responded as follows:

*Participation is easy to manage in a face-to-face tutorial class and this is easy to engage. When they work in groups, one can see if the quiet student participate or not (Tutor 6).*

*In an online environment it is just the same, all students are just quiet because they do not engage with the content, one another or with the tutor and one does not know if they understand or not (Tutor 4).*

Tutor 2 also indicated that the difficulty in facilitating learning among online learners is that students do not provide feedback, no matter how much a tutor tries. This is how she responded:

*Social interaction is encouraged in the class and in face-to-face classes the tutor makes sure that it happens, however, in an online environment it's a different ball game altogether because no matter how hard the tutor tries students do not come on board.*

One tutor indicated that attendance fluctuates when it comes to face-to-face tutorials. Students attend at the beginning of the semester, however, as the semester continues their attendance slows down.

Tutor 5 felt that

*Face-to-face program does not have a lot of challenges however its attendance that starts well, however, during the semester attendance fluctuates and decreases.*

According to tutors, there are low numbers participating in e-tutoring and that participation must be improved. These are tutors' responses to participation:

*Online students do not participate ... the only thing is that they go online, open the material and I suppose they read but they do not respond. They do not interact with the tutor. Very few of them interact with the tutor (Tutor 4).*

Tutor 6 indicated that if they respond they are too general as illustrated by the following quotation:

*All they say is that some materials posted online is very helpful however other than that they do not give constructive comments that would assist other students as well.*

Tutor 6 indicated that:

*Level of participation in e-tutoring is easy to get but less than 10% participate out of 200 students allocated to each tutor ... They also say the comment of a tutor has made their life easier ... They will never ask a tutor a question or comment on what was posted online.*

Tutors' responses are supported by Figure 2 (section 2.7) where Anderson (2003) refers to Anderson and Garrison (1998) regarding various modes of interaction. According to these researchers, interaction needs to take place on three levels, i.e., learner-instructor interaction, learner-content interaction and learner-learner interaction. The participants' responses show that students do not interact with their tutors and therefore the tutors do not know whether they are interacting with the content. These students seldom ask questions or comment on the content itself. Gunawardena and McLissac (2008) echo this view by saying that dialogue which occurs between the learner and the instructor is determined by the structure that exists in the course design. These researchers cited Moore and Kearsley (1996) who perceive structure as course rigidity or flexibility in terms of establishing educational goals, teaching techniques employed, assessment procedures and the extent to which individual's needs are covered. According to Moore (1993), structure is seen as a qualitative feature of a course rather than a quantitative feature.

Two tutors even suggested that the institution should link formal assessments with activities done online and face-to-face as this could motivate students to participate and interact with one another as well as with the tutor. According to their suggestion, the university could link participation to the formal assessment credit system and/or introduce badges. Tutors felt that this initiative could improve the level of participation in all programs.

#### **4.5.2.1 System design contributes to non-participation of students**

The system should be designed in a way that would be user-friendly to all students and not exclude anyone in the learning process. 1 of 6 tutors, a tutor for mathematics, indicated that the system does not make it easy for students to write down mathematical symbols and this might be one of the contributory factors that impede students from participating in the discussion forums. The tutor said that

*non-participation of students in the mathematics class could be attributed to the way the platform has been designed. The platform is not user friendly at all to most students especially those who do not have computer skills. The platform is not good in typing mathematical equations and it has been like that for years.*

The tutor recommended that designers of the systems should consult with the users to ensure that the end product will meet their need. South Africa (2013) (White paper for post school education and training) emphasises that universities need to create a conducive environment for all learners to learn without any barriers.

In addition to tutor 6's comment above, tutor 3 is of the opinion that another reason for low participation in the official Learning Management System (LMS) is that students create their own groups on social platforms and interact in those platforms. The social platform used by most students is WhatsApp and they may also invite tutors to participate in these platforms:

*Students develop their own offline mobile groups like on WhatsApp to support one another instead of using the apps on the myUnisa platform. This makes it difficult for the tutor to interact with them and the university to*

*monitor activities done online since they work offline in their own private platforms.*

Learner-learner interaction is highly encouraged in distance learning and institutions use learning management systems to provide platforms for students to interact, collaborate and learn together. This type of interaction assists students to learn from one another in a relaxed environment. In this way, students develop social learning skills.

The theory of social constructivism concurs with the issue of interaction and participation. Anderson and Dron (2011) refer to three levels of social constructivism, i.e., cognitive presence, teaching presence and social presence. Students are expected to engage cognitively by engaging with the content construct and confirm the meaning through course activities, sustained reflection and discourse. Participants indicated that students engage well with the content during face-to-face tutorials, however, this is not the case with online tutorial delivery. All six tutors remarked that students do not engage on the virtual platform and that this is a challenge for Unisa.

Social constructivism emphasises that, for learning to take place, there must be a teaching presence where tutors design, facilitate and direct the cognitive processes to realise meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes. Tutors indicated that they designed resources and uploaded them online so that students can access them and discuss the content, however, this rarely happens. In other words, the teaching presence is one sided and needs to be addressed by the institution.

The last level of social constructivism is social presence where students are expected to participate in a community of enquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally as real people through the medium of communication being used. The university has provided a platform where students are expected to engage and interact with one another, however, this is not happening the way it should. Even if tutors initiate the discussion by posting questions on the platform, students rarely interact with the topic or with one another. Participation and interaction is a challenge for online tutorials.

### 4.5.3 Roles and responsibilities

Participants felt that students do not understand the role of a tutor in distance education. Three tutors felt that students might know the role of a tutor, however, they choose to ignore it. They also do not know what their responsibilities are as students studying in a distance education institution like Unisa. All six participants reported that students came unprepared to class for face-to-face tutorials and expected tutors to teach them. Participants indicated that they found it difficult to assist students who do not take responsibility for their own learning.

Tutor 4 remarked as follows:

*Students do not do their part at home so that when they come to class they already know where their challenges are and the tutor can be able to assist them on such areas.*

2 of 6 tutors indicated that some students know their problem areas and come to class knowing what they want the tutor to assist them with, however, according to these tutors, there are very few students who understand their responsibilities as distance learners. The tutor plays a role of a facilitator and not a lecturer. Teaching is done when necessary, perhaps when a new concept is introduced that needs explanation. Participants indicated that students do not understand that. Tutor 2 indicated that:

*participation in the face-to-face classes is a challenge since students come to class unprepared so it's up to the tutor to create a conducive environment which will allow students to participate and also use facilitation skills that would force them to participate and be actively involved in discussions.*

In an ODL environment, tutors are expected to provide resources online and face-to-face facilitate discussions and ensure that they provide timely feedback to students. Their concern is that online students do not respond. Tutors post questions online to initiate a discussion and some even upload video clips to explain a concept, however, students do not respond. 2 of 6 tutors indicated that through a statistical tool found in the LMS, they are able to see how many students have opened the resource and the number of downloads but students seldom comment on the resources they downloaded. This makes it difficult for

tutors to comment if they have engaged with the content or if they downloaded it for later engagement.

The institution has a role to play in terms of alerting students about what is expected from them as ODL students. Tutor 2 is of the opinion that

*students need to receive information from the institution about the role of an e-tutor so that they are able to interact with her and get help at all times.*

Tutors are expected to motivate students to learn and ensure that they create an environment conducive for learning to take place, be it online or face-to-face (Holmberg, 2005). This approach can be associated with the empathy theory of learning in Chapter 2, section 2.6 of literature review. The creation of a conducive environment includes providing helpful and positive comments to motivate students, stimulate their active participation and interaction with aim of meeting their expectations (Keller as cited by Berridge et al., 2012).

#### **4.5.4 Tutor remuneration**

6 of 6 tutors expressed their unhappiness regarding remuneration for face-to-face tutors because the institution has been paying the same rate to face-to-face tutors for the past eight years. These tutors, however, continue to assist students because they like what they do. Tutor 5 said the following:

*The issue of remuneration which is not market related is a serious challenge and the institution should revisit this rate since this has been like this for many years. I continue with the task because I am passionate about assisting students and ploughing back to the community.*

Tutors recommended that the institution should look into increasing tutor remuneration to be market related to reward them for their commitment and dedication to their tasks as tutors employed on a contract basis.

#### 4.5.5 Feedback from academics

Academics need to re-define their role in the ODL tutoring system. Tutors facilitate content for students guided by academic departments, however, tutors feel that the support they receive from academics is not sufficient especially when it comes to timely provision of feedback. One of the tasks required from online tutors includes submission of monthly reports on the activities performed by them online. According to tutors, some academics acknowledge the receipt of the report but do not provide feedback. They feel that there is very poor communication between tutors and academics in the departments. Tutors had differing opinions in this area and they remarked as follows:

Tutor 3 indicated that

*academic staff needs to provide support to tutors and provide timely feedback. E-tutors are required to provide a monthly report on the activities they perform online. However, they do not provide immediate feedback. Actually, tutors never get feedback from academic staff; they only acknowledge that they have received the report.*

Tutor 6 had a slightly different opinion in this area and indicated that academic staff members are involved but that the tutor needs to initiate communication:

*Academic staff only gets involved when a tutor asks for some support, however, they never initiate communicating from their side. Academic staff has no relationship with their tutors.*

5 of 6 participants indicated that they feel that it is very important for the academics to share results of the students with them. This can assist them to know if they contribute positively and make a difference to the throughput rate of the institution.

Tutor 5 explained his frustration in this area by saying that:

*I am eager to know about the results of my students however, they are not shared with me. I have communicated a number of times with the lecturer but he is not getting back to me regarding this issue.*

Tutor 6 had a slightly different view on this issue and indicated that:

*Output or throughput rate cannot be measured since I do not have access to online results, but with face-to-face I am able to access the results of the students I am tutoring and, over the years, I am happy about the results of my students.*

Tutor 4 added by saying that “results could be used to motivate students who are still doing the course”.

Tutors’ views regarding the throughput rates are reflected in section 2.3 of chapter 2. Letseka and Karel (2015) indicate that one of the challenges of DE institutions is the success rate that is low globally compared to pass rates in contact higher education institutions. Tutors feel that academics should improve their support for tutors especially when it comes to such critical issues as they affect the strategic imperative and the core business of the institution that is teaching and learning.

#### **4.5.6 Internet access for students**

Although Unisa has provided computer and internet access to students, a lot still needs to be done. Because Unisa students are distributed across the globe, to participate in the DE learning, they need to access their learning materials online. One of the challenges mentioned by the participants is that some students struggle to access internet in some areas. Issues of affordability were mentioned by some of the participants indicating that some students do not have internet access in their geographical areas and that they may need to travel to places like internet cafes where they can access internet for a fee. Tutor 6 remarked:

*Some students indicated that they would want to engage in the platform however they will have to travel a long distance to access internet in town that is costly for them hence they will only engage once in a month on a platform if they have the money to travel and also pay for the internet access in the internet café.*

The views presented by tutors during the interviews show that the university still has to ensure that the three levels of social constructivism, as indicated by

Anderson and Dron (2011), are effective in the learning process of Unisa tutorial programmes. From these views, it is difficult to say that cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence exist optimally in the system. Suggestions were put forward by tutors to improve these.

#### **4.6 The impact of ITM on tutors' behaviour in their facilitation skills**

When tutors were asked how the ITM has affected their behaviour in terms of their facilitation, 5 of 6 tutors acknowledged that this model has changed the way they facilitate, as they need to be creative. According to them, a lot is expected from the online tutor that was not the case with face-to-face tutoring. Tutor 2 said: "The ITM forces tutors to grow and develop and they also start to think out of the box".

During the interviews, it emerged that tutors need to accept the fact that they are dealing with two types of students, online and face-to-face, even though, at times, this could be one group of students who participate online as well as face-to-face. Participants indicated that, initially, when this model was introduced, it was difficult for them to adapt but that they eventually adapted to ITM with the support they received from the administrators:

*The support that I get from the administrative staff assisted me to cope and understand that I am dealing with a different kind of group compared to face-to-face group.*

##### **4.6.1 Dealing with imaginary students**

Some participants indicated that dealing with imaginary students that they do not see physically, is an adjustment. This requires them to prepare with an imaginary student in mind, so that they are able to assist them to meet their learning objectives. Tutor 2 commented:

*Being involved in face-to-face with students has actually helped me to facilitate online students as if they are face-to-face, I get to imagine their existence even if they are not there and that helps me a lot although it is a challenge but this is one of the strategies that helps me to cope with the changes as a tutor involved in both offerings.*

#### **4.6.2 Tutors are expected to integrate technology into their tutoring activities**

Tutors are expected to integrate technology in their delivery of face-to-face tutorials and this requires creative thinking, research and learning from others.

*Tutors are expected to develop additional materials and upload [them] online. It takes a lot of time to develop the resources however since this is the only easy way for now to address their challenges the tutor takes time to do so. It's time consuming (Tutor 5).*

*There is a positive impact in using visual support like DVDs since the student can see the person as he presents the subject matter and understanding is enhanced through these support material for students (Tutor 2).*

*ITM has surely impacted positively on me since I am also a marker and this assists me to identify problems as I do the marking and immediately I am able to identify a question that is bothering many students. After marking, I develop material that will assist students to understand the question and respond to it better put it online for them to access and correct the mistakes in their assignments (Tutor 4).*

#### **4.6.3 Communication**

Communication is key in the implementation of the ITM and it requires a shift from the tutors who guide the learning process online and face-to-face. Platforms used for communication include social media and myUnisa/myLife e-mails. Tutors are aware that engagement requires communication and they commented as follows regarding the importance of communication:

Tutor 2 indicated that

*when you have posted something online, you need to make an announcement so that even those who did not visit the site should be able to see that there is something new on the platform.*

Tutor 4 agreed with tutor 2, however, he does the announcements firstly face-to-face and persuades students to visit the online platform for further information.

*I announce in the face-to-face tutorials that I will be posting something on the platform and students need to go and look for it in that platform especially if I am avoiding spoon-feeding them.*

Tutor 6 said: “Communicate continuously with students and don’t lose heart”.

Tutors are also using social media platforms like WhatsApp to communicate with students even though this is not linked to the official Unisa LMS. The university has provided blogs for communication between students and tutors. The advantage of blogs is that they are easily monitored by academic departments since they are linked to the myUnisa platform. 4 of the 6 tutors indicated that they know about these blogs but they do not use them. If the institution is able to link the LMS with the social platforms preferred by students, perhaps this will solve the challenge of interacting outside the official learning management system. These tutors suggested that the university should consider intensifying training, not only for tutors, but also for academic staff on how to use official social media platforms in the learning process. This suggestion is supported by the literature reviewed in section 2.5 that indicated that teaching staff should be equipped with skills to enable them to communicate, facilitate and manage students in an ODL environment (McPherson & Nunes, 2004). Bates & Sangra (2011) also suggest that institutions should have incentives to encourage staff to acquire these skills and use them to benefit students.

#### **4.7 SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS**

The focus of the study was to explore tutors’ views on the effectiveness of the integrated tutor model (ITM) in the facilitation of tutorials in an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution like Unisa. This section presented the summary of findings of the study as discussed in the sections above.

In order to be able to answer the main research question, 3 sub-questions were developed. However, the researcher saw fit to provide a background question that would assist in answering these questions. Participants were asked to explain their understanding of the Integrated Tutor Model (ITM). This was the very first question presented to participants. The findings of this study revealed

that tutors understood the concept of ITM and were able to explain what ITM is and its importance within the ODL context. Initially, one participant could not explain what ITM was. However, as the discussion continued, he was able to explain it. The importance of ITM was also presented as explained by participants. Among other reasons, tutors indicated that ITM is important for Unisa since this institution is situated in a developing country and this model will assist the institution to keep abreast with the global changes happening within the ODL context. Secondly, the ITM is crucial for integrating face-to-face with online delivery. Students are given the opportunity to access education and support using both systems of delivery. Lastly, the ITM reaches out to students and closes the spatial gap between the student and the educator through technology.

This chapter also provides a platform for the researcher to identify and discuss factors that contribute to the success of the ITM model. This was the second question asked of participants in order to answer the first sub-question of the main research question. The findings of this study in this area revealed that there are three factors that contribute to the success of the ITM at Unisa. These factors are:

- Academic and administrative support for tutors
- Training and development on facilitation skills and technology skills
- Provision of access to students.

Regarding the academic and administrative support for tutors, it was found that there are three stakeholders in the institution that contribute to the success of the ITM. Firstly, staff members based in the regions where there are face-to-face tutorials who provide support to tutors and students by ensuring that tutorials have all the necessary resources needed for the program to run successfully. Secondly, tutors acknowledged that academic staff members in the colleges provided support even though tutors acknowledged that this type of support should be intensified and academics need to deal with barriers such as limited communication. Thirdly, the findings reveal that the help of regional staff members and CPD training and development on facilitation and technology skills is of great assistance. Regions provide technical support in terms of basic

computer training for students and tutors, and also provide computer laboratories where students can access computers with internet.

The second sub-question deals with the challenges in the implementation of the ITM. The findings of the study revealed that the following factors form part of the challenges in the implementation of the ITM at Unisa:

- Provision of materials for facilitation of learning which is found on myUnisa. Without academic staff giving tutors access to the platform, tutors cannot access the material.
- Student participation and interaction is considered a major challenge for both face-to-face and online tutoring since all participants commented extensively on this issue and called for the university to act because of its negative impact on the learning process.
- System designs that fail to accommodate the needs of all students especially those who are studying courses with mathematical formulae that are not within the capabilities of myUnisa platform. As a result, students are unable to engage cognitively and reflect on the content.

Regarding roles and responsibilities that are not known by students, students expect tutors to teach and tutors expect students to bring challenges they experience with content, but problematic areas are:

- tutor remuneration which is not market related and has been on the same rate for 8 years;
- feedback from academics which is not prompt and sometimes is not provided.
- internet access for students in the areas where they stay which may be costly for some students who do not stay near the Unisa regional offices where free internet access is available.

The last finding provides an answer to the sub-question that deals with the impact of ITM on tutors' behaviour and their facilitation skills. The study revealed that 5 of 6 tutors indicated that the model has definitely changed the way they facilitate since they are now forced to be creative in order for them to remain relevant.

Tutors needed to adjust to the fact that they are dealing with imaginary students when they facilitate online and that their facilitation skills should address the needs of the students. As a result, tutors had to integrate technology into their tutoring activities when dealing with face-to-face students since such skills are required in both systems of tutoring. Lastly, tutors are expected to communicate using various platforms, including social media, in order to ensure that students receive relevant information regarding the content of their modules.

The findings discussed above suggest that the ITM has changed the way tutors facilitate learning at Unisa. This is supported by the theory of social constructivism as reflected in chapters 2 and 3 of the study. Anderson and Dron (2011), building on this theory, posit that it moves the location of control of the learning process from an instructor to a student. The role of a tutor, according to them, is to shape the learning activities and design the structure in which those activities take place.

Tutors commented that their responsibility lies in the provision of learning material loaded online and then in the initiation of discussions by posting questions online so that students can interact and encourage engagement with the content.

Based on the theory of social constructivism, the three levels of creating presence in the learning environment need to be considered by Unisa. They are that students interact with the content thus creating cognitive presence; that students interact with tutors in order to create teaching presence; and lastly, that students interact with one another and create a social presence.

The final chapter that follows presents an overview of the study, recommendations of the study, the limitations of the study and recommendations for further research.

# **CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE STUDY**

## **5.1 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY**

This final chapter begins by presenting a broad overview of the study, briefly outlining the key content of each chapter leading to this final chapter. Chapter 1 focused on introducing the topic of the study. It comprised the background against which the study was carried out, the research question and related sub-research questions, aims and objectives of the study, significance of the study, definition of concepts and the basic structural outline of the study. Chapter 2 presented the review of national and international literature on the key concepts of the study that included distance education, open distance learning, isolation in distance education, accessing of tutorial support in distance education, facilitation of learning and interaction.

Chapter 3 focused on research design and methodology. This included a discussion of research questions, sampling, data collection methods used, strategy used to analyse and interpret the research findings, validity of research, ethical considerations and limitations of the study. The theoretical framework against which this study was carried out was also presented in this chapter. Data was analysed and interpreted in chapter 4 where the research findings were presented in five sections, highlighting major themes that ran throughout the discussion. The study revealed that there are several factors that contribute to the effectiveness of the integrated tutor model in facilitating teaching and learning in an Open and Distance Learning environment. These factors included academic and administrative support for tutors, training and development on facilitation skills and technology skills as well as the provision of access to students.

Chapter 5 focuses on recommendations of the study, the limitations of the study, recommendations for further research and the conclusion.

## **5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS**

The research findings and related discussions inspired the following recommendations:

### **5.2.1 Training and development**

For tutors to succeed in performing what the institution has employed them to do, they should be equipped appropriately with the relevant skills that will enable them to perform as expected. For them to be able to do this, it is recommended that tutors should receive support at different intervals, i.e., before they start tutoring, during the semester as they tutor and after they have delivered at the end of the semester or year. New tutors need to be exposed to the aspects of Open Distance Learning (ODL) and related aspects needed by an ODL tutor.

#### **Before they start tutoring the course**

This initial training is mostly recommended for new tutors specifically those who have not tutored before. This group possesses the theoretical knowledge of the subject but do not have pedagogical skills to facilitate learning. Training offered to this group will cover aspects of ODL which includes the three roles of a tutor in an ODL environment as described by Baran and Correia (2009) and Berge (1995), how to facilitate in an ODL environment, profile of students they will be assisting, course specific tutor guides, introduction to myUnisa platform and social media platforms used by the Unisa community.

#### **Provision of tutorial resources**

Tutors must be provided with relevant tutorial resources during the training session so that they already have all the necessary resources when they commence with tutorials. Academic Support Coordinators should ensure that all tutors are linked to myUnisa prior to the training session.

#### **Practical training sessions**

During the tutor development workshop, it is recommended that all training, especially technical training, should be practical. For online tutors, it is

recommended that the institution should outsource such a service when CPD staff is unable to reach tutors. Training should be done face-to-face and online.

### **Follow up training sessions**

Follow up training sessions should be done with tutors who still lack confidence in some of the activities they are expected to perform. Such tutors need to arrange with staff members involved, be they academic staff or administrative support staff. Where possible, the follow up training should be done online depending on the nature of training required.

### **During the semester as they tutor the course**

It is important that tutors be consulted during the semester and the challenges they encounter in the process of tutoring be acknowledged. This could be done in a virtual platform, i.e., myUnisa project site for e-tutoring and through face-to-face meetings for face-to-face tutors. Here tutors will be coached on how to deal with the challenges they encounter in tutorial sessions.

### **After the semester**

A compulsory planning and review meeting or a workshop that would look at developing a strategy to address challenges met by tutors during the course of the year should be held. This meeting should be remunerated so that tutors will be motivated to attend a face-to-face meeting/workshop and it must form part of the requirements of the contract they sign with the institution.

Academic staff involvement is crucial in all phases of tutor support since they are the owners of the course content. It should be noted that administrative support staff can only be able to train and support tutors on other aspects such as facilitation skills and technical support, however, all course content aspects need committed academic staff. Without their involvement, the institution will fail to produce an all rounded tutor who is confident to perform the role.

## **Helpdesk for tutors**

This type of support would assist tutors to get assistance whenever they need it. Although Unisa is an ODL, it does not operate on a 24-hour service level. This service will be allocated times of operation and it could have automated frequently asked questions to provide support without a human face after hours and weekends.

### **5.2.2 Full commitment of academic staff**

Unisa is currently using an Integrated Performance Management System (IPMS) to manage deliverables of individual employees within the institution. This system commits individual staff members to perform on key areas as guided by the job description. The institution should build in the Key Performance Areas (KPA) and job description of academic staff involvement in the tutorial program. Academics need to demonstrate how they have supported tutors during the year and this should apply to both e-tutors and face-to-face tutors. This will start during the contracting process where they will commit to various activities to support tutors. When academic staff members have committed to a tutorial support activity, this will assist tutors to get maximum support from academic staff members. Mtsweni and Abdullah (2014) suggest that academics should understand that the students they teach are isolated learners who are impacted by various factors and should therefore train tutors to make proper use of the resources provided by the institution to promote excellent learning experiences.

This could be associated with incentives that are provided in order to motivate staff members to do activities that support the tutor system. According to Bates and Sangra (2011), some institutions have succeeded in motivating their staff members to engage in a number of initiatives by giving them incentives. It is important to acknowledge staff members who support the ITM and this could be done through an award system driven by each college. The same award system could be extended to all tutors until the system is well established within the institution.

This process should be guided by the institutional human resource department and the institutional strategic objectives for 2016-2030.

### **5.2.3 Tutor remuneration**

Tutor remuneration is another area that the institution should reconsider. For a number of years, face-to-face tutors have been paid an unchanging amount of money. Their scale has been stable for eight years and it is recommended that they are given a fair increase which is market related.

Unisa only considers the level of training in terms of qualifications for anyone to qualify as a tutor. Perhaps the institution could start looking at the level of experience brought by each tutor and remunerate accordingly.

### **5.2.4 Participation and interaction**

The university is aware that the level of participation for students is very low and the level of interaction between tutors and students is not what is expected by the institution. A number of strategies have been introduced to address this challenge, however, only a very small improvement has been identified. One of the strategies was the recently introduced online tutoring. In order to improve participation rates in tutorial programs as well as interaction levels at tutor-student interaction, student-content interaction and student-student interaction as described by Moore and Kearsley (2012) in the literature review section 2.7, the following is recommended:

Unisa should allocate credits for students' participation and interaction in the learning process. This will motivate students to participate constructively since they know that their participation and interaction will be rewarded. If students are required to participate online, they will make sure that they get access to computers and the internet. Those who are expected to participate in face-to-face tutorials will also be motivated to do so. In order to increase tutor-student interaction, the institution should

- Create a conducive environment for students to engage online by increasing access to computers and internet. For face-to-face tutorials, the institution should appoint tutors on time to ensure that tutorials commence

on time. By so doing, the institution will be putting students at the centre of the learning process as described by Gosling (2008) in the literature review section 2.7.

- To increase tutor-tutor interaction, tutors need to be given opportunities to discuss learner interactions and tutorial outcomes with more experienced tutors. This could be done through communities of practice established online or face-to-face. These communities of practice would assist tutors to discuss ideas for group learning situations with one another and address challenges they encounter as well as share good practices for improving participation and interaction.

### **5.3 AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

For further research studies, the following could be considered:

- Training and development strategies used by Unisa to empower tutors in the field of ODL could be investigated to find out if these strategies respond to the training needs of tutors.
- A comparative case study of different institutions could be implemented to do comparisons on the roles of tutors in enhancing effective facilitation.
- Students' perceptions of the integrated tutor model at Unisa should be explored.

### **5.4 LIMITATIONS**

Although the research had the following limitations, the researcher successfully managed the process to achieve the research outcomes:

- It was difficult to get hold of some participants, as they were contract workers who only came to the university when they had tutorials. These participants often have permanent jobs and some travel to provinces outside Gauteng and abroad to fulfil their full time work mandate. Such a challenge impacted negatively on the timelines for the research.
- There were six tutors who were involved in the study. One of them dropped out due to work travel commitments, however, the researcher managed to replace him with another one since there was a standby tutor to address

such challenges if they arose.

- Being a worker created a challenge for the researcher to manage the workload within the research process.

## 5.5 CONCLUSION

The purpose of this section was to present the contribution made by the research under review to the existing body of knowledge with regard to the implementation of the integrated tutor model at Unisa. Furthermore, it sought to present new ideas and areas of improvement in the implementation of this model in order to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. This study explored the perceptions of tutors on the effectiveness of the integrated tutor model in facilitating teaching and learning in an Open and Distance Learning environment.

The findings of the research revealed that there are three main factors that contribute to the effectiveness of the integrated tutor model at Unisa. These factors include:

**Academic and administrative support** provided to tutors who facilitate high-risk modules identified by the institution in different colleges. Academic staff members should increase their involvement in the tutorial delivery programs to support tutors and respond to their needs, when required.

**Training and development** contributes to the effectiveness of the integrated tutor model. This area should be intensified by ensuring that practical training is provided for tutors as they enter the ODL arena and that follow up training sessions be provided. This is echoed by McPherson and Nunes (2004) who indicate that teaching staff should be empowered with skills, including ICT skills that would make it possible for them to facilitate learning. Possessing these skills will put them at a global competitive level in ODL. The researcher proposes that the institution should look at outsourcing or getting into partnership with other institutions who will train tutors who cannot be reached by the Centre for Professional Development entrusted to train tutors at Unisa.

**Provision of access to students** is another aspect that contributes to the effectiveness of the integrated model in the sense that, without access to

computers and internet, there will be no interaction between tutors and students, and among students. This last aspect is not without its challenges that call for the institution to increase computer and internet access for students wherever there are. Unisa students can even collaborate with other institutions for the purpose of increasing access. This idea is reflected in the policy for post-school education and training (2013) which calls for collaboration among institutions of higher learning to address various issues, including access.

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# APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

## Semi-structured interview schedule: Tutor interview

**Name of the Researcher:** Ms Smangele Ntuli

**Institution:** University of South Africa

**Research Topic:** Tutors' perception of the effective facilitation through the use of an integrated tutor model (ITM) in an Open and distance learning environment.

**Date of Interview:** .....

**Name of an interviewee:** .....

**Venue of the interview:** .....

My name is Smangele Ntuli, I work for Unisa and I am also a student studying Master's Degree in Open and Distance Learning. The purpose of the study is to provide empirical evidence of tutor's views of the integrated tutor model, if the integrated tutor model is assisting the institution to meet its goal as intended. Getting tutors' views will be of great assistance as some of them are involved in both face-to-face and online facilitation of tutorials for high risk modules. The study will explore areas for improvement and suggest recommendations for enhancing a positive learning experience for students to participating in the UNISA tutorial programs. You have been identified as one of the most experienced tutor who will contribute positively in order to improve the implementation of the tutor model.

- Your participation in this study is voluntary and if you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty.
- Your identity will remain anonymous in the analysis of the results.
- The answers you give will be kept confidential to the researcher and only be used for the purpose of this research.
- The results of this study will be published and your name will not be used in any of the publications.

1. Recently Unisa decided to change the strategy of supporting its learners by implementing the new tutor model called integrated tutor model. What do you understand about this model?
2. How has this model affected the way you facilitate classes in an ODL environment like Unisa?
3. How do you cope with the changes that have been implemented through the ITM?
4. What support have you received from the institution to implement the tutor model to the best of your ability?
5. In your opinion, how does this model impact on students' access to and participation in tutorial classes?
6. What are the success factors of the integrated tutor model?
7. What are the challenges of the integrated tutor model?
8. What would you recommend in terms of improving the integrated tutor model?

# APPENDIX B: ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE



## RESEARCH PERMISSION SUB-COMMITTEE OF SRIHDC

19 August 2015

Ref #: 2015\_RPSC\_073

Mrs. Smangele Ntuli

Student #:

Staff #: 1130412

Dear Mrs. Smangele Ntuli,

**Decision: Research Permission  
Approval from August 2015 to 30  
June 2016**

### Principal Investigator:

**Mrs. Smangele Ntuli**  
Department of Curriculum and Instructional Studies  
School of Teacher Education  
College of Education  
Unisa  
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Supervisor: Dr. Tony Mays  
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**A study titled: "Tutors' perceptions of effective facilitation through the use of an integrated tutor model (ITM) in an open and distance learning (ODL) environment."**

Your application regarding permission to conduct research involving UNISA employees in respect of the above study has been received and was considered by the Research Permission Subcommittee (RPSC) of the UNISA Senate Research and Innovation and Higher Degrees Committee (SRIHDC) on 14 August 2015.

It is my pleasure to inform you that permission has been granted for the study to:

1. Gain access to the email addresses of face-to-face and online Unisa tutors at the 5 Regional Services Centers in Gauteng Region through the gatekeeping assistance of your study supervisor in order to recruit them for one-on-one interviews.
2. The prospective participants need to be made aware by a clear and detailed informed



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www.unisa.ac.za

consent letter that their participation in the study is entirely voluntary and that they have the right to opt out of the study at any point without any penalty.

You are requested to submit a report of the study to the Research Permission Subcommittee (RPSC@unisa.ac.za) within 12 months of completion of the study.

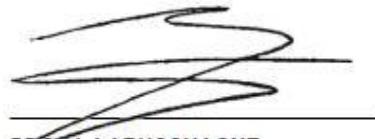
The personal information made available to the researcher(s)/gatekeeper(s) will only be used for the advancement of this research project as indicated and for the purpose as described in this permission letter. The researcher(s)/gatekeeper(s) must take all appropriate precautionary measures to protect the personal information given to him/her/them in good faith and it must not be passed on to third parties.

*Note:*

*The reference number 2015\_RPSC\_073 should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants and the Research Permission Subcommittee.*

We would like to wish you well in your research undertaking.

Kind regards,



**PROF L LABUSCHAGNE**  
**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: RESEARCH**

Tel: +27 12 429 6308 / 2445  
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## APPENDIX C: EDITOR'S LETTER

*Barbara Shaw*

*Editing/proofreading services*

*18 Balvicar Road, Blairgowrie, 2194*

*Tel: 011 888 4788 Cell: 072 1233 881*

*Email: [bmsshaw@telkomsa.net](mailto:bmsshaw@telkomsa.net)*

*Full member of The Professional Editors' Group*

### **To whom it may concern**

This letter serves to inform you that I have done language editing and formatting on the thesis **TUTORS' PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVE FACILITATION THROUGH THE USE OF AN INTEGRATED TUTOR MODEL (ITM) IN AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) ENVIRONMENT** by **CYNTHIA HLEKWASE SMANGELE NTULI**.



Barbara Shaw

14 February 2016