THROUGHPUT RATE OF THE MASTER OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA FROM 2005-2014

by

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submitted in accordance with the requirements for
the degree of

MASTER OF ADMINISTRATION IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

at the

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

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31 January 2019

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I declare that the above dissertation is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

SIGNATURE

23 September 2019

DATE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the following people for all their support during my master's journey:

God Almighty

Thank You Lord for giving me the strength and the energy to work hard throughout my journey. Thank You for being there when I felt like giving up.

My supervisors

Prof J.S. Wessels:

Thank you for your constant guidance during my journey. I appreciate your insightful advice. You taught me how to think outside the box and understand the work more clearly. You constantly convinced me about my academic journey. I will now officially be able to tackle my PhD.

Prof L.C van Jaarsveldt:

Thank you for your kindness during my journey. You were always there when I needed advice. Without you my journey would be incomplete. Thank you for always making time and for your thorough feedback. I will never forget your words "Thea, you are making good progress, keep it up".

My mother and father

Thank you for your understanding and support throughout my studies. You were always there to offer support in the best possible way.

My editor, Leatitia Romero

I highly appreciate your promptness in the editing process. You did a sterling job in editing my dissertation.

My statistician at Unisa: Dr Dion van Zyl

Thank you for providing me with all the information. This greatly assisted me with the data analysis process of my dissertation.

My colleagues at Unisa, and friends

To my colleagues, especially Mmatshepo Khanya and Itumeleng Dube, thank you for contributing your time and knowledge. I sincerely appreciate the fruitful discussions we had on a daily basis. Thank you also to my other colleagues who assisted and guided me throughout this process. Thank you to my friends who supported me throughout this tough journey. Thank you for keeping me grounded at all times.

The Graduate Development Fellowship Programme

Thank you for funding my academic journey as a master's student. The workshops and conferences I attended hugely contributed to the completion of my dissertation.

ABSTRACT

The Master of Public Administration (MPA) originated in 1909 and is offered by universities in most countries around the world. It has been written about extensively by various authors. The MPA is primarily focused on educating practicing public servants to perform their day-to-day work in a manner that is informed by a broad understanding of relevant conceptual perspectives for the work they do (McSwite, 2011:111).

A critical aspect related to the success of the MPA is the throughput rate of students. The concept 'throughput' has earned its place in academia due to the ever-increasing turn-around time for students completing their qualification, so the question surrounding throughput is no longer "should we accommodate it", but rather, "how do we accommodate it?" In this instance, it can be formulated as "how do we accommodate students to complete the MPA?"

The purpose of this study was therefore to investigate the throughput rate of MPA students at Unisa. The study includes an extensive and in-depth review of scholarly literature on the MPA qualification, as well as an analysis of the curriculum used by various higher education institutions. In addition, it includes statistical data analysis, and the researcher's verification of the current throughput rate of the MPA qualification at Unisa.

This research found that there is indeed a low throughput rate for the MPA qualification at Unisa. Although this research is specific to the Department of Public Administration and Management at Unisa, its findings pertain to any university offering the MPA.

Keywords: Master of Public Administration, Throughput rate, Students, Curriculum, Qualification, Admission

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CHAPTER 1: GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

South Africa faces a major challenge when it comes to improving the success and throughput rates in South African higher education institutions (Council of Higher Education (CHE), 2010). Several studies have recently been conducted on the throughput rate of South African students (for example, Botha, 2012; Davis & Venter, 2011; Maree, 2015; Risenga, 2010; Schenck, 2008; Van Biljon & De Kock, 2011). These scholars share the common perception that throughput rate is a reflection of a student's success or failure within a higher education context. While these studies are focused on the throughput rates of both undergraduate and postgraduate students, none of them has paid particular attention to the throughput rate of students enrolled for the Master of Public Administration (MPA) degree at the University of South Africa (Unisa).

The MPA is an important qualification that strives to provide a structured qualification for individuals who work in the public sector. In particular, it aims to provide support in management and strategic leadership to transform all spheres of government. This qualification enables graduates to improve on their management abilities within the administration sphere of government (University of Pretoria, 2015). Letseke and Karel (2015:1) mention the challenges of low pass and throughput rates at Unisa, and they claim that students do not graduate within the allocated time. Letseke and Karel (2015:1) considered the low throughput rate across the board on all Unisa qualifications. Within the context of the current study, the MPA qualification, as one of Unisa's qualifications, therefore fits into the category of qualifications with a low throughput rate.

The purpose of this study was consequently to contribute to an enhanced scholarly understanding of the throughput rate of MPA students in general, but specifically within the context of the largest South African university offering the MPA programme, namely Unisa. To obtain a comprehensive understanding of the throughput rate at Unisa, the antecedents, defining attributes and consequences of the throughput rate of MPA

students are discussed. The current study explored the MPA qualification within an international, national and institutional context.

This chapter provides the background to and justification for this study. From this justification, the research problem and research questions are identified and discussed. The subsequent research purpose and objectives for this study are articulated to inform the decisions related to the research design, demarcation of the study, research methods and subsequent ethical considerations. The chapter concludes with an overview of the chapters of this dissertation.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Worldwide, the MPA is regarded as an academic qualification with the purpose "to educate practicing public servants such that they can carry out their day-to-day work in a manner that is informed by broad understandings and relevant conceptual perspectives" (McSwite, 2001:111). This qualification is especially associated with the increased emphasis on professionalism for public officials. The emphasis is on understanding the increasingly complex issues that shape local and national level policies and projects (School of International and Public Affairs in Columbia 2014). The MPA is regarded by the Harvard Kennedy School of Government (2017:Online) as their flagship international qualification. In South Africa, this programme is aimed at public officials in managerial positions who want to improve their qualifications in the field of public administration (Wessels, 2009:506).

Worldwide, the MPA is a structured Master's qualification that consists of modules, papers or courses (Koven, Goetzke & Brennan, 2008:698; Wessels, 2009:512-513). Less than 30% of the MPA qualifications offered abroad include a research project (Koven, et al. 2008:698; Wessels, 2009:512-513), while 100% of the MPA programmes in South Africa include a research project (Wessels, 2009:417) as required by the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (CHE, 2013:32). This indicates that within the South African context, research projects are imperative as knowledge generators that

enhance creativity and innovation in people's skills development (Sipengane, 2014). The MPA offered by Unisa is thus a research Master's qualification by coursework and mini-dissertation.

The MPA offered by Unisa consists of five modules (policy studies, public human resource management, public leadership, public financial management, and a research proposal module), and a mini-dissertation of 10 000 to 20 000 words (Unisa, 2017). The Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) awarded 180 credits (1 800 notional hours, which refers to the average time a student requires to complete a qualification) to this qualification with an expectation that a candidate will complete the qualification within three years (Unisa, 2017:par 4.12). According to the CHE (2013:32), a Master's by coursework and mini-dissertation qualification, such as the MPA, requires a high level of theoretical engagement and intellectual independence. In some cases, it also requires a demonstration of the ability to relate knowledge to a range of contexts for professional practice.

In South Africa, the MPA is an example of one of the three different types of Master's qualifications offered to students (CHE, 2014:Online). The other two qualifications are the Master's by full dissertation and the professional Master's. In the context of Unisa, the institution only offers a research Master's by coursework and mini-dissertation (such as the MPA) and a research Master's by dissertation (such as the Master in Administration (MAdmin) in Public Administration. Similar to the MPA qualification, students are expected to complete the MAdmin within three years after first registration (Unisa, 2017).

Mdepa and Lullu (2012:19) argue that in order for South Africa to survive, access to higher education systems must be improved. They furthermore claim that improved access implies the need for improved diversity and throughput rate (Mdepa & Lullu, 2012:19). In the Unisa context, a 23% target has been set for the throughput rate of Master's qualifications (Unisa, 2018:30). The throughput rate of 7,1% and less for the MPA qualification is thus a concern (see Chapter 5). Hence, this study focused on understanding the seemingly low throughput rate of the MPA qualification at Unisa.

1.3 RESEARCH PROBLEM

The background discussion in Section 1.2 has shown that the concept 'throughput rate' is key to a better understanding of the throughput rate of the MPA qualification at Unisa. While a standard definition of the concept 'throughput rate' does not exist, various scholars, such as Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007:iii) and Kritzinger and Loock (2012:2), consider this concept a calculation of a specific cohort who enters a qualification and completes the qualification within a stipulated time (see Table 3.1). For a scholarly understanding of the inadequate throughput rate of this qualification, a comprehensive understanding of the concept 'throughput rate' is necessary.

The research problem for this study was thus to understand the possible causes for the inadequate throughput rates of student cohorts enrolled for the MPA qualification at Unisa between 2005 and 2014. Section 4.2 presents a more in-depth discussion.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Following the research problem statement, the question that drives this research is: 'What are the possible reasons for the inadequate throughput rates of student cohorts enrolled for the MPA qualification at Unisa?' In order to answer the research question, the following sub-questions first needed to be answered:

- What are the characteristics of the MPA qualification?
- How can the concept 'throughput rate' within the context of higher education be understood?
- How can the inadequate throughput rates of student cohorts enrolled for the MPA at Unisa be understood?

1.5 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to obtain an understanding of the inadequate throughput rates of student cohorts enrolled for the MPA qualification at Unisa for the period 2005 to 2014. In order to meet this purpose, this study was structured to meet the research objectives set in Section 1.6.

1.6 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research objectives of this study were:

- to describe the characteristics of the MPA qualification within its international, national and institutional contexts;
- to develop a conceptual framework for understanding the concept 'throughput rate' within the higher education context; and
- to use the conceptual framework for describing and analysing the throughput rate of the student cohorts enrolled for the MPA qualification at Unisa from 2005 to 2014.

1.7 CLARIFICATION OF KEY TERMS

In addition to the concept 'throughput rate', other concepts and terms are also used in this dissertation. While 'throughput rate' is analysed in Chapter 3, these additional concepts and terms are used with the following specified meanings:

- **Master of Public Administration (MPA)**

The MPA qualification aims to prepare individuals for employment in the public sector. Individuals with this qualification can serve within the public sector as managers or executives within the three spheres of government, namely national, provincial and local government. The core focus of this qualification is to equip graduates with the appropriate knowledge and skill to understand a broad range of topics relevant to the public sector (University of Pretoria, 2015). This is discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

- **Students**

Students are individuals who study in order to establish a career for themselves. The Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 defines a student as “any person registered as a student at a higher education institution” (South Africa, 1997:Section 1). In the context of this study, student cohorts who have been registered for the first time for the MPA at Unisa from 2005 until 2014, form the unit of analysis.

- **Student cohort**

A cohort study focuses on a homogenous group of units who “share a certain characteristic” (Van Thiel, 2014:56). Within the context of this study, a student cohort refers to MPA students whose shared characteristic is the year in which they registered for the first time for the MPA, e.g. 2005 or 2014.

- **University of South Africa (Unisa)**

The University of South Africa, as the immediate context of this study, is the largest university on the African continent. As an open distance e-learning institution, Unisa offers a wide range of qualifications (Unisa 2017), of which the MPA is one.

1.8 RESEARCH DESIGN AND RESEARCH METHODS FOR THIS STUDY

In order to obtain the necessary understanding of the inadequate throughput rates of student cohorts enrolled for the MPA qualification at Unisa for the period 2005 to 2014, the researcher had to consider an appropriate research design and research method. While the research design and method for this study are explained in Chapter 4, they are briefly summarised in the sections that follow.

1.8.1 Research design

A research design is the plan for conducting the research to meet the research purpose and solve the research problem. This plan provides various research choices to ensure that the research purpose will be reached (Van Thiel, 2014:54-60). The starting point of

the design for this study was an analysis of the research problem statement to determine the nature of the unit of analysis and the units of observation. While the unit of analysis of this study is MPA student cohorts (thus, groups of human beings within the so-called world of observations and experiences), it implies the choice of an empirical research design (Babbie & Mouton 2001:641) for obtaining and collecting information from them, and for analysing the data. As such, the research design provides the rationale for selecting these research participants, the specific measures to ensure reliability and validity, as well as the appropriateness of the data analysis techniques to be used (Van Thiel, 2014:54-55).

While there are different empirical design types (Mouton, 2001:148-174), this study follows a cohort study design (Van Thiel, 2014:56). This design is fitting when studying and comparing students' success over a period of time. Throughput rate, expressed as a percentage derived from aggregated numerical data (see Table 4.1), is used as a proxy for their success.

1.8.2 Demarcation of the study

While this study aims to contribute to knowledge on throughput rate in the context of higher education, it is demarcated to a single higher education institution, namely Unisa. It is furthermore limited to one qualification offered at Unisa, namely the MPA, and involves cohorts of students who have registered for the first time from 2005 until 2014.

1.8.3 Research methodology

The primary research methodology used for this cohort study is secondary data analysis. Two categories of secondary data are used, namely text data and numerical data, each with their distinct methods. Text data for this study included various institutional and regulatory documents, such as the HEQSF, Unisa policies, procedures, and curriculum documents. These documents were analysed hermeneutically. A basic descriptive

method was used to analyse the student throughput and graduation data sets. The research methodology is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

Figure 1.1 illustrates the various phases of the research design process used in this study.

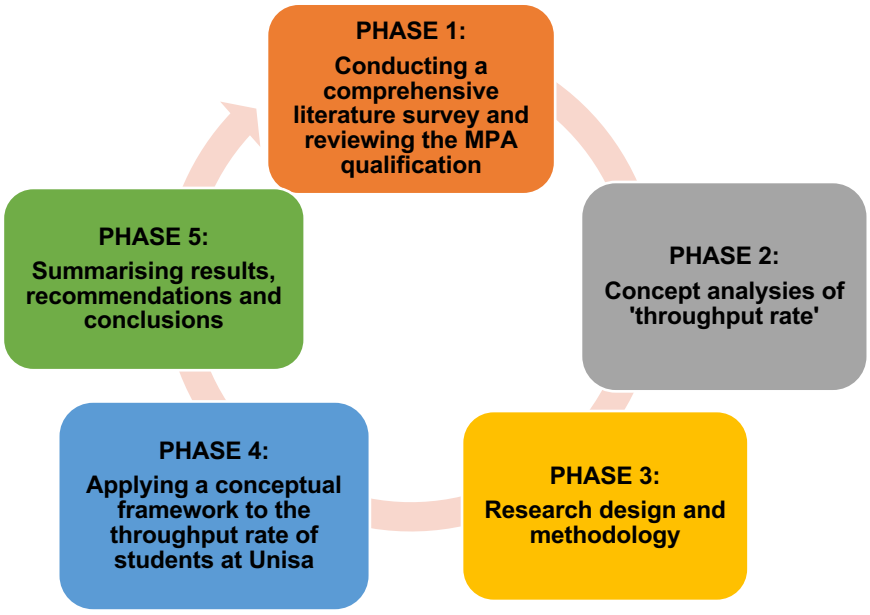

Figure 1.1: The various phases of this study

Each phase serves as a threshold to a better understanding of the next phase and consequently of the MPA throughput rate at Unisa. These phases are briefly discussed as follows:

1.8.3.1 Phase 1: Conducting comprehensive literature survey and review of the MPA qualification

The MPA qualification is an integral part of this study, and it was important for the researcher to conduct a comprehensive literature search on the qualification, from an international, national and institutional perspective.

The researcher consulted the following documents and educational institutions for the literature search:

- relevant published books;
- articles from scholarly journals;
- government documents (e.g. The HEQSF, South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), Council for Higher Education); and
- institutional documents (e.g. Master's and Doctoral policies, Master's and Doctoral admission policies, Master's and Doctoral procedures).

1.8.3.2 Phase 2: A concept analysis of throughput rate

Chapter 3 reports on a concept analysis of the concept 'throughput rate'. This concept relates to this study as it assists in determining the understanding of the throughput rate of the MPA qualification. Through this analysis the theoretical relationship of the concept with other concepts, categorised respectively as antecedents and consequences, is explicated. These conceptual relationships are combined in a conceptual framework (see Table 3.4) to be used in understanding the influences of various antecedents (e.g. qualification, admission requirements, students and curriculum) on the throughput rate.

1.8.3.3 Phase 3: Research design and methodology

This phase refers to the selection of a cohort analysis design with secondary data analysis for the entire research process. This methodological choice implies that human participants are not directly involved, but indirectly through anonymised aggregated data on their study performance. Statistics were used to analyse students registered for the MPA qualification for the period 2005 to 2014. The numerical data sets were obtained from the Department of Institutional and Analysis (DISA) as well as the Department of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) at Unisa. Chapter 4 discusses the research methodology in detail.

1.8.3.4 Phase 4: Applying conceptual framework to understand the throughput rate of the various cohorts of MPA students

This phase consists of the qualitative analysis of the textual as well as the numerical data sets in order to provide a comprehensive description and analysis of the throughput rate of the various cohorts of MPA students from 2005 until 2014 (see Chapter 5).

1.8.3.5 Phase 5: Research findings, conclusions and recommendations

Phase 5 consists of a summary and interpretation of the research findings, conclusions and recommendations to improve the throughput rate of the MPA qualification (see Chapter 6).

1.9 ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

As indicated in the discussion of Phase 3, this study indirectly involved human participants through the analysis of aggregated student data. This study was thus eligible for a research ethics review as the research procedures indirectly involved human subjects (Wessels & Visagie, 2017:168). The researcher obtained research ethics clearance for the study (see Attachment A for a copy of the certificate) and the necessary institutional permission to utilise student data (see Attachment B for a copy of the certificate). Section 4.5 provides a comprehensive discussion of the ethical considerations for this study.

1.10 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

The dissertation consists of the following chapters:

Chapter 1 provides a general introduction of the research study, which includes a discussion of the background to the study, the statement of the research problem, the set of research questions, the research purpose statement, specific research objectives, a brief outline of the research design and methods, and lastly, the ethical considerations.

Chapter 2 offers a contextual overview of the MPA qualification from an international, national and institutional perspective. The purpose of this chapter is to respond to the first research question, namely "What are the characteristics of the MPA?" in order to determine the role of this qualification within the specific context of South Africa, and Unisa as an institution. The chapter provides the necessary justification for this study. The history of this qualification is also discussed and detailed information on the MPA qualification is presented.

Chapter 3 reports on a concept analysis of the concept 'throughput rate' within the context of the South African higher education sector. This chapter proposes a conceptual framework to indicate how 'throughput rate' relates to other concepts, such as 'qualification', 'admission requirements', 'students', and 'curriculum'. This framework informs the research design on which Chapter 4 reports.

Chapter 4 reports on and justifies the selected research design and methodology for this study.

Chapter 5 responds to the second and third research questions. It provides a comprehensive description of the throughput rate of the ten selected MPA cohorts at Unisa, as well as an analysis of the data by applying the antecedents identified in the conceptual framework.

Chapter 6 provides a summary of the research process and the findings. It concludes by suggesting a possible understanding of the throughput rate of MPA students at Unisa, recommendations for improving the throughput rate, and suggestions for further research.

1.11 SUMMARY

This chapter gave a synopsis of the entire study which relates to the MPA qualification at Unisa. A brief background was provided alongside the research problem, research

questions, purpose of the study, research objectives, research methods and methodology. Finally, the ethical implications of the study were addressed.

Chapter 2 discusses the literature review which details the history of the MPA qualification and the various countries which offer the qualification. The literature is considered from an international and national perspective.

CHAPTER 2: THE MPA: A CONTEXTUAL OVERVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the research that the dissertation reports on, namely to understand the low throughput rate of students enrolled for the MPA at Unisa. A first step towards understanding the low throughput rate is to understand the MPA qualification as offered by Unisa in its different contexts. Chapter 2 explores the MPA within international, national and institutional contexts. This exploration is based on a review of South African and international scholarly literature, as well as a selection of institutional documents. Specific attention is given to the historical development, regulatory requirements, academic composition and professional requirements of the MPA as evident from its diverse contexts. The purpose of this chapter is to respond to the first research question of this study, by outlining the most common characteristics of the MPA; both abroad and in South Africa. The first section of this chapter reports on the identification and review of the scholarly literature needed for this exploration.

2.2 IDENTIFICATION AND REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The literature reviewed in this chapter was identified through a survey of scholarly databases such as Nexus and Unisa's institutional repository and library guide. These databases, including journal articles, books, and online documentation, have revealed the existence of a wide variety of literature on the MPA. In conducting the survey, the following keywords were utilised to obtain research contributions regarding the Master of Public Administration (MPA): MPA, coursework and mini-dissertation, and throughput rate. The bulk of these contributions were published from 1997 to 2014. They reported on research conducted primarily in the United States of America (USA). Studies from Brazil, China, and Commonwealth countries such as Australia, New Zealand and South Africa were also identified and reviewed. The studies from the Commonwealth countries are particularly important for this study, due to the known similarities between the educational

systems of Commonwealth countries. Table 2.1 summarises the scholarly literature reviewed for this study, the countries they report on, and the themes relevant to this study.

Table 2.1: Scholarly literature reported on the MPA as offered in various countries

Author (s) and year of publication	Title of article	Country reported on	Core theme of Theme
Bowan, 1988	Admission practices in Master of Public Administration programs: A nationwide study	USA	Admission procedures of the MPA qualification, criteria required for admission
Guy and Rubin, 2015	Public Administration Evolving: From Foundations to the Future.		The transformation of Pubic Administration from different perspectives
Stout and Holmes, 2013	From theory to practice: utilizing integrative seminars as bookends to the Master of Public Administration programme of study		The importance of the theoretical aspect of public administration; the application of theory and practice in public administration
Ronald and Penny, 2008	A History of the Department of Public Administration		The emphasis on the inception of the Department of Public Administration at the Adler University

Author (s) and year of publication	Title of article	Country reported on	Core theme of Theme
The Australia and New Zealand School of Government, 2017	Why the EMPA?	Australia and New Zealand	The importance of the MPA qualification
Stanek, 2013	The educational system of Brazil	Brazil	The educational system in Brazil and how each level is taught
Rosenbaum, 2015	Approaches to Enhancing the Quality of Public Administration Education and Training. In *Quest of Excellence*		How the MPA is taught at the Brazilain School of Public and Business Administration
Tong and Straussman, 2003	A Master of Public Administration degree with Chinese characteristics?	China	The inception of the MPA qualification in China, by adopting a westernised approach to the qualification
Cloete,1988	South African Public Administration	South Africa	The focus is on the activities that are involved in public administration.
Wessels, 2012	A core curriculum for a Master of Public Administration (MPA) qualification: some		How the MPA qualification curriculum is structured in South

Author (s) and year of publication	Title of article	Country reported on	Core theme of Theme
	considerations for a developmental state		Africa with a comparison of Commonwealth countries

The subsequent literature review identified emerging themes in international and South African scholarship related to the historical, regulatory, professional and academic dimensions of the qualification.

Through a comprehensive review of identified literature (see Table 2.1), this chapter briefly describes the historical development of the MPA qualification and reviews both international and national universities that offer the qualification. This approach was chosen to highlight the developmental stages of the MPA qualification.

In addition to the scholarly literature, official documents relevant to the regulation of the MPA (for example the HEQSF) were identified (see Table 2.2) and reviewed. These documents provide information on the history, regulatory framework, structure, curriculum and throughput rate of the qualification.

In the next section, the historical development of the MPA is described and analysed to gain an understanding of the qualification's origin.

2.3 THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE MPA

As mentioned, the MPA is offered in several countries all over the world, including the USA, Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, China and South Africa. It is necessary to understand the historical background of the MPA to fully comprehend the significant consequence of the low throughput rate of students enrolled for this qualification at Unisa.

The next section addresses the historical background of the MPA qualification in a number of countries, to understand the MPA qualification from an international, national and institutional perspective.

2.3.1 The MPA in the USA

The literature revealed that the first MPA qualification has been offered by the University of Kansas and Wisconsin in the USA since its inception in 1909 (Guy & Rubin, 2015:102). In 1909 universities in the USA focused on educating individuals for professional careers, and for employers (Guy & Rubin, 2015:102). Universities attained funding to provide a range of professional activities and enterprises.

In addition to the University of Kansas and Wisconsin, a department of public administration was established at the North Carolina Central University in 1973. The MPA qualification was introduced in 1985 and continued to develop and evolve (Ronald & Penny, 2008:1). The popularity of the MPA in the USA is evident from the extensiveness of the qualification: it not only aims to educate students, it also equips them with practical experience from the public sector.

2.3.2 The MPA in the UK and some Commonwealth countries

From the previous section, it is clear that the MPA qualification is popular in the USA. However, countries such as the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Australia and New Zealand also offer the qualification and share common characteristics (including similar modules like research methodology and policy analysis, and the mini-dissertation) with the USA (Wessels, 2012:158). Several higher education institutions in Australia and New Zealand offer the traditional MPA as the Executive Master of Public Administration (EMPA). This qualification is offered by the School of Government (ANZSOG, 2017) that partners with fifteen HEI's and the government in both countries (ANZSOG, 2017).

According to the ANZSOG (2017), the EMPA aims to produce world-class public sector managers. The qualification offers a thorough grounding in public administration theory and practice. The qualification is structured in such a way that there are eight core modules, a public sector finance module (that has to be undertaken with a partner university) and two elective modules. All of these enhance the core curriculum and cater to students' needs. The qualification also includes a mini-dissertation. Once students complete their modules, they undertake the research for the mini-dissertation.

2.3.3 The MPA in Brazil and China

The first institution in Latin America to offer Public Administration was Escola Brasileira de Administracao, also known as the Brazilian School of Public and Business Administration (EBAPE) in Brazil in 1952 (Rosenbaum, 2015:172). EBAPE has played a significant role in training public servants, not only in Latin America, but also in Africa (Rosenbaum, 2015:172). While this institution offers academic qualifications such as the Master's in Administration, Professional Master's in Public Administration, International Master's in Practicing Management, and the Doctorate in Administration, the current dissertation focuses on the Master's in Public Administration. The MPA at EBAPE is a part-time qualification, which allows the student to work while studying. The aim of the qualification is to enhance and train leaders within the public sector to exercise management techniques to advance their careers (Rosenbaum, 2015:176).

The Chinese Academy of Governance (CAG), previously known as the China National School of Administration, was established in 1994. One of the main aims of the CAG is to train civil servants to contribute to the government (Chinese Academy of Governance, 2010). One of the primary qualifications offered by the CAG is the MPA. This qualification is offered to ministers, provincial governors and director generals. Specific topics and training programmes are conducted for leaders of key state-owned enterprises, young civil servants, and civil servants from countries such as Hong Kong and Macao (Rosenbaum, 2015:177). Rosenbaum explains that students who enrol for the MPA

qualification are selected by the State Graduate Entrance Examination, which takes place prior to students applying for their postgraduate qualification.

2.3.4 The MPA in South Africa

In South Africa, the MPA has been offered since 1965. The University of Pretoria took the lead by "making it possible for graduates who did not have Public Administration as a subject for their degrees, to obtain a Master's degree in Public Administration" (Cloete, 1988:97). This qualification, at that stage called the Master of State Administration (MSA) (Auriacombe, 1991:174), was intended for professional officials in the public services, such as engineers, educationists and medical practitioners (Cloete, 1988:97). While the name of this qualification at the University of Pretoria was changed in 1985 to Master of Public Administration (MPA) (see Universiteit van Pretoria, 1985:40-41), the MPA was introduced at Unisa with effect from 1982 (Auriacombe, 1991:334).

The MPA qualification at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University was utilised as a model for the MPA qualification at Stellenbosch University. This assisted in laying the foundation for the MPA curriculum in South Africa. The academic work on the qualification was established on world best practices; hence, the Kennedy School of Government was selected as an example to enhance the standard of the MPA qualification in South Africa (University of Stellenbosch, 2013:4). Since then the MPA has grown significantly with many universities in South Africa offering the qualification. These universities include the University of Johannesburg, the University of the Western Cape, and the North-West University.

While professionals were previously only required to complete an undergraduate qualification in order to progress in their careers, times have changed. According to Clarke and Drennan (2009:483), professional associations, employers and governments have introduced requirements for continuing education. The higher education sector has increasingly become more involved in the development and provision of professional education, mainly through coursework Master's qualifications.

This section has shown that the MPA qualification worldwide has had a noteworthy development from its origin in 1909 to its current position as an internationally recognised and accredited qualification. The history of the MPA is relevant to this study as it provides a clear understanding of the purpose of the qualification and its importance to public service servants.

The next section discusses the regulatory requirements of the MPA qualification.

2.4 THE REGULATORY CONTEXT OF THE MPA OFFERED AT UNISA

In order to understand the throughput rate of MPA students at Unisa, it is necessary to take notice of the regulatory requirements applicable to these students and the specific qualification. Subsequently, the requirements of the relevant legislation and regulations related to the MPA were identified and analysed to determine and understand its possible influence on the throughput rate of the MPA students at Unisa.

In South Africa, the SAQA implements the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), by overseeing the quality assurance system for higher education (CHE, 2008:58). This system is founded in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, and its subsequent regulatory frameworks.

2.4.1 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996

The regulatory context of the MPA in South Africa is founded in Subsection 29(1)(b) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, confirming the right to further education for everyone in the country. Further education includes higher education, which the state has the responsibility to provide in terms of the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, as discussed next.

The MPA, as with all other qualifications offered by higher education institutions, is regulated by the CHE which was established in terms of the Higher Education Act 101 of

1997 (see South Africa, 1997:Sections 4-19). The functions of the CHE are primarily to advise the Minister on various aspects of higher education, including the HEQSF, the development and implementation of policies and criteria related to qualification standards, to promote quality assurance in higher education, and to promote students' access to higher education institutions (CHE, 2013:9-10; South Africa, 1997:Section 5).

The Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 is thus pivotal for understanding the MPA qualification within the South African context. The next section highlights the HEQSF.

2.4.2 The Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF)

The HEQSF is one of three co-ordinated qualification sub-frameworks which forms part of the single, integrated NQF (see Section 4 of the NQF Act 67 of 2008). The HEQSF was published as a policy of the CHE by SAQA in Government Gazette No 36721 of 2 August 2013 (CHE, 2013). This sub-framework provides for the following (CHE, 2013:11):

- "the basis for integrating all higher education qualifications into the National Qualifications Framework (NQF);
- a basis for standards development and quality assurance;
- a mechanism for improving the coherence of the higher education system and indicates the articulation routes between qualifications, thereby enhancing the flexibility of the system and enabling students to move more efficiently over time from one programme to another as they pursue their academic or professional careers."

The HEQSF provides for two qualification types, namely undergraduate (levels 5-7) and postgraduate (levels 8-10). The Master's qualification, offered at level 9, is one of six postgraduate qualifications types (see Table 2.2) while the MPA is one of several variants of the Master's degree (CHE, 2013:18). Each qualification type descriptor includes an indication of the "number of notional study hours required for achieving the learning outcomes specified for the qualification" (CHE, 2013:15). Ten notional hours is regarded as one credit resulting in each of these qualification types having a descriptor for its

unique number of minimum credits. In addition, each qualification has unique descriptors of the NQF exit level, purpose and characteristics, as well as its relation to other qualification types (CHE, 2013:13, 19). One of the most critical descriptors is the level descriptor (for more detail on the level descriptors, see SAQA, 2012). All the qualifications within a specific type are expected to be consistent with the descriptor applicable to the qualification type (CHE, 2013:19). Table 2.2 provides a summary of the qualification types that constitute the HEQSF.

Table 2.2: A summary of the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF)

NQF level	Qualification type	Purpose and characteristics	Minimum total credits
5	Higher certificate	basic introductory knowledge, cognitive and conceptual tools practical techniques for higher education studies	120
6	Diploma or advanced certificate	to develop graduates who can demonstrate focused knowledge and skills in a particular field	240
7	Bachelor's degree Advanced diploma	to provide a well-rounded, broad education	360 120
8	Bachelor's honours degree Postgraduate diploma	to consolidate and deepen expertise in a particular discipline; develop research capacity	120
9	Master's degree Master's degree (professional)	to educate and train researchers to contribute to the development of knowledge at an advanced level and to be able to reflect critically on theory and its application, and to deal with complex issues	180

NQF level	Qualification type	Purpose and characteristics	Minimum total credits
10	Doctoral degree Doctoral degree (professional)	to provide training for an academic career, education and training for a career in the professions and/or industry	360

(CHE, 2013)

Table 2.2 shows that the framework provides for two variants of Master's degrees, namely a general Master's degree and a Master's degree (Professional). The MPA offered by Unisa is a general Master's degree, with the primary purpose to "educate and train researchers who can contribute to the development of knowledge at an advanced level" (CHE, 2013:36). However, the HEQSF provides for two variants of the general Master's degree, namely a "research Master's degree by dissertation and a research Master's degree by coursework and mini-dissertation" (CHE, 2013:36). The MPA is a Master's of the latter variant. Subsequently, the MPA is required to meet the following characteristics:

> *A coursework programme requiring a high level of theoretical engagement and intellectual independence, and in some cases demonstration of the ability to relate knowledge to a range of contexts for professional practice. In addition, this variant of a general Master's degree must contain a research project comprising a minimum of 60 credits at level 9, culminating in the acceptance of a mini-dissertation or other forms of research…* (CHE, 2013:36)

In addition to the stated characteristics, the MPA needs to meet the broad learning achievements and outcomes as specified by the SAQA level descriptors for NQF level 9, in relation to (South African Qualifications Authority, 2012:11-12):

- The scope of knowledge.
- Knowledge literacy.

- Methods and procedures to solve complex practical and theoretical problems.
- Ethics and professional practice: an ability to make autonomous ethical decisions in a specific context.
- Accessing, processing and managing information to produce significant insights within their area of specialisation.
- Producing and communicating information with a range of audiences with different levels of knowledge or expertise.
- The ability to address the intended and unintended consequences of interventions within relevant contexts and systems.
- Ability to develop own learning strategies.
- Accountability and ensuring good resource management and governance practices.

Once the Master's qualification has been completed and the student meets the minimum requirements, they may enrol for a doctoral qualification, within the area of specialisation.

The MPA offered by Unisa thus has a very specific South African regulatory context which determines its type, level, duration, purpose, characteristics, and position within a broad framework of higher education qualifications. Its structure as a research Master's by coursework and mini-dissertation is specifically aligned with the HEQSF. This regulatory context ensures that this qualification is fully integrated with national imperatives for learning, quality, access, and progress. This context needs to inform any study of student throughput rate of a qualification within this framework.

The next section focuses on legislature and how legislature and regulation are imperative in higher education.

2.5 THE STRUCTURE OF MPA CURRICULA AS OFFERED ABROAD

Since the MPA is offered in various countries all over the world (see Section 2.3), the purpose of this section is to provide a few examples from a selection of these countries of how this qualification is structured.

In an approach to achieve a worldwide standard for this qualification, the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA), a network with more than 300 members in the USA and at least 24 other countries offering MPA and related programmes, serves as a recognised accreditation body for Master's degree programmes in Public Administration (NASPAA 2018). The accreditation standards used by their Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation (COPRA) do not provide any guidance regarding a preferred curriculum or qualification structure (Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation, 2014). However, in a comparative study by Pahigiannis (2005), components such as courses, internships and capstone experiences were identified. Pahigiannis (2005:5) observes that "Traditional thesis components and comprehensive exams are more often than not being replaced by capstone experiences, and internships are almost always required unless the student has a minimum of two years of relevant work experience". Several other US-based studies also referred to capstone projects: Mayhew, Swartz and Taylor (2014:324) mention the use of capstone projects in MPA programmes "to engage in applied research and consultation projects, which are integral in bridging the theory-praxis dichotomy". In another study, a capstone course was shown to be suitable for measuring the learning of "the third NASPAA universal required competency (to analyze, synthesize, think critically, and solve problems)" (Powell, Saint-Germain & Sundstrom, 2014:157). However, a capstone or research component does not seem to be compulsory for all MPA programmes offered in the USA, as a study by Koven, et al. (2008:699) has shown that it is a core component of only 32,2% of the accredited programmes they surveyed. Capstone projects have a diversity of formats, such as dissertations, mini-dissertations, research reports, seminars and treatises (Wessels, 2009:512). Regarding the duration of the MPA programmes offered by USA universities, the literature has shown various practices of calculating credit hours (Koven, et al. 2008:706; Mayhew, et al. 2014:326), resulting in the duration of these programmes varying from 12 months to three years for full-time students, and up to five years for part-time students (Ferrer, 2018:5; Pahigiannis, 2005:6). There seems to be an absence of a generic structure of MPA programmes in the USA.

In Australia and New Zealand, ANZSOG offers the EMPA qualification as a two-year postgraduate qualification (ANZSOG, 2017). The curriculum consists of a core of eight subjects (including an applied research project), a course in public sector financial management, and two electives offered by partner universities (ANZSOG, 2017:4). This qualification is offered over two years.

The Brazilian School of Public and Business Administration offers a Professional MPA with a curriculum that aims to equip its students with the understanding of economic, political, financial, and global positioning of the infrastructure sector within the country (Rosenbaum, 2015:175). The curriculum for this qualification consists of "four required courses, plus one Scientific-Technological Intervention/Dissertation Direction, and at least eight substantive elective disciplines" (FGV, 2017). The duration of this programme is 22 months (FGV, 2017).

From the examples presented, it appears that most of the MPAs are offered over a period of two years while the curricula consist of coursework modules with a diversity of capstone research projects. Despite efforts for international accreditation of the MPA and the evident similarities in the curriculum and structures of the MPA programmes offered worldwide (policy analysis and capstone projects are common features), it is not possible to identify a universal core curriculum structure for this qualification. The next section presents an overview of the MPA as offered by South African universities.

2.6 THE MPA CURRICULUM INTERNATIONALLY WITH REGARDS TO STRUCTURE

The MPA curriculum at internationally based universities has common characteristics in terms of their structure. In the USA, the Metropolitan College of New York, for instance, offers the MPA qualification over three semesters. Students enter the programme as cohorts. In the first semester, students are required to identify a need, challenge or opportunity for their research (Nufrio & Tietje, 2008:218). The second semester consists of drafting a pilot study to solve and implement the problem. The last and final semester

constitutes the evaluation phase, and recommendations for future research is presented, along with any other matters related to the research (Nufrio & Tietje, 2008:218).

ANZSOG offers the EMPA qualification as a two-year postgraduate qualification. Students are required to complete eight modules and a research project after completing the modules. The modules include:

- Delivering Public Value
- Managing Public Sector Organisations
- Government in a Market Economy
- Designing Public Policies and Programs
- Decision Making under Uncertainty
- Governing by Rules
- Leading Public Sector Change and
- A Work-Based Project

The core modules are accompanied by three elective modules; one of these modules is in the area of public sector finance (ANZSOG, 2017).

The Brazilian School of Public and Business Administration has a curriculum that aims to equip its students with the understanding of economic, political, financial, and global positioning of the infrastructure sector within the country (Rosenbaum, 2015:175). The MPA qualification consists of the following modules which students need to complete.

Table 2.3: The core curriculum and elective subjects of the MPA qualification

Core curriculum	Elective Subjects (no less than six modules to be selected)
• Quantitative Analysis • Research methodology • Public Policy 1	• Consultancy Methods and Strategies • Educational Methods and Strategies • Financial Administration • Public Sector Economy • Strategic Management

Core curriculum	Elective Subjects (no less than six modules to be selected)
• Public Policy 11	• Organisational Analysis and Modeling • Programme and Project Management • Marketing in Public Organisations • Government Budgeting • Public Administration Theories • Management of Technological Qualification, Advancement Processes and Innovation in Companies • Human Resource Administration • Human Resource Policy, Globalization, Employment Opportunities and Change in Labour Relations • Contemporary Strategies for Making Public Management More Flexible • Organisational Culture • Decision-making Theory • Corporate Logistics • Budgeting as a Management Tool in Public Services • Organisation and Management Topics • Project and Company Analysis and Appraisal • Investment Portfolios • Construction of Institutions and Human Development • Government and Lobbying in Brazil • Internationalisation Process Management • TQM-Total Quality Management

(Rosenbaum, 2015:177)

Modules, such as the above, offer a sense of common purpose to advance public interest, and reflect the determination of the programme to exceed the normal traditional standards of excellence (Rosenbaum, 2015:175).

The MPA is offered in two forms at the Kennedy School of Government. The first qualification is the MPA in International Development, and the second is the MPA.

Rosenbaum (2015:202) highlights that the MPA in International Development is geared to future practitioners, not only to become future academics, but to develop internationally. The MPA curriculum, on the other hand, is a flexible programme, which will enhance individuals' knowledge to improve their leadership skills within the public sector (Harvard Kennedy School, 2017:Online).

The qualification is an eight-credit programme which includes a summer programme. It is designed for professionals with work experience of at least seven years, and for those who would like to enhance their careers within the public sector (Rosenbaum, 2015:203).

The individual is allocated an advisor who assists with the development of a 16-credit study plan. Alternatively, students who are studying concurrently are allocated an advisor to assist with their 12-credit study plan. There are three foundational methodological areas to which a student has to adhere. These include analytics, management, and leadership (Rosenbaum, 2015:202).

A common aspect in the Kennedy School of Government and CAG, is that both universities state that they offer their MPA qualification primarily for professionals who work in the public sector.

The MPA qualification at the Kennedy School of Governance is a two-year programme and consists of the following modules:

- Business and Government Policy
- Democracy, politics and Institutions
- International and Global Affairs
- International Trade and Finance
- Non-profit Sector
- Political and Economic Development
- Social and Urban Policy (Rosenbaum, 2015:205-206).

One credit is taken from each of the following requirements: quantitative methods, strategic public and non-profit management, and political advocacy, leadership, ethics and press.

The Department of Public Administration at Erasmus University Rotterdam is one of the largest departments in Europe (Rosenbaum, 2015:180). It was established in 1984 and is located in the Faculty of Social Sciences (FSS). The Master of Sciences in Research in Public Administration and Organisational Science is a similar qualification to the MPA in that it also aims to prepare the individual to enhance their practice in public administration and organisational research. The qualification constitutes a theoretical and practical aspect (Rosenbaum, 2015:182). The theoretical aspect results in the individual producing an article and a detailed research proposal, whereas the practical-orientated aspect goes through all the phases of contract research, ranging from acquisition through consultation, all the way to the final research report (Rosenbaum, 2015:182).

Table 2.4 illustrates a detailed list of all the modules an individual need to complete in Rotterdam, in order to successfully complete the Master of Science in Research in Public Administration and Organisational Science.

Table 2.4: Curriculum for Master of Science in Research in Public Administration and Organisation Science at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam

First year	Second year	First and second year
Core themes and modern classics in public administration	Social transformations and public governance	Research seminar
Core themes and modern classics in public management and organisation	Qualitative data collection	Research and Master's thesis track A
Philosophy of Science	Research seminar: academic practice and research reporting	Thesis seminar

First year	Second year	First and second year
Statistics and advanced quantitative data analysis	Applied policy research and research methods	Research and Master's thesis track B
Tutorials		
Research strategy and design		
Survey research		
Qualitative data analysis		

(Rosenbaum, 2015)

It can be deduced that similarities exist in the curriculum and structure of the reviewed MPA qualifications. Policy analysis and the mini-dissertation are common features within all the different qualifications mentioned. All the institutions also state that a student who registers for the qualification must have a certain level of work experience within the public sector.

Since the MPA has been discussed within the international context, the next section discusses it within the South African context.

2.7 THE MPA AS OFFERED BY SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

Several universities in South Africa offer the MPA qualification (Wessels, 2009). While all are regulated by the HEQSF, the specifications and requirements of their offerings nevertheless differ. For the purpose of this study, the offerings of three universities were unsystematically selected for comparison with Unisa. This comparison is presented in Table 2.5.

Table 2.5: MPA offerings at South African universities: a comparison

Criteria	University of Pretoria	Stellenbosch University	University of KwaZulu Natal	University of South Africa
Name of qualification	Master of Public Administration	Master of Public Administration	Master of Public Administration	Master of Public Administration
Exit level	9	9	9	9
Minimum total credits	180	180	192	180
Admission requirements	BAdmin honours qualification or equivalent is required to apply	BAHons or BAdmin Honours in Public Administration or Advanced Diploma in Public Administration and Management	A Bachelor's degree with a minimum of 5 years working experience	Bachelor honours, or postgraduate diploma, or 480 credit Bachelor's with a minimum of 96 credits at NQF level 8 in Public Admin
Curriculum	(A) Five prescribed compulsory modules: • Public Policy Analysis; • Municipal Government and Administration; • Modern Management Techniques; • International Administration; • Rural Development Management. (B) Two elective modules	(A) Three 30 credit modules: • Advanced Program and Project Management • Anti-Corruption Studies • Capita Selecta: A sector specialisation as requested by students • Comparative and Contemporary Public Management Innovation Studies • Integrated Community-based Development • Integrated Public Management • Integrated Public Policy Management and Analysis • Monitoring and Evaluation • Municipal Management and Development	Four modules: • Public Administration and Development Management Theory • Research Methodology and Applied Techniques • Advanced Public Sector Financial Management • Advanced Provincial and Local Governance. A mini-dissertation	Four compulsory modules, namely • Public Policy; • Public Financial Management; • Public Human Resources; and • Public Leadership. Research proposal module Mini-dissertation

Criteria	University of Pretoria	Stellenbosch University	University of KwaZulu Natal	University of South Africa
	(C) One mini-dissertation	• Public Management Law (B) An appropriate, advanced course in research methodology and academic writing skills (C) A limited thesis of 90 credits		
Progression with framework	Doctorate	Doctorate	Doctorate	Doctorate
Source	University of Pretoria, 2018: Online	Stellenbosch University, 2018: Online	University of KwaZulu Natal, 2018:Online	University of South Africa, 2018: Online

(University of Pretoria, 2018:Online; Stellenbosch University, 2018:Online; University of KwaZulu Natal, 2018:Online; University of South Africa, 2018:Online)

Table 2.3 illustrates that the structure of the MPA qualifications offered by the selected universities in South Africa meets the regulatory requirements of the HEQSF regarding the admission requirements, credits, the minimum credit weight of the research component, and the progression in the qualification framework. It is clear that there are common factors related to the qualification, including the name of the qualification, exit level, admission requirements, and progression with the framework.

The next section provides an overview of the development of the MPA qualification at Unisa.

2.8 CHANGES IN THE MPA CURRICULUM STRUCTURE AT UNISA

Since introducing the MPA qualification at Unisa in 1982, the curriculum has consisted of two components, namely coursework modules and a dissertation of limited scope. The most recent changes to the curriculum were introduced in 2012 to align the qualification structure with the revised HEQSF, which was formally introduced in 2013. As this study includes student cohorts enrolled for the pre-2012 curriculum, this section reviews both the pre-2012 curriculum and the post-2012 curriculum.

Before 2012, the MPA programme (Degree code 07056) consisted of eight modules and a dissertation of limited scope (See the Rules for the Degree of Master of Public Administration as Published in the 2010 Calendar of the University of South Africa). The admission requirements for this qualification were a Bachelor's degree, "at least three years' appropriate practical experience, preferably in the public sector", and a prospective student must "have passed Public Administration or Municipal Government and Administration as a major subject" (Unisa, 2010:Rule PC32). Table 2.6 offers a list of the eight coursework modules included in the pre-2012 MPA curriculum at Unisa:

Table 2.6: Pre-2012 MPA coursework modules

Module and module code	Syllabus
Theory of science and public administration (HFILPAK)	• Knowledge as a component of science. • What is science? • The research process.
Public and municipal personnel administration and management (HPERSAK)	• Theoretical perspectives. • Public personnel administration and management. • Municipal personnel administration and management.
Management of public and municipal finance (HRFINSE)	• Theories of public financing; • Public financial management; and • Municipal financial management.
Planning and policy analysis in the public sector (HBEBEP3)	• Planning. • Policy analysis.
Study of organisations and the public sector (HORSTEH)	• Purposes and environments of organisations. • Organising as function and organisation as structure.
Management and the public sector (HOPBESV)	• Manifestation of administration and management in the public sector. • Skills for public managers. • Technological and analytical aids for the public sector.
Politics in the public sector (HPOLPSQ)	• Theoretical perspectives. • The role and influence of politics on the public service. • The role and influence of politics on the public sector. • The role and influence and influence of politics on municipal government level.
Labour relations and the public sector (HARBVHK)	• Labour relations in the political and socio-economic context. • Government as a role player in labour relations. • Labour relations in the public sector.

(Unisa, 2010:Rule PC33)

In addition to the eight coursework papers, a student had to submit a dissertation of limited scope on an approved topic from public administration or municipal government and administration (Unisa, 2010: Rule PC 32).

Since 2012, a revised MPA curriculum has been introduced which is still currently in use. Unisa's new MPA curriculum consists of four compulsory coursework modules (see Table 2.7), a research proposal module and a mini-dissertation.

Table 2.7: The 2012 MPA coursework modules

Module and module code	Syllabus
Policy studies (PUB5970)	• The nature, role and history of public policy; • Theories and models for analysing public policy; • Public policy in more and lesser developed states; • The public policy process; • Policy agenda setting; • Policy design; • Policy decision making; • Policy implementation; • Programme management, project management and public policy implementation; • Policy evaluation; and • Policy dynamics: change, failure and success.
Public Human Resource Management (PUB5971)	• Knowledge and an understanding of the activities, roles and functions, and milieu, of human resource management in the public sector; • Practice of strategic public human resource planning; • Utilisation and development of employees in the public sector; and • Remuneration in the public sector.
Public Leadership (PUB5972)	• The environment of managers and leaders; • Foundations of individual behaviour; • Understanding groups and managing teams; • Leadership and theories;

Module and module code	Syllabus
	• Leadership, change and innovation; and • Understanding leadership in Africa.
Public Financial Management (PUB5973)	• Principles of sound public sector financial management; • Understanding the core components of the Public Finance Management Act and Treasury regulations; • Strategic and operational planning; • Successfully linking the budget to the strategic and operational planning within the medium-term expenditure framework; • Performance measures; • Preventing unauthorised, irregular and wasteful expenditure through sound expenditure management and financial management; • Identifying actions required for successful integration of the supply chain management model into the public sector departments management process; and • Effectively applying risk management principles and internal control systems.

(Unisa, 2015).

In addition to these compulsory modules, a student has to pass the Master's Research Proposal (MPEMS91) module within a year; thereafter, a student may register for the dissertation of limited scope (DFPUB91). The duration of this 180-credit-bearing structured coursework qualification is three years (Unisa, 2015).

2.9 HOW THE MPA IS TAUGHT AT UNISA

The four coursework modules of the MPA programme at Unisa are taught by correspondence through tutorial letters, study guides, assignments and venue-based examinations. The research proposal module is taught primarily by correspondence, although face-to-face contact meetings have also been used. The purpose of this module is to guide a student to develop an acceptable research proposal on a selected and approved topic, under the guidance of a research supervisor.

The student has to select a research topic within the scope of one of the following research focus areas in which the Department of Public Administration and Management can offer research supervision:

- Knowledge and methods of public administration;
- Public human resource management and organisational studies;
- Public finance;
- Public policy;
- Local government;
- Public service delivery; and
- Administrative justice and ethics (Unisa, 2015).

Upon completion of the research proposal module, the student may enrol for the mini-dissertation and proceed with the approved research project under the guidance of the supervisor within the applicable research focus area. The choice of a supervisor for a particular study is balanced out by factors such as lecturers' workload and area of specialisation. There is also the issue of how compatible the student is with the supervisor in terms of research interest (Brynard, 2001).

The relationship between a student and a supervisor is crucial when the student begins with the dissertation process as the supervisor serves as a guide to the student. Once the relationship develops, a contract is signed that the student and supervisor agree on. Both parties have to adhere to what is stipulated in writing.

2.10 CONCLUSION

This chapter responded to the first research question by outlining the characteristics of the MPA qualification offered by Unisa within international, national and institutional contexts. Although this qualification is offered worldwide, the brief historical overview touched on the origin and development of the MPA qualification in just a few countries, including the USA, Brazil, China and South Africa. This overview nevertheless confirms that the MPA is internationally regarded as the dedicated postgraduate

qualification to educate and prepare public managers for professional managerial careers in the public sector.

Within the South African context, this chapter has shown that the MPA is a well-regulated qualification in terms of its type, level, duration, purpose, characteristics, and position within a broad framework of higher education qualifications. Its structure as a research Master's by coursework and mini-dissertation is specifically aligned with the HEQSF and fully integrated with national imperatives for learning, quality, access, and progress. The international trend appears to be an MPA offered over a period of two years consisting of coursework and research components. However, it seems challenging to identify an internationally-accepted core curriculum structure for this qualification. However, within the South African context, the MPA has a common structure, although the content of the coursework component may differ among universities. This structure has also been followed by both the pre-2012 and the post-2012 curriculum offered by Unisa.

As this study aimed to obtain an understanding of the throughput rate of various cohorts of MPA students at Unisa, the next chapter reports on a concept analysis of 'throughput rate' and proposes a conceptual framework for analysing the throughput rate of MPA student cohorts.

CHAPTER 3: THROUGHPUT RATE: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 INTRODUCTION

To understand the throughput rate of students enrolled for the MPA qualification at Unisa, Chapter 2 provided a contextual overview of the MPA qualification. This overview has shown that as this qualification is pivotal for managerial capacity building for the public sector, acceptable student throughput rates are of national importance for any country. As such, it provides the necessary justification for conducting a study to understand inadequate throughput rates of MPA students.

In line with the throughput rate being the focal point of this study, and since concepts form the "basic building blocks in theory construction" (Walker & Avant, 2014:163), the purpose of Chapter 3 is to analyse the concept 'throughput rate' and to develop and suggest a conceptual framework for making sense of the throughput rate of MPA students. This framework will serve as a written or visual indication of the variables and their interrelationships (Miles & Huberman, 1994:18).

This chapter thus firstly reports on an analysis of the concept 'throughput rate'. Secondly, it proposes a conceptual framework for explaining the throughput rate of MPA students at Unisa. For this purpose, relevant journal articles, books and official sources were reviewed. The next section reports on the analysis of the concept 'throughput rate'.

3.2 THROUGHPUT RATE: A CONCEPT ANALYSIS

To understand and explain the throughput rate of MPA students at Unisa, it is necessary to describe the phenomenon in a measurable or communicable way (Walker & Avant, 2014:163). For this purpose, concepts serve as precise thinking tools (Pauw & Louw, 2014:8) by clearly naming, defining and describing the phenomenon to which it refers. Consequently, the concept 'throughput rate' is analysed to obtain clarity on how this concept serves to describe, explain or predict reality. Because a concept has one meaning that may be articulated through different words (Pauw &

Louw, 2014:8), concept analysis is a challenging task. Therefore, the seminal process of concept analysis, as suggested by Walker and Avant (2014:166-181), was selected for this study. The concept 'throughput rate' is analysed in the next section by determining the aims and purposes of the analysis. The following are identified: the uses of the concept, defining attributes, a model case of throughput rate, additional cases, antecedents, consequences, and empirical referents (Walker & Avant, 2014:166). The section concludes with a conceptual framework of the concept.

3.2.1 The purpose of analysing the concept 'throughput rate'

Determining the purpose of a concept, according to Walker and Avant (2014:164), helps the researcher to distinguish the concept from other concepts that are similar but not the same. The purpose of this concept analysis is to obtain clarity on the scientific meaning of 'throughput rate' within the context of South African higher education, Unisa, and the MPA qualification. Clarity of meaning enabled the researcher to use the concept as a thinking tool. The researcher was also able to make precise descriptions and analyses of the phenomenon, and sound explanatory conclusions. As various uses of the concept exist, clarity on the purpose of analysis is necessary.

3.2.2 The various uses of the concept "throughput rate"

As evident from dictionaries, official documents, and scholarly literature, the concept 'throughput rate' is associated with various terms, including drop-out, stop-out, retention and completion. The use of the concept is thus not restricted to the sphere of higher education. The concept seems to be relatively new, as earlier editions of dictionaries such as The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (1968), and the Collins Paperback Dictionary and Thesaurus (2006) do not include the terms. Although the 2014 version of the Collins Dictionary still does not define the concept 'throughput rate', it provides a definition of 'throughput', namely as being the "raw material or information that is quantified and is processed in a specific period" (Collins Dictionary, 2014). In a relatively similar way, the Business Dictionary (2012) defines 'throughput' as the productivity of a machine over an allocated period of time. The two ordinary

definitions of ‘throughput’ share two attributes, namely (a) quantification or measurement, and (b) a fixed period of time.

It is noteworthy that the special edition of the Sanchez (2014) on Tinto’s South African lectures only contains the concept ‘throughput’ and not the concept ‘throughput rate’. Furthermore, both Tinto (1975 and 1988) and Jiranek (2010) link the concept ‘throughput’ within the context of higher education to various related concepts, such as pass or success rate, completion, drop-out, stop-out and retention, all of which are closely related to throughput rate.

Throughput rate has shown to be a technical concept used in official documents within the higher education sphere (CHE 2016; National Planning Commission, 2013). Hence, the document *Vital Stats: Public Higher Education 2014,* published in 2016 by the CHE, defines the concept as follows within the context of undergraduate studies (CHE, 2016:iv):

> *The throughput rate calculates the number of first-time entry undergraduate students of a specific cohort of a specific year who have graduated either within the minimum time, or up to 2 years beyond the minimum time, to the number of students in the baseline enrolments of that cohort.*

Apart from the official documents, ‘throughput rate’ has been used in various scholarly publications (see Table 3.1). The various authors use the concept with a relatively similar meaning, although not exactly the same defining attributes. Walker and Avant (2014) state that “attributes appear in the literature when describing the concept and are used to differentiate the concept from other concepts”.

Table 3.1: Uses of the concept 'throughput rate' in the context of public higher education

Author	Examples	Defining attributes
Amehoe, 2013:31	"The number of students who successfully complete their studies in an institution or a country within a specified period of time" (Amehoe, 2013:27)	(a) the number of students who have completed their qualification at (b) within a specified period of time
	"Completion and throughput is a process of beginning and ending" (Amehoe, 2013:31)	(a) 'beginning' or 'enter' and (b) 'ending' or 'pass'
Scott, Yeld and Hendry, 2007	"The calculation of how many students in a given cohort completed their degrees and graduated within the stipulated time, how many dropped out, and how many took longer than the stipulated time to graduate." (Scott, Yeld and Hendry, 2007:iii)	(a) a calculation of (b) the completing students as a percentage of (c) the entering students of the same cohort, and the (d) minimum time of completion
Fisher, 2011:8	"A cohort analysis of throughput, indicating the numbers and proportion of each intake graduating in 4, 4+1 and 4+2 years."	(a) Numbers/proportion of each intake (b) Period of time Graduating
Kritzinger and Loock, 2012:12	"The throughput rate is determined by the number of students who successfully graduate" (Kritzinger and Loock, 2010:12)	(a) number of students graduating
Subotzky and Prinsloo, 2011:179	"Factors impact on success at three related levels: ***Individual*** (academic and attitudinal attributes and other personal characteristics and circumstances)	These factors are not a defining attributes of throughput rate, but possible antecedents

Author	Examples	Defining attributes
	Institutional (quality and relevance of academic, non-academic and administrative services) ***Supra-institutional*** (macro-political and socio-economic factors)".	
Van Biljon and De Kock, 2011:988	"Postgraduate supervision performance is a multi-valued variable that can be measured in terms of the attrition rate, the throughput rate (percentage of students passed per tuition period)"	(a) Number students who completed qualification (b) Period of time of completion (c) Number students enrolled 'a' as a percentage of 'c'
Wingfield, 2011:1-2	"Student throughput rates have become a much debated topic, not only in the South African academic environment but in many parts of the world. Of particular concern are Master's and PHD degrees: how many years should students take to complete them?" "The norms for postgraduate student throughput are being set in a simplistic way, often through benchmarking South Africa with other countries. A frustration I feel is that every Master's and PHD student is different. These students are adults with different academic, family and financial backgrounds".	(a) Years to complete

The most comprehensive definition of 'throughput rate' listed in Table 3.1, is provided by Scott, et al. (2007:iii). Their definition consists of similar attributes of the description used by the South African Council on Higher Education (see 2016:iv), namely (a) a specific cohort of entering students, (b) a minimum period to complete the qualification, (c) the number of those entering cohort students completing their qualification, (d) as a percentage of the entering cohort (Scott, et al. 2007:iii).

Fisher's (2011:8) definition, although brief, contains the same attributes. Other scholars use similar, but fewer attributes when they refer to throughput rate. Amehoe (2013:31) does not include the minimum period of completion of the qualification as part of the definition, while Kritzinger and Loock (2012:12) only refer to the number of students who successfully graduate. Van Biljon and De Kock (2011:988) do not mention the specific entering cohort of students in their definition. Although Wingfield (2011:1-2) refers to throughput rate, the concept is not defined, and Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011) do not provide a definition of 'throughput rate', but identify valuable antecedents of the concept.

These examples confirm that the concept 'throughput rate' is used by various authors in different ways. In this study, 'throughput rate' refers to the number of students of a specific cohort who have completed their qualification within a specific number of years after registration, as a percentage of the cohort who have registered.

3.2.3 Defining attributes of the concept 'throughput rate'

The purpose of this section is to elaborate on the defining attributes of the concept 'throughput rate' in order to fully understand the throughput rate of MPA students at Unisa. Walker and Avant (2014:168) refer to the defining attributes as the "heart of concept analysis". The defining attributes of 'throughput rate' are those aspects or characteristics that are most commonly associated with the concept. These attributes are used to differentiate the concept from similar or related concepts (Walker & Avant, 2014:168). The definitions of 'throughput rate' listed in Table 3.1, reveal the following most commonly used defining attributes, namely (a) the number of students enrolled in a specific cohort, (b) a specified period to complete the qualification, (c) the number

of students who have completed (graduated), and (d) a calculation expressing the number of completion as a percentage of the number of first enrolments:

(a) The number students enrolled in a specific cohort

Within the context of this study, the concept 'throughput rate' is used to compare the throughput percentage of different cohorts of students over a specific time for a specific qualification, such as the MPA. The concept 'cohort' within a discussion on throughput rate, refers to a group of students registered in a specific academic year (Carnoy & Chisholm, 2008:15; Fenger & Hiomberg, 2011:391; Statistics South Africa, 2017:x). Visser and Van Zyl (2013:1) regard a cohort analysis as the most reliable method of measuring throughput rate as it enables the researcher to track a student's progress over several years.

Van Zyl and Barnes (2012:2) identify the following four types of students who can be classified as cohorts. The first category consists of students entering from a secondary or work environment, and the second category comprises students who transfer from another institution. The third category relates to students who enrol for a different qualification within the same institution, for the first time. The final category consists of students who repeat the same qualification. For the purpose of this study, a cohort refers to students enrolling for the MPA qualification at Unisa, for the first time, in a specific year. To calculate the throughput rate for this cohort of students, the number of students who have registered for the first time in this cohort is used.

(b) A specific, predetermined period to complete the qualification

The second defining attribute of 'throughput rate' is the specified period for completing the qualification (Amehoe, 2013:31; Kritzinger & Loock, 2012:12; Scott, et al. 2007:vii-viii). Students registered for a coursework Master's degree have to complete their studies within three years, which is the time limit for this qualification (Unisa, 2017). For the calculation of the throughput rate, an additional one year is added to the three years. Thus, when calculating throughput rate for a qualification, only those students in a cohort who have completed their qualification within the specific, predetermines period (three years plus one) are included. Those students taking longer than the four-

year period (Unisa, 2017) to complete their qualification are not included in the throughput rate calculation for their cohort.

(c) The number of students who have completed the qualification (graduated)

Graduation is defined as the actual ceremony in which qualifications are conferred (Oxford Dictionary, 2016). However, Van Zyl and Barnes (2012:2) describe graduation as the period during which a student enters and completes a specific qualification. The number of students who graduate within a specific period (e.g. three years plus one) is used to calculate the throughput rate of a specific cohort of students enrolled for the qualification. In the case of the MPA qualification offered by Unisa, students who graduate is a defining attribute of the throughput rate. To calculate the throughput rate of a specific cohort of students, the number of students who have graduated is expressed in a percentage of the cohort of students who initially enrolled for the qualification.

(d) Calculation expressed as a percentage

The fourth defining attribute of throughput rate is a calculation expressed as a percentage (Amehoe, 2012:12; Scott, et al. 2007:iii; Van Biljon & De Kock, 2011:988). This is a critical indicator of performance (South Africa, 2014:20) of the specific cohort of students, as well as of the relevant university offering the specific qualification.

3.2.4 Additional, borderline or related cases of 'throughput rate'

While 'throughput rate' within the context of this study is defined based on the four attributes discussed, several other borderline or related concepts are also used in the literature and in practice for describing and analysing student success. Examples of these concepts are pass or success rate, completion, drop-out, stop-out and retention. Although these concepts share some of the defining attributes with 'throughput rate', not all the attributes are present. The purpose of this section is thus to examine these concepts in order to get a clearer understanding of what counts (Walker & Avant, 2014:170) as defining attributes for the concept 'throughput rate'.

(a) Pass rate or success rate

According to the Young People's Learning Agency (2011:4), 'pass rate' and 'success rate' are often used interchangeably. Both these concepts originated from general, dictionary meanings. The word 'pass', according to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (2005:1063), refers to moving past or to exceed. In terms of an examination, a pass indicates a successful result in an examination (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2005:1064). These two concepts are related, because they both indicate moving forward, meaning there is an end result. Success rates, as stated by the CHE (2010:24), range from a variety of factors such as administrative inefficiencies, and economic factors such as personal, health and social factors.

According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (2005:1477), the word 'success' refers to an individual achieving what he or she wants to achieve, for example, achieving a good result in respect of their academics. Students who therefore qualify to write and pass an examination are referred to as being part of a group of students who form part of the pass rate or success rate (Horne & Naude, 2007:268). Based on the definition, the percentage of students who do not complete the qualification they are registered for also forms part of the drop-out rate. In this case, the students are known to either have discontinued their studies or not completed their academic qualification. According to the CHE (2016:234), success rates and throughput rates affect the development of human capital, because of the critical skills shortage. Hence, this is why students take prolonged time to complete their qualifications. The CHE (2016:329) also states that pass rates would increase the number of graduations if the structure of the curriculum within the higher education sphere were to be evaluated.

The concept 'pass and success rate' can be linked to 'throughput rate', because all these concepts encompass the completion of a student's studies from the inception of enrolment until the point of completion in a specified period of time for a specific qualification.

(b) Graduation rate

The meaning of the concept ‘graduation rate’ and its accuracy of measuring student success has proven to be contested in the world of higher education (Krislov, 2018). The concept is used to compare the number of students who graduated with the number of those entering the same institution (Krislov, 2018). Within the South African context, the National Plan for Higher Education uses graduation rate as an indicator for the efficiency of higher education institutions (CHE, 2018:20; Watson, 2009:727). The Department of Higher Education and Training defines graduation rate thus as “a calculation based on the number of students who have graduated in a particular year, irrespective of the year of study, divided by the total number of students enrolled at the universities, in that particular year” (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2016:125). With this definition in mind, the benchmark graduation rate for Master’s students at South African distance education institutions is 25% (Ministry of Education, 2001).

In the context of this study, it is necessary to make a distinction between two measurements of graduation rate, namely the proxy graduation rate and the cohort graduation rate (CHE, 2016:347). Within the Unisa context a ‘proxy graduation rate’ means the number of graduates for a specific year divided by the number of enrolments for the same year, while the ‘cohort graduation rate’ means the number of graduates for a specific cohort divided by the number of first-time enrolments for the same cohort (Visser, 2016). The latter concept thus differs from the concept ‘throughput rate’ by not including the period of completion as defining attribute.

(c) Completion rate

Before the concept ‘completion rate’ can be defined, an understanding of completion needs to be established. Completion refers to the act or process of finishing and being complete (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2005:296). According to Hauser and Koening (2011), completion is an indicator in terms of a percentage of how many students complete their qualification. In the context of this study, ‘completion rate’ refers to the percentage of students enrolled, who are not repeating and who have completed their qualification (McMillion, Ramirez & Roska, 2011:22). Defining

throughput rate in terms of completion is relevant because higher education institutions expect their students to complete their studies, since there are factors such as cost implications to be considered. To produce more graduates, more students need to complete their qualifications.

A common trait identified between Jiranek (2010), Hauser and Koening (2011) is the issue of the time required to complete a specific qualification. Therefore, time plays an important role in the completion of qualifications. The completion rate can be related to the defining attributes in Section 3.2).

(d) Drop-out rate

'Drop-out rate', as a borderline case of the concept 'throughput rate', is especially relevant as it relates to the measurement of throughput rate. The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (2005:451) defines a dropout as "a person who leaves school or college before they have finished their studies". According to Bonneau (2006:14), a dropout is any individual who does not complete or graduate a specific qualification. Bonneau (2006:16) explains that students who fail to return to school after a long period of suspension are not considered as drop-outs. The definition of a dropout, according to Schargel and Smink (2013:3), refers to young adults who leave school without successfully completing a qualification. This definition also applies to higher education institutions were students leave universities without completing their qualifications.

A student who changes qualifications may be regarded as a 'dropout', and this would affect the throughput rate of that specific cohort (Scott, et al. 2007:12). Student drop-outs are costly for both the individual and the institution.

From the definitions presented, it can be concluded that the concepts 'drop-out rate' and 'throughput rate' are interrelated, because should a student who registered for the MPA qualification at a higher education institution drop out, in the context of the study, it will affect the throughput rate.

(e) Stop-out

According to Bean (2000:Online), stop-out refers to students who leave a particular qualification for a period of time and re-enrol again after a period of time. Bean (2000: Online) presents different reasons why a student would stop-out of an institution. These reasons include, for example, financial shortfalls, family crisis, or when a student decides to work full-time and raise a family (Bean, 2000). Balakrishnan and Coetzee (2013) define a stop-out as a student's last interaction with a qualification, regardless of the nature of the interaction. However, Taylor, Veeramachaneni and O'Reilly (2014:4) do not agree with Balakrishnan and Coetzee's (2013) definition; they believe that stop-out happens when students do not submit their required academic assessments during a specific period. These students then end up not writing and completing examinations, and as a result stop all their academic activities. Therefore, Balakrishnan and Coetzee (2013) view stop-out as the end of a student's studies. They accept that such students will not return to complete their qualification. Stop-out, therefore, affects throughput rate because it affects first-time enrolment students.

(f) Retention

According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (2005:1249), retention refers to "the action of keeping something rather than losing it". The aspect of retention has been a concern for higher education institutions worldwide. Retention in higher education refers to students who begin their qualification in a specific year and continue to study until their qualification is obtained (Crosling, Heagney & Thomas, 2009:10).

In order to understand retention, the model created by Tinto (1975) will be used. This model is relevant as it explains students' success within their academic journey. Student success relates to students' completion of studies within a specific period of time, which has a consequent impact on throughput rate.

Tinto (1975) mentions that in order for retention to be successful, a student should be integrated both socially and academically. Tinto (1975) identifies two characteristics of dropping out: the attention given to defining questions in curricula, and theoretical

models explaining students' decisions to leave (drop-out or stop-out) a higher education institution.

The additional or borderline cases are essential for this study as it shows that the concept 'throughput rate' is not isolated but related to other concepts such as pass and success rate, completion, drop-out, stop-out and retention. From the presented definitions and concepts linked to the term 'throughput', it can be confirmed that the concept 'throughput rate' cannot be utilised in isolation.

For the concept and phenomenon of throughput rate to exist, certain antecedents need to exist simultaneously. These antecedents are discussed next.

3.2.5 The antecedents of throughput rate

Walker and Avant (2014:173) use the concept 'antecedent' to refer to "those events or incidents that must occur or be in place prior to the occurrence of the concept". Within the context of the current study, the antecedents of the concept 'throughput rate' are those conditions that determine throughput rate. Thus, it relates to the instruments or lenses to understand the concept as well as the phenomenon of cohort throughput rate of MPA students.

Figure 3.1 depicts the antecedents that affect throughput rate. These antecedents are then discussed in detail. The first antecedent of throughput rate to be discussed, is the specific qualifications for which students are enrolled.

(a) Qualification

The first antecedent of the throughput rate is the qualification for which throughput rates are determined. Within the South African context, the MPA forms part of a single, integrated system of qualifications which is classified, registered, published and articulated in terms of Section 4 of the NQF Act 67 of 2008. As a higher education qualification, the MPA forms part of the HEQSF which, inter alia, provides an integrated basis for quality assurance, coherence and articulation (CHE, 2013:11).

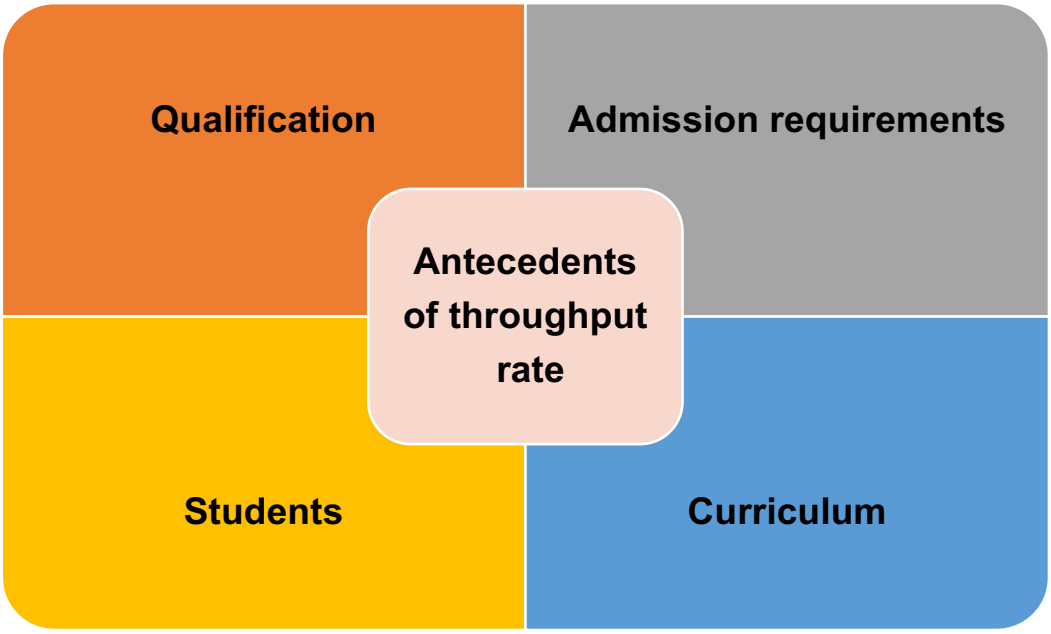

Figure 3.1: The antecedents of throughput rate

This framework provides for two variants of the general Master's degree, namely a research Master's degree by dissertation, and a research Master's degree by coursework and mini-dissertation (CHE, 2013:36). The MPA falls within the latter category. This implies that the MPA requires "a high level of theoretical engagement and intellectual independence" from students, and in some cases a "demonstration of the ability to relate knowledge to a range of contexts for professional practice" (CHE, 2013:36). Both the MPA and the Masters of Administration in Public Administration are offered on level 9 of the NQF, and both require 1 800 notional study hours (180 credits) to complete. As indicated in previous sections of this dissertation, both Master's qualifications are expected to be completed within three years. Hence, the nature of the qualification determines the year value (three plus one) for calculating the throughput rate of students.

(b) Admission requirements

'Admission requirements' is the second antecedent to throughput rate as it predominantly determines the number of students entering a specific cohort (Cloete, Mouton & Sheppard, 2015:129). Within the South African context, admission requirements appear to be a core theme in the higher education discourse (CHE, 2016: 81; Van Rooyen & Wessels, 2015:187). The expectation is that "universities to

become more selective in their degree admission criteria" (CHE, 2016:375). According to Sargeant, Foot, Houghton and O'Donnell (2012:24), there are two types of admission systems: the open admission system, which exists only if a student holds a previous minimum qualification and thus has the right to enter the higher qualification, and the selective admission system, where the student has to meet additional criteria in order to be accepted.

In South Africa, the admission requirements for university qualifications are determined by various regulatory documents, such as the Higher Education Act, 1997 and the HEQSF, as revised in 2013. Within the specific context of Unisa, admission requirements are also determined by the institution's Admission Policy as well as Senate. According to the Admission Policy, Senate "has the prerogative to set additional and/or alternative entry requirements to the statutory minimum admission requirements". Unisa (2017) determines that only students who received admission approval may register for the qualification. As a result, the monitoring of a specific cohort can take place (Unisa, 2017). The admission requirements serve as antecedents for 'throughput rate' as it determines the first defining attribute, namely the nature and number of students enrolled for a qualification, such as the MPA. The specific admission requirements for the MPA offered at Unisa are discussed in Section 5.3 of this dissertation.

(c) Student profile

Students, as a collective, is the third antecedent for throughput rate. According to the Oxford Dictionary (2016), a student is defined as "someone who is studying in order to enter a specific profession". The Oxford Dictionary (2016) also describes a 'student' as a person who is studying at a higher education institution. In the case of this study, the students who are enrolled for the MPA qualification are the primary focus as they are the unit of analysis. For the throughput rate to be determined, the specific cohort of students has to be identified. Visser and Van Zyl (2013:1) mention that for a student's progress to be measured, a cohort analysis is the most critical method in doing so.

Awortwi (2010:723) refers to the need for “different kinds of competences and not the traditional” to enable “government administrators and managers” to “meet these challenges” while Wooldridge (2004:385) refers to the importance of linking training design and delivery to “the organization’s response to these new challenges”. While the concept ‘challenge’ is evidently core to the curriculum discourse in Public Administration, clarity on the meaning of the concept seems to be an imperative.”

Stoop (2015:1) states that understanding the throughput rate pattern of a student has always been a challenge, especially for those who are enrolled in a higher education institution. In order to understand the fluctuation of throughput rate, it is necessary to understand the factors that may influence students’ decisions to drop out, or to excel. It is, therefore, necessary to take note of Jiranek’s (2010) observations that a student’s qualities and personal situation (such as academic ability, financial circumstance, ability to interact with others and language skills) may explain their success or failure.

Within the Unisa context, Prinsloo and Subotzky (2011:179) identified three student success factors, namely, (i) individual factors (academic and attitudinal attributes, personal characteristics and circumstances), (ii) institutional factors related to the quality and relevance of academic, non-academic and administrative services, and (iii) supra-institutional factors (macro-political and socio-economic factors).

(d) Curriculum

The fourth antecedent is the curriculum. The term ‘curriculum’ originated from the Latin word “currere”, which means to continue or proceed, with reference to the experiences children go through in order to become mature adults (Nyere, 2014:1). The concept ‘curriculum’ is interpreted differently among different scholars and finding agreement on its meaning and interpretation can be difficult. Fisher (2011:12) identifies throughput rate as a problem which may be attributed to several factors, of which the curriculum is an important one.

Within the context of public administration, several contributions have been made on the curriculum. Van Dyk (2013:94-99) provides support for the existence of a direct relationship between the curriculum and student throughput and success rates; “Ensuring that the learning (through the curriculum) is relevant and contextual will result in positive engagement, which implies a more engaged and successful student” (Van Dyk, 2013:84).

The CHE (2013:5) refers to the curriculum as the planned learning experiences that students are exposed to with a view to achieving desired outcomes in terms of knowledge, competencies and attributes.

Kelly (1999:3) explains the curriculum as “the content or the body of knowledge that should be transmitted or a list of the subjects to be taught”. Farrant (1988:12) elaborates that the “curriculum is that set of broad decisions about what is taught and how it is taught, that determines the general framework within which lessons are planned and learning takes place”. Farrant (1988:12) elaborates that a curriculum represents the distilled thinking of society on what it wants to achieve through education. Thus, a curriculum mirrors a society by reflecting the society’s aims, values and priorities by identifying the physical and mental skills that are important to the society. Kelly (1999) argues that the nature of the curriculum is divided into three aspects, namely: (i) planned curriculum, (ii) received curriculum, and (iii) hidden curriculum. The planned curriculum refers to what is already in existence of the syllabus. Received curriculum is how the student relates to the syllabus, in other words, it is based on the students’ experiences with the curriculum. The hidden curriculum refers to what the student learns from the curriculum.

As discovered, the concept ‘curriculum’ has been broadly defined by different scholars. Dillon (2009:344) investigates what a curriculum includes and emphasises a number of questions surrounding the concept. The first question asks ‘what are the different elements of a curriculum?’ The second question probes the elements of the curriculum, and the third question analyses what constitutes the practice of curriculum. Table 3.2 illustrates these questions (Dillon, 2009:344).

Table 3.2: Questions relating to curriculum

Order of curriculum	Questions surrounding curriculum	Interpretation relating the questions to the MPA
Nature of a curriculum	What are the basic aspects of a curriculum? What are the basic questions about a curriculum?	In order to determine the basic aspects of curriculum, the definition of MPA needs to be discussed (see Chapter 2 for the full discussion of the MPA). The basic questions to include will be on the structure of the qualification. Thereafter, the questions pertaining to the MPA can be determined.
Elements of a curriculum	Who composes the curriculum?	The elements of the MPA qualification would include: • **Students** What should be taken into account when a student is studying for the MPA? What qualities does the student possess? Does the student learn from the curriculum? • **Lecturers** How does the lecturer teach the MPA qualification? What content is provided by the lecturer regarding

Order of curriculum	Questions surrounding curriculum	Interpretation relating the questions to the MPA
		the various MPA modules? • **Subject matter** What is the nature and content of the MPA curriculum? What and how should the MPA be taught at Unisa?
Practice of curriculum	How is the curriculum implemented?	This results in the planning and expected outcome of the MPA curriculum.

(Dillon 2009:344)

Similar to Dillon (2009:344), the Unisa Curriculum Policy (2012) emphasises certain key aspects, such as the nature of the curriculum and how the curriculum is taught (see Table 3.3).

Table 3.3: Key aspects of the curriculum defined by Unisa

Question	Aspect	Relation to the MPA qualification
What is to be learnt?	Content	This relates to the modules that are taught within the MPA qualification.
Why is it to be learnt?	Rationale and underlying philosophy	This reports on how MPA students relate to what is taught and how they can implement what they have learnt in their work life.
How is it to be learnt?	Process	The process of the MPA qualification is important,

Question	Aspect	Relation to the MPA qualification
		because this relates to how the qualification is taught and how the students seek to understand the qualification.
When is it to be learnt?	Structure of the learning process	The structure of the MPA consists of four compulsory modules and a mini-dissertation.
How will the learning process be demonstrated?	The achievement of the assessment	In the context of the MPA, the learning process will be determined by the achievement of the assessment.

(Unisa Curriculum Policy, 2012:3)

Although the explanations of curricula can be broad and varied, most authors agree that a curriculum refers to the importance of subject content. In this instance, it is the subject content that forms part of the MPA. The throughput rate of the MPA qualification can be best understood through the nature of the curriculum because out of all the other antecedents, the curriculum is the only variable that can be changed. For an overview of the MPA curriculum and how the MPA qualification is taught at Unisa refer back to Chapter 2 (Sections 2.6, 2.7 and 2.8).

3.2.6 Consequences of 'throughput rate'

The consequences of a concept are "those events or incidents that occur as a result of the occurrence of the concept" (Walker & Avant, 2014:173). With reference to this study, the consequences of 'throughput rate' relate directly to the relevance and magnitude of the problem of a low (zero) throughput rate of MPA students enrolled at Unisa, as described in Section 1.2 of this dissertation. A review of the literature and the relevant official documents reveals that the student throughput rate for this qualification may have consequences for, among others, the finances of the University (CHE, 2016:24; Van Dyk, 2013:99), the public sector's needs for qualified middle-managers (The Public Service Commission, 2014:ix-x; Nielsen & Quinn, 2016:92),

and student expectations (Forsyth, Laxton, Moran, Van Der Werf, Banks & Taylor, 2009:644; Hiedermann, Nasi & Saporito, 2017:83; Liilejord & Dysthe, 2008:75).

(a) Financing for the university

According to the World Bank (2010:Online), like many other countries in the world, South Africa is faced with financial difficulties in higher education institutions, due to wide participation of students. In other words, a significant number of students are registered for various qualifications, with low throughput rates. The higher the throughput rate, the higher the possibility for the university to be financed by the government. This will lead to a higher number of students graduating each year.

According to the CHE (2016:42), based on 2010 data projections, the 'unproductive use of subsidy', does not result in student graduations. Such a problem thus results in a gap between the schooling and university phase. This means that there may be a contributing factor of lack of funding or a possible level of unpreparedness by the student. The throughput rate is affected because the resources allocated are not utilised to the institution's fullest capabilities (CHE, 2016:42).

(b) Satisfying public sector needs

According to Hull (2016:28), there are values associated with students, and one of these values include allocative efficiency. This means that higher education qualifications need to meet labour-market needs. In the case of the MPA qualification, the aim of the qualification is to enhance the student to be efficient within the public sector; hence, the satisfaction of the public sector is imperative.

(c) Satisfying student expectations

For economic and social improvement, it is a university's responsibility to produce graduates who will meet the necessary requirements to have an impact on the human resource needs of the public sector. Hence, it is essential to deliver quality content to students in higher education institutions (Jalali, Islam & Ariffin, 2011:184). In the case of Unisa, students are antecedents within the throughput rate, so it is essential for their

needs to be met, because they are the determinants of throughput rate for the MPA qualification at Unisa.

Lewin and Mawoyo (2014:9) reveal that graduation and throughput rates in South Africa are low. This finding is based on the results of the CHE (2013). As such, it relates to this study in terms of understanding the low throughput rate of the MPA qualification at Unisa.

In order for research, innovation and job creation to be enhanced, it is important for more Master's graduates to be produced (Visser & van Zyl, 2013:25). Therefore, if more MPA graduates are produced, the throughput rate will increase.

3.3 A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING THE THROUGHPUT RATE OF MPA STUDENTS AT UNISA

A conceptual framework is defined as a "system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs and theories that support and inform your research" (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Robson, 2011:63). The purpose of this conceptual framework (see Table 3.4) is to create an understanding of the throughput rate of MPA students at Unisa. The core of this framework consists of the defining attributes of the concept 'throughput rate', namely:

(a) the number of students enrolled for the first time in a specific cohort,
(b) the predetermined period to complete the qualification,
(c) the number of students in that cohort who have completed the qualification (graduated) within the period determined in b, and
(d) a calculation expressed as percentage.

The throughput rate of a specific cohort can thus be calculated as follows:

Throughput rate = (a ÷ c) × (100 ÷ 1).

The conceptual framework furthermore postulates that throughput rate may be determined by several antecedents, such as the nature of the qualification, the

admission requirements for that qualification, the profile of the students registered for the qualification, and the curriculum of the qualification. Furthermore, it also assumes that the subsequent throughput rate has specific consequences (the third component of the conceptual framework). These consequences may pertain to university finances, and to meeting public sector needs and student expectations. For the purpose of this study, the conceptual framework suggests that an increase of the throughput rate of MPA students at Unisa will result in increased subsidy for the university, as well as increased satisfaction of the needs of the public sector and students.

The vexing question is this: How can the throughput rate of the MPA students at Unisa be improved? The conceptual framework proposes possible approaches in terms of the nature of the qualification, the admission requirements, the student profile, and the curriculum. These approaches are consequently briefly considered.

Table 3.4: A conceptual framework or understanding the throughput rate of students enrolled for the MPA qualification at Unisa

Throughput rate				
Antecedents		**Defining attributes**		**Consequences**
Qualification Admission requirements Student profile Curriculum		The number of students enrolled in a specific cohort The predetermined period to complete the qualification The number of students in that cohort who have completed the qualification (graduated) within the specified period A calculation expressed as percentage		Finance for the university Satisfying public sector needs Satisfying the expectations of the students

(a) Understanding throughput rate of the MPA qualification at Unisa through the nature of the MPA qualification

The qualification is an integral part of the understanding of the low throughput rate of the students enrolled for it. The structure of the MPA qualification is regulated by the HEQSF (CHE, 2013). Consequently, the level on which the qualification is offered, the minimum total credits, the purpose and characteristics, the requirements for the successful completion, and the minimum admission requirements are predetermined by the framework. Thus, this predetermined structure of the qualification cannot be used or manipulated to increase the number of students enrolled for the MPA. The nature of the MPA can be regarded as a fixed variable of student throughput rate as it would be difficult to change the nature of the qualification.

(b) Understanding student throughput rate of the MPA qualification at Unisa through admission requirements

Section 3.2.5 of this chapter has shown that the admission requirements for the MPA qualification at Unisa are determined by several regulatory documents. Within the context of this regulatory framework, the admission policy of the institution also provides for a student to be admitted for the MPA qualification. There are a few requirements that the student should adhere to, which include: an honours degree, and 60% for a research methodology module (Unisa, 2017). Considering that the admission requirements as approved by Senate has changed since the inception of the MPA at Unisa, it might be worthwhile to investigate the possible influence of these requirements on the throughput rate of MPA students.

(c) Understanding the throughput rate of the MPA qualification at Unisa through the profile and needs of students

While there is an extensive body of scholarly literature that addresses the issue of student expectations and needs in higher education, the studies by Ritt (2008) and Woodhall, Hiller and Resnick (2014) are noteworthy. Ritt (2008:12-14) identifies factors such as an ageing and diverse population (for example, adult learners in higher education), shifting demands of the economy, and the rapid change in technology.

Woodhall, et al. (2014:55) claim that students' needs and expectations in the higher education sphere are important (see Table 3.5). Their view is that students should be considered as customers (or clients) who need to be serviced, because this serves as a basis for identifying improvement opportunities for the student (Woodall, et al. 2014:55).

Table 3.5: Students' needs in higher education:

Results for the customer or client (student)	Service attributes	Acquisition and relationship costs
Practical outcomes (e.g. knowledge, learning, time management)	Academic support (e.g. library services, access to academic resources, teaching)	Direct learning costs (e.g. books, stationery, IT needs)
Social outcomes (e.g. friendships, social status, life experience)	Lifestyle enhancers (e.g. campus life, student unions, student facilities)	Effort (university work, employment, personal issues at home)
Strategic outcomes (e.g. qualification, employment opportunities)		Psychological costs (e.g. academic stress, financial stress, personal expectations)
Personal outcomes (e.g. self-fulfilment, personal development)		

(Woodall, et al. 2014:55)

(d) Understanding student throughput rate of the MPA qualification at Unisa through the curriculum

The analysis of the curriculum as an antecedent of student throughput rate of the MPA qualification at Unisa (see Section 3.2.5.d), has indicated that the curriculum is a variable that can be manipulated to improve the qualification. This is also confirmed by the key curriculum aspects identified by the Unisa Curriculum Policy (Unisa 2012:3).

Furthermore, Chapter 2 of this dissertation has shown that the MPA curriculum at Unisa has indeed changed during the period of investigation for this study (2005-

2014). This provides sufficient reason for embarking on further investigation of the possible influence of the MPA curriculum on student throughput.

3.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter reviewed the scholarly literature on the concept 'throughput rate'. A concept analysis of 'throughput rate' was done by means of a review of scholarly literature. This concept reveals the percentage of the number of a specific cohort of students who have completed their qualification within a specified period of time. The concept analysis has furthermore shown that the concept, within the context of this particular study, is determined by at least four antecedents, namely the nature of the qualification, the admission requirements, the specific student profile, and the curriculum. Furthermore, the concept analysis illustrated that 'throughput rate' has implications for, inter alia, a university's finances, the capacity needs of the public sector, as well as students' expectations.

Informed by the concept analysis, a conceptual framework was developed to map out the remainder of this study. Based on this framework, four possible non-exclusive approaches to understand the throughput rate of MPA students at Unisa were identified. For the purpose of this specific study, the researcher decided to approach the student throughput rate of the MPA qualification at Unisa through the curriculum as antecedent. The next chapter reports on the research design for this study.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 3 provided a conceptual framework for describing, analysing and understanding the throughput rate of MPA student cohorts at Unisa. This framework consists of three categories of concepts related to throughput rate, namely its defining attributes, antecedents, and consequences. While this framework provides the thinking tools required for a deepened understanding of the influence of certain antecedents on the throughput rate of MPA students and its subsequent consequences, it also informs the research design and methodology for this study.

Chapter 4 describes and justifies the research design and methods used in this study by reporting on the considerations for aligning the research design and methodology with the research problem statement and questions, as well as with the research purpose and objectives.

4.2 REFINING THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The formulation of the research problem is an important stage in the research process (Wessels & Thani, 2014:169) as it enables the researcher to identify and articulate the research problem to investigate. The pre-scientific problem that drove this study is the low throughput rate of the student cohorts enrolled for the MPA qualification at Unisa during the period 2005-2014 (see Section 1.3). The conceptual framework in Chapter 3 (see Section 3.3) presents four antecedents as possible lenses for understanding the throughput rate of MPA students, namely the nature of the qualification, its admission requirements, the student profile, and the curriculum.

The antecedent ‘curriculum’ has been selected to obtain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon ‘throughput rate’ (see Section 3.4). Consequently, the problem statement as discussed in Section 1.3, has been refined to the following: How can the

curriculum of the MPA qualification at Unisa contribute to a better understanding of the students enrolled for the MPA qualification at Unisa during the period 2005-2014?

4.3 A REFINED PURPOSE STATEMENT OF THE STUDY

Based on the refined research problem statement presented in the previous section, the purpose of this study was thus to apply the lens of the qualification's curriculum to the throughput rate of student cohorts enrolled for the MPA qualification at Unisa during the period 2005-2014. This was done in accordance with the following objectives:

- to describe the throughput rate of MPA students at Unisa for the distinct cohorts from 2005 to 2014; and
- to analyse the throughput rate of the distinct cohorts of MPA students at Unisa from 2005 to 2014 by applying the 'curriculum' theoretical lens.

From the research purpose statement one can deduce that the unit of analysis of this study is the annual cohorts of MPA students enrolled at Unisa from 2005 to 2014. The point of focus (phenomenon) for this study is the throughput rate of these students, while various units of observation have been utilised.

4.3.1 Unit of analysis

As a collective, the distinct cohorts of MPA students of Unisa (2005-2014) have been selected as the unit of analysis (the 'what') for the study. While the throughput rates for the various cohorts may differ, in this study each cohort is treated as a separate collective (O'Sullivan, Rassel & Berner, 2008:135; Yin, 2018:102).

4.3.2 Point of focus

While various aspects of the selected cohorts of MPA students may justify a researcher's interest, the point of focus of this research project is these student cohorts' throughput rates as defined by the percentage of those students in specific

cohorts originally enrolled for the MPA who graduated within four years. This study utilises one of the identified antecedents of throughput rate, namely the curriculum of the qualification (see Section 3.3 for a full exposition of the concept), as a lens to obtain a deeper understanding of the percentage of students who graduated within the required timeframe.

4.3.3 Units of observation

While the concept 'unit of observation' refers to the material to be studied or observed in order to obtain the required knowledge and understanding of the unit of analysis (Wessels & Thani, 2014:173; Babbie & Mouton, 2001:174; Boyd, 2011:929), the units of observation for the current study consist of secondary data sources comprising texts and numerical data sets on the phenomenon (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1: Sources of textual and numeric secondary data analysed for the current study

Textual data	Numeric data
1. Unisa policies and procedures: • Unisa M and D admission policy documents • Unisa M and D procedure documents • Unisa curriculum submission documents **2. Unisa study material:** Study guides and tutorial letters for the following modules: • Public policy • Public leadership • Public Human Resource Management • Public Financial Management • Research Proposal tutorial letter	**1. Data provided by the Unisa institutional statistics (DISA):** Aggregated institutional statistics of the MPA qualification from the period 2005-2014 which structured according to the following categories: • Students per specific cohort • Student drop-out rates per cohort • Students per cohort still enrolled, and • Total number of students per cohort graduated (per year) **2. Data provided by the Unisa Department of Information and Communication Technology (ICT):** Anonymised academic records of each student registered for the period 2005-

Textual data	Numeric data
3. Documents related to Higher Education in the public domain: • Documents of Council on Higher Education • Higher Education Qualification Sub-Framework • Documents of the South African Qualification Authority • Documents of the Department of Higher Education and Training	2014, structured according to the following categories: • Student number (which has been kept anonymised throughout the study) • Enrolment period • Each module the student enrolled for • Final mark for each module (pass or fail) • The examination period

The various sources of secondary data listed in Table 4.1 were utilised to provide necessary, well-nuanced knowledge and insight on the throughput rate of the selected cohorts of MPA students at Unisa.

The textual data (see the first column of Table 4.1) indicates all the documentation that is available in the public domain. This assisted the researcher to understand from where the throughput rate of the MPA qualification emanates.

The numeric data were obtained from two institutional sources within Unisa, namely the DISA and the ICT. The aggregated data obtained from the DISA provided institutional information on the throughput rate of MPA students for the period 2005 to 2014. The statistical data was obtained once the researcher received ethical clearance and research permission from the respective committees (see Annexures A and B). The data sets, received as Microsoft Excel documents, provided aggregated student information for each period (cohort) on their enrolments, the drop-out rate, the students who are still registered, and the total number of students who had graduated. This information enabled the researcher to analyse the various trends of each cohort over time.

The ICT provided the researcher with a data set of all students (437) who were registered for the MPA qualification during the period 2005-2014. The data set presented information on the number of students registered for each module, as well as information on the completion status of students (coursework and mini-dissertation).

The researcher utilised two different student cohort data sets which included the aggregated student cohort information obtained from the DISA and the non-aggregated but anonymised student cohort data set obtained from the ICT. The two data sets were compared to each other ensuring that the different sources of information correlated. In order to ensure the reliability and validity of the two data sets, the researcher manually verified each student's academic record. During the review of the data sets, the researcher found no correlation between the DISA and the ICT, hence the researcher had to verify the information received personally. During the review of student information, the researcher found the following:

- duplications in student numbers;
- some first registration dates were incorrect, for instance, the student number received from the ICT would state that a certain student was enrolled in 2005, however, according to the researcher's verification the student was enrolled in 2006; and
- the total number of completions did not correlate with the statistics received from the DISA.

The data sets were subsequently cleaned before they were used for reporting and analysis in this dissertation.

4.4 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this section is to describe and justify the researcher's decisions in terms of the research design, research methodology and research methods for this study.

4.4.1 Research design

The research design refers to the "plan or blueprint" (Mouton, 2001:55) of how this research was conducted. Mouton (2001:76) presents a typology of research designs broadly consisting of empirical and non-empirical research designs. Following from the research problem statement, the research purpose and objectives, and the selected unit of analysis and units of observation discussed in the previous section, this study used an empirical research design.

Considering the vast number of empirical design types (Mouton, 2001:148-174), as well as the focus of this specific study, the researcher selected the evaluation research design type (Mouton, 2001:158) for this study. Evaluation research is commonly used to establish whether a specific intervention has been successful or not (Van Thiel, 2014:178). Consequently, this design type was selected for the current study, in order to evaluate the possible effect of the MPA curriculum at Unisa on student throughput rate. With this in mind, the selected design facilitated the analysis of existing data consisting of textual data (e.g. policy and curriculum documents) and numerical data (e.g. aggregated descriptive statistics).

4.4.2 Research methods

Mouton (1996:36) uses the term 'research methods' to refer to "the means required to execute a certain stage in the research process". He continues to refer to methods of definition, sampling methods, measurement methods, data collection methods and data analysis methods. Similar to Mouton's explanation of research methods, Long (2014:428) states that research methods refer to "specific strategies, procedures, and techniques of analysing and interpreting data". In addition, Long (2014:428) explains that research methods are the actual ways of conducting a study and points out that the information obtained from the analysis of the methods is still beneficial to understanding research.

Therefore, this study followed the empirical design approach, which provides for a longitudinal cohort analysis (see De Villiers & Van Wyk 2013; Fisher 2011:8; Van Thiel 2014: 56; Van Zyl & Barnes 2012:2; Visser & Van Zyl 2013:1; Voorhees & Lee, 2009)

of existing data consisting of text data (e.g. policy and curriculum documents) and numeric data (e.g. aggregated statistics). Consequently, it was necessary to consider and select the appropriate research methods for this project (Mouton, 2001:56). The methods used in this study included content analysis and descriptive data analysis. The method of content analysis is specifically appropriate for the study of "the content of the existing data source, which will usually consist of written material or documents" (Van Thiel, 2014:107).

4.4.3 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria refer to the selection criteria used to "rule in or out" the population that has been selected for a research study (Salkind, 2012:2). The inclusion criteria of this study resulted in the selection of ten MPA cohorts for the period 2005-2014. This specific period was selected because it represents changes in the MPA curriculum. Prior to 2005 up to 2010, the MPA curriculum was designed in such a way that a student had nine modules and a mini-dissertation to complete within three years. However, from 2011, the curriculum changed and the number of modules were reduced to five compulsory modules and a mini-dissertation to complete within four years.

The researcher included data of students who enrolled for the first time for the qualification between 2005 and 2014. These first-time enrolled students determined the throughput rate.

4.4.4 Analysis of aggregated statistical data

As mentioned, the numerical data sets used for this study were obtained from the ICT at Unisa. These electronic data sets (in Excel format) provided information on students enrolled for the MPA qualification in respective cohorts from 2005 to 2014. The data sets were obtained to describe the throughput rates, graduation rates, drop-out rates and retention rates for each cohort of first-time enrolled students. In order to make these calculations, the data sets comprised the following information:

- academic year (the year each student enrolled);
- qualification code (the old MPA qualification is 07056 and the current MPA qualification code is 98651);
- module (the specific module each student is registered for);
- result type (this indicates whether the student has passed, passed with a distinction, or failed); and
- examination year.

The data sets provided by ICT consists of aggregated data of 270 first-time enrolled students from 2005 to 2014. Before the analysis could be commenced, the researcher validated the data set by verifying certain categories of information of each student. Verification, in this context, means that the researcher checked each student's academic record in order to ensure a true representation of what actually occurred or are clearly derived from the analysis. From each student record, the researcher verified:

- the year of first registration of each student, as this would determine the cohort;
- the modules registered for and completed, as that would indicate whether they completed the modules or not, roughly how many modules a student completed in one year, and whether a student experienced a problem with one or more modules;
- if and when the student was registered for the mini-dissertation and completed it; and
- the year in which the student completed the MPA qualification.

After validating all the data sets, this data were analysed through textual data analysis.

4.4.5 Analysis of textual data

The researcher was granted access to institutional documents that was not in the public domain but related to the MPA qualification. This documentation consisted of:

- Unisa Master's and doctoral policies and procedures;

- Unisa Master of Public Administration study material (study guides and tutorial letters);
- Unisa calendar with information pertaining to the MPA; and
- MyChoice documents indicating the MPA curriculum.

In addition to these documents, the researcher consulted the CHE's documents which are available for public viewing. Table 4.1 indicates which documents were utilised for this study.

Table 4.2 compares the information received from the DISA and the information verified by the researcher. The information in this table indicates the number of entering students and the total number of graduations. It has therefore been found that the data obtained from the DISA were not 100% accurate, and needed verification by the researcher.

Table 4.2: A comparison of statistics received from the DISA and statistics verified by the researcher on the Unisa student system

Cohort year	Number of entering students (Information obtained from the DISA)	Number of entering students (Verification by researcher)	Total graduations (Information obtained from the DISA)	Total graduations (Verification by researcher)
2005	23	25	4	5
2006	19	29	3	4
2007	20	34	1	1
2008	28	33	0	5
2009	5	13	0	2
2010	8	30	0	2
2011	64	66	0	3
2012	32	40	1	2
2013	42	27	0	1
2014	20	14	0	1
Totals	**261**	**311**	**9**	**26**

The information provided by the DISA was pulled from a database from where the researcher was able to analyse each cohort (2005-2014). The information included the entering cohort, total number of drop-outs, graduates, and students who were still in the process of their studies. The Unisa student system is more reliable than the information provided by the DISA, because the student system enabled the researcher to verify the academic record of each student who was registered from the period 2005-2014. From this it can be concluded that more information was obtained from the student system. As a result, the verification process was more detailed.

From Table 4.2, it is evident that the number of entering students from the statistics received from the DISA, is lower than the number of entering students verified by the researcher. It is also apparent that students graduated each year, even though these numbers were low. On the other hand, the statistics received from the DISA for the period 2008 to 2011, indicates that there were no graduations at all, however, 2012 shows one student graduated out of 32 entering students.

4.5 RESEARCH ETHICS CLEARANCE

Kumar (2014:289) states that “being ethical means adhering to the code of conduct that has evolved over the years”. Ethical clearance is important for any research study. Research ethics, according to Miller, Birch, Muthner and Jessop (2012:14), refers to “the moral deliberation, choice and accountability on the part of researchers throughout the research process”.

The Policy on Research Ethics (Unisa, 2017:Subsection 1.6.1) aims to ensure an ethical and scientific culture in the research practice at the institution. This policy is primarily aimed at protecting the rights and interests of “human participants, institutions communities, animals and the environment” (Unisa, 2017a:Subsection 1.6.2). Furthermore, this policy stipulates that all “(h)uman, animal, plant, molecular and cell research conducted by Unisa employees and students should receive ethics clearance from an Ethics Review Committee before it may commence” (Unisa, 2017:Subsection 5.7). For the purpose of this study, secondary data were used. No human subjects were directly involved, hence the risk of harming them was low. The researcher subsequently applied and obtained research ethics clearance (Reference

number 2016_CRERC_005(SD) of 16 February 2016) from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the College of Economic and Management Sciences (see Attachment A).

4.6 RESEARCH PERMISSION

In addition to the ethical requirements discussed in the previous section, Unisa regards it as "essential that research involving Unisa employees, students and data be conducted in accordance with national constitutional provisions, policies and legislative frameworks that guide research, ethical considerations and protection of human participants" (Unisa, 2017b:Subsection 1.3). Subsequently, the Policy for Conducting Research Involving Employees, Students or Data (Unisa, 2017b) has been adopted by the institution to serve "as a common repository of generally accepted practice for proven, emerging and developing researchers for the purpose of generating research output for publication in the public domain" (Unisa, 2017:Subsection 5.1). In terms of this policy, the Research Permissions Subcommittee (RPSC) has the duty "to grant permission to conduct research involving Unisa employees, students or data as required by the Policy for Conducting Research involving Unisa Employees, Students or Data" (Unisa, 2017b:Subsection 9.1.4a). On 7 November 2016 the researcher applied for permission to obtain aggregated student data for the MPA qualification from 2005 until 2015. The researcher obtained approval from the Research Permission Sub-Committee (RPSC) of the Senate Research, Innovation, Postgraduate Degrees and Commercialisation Committee (SRIPCC) on the 24 January 2017. The correct procedures were followed in obtaining information from the Unisa databases. During the time of the study, the researcher was a Unisa employee who sought and was granted permission to utilise Unisa resources. These included:

- access to the statistics on the throughput rates of the MPA qualification from 2005-2015;
- access to the throughput rate of students statistics enrolled for the Masters by mini-dissertation in the different Colleges at Unisa;
- access to the various Unisa policy documents (see Table 4.1 for detail); and

- access to the student online system.

4.7 METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

The researcher faced a number of limitations in this study, which are noted here:

- The research was restricted since human participants were not directly involved in the study.
- This study is limited to MPA students at Unisa. If this study incorporated the MPA qualification across all other universities, it would have had increased benefits because other universities would also find value in the study.

Although the aim of the study was subject to limitations, the method used was appropriate because the researcher was able to utilise data received from the DISA and the ICT to determine how the low throughput rate of the MPA qualification impacted on students.

4.8 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter outlined the research process, which included a discussion of the problem statement and the study purpose, and entailed the refined research purpose. The research design and methodology were further discussed, and the researcher indicated the form of data collection for this study. Further, the chapter discussed the form of sampling and the nature of data analysis.

Research ethics is an important factor in this study, as it highlights the confidentiality aspect of the research and indicates that no harm was caused during the course of the study (since no participants were used for the study). Lastly, this chapter presented the methodological limitations of the study, together with data quality and criteria.

The next chapter reports on the research results.

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH RESULTS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 4 provided a justification for the appropriateness of the research design, methodology and methods selected for this study. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the throughput rate of the annual cohorts of MPA students at Unisa from 2005 until 2014, report on an analysis of the throughput rate of the respective cohorts, and to suggest ways of making sense of the analysis of the data. The data used for this description, analysis and interpretation were obtained from the DISA. The analysis and interpretation were guided by the conceptual framework which is provided in Section 3.3.

This chapter subsequently reports on the application of the selected design, methodology and methods to meet the research objectives as formulated in Section 4.3. Consequently, this chapter is structured to report on (a) the description of the throughput rate of MPA students at Unisa for the distinct cohorts from 2005 until 2014, (b) the analysis of the throughput rate of those distinct cohorts, and (c) the use of the curriculum of the MPA qualification at Unisa to understand the throughput rate.

5.2 DESCRIPTION OF THROUGHPUT RATE

The first research objective of this study was to describe the throughput rate of the MPA students at Unisa for the distinct cohorts from 2005 until 2014. In the context of the MPA qualification, the throughput rate is seen as (a) the number of students in a specific cohort who have graduated within four years after their first registration, and (b) as a percentage of the number of students enrolled for that cohort (see Section 3.2).

The description of the throughput rate of the MPA qualification is based on aggregated institutional student statistics for the first-time enrolment cohorts for the years 2005 until 2014. As two sources of numerical data were used, namely the DISA and the ICT

(see Table 4.1), two slightly different versions of the throughput rate for these cohorts of MPA students can be presented (see Tables 5.1 and 5.2).

Table 5.1: Throughput rate of MPA students based on the data provided by the DISA

Cohort year	Number of entering students	Number of students graduated within 4 years after entering	Throughput rate (%)	Total number of graduates until 2017	Cohort graduation rate (%)
2005	23	0	0	4	17%
2006	19	0	0	3	15%
2007	20	0	0	1	5%
2008	28	0	0	0	0%
2009	5	0	0	0	0%
2010	8	0	0	0	0%
2011	64	0	0	0	0%
2012	32	0	0	1	1.5%
2013	42	0	0	0	0%
2014	20	0	0	0	0%
Total	**261**	**0**	**0**	**9**	**3.4%**

Table 5.1 indicates that the numbers of entering students within the different cohorts varied, with the lowest being five in 2009 and the highest 64 in 2011. The varying number of entering students does not provide any explanation for the fact that not a single student graduated within the required four years.

Table 5.1 thus reveals that despite a few graduations, the MPA qualification at Unisa had a zero (0) throughput rate for the cohorts 2005 to 2014. Furthermore, this table illustrates that only nine of the total number of 261 students who registered for this qualification since 2005, had graduated by 2014.

The data obtained from the ICT consisted of identifiable student records. These enabled the researcher to verify their actual first-time registrations, as well as their actual year of completion and graduation. This verification process resulted in a slightly

different data set and subsequent description of the throughput rates and graduation rates (see Section 3.2.4) of the selected cohorts (see Table 5.2). The statistics, as presented in Table 5.2, were used for the purpose of further analysis and interpretation.

Table 5.2: Throughput rate of MPA students after verified with the data provided by ICT

Cohort year	Number of entering students	Number of students graduated within 4 years after entering	Throughput rate (%)	Total number of graduates until 2017	Cohort graduation rate (%)
2005	25	0	0	5	20,0
2006	29	0	0	4	13.8
2007	34	0	0	1	2.9
2008	33	0	0	5	15.2
2009	13	0	0	2	15.4
2010	30	0	0	2	6.7
2011	66	0	0	3	4.5
Old cur:	**230**	**0**	**0**	**22**	**9,5**
2012	40	1	2.5	2	5,0
2013	27	1	3.7	1	3.7
2014	14	1	7.1	1	7.1
New cur:	**81**	**3**	**3,7**	**4**	**4,9**
Total	**311**	**3**	**1,0**	**26**	**8,4**

The verified statistics in Table 5.2 indicate that a total of 311 (and not 261) students entered the various cohorts, of which 26 (and not nine) had graduated up to 2014. Only three students graduated within the specified allocated time (four years). These students were part of the 2012, 2013 and 2014 cohorts, resulting in throughput rates of 2,5%, 3,7% and 7,1% (and not 0%) respectively. While the purpose of this study was not to explain the slight difference between the two sources, both sources confirm that the throughput rate of each cohort from 2005 to 2011 was 0%. The verified data reflects a slight improvement in the throughput rate since the introduction of the revised curriculum in 2012; namely from zero (0) for the 2005 to 2011 cohorts, to 7,1% in 2014. Table 5.2 thus shows that while each cohort in the period 2005 to 2011 had a zero

(0%) throughput rate, they nevertheless had positive graduation rates. The cohorts (2012-2014) enrolled for the revised MPA curriculum since 2012 (2012-2014) had both positive graduation and throughput rates.

To provide a more nuanced description of the throughput rate of the selected cohorts, the researcher utilised one of the borderline concepts described in Section 3.2.4 of this dissertation, namely 'graduation rate' to determine how many students of the distinct cohorts have graduated, although not within the four-year period.

Table 5.3: Total number of students who have graduated and the year in which they graduated

	Cohort year	Number of entering students	Number of Graduates per annum							Gra-duates (n)	Min. years to gra-duate	Max. years to gra-duate
			2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017			
Old Curriculum	2005	25	1	3	1					5	7	9
	2006	29		2	1		1			4	7	10
	2007	34						1		1	10	10
	2008	33					2	3		5	8	9
	2009	13				1		1		2	6	8
	2010	30						1	1	2	7	8
	2011	66						3		3	6	6
New curriculum	2012	40					1		1	2	4	6
	2013	27						1		1	4	4
	2014	14							1	1	4	4

Table 5.3 also illustrates a shorter completion period for students enrolled for the revised curriculum (since 2012) in comparison to the students enrolled for the previous curriculum (2005-2011). The minimum period for completion of a student in the cohort 2005 to 2011 was six years, and the maximum time for completion was ten years. The minimum time for completion under the new curriculum was four years (two years shorter than previously) while the maximum time was six years (four years shorter than previously). The nature and structure of the curriculum have a direct influence on the throughput rate of this qualification. The next section proceeds with the analysis of the

influence of the curriculum, as well as other antecedents on the throughput rate of the MPA qualification as offered by Unisa.

5.3 THE USE OF THE ANTECEDENTS TO UNDERSTAND THROUGHPUT RATE

The data presented in Section 5.2 reveals a zero-throughput rate for the cohorts registered for the pre-2012 curriculum (2005-2011), while a throughput rate between 2,5% and 7,1% exists for the cohorts of students registered for the revised curriculum (2012, 2013 and 2014). The purpose of this section is to search for an understanding of the absence, or very low throughput rates, of these cohorts of students as described in Section 5.2. This is done by using the framework developed in Chapter 3 (see Table 3.4) to analyse their throughput rates. This analysis sets out to determine the influence of each of the four antecedents, namely the nature of the qualification, the admission requirements for this qualification, the student profile enrolled for this qualification and the curriculum of this qualification (see Section 3.2.5), on one or more of the defining attributes of throughput rate (see Section 3.2.3).

5.3.1 Qualification

The throughput rate for the selected cohorts of MPA students as described in Section 5.2 need to be understood considering the nature of this qualification, namely a Master's degree by coursework and dissertation (see Section 3.2.5.a). The graduation and throughput rates of these cohorts of students need to be compared with national and institutional benchmarks for Master's qualifications. While the graduation rate benchmark for Master's degrees offered at distance education institutions has been set by the South African government at 25% (Ministry of Education 2001:20), no throughput rate benchmark has been set. However, the 2018 Annual Performance Plan and Supporting Documentation submitted by Unisa to the Department of Higher Education and Training, has set a throughput target at 23% for Master's and equivalent students, with the 2015 baseline at 21,6% (Unisa 2018:30). Thus, compared with Unisa's own throughput rate target of 23% for Master's qualifications, the actual throughput rates varying between 2,5% and 7,1% for the various MPA cohorts provided in Section 5.2, do not meet this target. While the nature of the qualification offers a

comparative standard for the severity of the problem on inadequate throughput rate, it does not explain the cause of this problem. Subsequently, this researcher applied the antecedent 'admission requirements' as the next lens for sense-making.

5.3.2 Admission requirements

As indicated in Section 3.2.5.b of this dissertation, the admission requirements of this qualification are determined by various regulatory documents such as the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, the HEQSF of 2013 and Admission Policy of the University of South Africa of 2011. The Senate of Unisa set additional admission requirements for this qualification. Since 2012 an appropriate Bachelor's honours degree, or postgraduate diploma in Public Administration, with an average of 60% has been required (Unisa, 2017). These admission requirements are substantially different from the requirements for the pre-2012 qualification, namely a relevant Bachelor's degree, Public Administration on the third year level, and at least three years' experience in practice (Wessels, 2009:506-519).

While the pre-2012 admission requirements for the MPA required only a Bachelor's degree and not a Bachelor honours degree, the coursework modules included in this qualification were offered on the level of a Bachelor honours. Table 5.6 shows that between 28% and 48% of the students in the selected cohorts eventually passed all their coursework modules. This implies that the admission requirements were not adequate for selecting suitably prepared students for the coursework of this qualification. Furthermore, the exceptionally low graduation rate indicates an inability to complete the mini-dissertation within the specific curriculum structure. While the admission requirements included a minimum of three years' experience in the practice of public administration, this did not adequately provide for a selection of students with the ability to do research which will culminate in a mini-dissertation.

Since 2012, experience in the practice of public administration has been removed as an admission requirement. The academic requirements are now on a higher level (at least 60% score in a Bachelors honours degree or postgraduate diploma, including a module in research methodology). Tables 5.5 and 5.6 show that the completion rate for the coursework modules of the cohorts enrolled for the new curriculum was between

63% and 75%; considerably higher than the coursework module completion rate for the pre-2012 curriculum which varied between 28% and 57%.

5.3.3 Student profile

Considering the three student success factors identified by Prinsloo and Subotzky (2011:179) referred to in Section 3.2.5.c of this dissertation, this research project did not set out to collect individual data on the academic and attitudinal attributes, personal characteristics and circumstances of students. Subsequently, no evidence could be found of macro-political and socio-economic factors that may attribute to the poor throughput rate, or changes in the throughput rate since 2012. However, the institutional factors in terms of the quality and relevance of the academic services rendered to students (Prinsloo & Subotsky, 2011:179) do relate directly to students' learning experience as facilitated by the MPA curriculum. These curriculum-related factors are discussed next.

5.3.4 Curriculum

The curriculum, as an antecedent, is the remaining theoretical lens for obtaining an understanding of the throughput of MPA students at Unisa, which has been discussed in Section 3.2.5.d of this dissertation. While scholars may have different understandings of the word 'curriculum', there seems to exist a general agreement that a curriculum refers to a structured learning process involving students, lecturers and subject matter, facilitated within a specified period of time (see Tables 3.2 and 3.3).

To understand the low throughput rate of the students enrolled for the MPA qualification at Unisa, an understanding of why those students who have indeed obtained their qualification, yet could not do it within four years, is required. This problem of throughput rate relates directly to the structuring of the learning process and the assessment of the learning that occurred (Dillion, 2009:344) (Tables 3.2 and 3.3).

A positive throughput rate for the MPA qualification requires students to graduate within four years after the first enrolment (refer to Section 3.2.3). This implies that the

curriculum should be structured to enable the typical student to complete all the required learning components within four years. This study has shown that not one student enrolled for the pre-2012 curriculum could meet these requirements, while the requirements were met by some students enrolled for the post-2012 curriculum. A comparison of the structure of the learning processes of the two curricula is provided in Table 5.4.

Table 5.4: The structuring of the duration of the learning processes of the two MPA curricula offered at Unisa from 2012-2014

Curriculum components	Pre-2012 MPA curriculum		2012 MPA curriculum	
	Minimum years to complete (qualification structure)	Minimum years in which a student completed	Minimum years to complete (Qualification structure)	Minimum years in which a student completed
Coursework	8 modules in 2 years	8 modules in 3 years	4 modules in 1 year	4 modules in 2 years
Research proposal			1	1
Mini-dissertation	2 years	4 years	1 year	5 years
Full qualification (+ 1)	4 years	6-10 years	4 years	4-6

Table 5.4 shows that it was expected from a student enrolled for the pre-2012 curriculum to complete the MPA within four years. In order to do that, a student had to complete eight coursework modules within two years and a mini-dissertation within another two years.

The actual figures reveal that the average student completed the coursework in a minimum time of three years and the mini-dissertation in four years.

During the pre-2012 curriculum, a student was not required to complete a research proposal. Once the student completed the coursework, they could immediately start with the mini-dissertation.

The MPA curriculum introduced in 2012 also expected students to complete the qualification within four years. This curriculum consists of four coursework modules, a research proposal module and a mini-dissertation. Table 5.4 shows that it is indeed possible to complete within the minimum allocated time which is within one to two years. The actual time a student spends on completing the coursework is two years, one year for the proposal, and five years for the completion of the mini-dissertation.

It can thus be concluded that the completion time (three years plus one) is not met by the average student. It takes students longer to complete the qualification. Furthermore, it can be seen that the mini-dissertation seems to be a problem as students take more time to complete that component of the qualification.

As indicated in Section 5.2, this study included two MPA qualifications and subsequently two curricula, namely, the pre-2012 and the post-2012 MPA curriculum. Although the expected completion time for both qualifications is three years (plus one), the two curricula differ in content and structure. As mentioned, the old curriculum consists of a selection of eight modules, and a dissertation of limited scope (Unisa, 2009:2-4) whereas the new curriculum consists of four modules, a research proposal and a mini-dissertation. In order to be calculated as part of the qualification's throughput statistics, a student needs to complete the modules and dissertation within the specified period of three (plus one) years.

Table 5.5 indicates the number of modules passed per cohort for the old MPA curriculum. By looking at the modules per cohort, this will offer a better understanding of the throughput rate of this qualification.

Table 5.5: Modules and dissertation of limited scope passed by the students per cohort pre-2012

Cohort year	Entering cohort (E)	Number of modules passed by the students per cohort				Dissertation of limited scope completed						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	N	% of E	% of 8
2005	25	7	2	2	1	1	1	2	9 (36%)	5	20,0	55,5
2006	29	3	2	1	4	2	1	2	14 (48%)	4	13,9	28,6
2007	34	4	2	3	3	4	4	3	11 (32%)	1	2,9	9,1
2008	33	2	1	2	3	1	2	3	19 (57%)	5	15,2	26,3
2009	13	0	0	0	1	2	3	1	6 (46%)	2	15,4	33,3
2010	30	1	4	3	2	1	6	4	9 (30%)	2	6,7	22,2
2011	66	27	5	6	4	2	2	1	19 (28%)	3	4,5	15,7
Total	**230**	**44**	**16**	**17**	**18**	**13**	**19**	**16**	**87 (38%)**	**22**	**9,5**	**25,3**

Students who were enrolled for the pre-2012 MPA curriculum had to pass eight modules as well as a dissertation of limited scope (refer to Section 2.7). Table 5.5 shows that only 87 (38%) of the 230 students registered for the MPA during the period 2005 to 2011 passed all the required modules. Furthermore, the table shows that only 22 (25,3%) of the 87 students who passed their coursework, completed and passed their dissertations of limited scope and subsequently graduated. The average completion rate for the dissertation of limited scope was 25,3%, considerably lower than the average completion rate of 38% for the coursework part. The low throughput and graduation rate for the pre-2012 MPA can thus be attributed to both the 62% non-completion of the coursework, and the 74,7% non-completion of the dissertation of limited scope.

It can thus be deduced that there is a higher success rate in the new curriculum.

Table 5.6: Modules and mini-dissertation passed by students enrolled for the new curriculum

Cohort year	Entering cohort	Number of modules passed per cohort					Number mini-dissertations completed		
	E	**0**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**n**	**% of E**	**% of 4**
2012	40	4	1	2	3	30 (75%)	2	5,0	6,6
2013	27	3	1	3	3	17 (63%)	1	3,7	5,9
2014	14	2	0	1	1	10 (71%)	1	7,1	10,0
Total	**81**	**9**	**2**	**6**	**7**	**57 (70,37%)**	**4**	**4,9**	**7,0**

As discussed, the pre-2012 MPA curriculum was replaced in 2012 with a new curriculum consisting of four compulsory coursework modules, a research proposal module and a mini-dissertation. The coursework modules are Public Policy, Public Finance, Public Leadership, and Public Human Resource Management. Upon completion of these four modules, the student registers for a research proposal module which they should complete within one year. After passing this module, the student will be able to register for the mini-dissertation in order to complete the qualification (see Section 2.7 for a discussion of the new curriculum). Table 5.6 shows that the average completion rate of the module component of the MPA qualification for the three cohorts (2012, 2013 and 2014) was 70,37%. This is substantially higher than the average module completion rate of 38% for the old curriculum. However, the average dissertation completion rate of 4,9% for the new curriculum is lower than the 9,5% for the old curriculum. While the new curriculum has demonstrated an improved average module completion rate compared to the old curriculum, the low average dissertation completion rate may be an indicator of a curriculum constrained on the throughput rate of the qualification.

5.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter provided a description and analysis of the cohort throughput and graduation rates of the MPA students at Unisa from 2005 until 2014. The data used for this purpose was categorised separately for the cohorts enrolled for the old (pre-2012) and the new (since 2012) MPA curriculum. The data reveals that not one of the 230 students completed their qualification within the required period of four years. Consequently, the throughput rate for all the cohorts from 2005 until 2011 was zero. However, the throughput rate for the cohorts (2012-2014) enrolled for the new curriculum varied between 2,5% and 7,1% with an average of 3,7%. Furthermore, the data reveals that the minimum period within which a student could complete the MPA qualification has been reduced from six years under the old curriculum to four years under the new curriculum.

The subsequent analysis of this data aimed to understand the reason for the lack of throughput rate for the cohorts from 2005 to 2011 and the low throughput rate for the cohorts from 2012 to 2014. For this purpose, four antecedents were used, namely the nature of the qualification, the admission requirements for this qualification, the student profile enrolled for this qualification, and the curriculum of this qualification.

The analysis revealed that the curriculum had the most decisive influence on the throughput rate. The structure of the curriculum, specifically the number of coursework modules, was shown to influence the minimum period within which a student can complete the qualification. The reduction of modules from eight to four, not only resulted in students completing the qualification within the minimum period of four years, but it resulted in an increase of the average completion rate of all the modules from 38% (old curriculum) to 70,37% (new curriculum). However, the analysis of the data also revealed that the students who completed their dissertations, as a percentage of those who completed their coursework, has declined from an average of 25% to an average of 7% since the introduction of the new curriculum. It is thus evident that although the curriculum introduced in 2012 have reduced the time to complete the coursework part of the qualification, it has not succeeded in reducing the period to complete the mini-dissertation.

Chapter 6 presents a summary and conclusion of this dissertation, and makes recommendations resulting from this study.

CHAPTER 6: SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This study was motivated by evidence of low, and even the absence of throughput rates of students enrolled for the MPA qualification at Unisa. While throughput rate is generally used in the higher education sector as an indicator of students' success or failure, and while the purpose of the MPA qualification is to prepare public sector managers to meet new and complex professional challenges, a low throughput rate of MPA students has negative implications for the development of the management capacity of the public sector. The ongoing scholarly discourse on the throughput rate of students enrolled for this specific qualification (see Chapter 1) is an indication of the importance of the topic of this dissertation within the context of the scholarly literature. It is also critical for the professional practice of public administration and management.

In order to improve student throughput rate for the MPA, the nature and causes of the inadequate throughput rates needed to be understood within the context of Unisa, as the largest South African university offering the qualification. This study subsequently set out to understand the low throughput rate of students enrolled for the MPA qualification at Unisa (Section 1.3). For this purpose, the following three research questions were posed:

- What are the characteristics of the MPA qualification?
- How can the concept 'throughput rate' within the context of higher education be understood?
- How can the inadequate throughput rates of student cohorts enrolled for the MPA at Unisa be understood?

Following these research questions, this study was informed by scholarly literature on the history and development of this qualification in various parts of the world (see Chapter 2) and in South Africa, while it was guided by a conceptual framework deduced from the literature on curriculum development within higher education (see Chapter 3). The research design and methods for this study, informed by the

conceptual framework, was selected to provide a considered description and analysis of this phenomenon (see Chapter 4).

This chapter offers a summative overview of the characteristics of this qualification as informed by its context (Section 6.2), the value of the conceptual framework for understanding this phenomenon (Section 6.3), the research process (Section 6.4), and the research findings (Section 6.5). A conclusion (Section 6.6) and recommendations (Section 6.7) are also presented.

6.2 THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MPA

In response to the first research question (What are the characteristics of the MPA qualification?), a review of literature was conducted on the MPA qualification from an international and national perspective, with the focus on Unisa (Chapter 2). The review revealed that, apart from South Africa, the MPA is offered in several other countries such as the USA, Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, and China. A common characteristic of this qualification was found to be its purpose to capacitate public sector managers to contribute to the public sector and to advance the public interest at a highly developed and complex level.

Within the context of the South African HEQSF, this qualification is offered on the second highest level (NQF level 9) which provides for specialised knowledge and preparing students for autonomous decisions (see Table 2.2). This study found that this qualification, as offered by South African universities, has relatively similar names, exit level standards, minimum total credits, admission requirements, curricula, and progression pathways (see Section 2.6). As determined by the South African HEQSF, this qualification is offered as a research qualification by coursework and mini-dissertation. The expectation is that a student will complete this qualification within three years after registering for the first time (see Section 2.7). It thus makes sense that an inability among MPA students to complete this qualification within the expected period of time will have straining implications for the capacity of the public sector to meet the challenges with which they are confronted. Within the South African context with a shortage of mid-career management capacity, an attempt to understand and improve the inadequate throughput rate of MPA students, seems to be an imperative.

6.3 A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING STUDENT THROUGHPUT RATE

In response to the second research question (What does throughput rate mean in the context of higher education?), Chapter 3 reports on an analysis of the concept 'throughput rate' culminating in a conceptual framework (see Table 3.4). While this concept has been used with diverse meanings in the literature, this study used the concept 'throughput rate' in referring to the number of students in a specific cohort who has completed their qualification within a predetermined period (four years), as a percentage of those who had initially enrolled in that cohort (see Section 3.3). With this definition in mind, the concept analysis identified four defining attributes of the concept, four antecedents which may influence the concept, and at least three consequences (see Table 3.4). The conceptual framework serves as a theoretical point of departure for the research design to understand the number of students completing as well as the time it took to complete. The four antecedents (qualification; students; admission requirements; curriculum) are presented as possible theoretical lenses for the study, while the three consequences (finance; public sector needs; student expectations) serve as an indication of the importance of the concept, and eventually the research topic.

6.4 THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Chapter 4 reports on the design of this longitudinal study. An empirical research design was used (Section 4.4.1) to make a longitudinal study of the MPA student cohorts (2005-2014) as units of analysis (Section 4.3.1) and their distinct throughput rates as points of focus (Section 4.3.2), with anonymised, aggregated data sets as well as various institutional curriculum-related documents as units of observation (Section 4.3.3). The research process was designed to ensure a trustworthy description of the throughput rates of the selected cohorts. By planning for obtaining the most valid and reliable documentary information (such as policies, Unisa's MPA study material and regulatory documents from the Higher Education Council) regarding the possible antecedents of throughput rate, the design aimed to ensure trustworthy interpretation of the throughput rates of the different cohorts.

6.5 THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Chapter 5 provides a numerical description of the throughput rates of the first-time enrolment cohorts of MPA students at Unisa from 2005 until 2014, as well as an interpretation of these rates. This descriptive data shows:

- a total of 311 students entered this qualification for the first time during the period 2005 and 2014;
- only three of these cohorts registered a positive throughput rate (varying from 2,5% to 7,1%);
- the throughput rate for the entire group of students is thus 1%; and
- only 26 of the 311 students (8,4%) had graduated by 2017. The cohort graduation rate varies from 20% (2005) to 2,9% (2007).

By applying the four antecedents of the concept 'throughput rate' as lenses to make sense of the above numerical findings (see Section 5.3), the study finds the following:

- **Qualification**: The cohort throughput rates of the MPA do not meet the 2015 baseline throughput rate targets of 23% set by Unisa for Master's qualifications (see Section 5.2).
- **Admission requirements**: The study indicates a possible relation between the academic as well as experience dimension of the admission requirements for the qualification and the throughput rate (see Section 5.2). However, this needs further research.
- **Student profile**: This study did not explore the possible influence of this antecedent on throughput rate.
- **Curriculum**: Dillon's (2009:344) questions relating to curriculum provide an appropriate set of lenses for understanding the cohort throughput rate of this qualification. This study found that the change in the structure (basic aspects) of the curriculum (especially the reduction of the number of modules from eight to four) led to an improvement in the completion rate of the coursework part of the curriculum.

(a) The average percentage of students who have completed all their coursework modules increased from 38% for the pre-2012 curriculum, to 70,37% for the 2012-curriculum.

(b) Those students who have completed their mini-dissertations as a percentage of those who have completed their coursework modules, decreased from an average of 25,3% for the pre-2012 curriculum to 7% for the 2012-curriculum. While the curriculum has been restructured to make completion within three years possible, it seems that the 2012-curriculum has not changed the practice of the curriculum (the implementation) to ensure the completion of the research part (research proposal and mini-dissertation) within two years.

6.6 CONCLUSION: A POSSIBLE UNDERSTANDING OF THE THROUGHPUT RATE OF MPA STUDENTS

The research findings presented in Section 6.5 indicates that the cohort throughput rate for the MPA offered at Unisa is nearly non-existent and thus miss the institutional throughput rate target of 23% for Master's qualifications. This situation has dismal implications for the institutional finances, the capacity needs of the public sector, and justified student expectations (see Table 3.4). This study has found that the problem with the qualification stretches wider than the throughput rate. The low cohort graduation rate is an indication of an inability among students to complete their qualification, irrespective of the time. Considering the high completion rate of the coursework component of the qualification by students who have been enrolled under both curricula, the results indicate an inability among students to complete the research part of the qualification. While the low throughput rate of the MPA qualification offered by Unisa can evidently be attributed to the nature of the curriculum (Dillon, 2009:344), a more substantive cause for the state of affairs may be attributed to the current curriculum practice and elements (Dillon, 2009:344). The researcher thus recommends an improvement in the nature and practice of the MPA curriculum through a fundamental integration of all the curriculum elements (e.g. students, lecturers, subject matter and professional practice) in order to increase the throughput rate of the MPA qualification.

6.7 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE THROUGHPUT RATE

Considering the conclusions in Section 6.6, the following is recommended:

6.7.1 Reviewing the MPA curriculum

In order to improve the throughput rate of this qualification, it is recommended that the current MPA curriculum should be fundamentally reviewed and redesigned to ensure that it adequately, and within the allocated timeframe, prepares middle and senior public sector managers to meet the emerging challenges of the 21st century.

6.7.2 Linkage between Department of Public Administration and Management at Unisa and various public sector institutions

In order to improve the MPA qualification at Unisa, there needs to be a linkage in terms of what is required from the public sector. If various public sector institutions can work together with Unisa, better quality students will be produced.

6.7.3 Support

Students should be actively supported to pass their research proposal modules and to complete their mini-dissertations within the shortest possible time. These support initiatives may include online engagement as well as discussion classes where they can familiarise themselves with the aspect of learning and researching. This is necessary, since the findings reveal that the majority of students do not complete the qualification due to the research component of the qualification.

6.8 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

It is recommended that further research been done on the following:

- the optimal integration of the mini-dissertation with the coursework modules in order to serve as a research capstone for the qualification; and

- the creation of a vibrant community of practice/interest of MPA students to enhance their throughput and success.

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Annexure A

UNISA university of south africa

COLLEGE OF ECONOMIC AND MANAGEMENT SCIENCES

RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

16 February 2016

Ref #: 2016_CRERC_005(SD)

Name of applicant : Ms D Ngele

Staff/Student No #: 53793935

Dear Ms Ngele

Decision: Ethics Approval

Name: Ms D Ngele, ngeledtl@unisa.ac.za, 012 429 4907

Proposal: Throughput of Masters of Public Administration at the university of South Africa

Qualification: MAdmin (Public Administration)

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the College of Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee for the above mentioned research. Final approval is granted for the duration of the project.

For full approval: *The revised application was reviewed in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics by the CRERC on* ***15th February 2016****.*

The proposed research may now commence with the proviso that:

1) *The researcher/s will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.*
2) *Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study, as well as changes in the methodology,*

Open Rubric

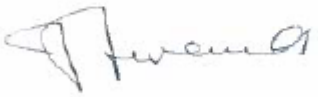
University of South Africa
Preller Street, Muckleneuk Ridge, City of Tshwane
PO Box 392 UNISA 0003 South Africa
Telephone: +27 12 429 3111 Facsimile: +27 12 429 4150
www.unisa.ac.za

should be communicated in writing to the CRERC.

3) *An amended application could be requested if there are substantial changes from the existing proposal, especially if those changes affect any of the study-related risks for the research participants.*
4) *The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study.*

Note:
The reference number **2016_CRERC_005(SD)** should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication [e.g. Webmail, E-mail messages, letters] with the intended research participants, as well as with the CRERC.

Kind regards,



Prof JS Wessels
Chairperson of the CRERC, CEMS, UNISA
012 429-6099 or wessejs@unisa.ac.za

Prof R.M.T. Mogale
Executive Dean: CEMS
mogalmt@unisa.ac.za

ANNEXURE B

UNISA university of south africa

RESEARCH PERMISSION SUB-COMMITTEE (RPSC) OF THE SENATE RESEARCH, INNOVATION, POSTGRADUATE DEGREES AND COMMERCIALISATION COMMITTEE (SRIPCC)

24 January 2017

Decision: Research Permission Approval from 24 January 2017 until 30 November 2017.

Ref #: 2017_RPSC_002
Ms. Diakanyo Ngele
Student #: 53783635
Staff #: N/A

Principal Investigator:
Ms. Diakanyo Ngele
Department of Public Administration and Management
School of Public and Operations Management
College of Economic and Management Sciences
UNISA
ngeledtl@unisa.ac.za, (012) 429-4907/ 082 449 4892

Supervisor : Prof Jacobus Wessels
wessejs@unisa.ac.za, (012) 429-6099/ 083 955 8310

A study titled: Throughput of Master of Public Administration at UNISA "."

Your application regarding permission to conduct research involving UNISA data in respect of the above study has been received and was considered by the Research Permission Subcommittee (RPSC) of the UNISA Senate, Research, Innovation, Postgraduate Degrees and Commercialisation Committee (SRIPCC) on 19 January 2017.

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

1. Gain access to the statistics on the throughput rates of the MPA qualification from 2005-

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2015.

2. For the purpose of comparison, the applicant may also gain access to the throughput rate statistics of the students enrolled for Masters by mini-dissertation in the different Colleges as outlined in the application.
3. Gain access to the various Unisa Policy documents as outlined in the application.

You are requested to submit a report of the study to the Research Permission Subcommittee (RPSC@unisa.ac.za) within 3 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 **2017_RPSC_002** 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,

pp. Dr Retha Visagie – Manager: Research Integrity
Email: visagrg@unisa.ac.za, Tel: (012) 429-2478

Prof L Labuschagne – Chairperson: RPSC
Email: llabus@unisa.ac.za, Tel: (012) 429-6368

ANNEXURE C

Between the lines editing

Leatitia Romero
Professional Copy-Editor, Translator and Proofreader
(BA HONS)

Cell: 083 236 4536
leatitiaromero@gmail.com
www.betweenthelinesediting.co.za

27 January 2019

To whom it may concern:

I hereby confirm that I have edited the thesis of DIAKANYO THAKANE LYNNETTE NGELE, entitled: "THROUGHPUT RATE OF THE MASTER OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA FROM 2005-2014". Any amendments introduced by the author or supervisor hereafter, is not covered by this confirmation. The author ultimately decided whether to accept or decline any recommendations made by the editor, and it remains the author's responsibility at all times to confirm the accuracy and originality of the completed work.

Leatitia Romero
(Electronically sent – no signature)

Affiliations

PEG: Professional Editors Group
English Academy of South Africa
SATI: South African Translators' Institute
SfEP: Society for Editors and Proofreaders