

Students' perceptions of the quality of learner support in ODL

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Abstract

After the merger between the University of South Africa, Technikon South Africa and the distance education campus of Vista University, the College of Economic and Management Sciences at the University of South Africa initiated a research project to determine whether the college complies with the quality criteria set for higher education in general, and for distance learning in particular. The purpose of the research was to determine the status quo in the CEMS with regard to the minimum targets formulated by NADEOSA on learner support, and to identify shortcomings. The project had three focus areas, namely the evaluation of study material; opinion surveys amongst students, tutors and academic staff; and the gathering of statistics and other necessary data required in terms of the minimum targets. For the opinion survey amongst students, which is the focus of this article, questionnaires were used to determine students' perceptions regarding their satisfaction with and the importance of certain features of learner support in open and distance learning. The results indicate a difference between age groups, geographical regions, gender, and even between academic departments.

INTRODUCTION

This research was undertaken after concerns were expressed in 2004 by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) about the quality of open distance learning (ODL) in South Africa. As a result, the College of Economic and Management Sciences (CEMS) of the University of South Africa (Unisa) initiated an opinion survey amongst a representative sample of undergraduate students, to determine the level of compliance of the college with the minimum standards set by the National Association of Distance Education Organisations of South Africa (NADEOSA). The aim of the research was to determine the students' perceptions of the quality of learner support in ODL within the CEMS at Unisa.

BACKGROUND

The *White paper on education and training* of 1995 (Department of Education 1995), a *Green paper on higher education transformation* (Department of Education 1996) and the *Draft white paper 3* in 1997 (Department of Education 1997a) expressed a clear requirement for an improvement in the quality of higher education provision in South Africa, including that of ODL.

The subsequent White Paper, entitled *A programme for the transformation of higher education* (Department of Education 1997b) required the establishment of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) as a permanent committee of the CHE, and promulgated and implemented the Framework for Institutional Audits (Council on Higher Education 2003) and the Criteria for Programme Accreditation (Council on Higher Education 2004a).

On 1 January 2004, the merger of the University of South Africa (Unisa), Technikon Southern Africa (TSA) and the distance education campus of Vista University (Vudec) resulted in the establishment of the new Unisa, to become the only dedicated public ODL provider in South Africa.

On 28 January 2004, the Minister of Education appointed a task team to investigate the role of distance education (at Unisa, referred to as ODL¹) in South Africa: 'I asked the Council on Higher Education (CHE) to investigate and advise me on the role of distance education in higher education, ...' (Keynote address by the Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, MP, Ormonde, Johannesburg, 28 January 2004).

In the *Policy advice report* by the task team, several concerns regarding the quality and efficiency of distance education in South Africa were raised, and certain strategies for assuring the quality of distance education provision were recommended (Council on Higher Education 2004b, 61). The strategies for quality assurance included a recommendation that a comprehensive set of quality criteria for distance education be adopted.

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

The newly merged Unisa was confronted by the reality of the planned HEQC institutional audit (Council on Higher Education 2003) and the quality concerns raised in the *Policy advice report* (Council on Higher Education 2004b). The Quality Assurance Committee of CEMS at Unisa consequently initiated a self-evaluation process by all academic departments in the college, utilising a template which combined both the NADEOSA and the HEQC institutional audit criteria (University of South Africa 2005).

The *Policy advice report* (Council on Higher Education 2004b) organised the minimum standards into seven categories, and further subdivided each category into a list of standards or criteria. Listed in Table 1 are the three categories applicable to learner support and the minimum standards required per category.

Table 1: Criteria for seven categories of minimum standards

Minimum Standard Categories	Criteria
1. Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15% of notional learning hours of a course² allocated to student preparation of formative assessment task(s) • Individualised feedback on the task reaches the student before he prepares for summative assessment • Formative assessment contributes at least 25 per cent to the final mark
2. Course delivery and learner support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students receive printed course materials before or during the first week of the course • At least 10 per cent of the notional learning hours devoted to contact sessions³ • The tutor/student ratio for tutorial groups no larger than 1:35 • Arrangements exist to enable learners to contact the provider telephonically when convenient to the learner
3. Programme monitoring and evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are records of attendance at contact sessions/tutorials/practicals and the submission of formative assessment • There is analysed monitoring information about tutor performance, learner attendance, learner performance and the despatch of materials • There are analysed reports of learner and stakeholder feedback on courses • Learner feedback is considered during management/curriculum meetings and appropriate action is taken to adjust processes • For shorter programmes, the target throughput rate is between 55 and 70 per cent • For longer programmes, the target throughput rate is between 15 and 30 per cent

Source: Welch 2003

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND AIM

After studying the minimum standards criteria, the college was unable to establish with any degree of certainty whether or not it complied. Consequently, a comprehensive research project was initiated to determine the level of compliance with the minimum standards set for quality ODL. The project as a whole addressed the issue of compliance from the following different perspectives:

- Compliance with the minimum targets from students', lecturers' and tutors' points of view;
- Compliance of courseware with the minimum standards set by the HEQC for quality ODL material.

The aim of the part of the research discussed in this article, was to determine students' perceptions of the quality of learner support in ODL within the CEMS at Unisa. The study focused on those students enrolled at the college during 2006.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The preferred research methodology was a quantitative approach, because of the potential data available thanks to the large student population at Unisa. Further reasons for preferring such an approach to a qualitative method, was to ensure that the study included responses across all disciplines in the college, while making provision for the non-availability of post-merger data on this topic.

The research population included all undergraduate students registered for courses in 2006 in CEMS – a total of 40 896.

An opinion survey was conducted to determine students' perceptions of the quality of learner support at Unisa. Students with e-mail facilities were requested to complete a web-based questionnaire electronically. Students without e-mail facilities received their questionnaires by regular mail.

In view of the large number of students and the large variety of subjects offered at undergraduate level, a sample of courses at first-, second- and third-year level was drawn from every department of the college. All students registered for courses with fewer than 500 candidates were included in the study, while systematic random samples of 500 were drawn for courses with more than 500 students. The final sample included 11 745 students (28.72 per cent of the total undergraduate enrolments at CEMS during 2006), which was considered to be representative of the students enrolled for the undergraduate modules in the college.

The questionnaire, which was pre-structured, required respondents to indicate the importance they attach to the different aspects listed in the minimum criteria

for ODL, and their level of satisfaction with the current situation at Unisa. The questionnaire was pilot tested before finalisation, to ensure that no ambiguity would exist.

Unisa's Bureau of Market Research (BMR) was responsible for administering and managing the fieldwork process. This entailed the random selection of students, telephonic contact with selected sample elements, fax or e-mail reminders, the receipt and editing of questionnaires received via fax, verifying and editing of electronic questionnaires, and the construction of electronic coding manuals. The fieldwork took place over a period of four months.

A total of 2 406 usable questionnaires was received, giving a response rate of 20.5 per cent. In total, 62.8 per cent web-based questionnaires were completed, 27.8 per cent of the questionnaires were submitted by mail, 5.7 per cent were received by fax and 3.7 per cent by e-mail. The response rate was considered to be a valid indicator of CEMS students in general.

Data analysis

Statistical analysis was performed on the data obtained from the questionnaires, using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques.

Sample data from the questionnaires were summarised in a satisfaction/importance classification grid, which was then used to perform log-linear analysis and to generalise the findings of the sample to the population of students in the study. The log-linear statistical model was used in this research project to estimate, firstly, the expected number of respondents belonging to a specific section of the classification grid and, secondly, to estimate the expected total number of respondents occurring in a row or column of the classification grid. In doing so, the researchers were able to identify the learner support areas which reflect low satisfaction among students, that is, those areas which need to be improved.

Descriptive statistics in the form of medians and standard deviations were used to summarise students' perceptions in terms of the importance and satisfaction of various learner support areas covered in the questionnaire. Z-tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were used to compare the mean scores of respondents according to gender, exam results, age, home province and academic department.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Biographical information

More than half of the respondents were female (52.7%), and 57.8 per cent of the respondents indicated that English was their home language. Afrikaans was the home language of 25.5 per cent and Zulu the home language of 10.8 per cent.

The respondents also had to indicate their examination results in 2005 for the course for which they completed the questionnaire. More than half of the respondents (54.5%) had passed; 30.5 per cent had failed, while 14.9 per cent did not write the examination.

More than two-thirds (69.1%) of the respondents had failed a course prior to 2005. When these respondents were asked to indicate how many courses they had failed in the last two years, the results indicated that 1.2 per cent of them had failed 11 or more courses. The average number of courses failed by these students during the past two years was 3.3.

In terms of the age of the respondents, the results showed that 23.2 per cent were between 25 and 29 years old, 22.9 per cent between 20 and 24, and 22 per cent between 30 and 34. In total, 31.9 per cent were older than 34 years of age, thus forming a substantial proportion of the student complement of the college.

Statistical analysis

Satisfaction/importance classification grid with action implementations

The respondents had to rate various learner support areas and aspects thereof, by indicating the level of importance they attach to each area, as well as their current level of satisfaction with each area. This enabled the researchers to develop a satisfaction/importance classification grid and to categorise the responses into different sections, according to their scores on both the importance they attach to the research area and their current level of satisfaction with each area. The grid consists of nine sections, numbered A to I; the sections relate to different combinations of satisfaction/importance scores as rated by the respondents, thus clearly identifying satisfactory learner support areas and areas that require improvement.

A satisfaction/importance grid was constructed for each learner support area for which satisfaction and importance ratings were required. The research design enabled satisfaction/importance scores to be measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with a score of 1 or 2 classified as low, 3 as average, and 4 or 5 as high. There is also a recommended action for each section of the satisfaction/importance grid,

which serves as a guideline for how to deal with a learner support area with a high percentage of responses in that section.

The main focus is on those learner support areas which reflect the least satisfaction among respondents, that is, those areas with the largest percentage of responses classified in the grid sections A, B and C.

Table 2 depicts the satisfaction/importance classification grid, together with its action implementations.

Table 2: Satisfaction/importance classification grid with action implementations

Satisfaction	Importance		
	Low	Average	High
Low	A Ensure no further slippage	B Target area for improvement	C Immediate action; priority area
Average	D Restrict attention	E Ensure no slippage	F Target for future priority
High	G Maintain standard; no action required	H Maintain standard	I Maintain standard, improve where possible

Using the classification grid, a summary table was constructed for each learner support area to show the percentage of responses occurring in the critical grid section C, as well as the total percentage of responses occurring in the low satisfaction grid sections A, B and C.

It is clear from Table 3 that support from Unisa received low satisfaction ratings from more than 30 per cent of respondents. The provision of learning materials and support facilities, however, performed well, receiving low satisfaction ratings from less than 14 per cent of respondents.

Log-linear analysis

The log-linear model applicable to the satisfaction/importance grid is $\ln(f_{ij}) = \mu + \lambda_i^S + \lambda_j^I + \lambda_j^S$ for the saturated model, or $\ln(f_{ij}) = \mu + \lambda_i^S + \lambda_j^I$ for the independence model, where $i=1,2,3$ and $j=1,2,3$. This is the model in Goodman's notation (Knoke and Burke 1980, 18). Here 'S' denotes the satisfaction score (low, average or high) and 'I' the importance score (low, average or high).

The likelihood ratio test is used to distinguish between the saturated model and the independence model on the 1 per cent level of significance, where a p-value of 0.01 or less indicates the use of the saturated model. Each of the model's parameters is an indication of the expected number of responses occurring in a section of the grid, as well as the expected total number of responses occurring in a row or column of the grid. Log-linear analysis was performed on each learner support area, focusing on the expected number of responses categorised in the sections of low satisfaction.

It was found that administrative support was expected to receive the greatest number of low satisfaction ratings from respondents, while the provision of learning materials was expected to receive the greatest number of high satisfaction ratings. The relative number of low/high satisfaction/importance ratings from respondents was expected to be above average for the support from Unisa.

After performing log-linear analysis on the learner support areas, the issues were analysed to further determine which aspects within each learner support area of the survey were expected to be problematic. Table 3 reflects those issues with which students were expected to be the least satisfied (in other words, predicted to be dissatisfied).

Table 3: Learner support issues reflecting the lowest satisfaction among students

Learner support area	Percentage of students in section C	Specific issue	Total percentage of students in sections (A+B+C)
Support from Unisa	34.8	Availability of counselling and advice during period of study	36.3
Provision of learning materials	8.1	Availability of prescribed books at the start of the year/ semester	10.2
Discussion/tutorial classes	21.0	Teaching on assignments by tutors	25.6
Support facilities	11.1	Support by peer group	13.4
Administrative support	23.0	Helpfulness of admin staff after registration	26.6

Descriptive statistics

A sample overview of the students' perceptions of the different aspects of learner support is given by means of descriptive statistics, in particular the medians of the importance and satisfaction scores. The median, rather than the mean, was used as a descriptive measure, since it is unaffected by possible outliers in the data.

The results indicated median importance scores of 4 and above, which shows that the respondents regarded all learner support areas across all departments as very important. The standard deviation of the median importance scores ranged between 0.57 and 1.08, indicating not too great a fluctuation.

An open-ended question at the bottom of the questionnaire afforded students the opportunity to indicate any additional areas of support they considered to be important. In total 1 161 responses were received, of which only 98 reflected positive experiences. All the other comments reflected personal frustrations and can be categorised under the groups of learner support selected for the study.

Table 4: Median satisfaction scores for learner support areas per department

Department	Learner support area				
	Support from Unisa	Provision of learning materials	Discussion/tutorial classes	Support facilities	Administrative support
Management and Entrepreneurship	3	4	3	3.5	3
Marketing and Retail	3	3	3	3.5	3
Finance, Risk, Real Estate and Banking	3	3	3	3.5	3
Human Resource Management	3	3	3	3.5	3
Industrial and Organisational Psychology	3	3	3	4	3
Public Administration and Management	3	4	3	3.5	4
Financial Accounting	3	3	3	3	3

Management Accounting	3	4	3	3.5	3
Taxation	3	3	3	3.5	3
Auditing	3	4	3	3.5	3
Economics	3	4	3	3.5	3
Transport Economics, Logistics and Tourism	3	4	4	3.5	4
Decision Sciences	3	4	3	3.5	3
Total	3	3.5	3	3.5	3

The median satisfaction scores of 3, 3.5 and 4, shown in Table 4, indicate that most of the respondents were either highly satisfied or modestly satisfied with the learner support areas. The standard deviation of the median satisfaction scores was quite high, ranging between 0.86 and 1.45, which is indicative of a relatively large fluctuation. This means that some students rated learner support very low, while others rated learner support very high on the satisfaction scale, which is not unexpected due to the heterogeneous nature of Unisa’s student population.

Z-tests

Section B of the questionnaire contains the respondents’ biographical information, such as gender (B1), and whether or not the respondent had failed a module prior to 2005 (B6). Z-tests were used to compare the mean scores of male and female students, and also of those students who had previously failed a module and those who had not. Table 5 gives the results for both B1 (gender) and B6 (failing of a module at Unisa prior to 2005).

Table 5: Z-tests for B1 (gender) and B6 (failing of a module at Unisa prior to 2005)

Learner support area	B1/B6	Mean importance scores		Mean satisfaction scores	
		Result	z	Result	z
Support from Unisa	B1	Male < Female	-3.787	Male > Female	2.067
	B6	No < Yes	-1.811	Yes = No	1.072

Provision of learning materials	B1	Male < Female	-2.977	Male = Female	1.420
	B6	No > Yes	2.131	Yes = No	0.527
Discussion/tutorial classes	B1	Male < Female	-2.673	Male > Female	1.973
	B6	No < Yes	-2.989	No > Yes	1.652
Support facilities	B1	Male < Female	-2.394	Male < Female	-2.832
	B6	Yes = No	-0.979	No > Yes	2.249
Administrative support	B1	Male < Female	-2.662	Male > Female	4.019
	B6	Yes = No	-0.164	Yes = No	1.520

Male students regarded all learner support areas as less important than female students did, and were more satisfied than female students with the support received from Unisa, the discussion/tutorial classes as well as the administrative support. Female students were more satisfied with the support facilities.

Those students who had failed a module at Unisa prior to 2005, regarded the provisioning of learning materials as less important than those who had not failed any modules. The same students were less satisfied with the discussion/tutorial classes and support facilities. Despite this, however, the failure of a module at Unisa prior to 2005 did not appear to have a significant influence on the students' perceptions of learner support at Unisa.

It was also tested whether the importance scores of the learner support areas were significantly higher than the satisfaction scores. Both mean and median scores were used.

Table 6: Z-tests for importance scores and satisfaction scores

Learner support area	Mean scores		Median scores	
	Result	z	Result	Z
Support from Unisa	Importance > Satisfaction	46.295	Importance > Satisfaction	44.142
Provision of learning materials	Importance > Satisfaction	57.430	Importance > Satisfaction	46.835
Discussion/tutorial classes	Importance > Satisfaction	30.935	Importance > Satisfaction	28.047

Support facilities	Importance > Satisfaction	30.064	Importance > Satisfaction	27.401
Administrative support	Importance > Satisfaction	38.546	Importance > Satisfaction	36.616

The results in Table 6 show that, for all learner support areas, the importance scores were significantly higher than the satisfaction scores. The large values of the Z-statistic are an indication that the survey produced importance scores that were much higher than the satisfaction scores.

Since most of the respondents (50.5%) lived in Gauteng and Unisa’s main campus is situated in Pretoria, it was of interest to compare the responses of Gauteng students to those of students living in other provinces. A t-test was used for the small sample of Northern Cape students.

Table 7: Z-tests comparing Gauteng with other provinces – differences obtained

Learner support area	Mean importance scores		Mean satisfaction scores	
	Province	p-value	Province	p-value
Support from Unisa	Western Cape <	0.031	KwaZulu-Natal <	0.003
			Eastern Cape <	0.002
Provision of learning materials	Limpopo <	0.021	KwaZulu-Natal <	0.000
	Eastern Cape <	0.042	Western Cape <	0.006
			Eastern Cape <	0.013
Discussion/tutorial classes	Mpumalanga >	0.023	KwaZulu-Natal <	0.003
			Eastern Cape <	0.000
Support facilities			Limpopo <	0.001
			KwaZulu-Natal <	0.000
			Eastern Cape <	0.000
			Free State <	0.030
			North West <	0.047
			Western Cape <	0.050
			*Northern Cape <	0.030

Administrative support	Western Cape <	0.024	Mpumalanga >	0.019
			Limpopo >	0.004
			KwaZulu-Natal <	0.009
			Western Cape <	0.000
			Eastern Cape <	0.009
* T-test > Indicates a larger mean than Gauteng < Indicates a smaller mean than Gauteng				

Table 7 shows the significant differences between the mean importance and satisfaction scores given by respondents living in Gauteng and those of the other provinces, with regard to each learner support area. Provinces not included in Table 7 did not differ significantly from Gauteng in terms of the mean importance and satisfaction scores of respondents.

In terms of the mean satisfaction scores, KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape had lower ratings than Gauteng in respect of all five learner support areas. Students from the Western Cape were less satisfied with the provision of learning materials, support facilities and administrative support than students from the other provinces. In Limpopo, students gave lower ratings for support facilities, but higher ratings for administrative support. Administrative support was also rated higher by students from Mpumalanga than by those in Gauteng.

The mean importance scores of the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga and Limpopo students differed from those of Gauteng students: those living in the Western Cape regarded support from Unisa and administrative support as less important, Limpopo and the Eastern Cape showed lower ratings with regard to the provisioning of learning materials, while Mpumalanga students rated discussion/tutorial classes higher.

Analysis of variance

ANOVA tests were used to compare the mean scores of respondents with different exam results, ages, provinces and academic departments. If significant differences were found, pairwise comparison procedures were applied to specify which of the categories differed significantly. For normally distributed data, Scheffé's pairwise comparisons were used in the case of equal group variances, and the Games-Howell procedure in the case of unequal group variances. Kruskal-Wallis tests were used when data within one or more categories was non-normally distributed, together with Dunn's pairwise comparisons procedure

(Hollander and Wolfe 1973, 124), to specify the differences. This was done for all learner support areas.

The results for B5 (exam results for this course/module), B10 (current age) and B11 (province in which you live), are shown in Table 8.

Table 8: ANOVA results for B5 (exam results for this course/module), B10 (current age) and B11 (province in which you live)

Learner support area		Mean importance scores		Mean satisfaction scores	
		Result	p-value	Result	p-value
Support from Unisa	B5	Differ	0.000	Differ	0.000
	B10	Don't differ	0.575	Don't differ	0.737
	B11	Don't differ	0.802	Differ	0.004
Provision of learning materials	B5	Don't differ	0.202	Differ	0.007
	B10	Don't differ	0.087	Don't differ	0.192
	B11	Don't differ	0.167	Differ	0.002
Discussion/tutorial classes	B5	Differ	0.000	Differ	0.002
	B10	Don't differ	0.441	Don't differ	0.926
	B11	Don't differ	0.798	Differ	0.016
Support facilities	B5	Differ	0.001	Differ	0.000
	B10	Don't differ	0.094	Don't differ	0.305
	B11	Don't differ	0.507	Differ	0.00001
Administrative support	B5	Differ	0.013	Differ	0.026
	B10	Differ	0.003	Differ	0.013
	B11	Don't differ	0.971	Differ	0.00001

In terms of B5 (exam results for this course/module), the provisioning of learning materials was the only learner support area for which no significant differences were found for the mean importance scores. Students who had passed their course showed lower importance ratings with regard to the support from Unisa, the discussion/tutorial classes and support facilities than students who had failed.

Students who had passed their course also regarded discussion/tutorial classes as less important than students who did not write the exam.

For the mean satisfaction scores (for B5), significant differences were found for all the learner support areas. Students who had passed their course gave higher satisfaction ratings with regard to support from Unisa, the provision of learning materials, the discussion/tutorial classes and support facilities than those who failed. Students who passed were more satisfied with the administrative support than students who did not write the exam. Also, students who failed their course were less satisfied with the support from Unisa, the provisioning of learning materials and support facilities than those who did not write the exam. The results therefore clearly indicate that the students' exam results had a significant influence on their perceptions of learner support. This is not surprising, but may indicate a need to create a greater awareness of support services during the course of teaching.

In terms of B10 (current age), administrative support was the only learner support area for which significant differences were found between the ages in terms of importance and satisfaction. Students between the ages of 20 and 29 regarded administrative support as more important than did students aged between 40 and 44.

In addition, students aged between 20 and 24 were more satisfied with the administrative support received from Unisa, than those students aged between 45 and 49. Younger students between the ages of 20 and 29 perceived the quality of administrative support differently from students aged between 40 and 49. There were no significant differences, however, in terms of how students from different age groups perceived the importance of and their satisfaction with the other learner support areas.

In terms of B11 (province in which you live), no significant differences were found between the provinces in terms of the mean importance scores, but all learner support areas showed differences in terms of the mean satisfaction scores.

Students living in Gauteng were more satisfied with the provision of learning materials and support facilities than students from KwaZulu-Natal. Students from Gauteng were also more satisfied with the support from Unisa, the discussion/tutorial classes and the support facilities than students living in the Eastern Cape.

With regard to administrative support, students from Gauteng, Mpumalanga and Limpopo all showed a higher level of satisfaction than students from the Western Cape. Students from both Mpumalanga and Limpopo were more satisfied than those from the Eastern Cape, while students from Limpopo showed greater satisfaction than students from KwaZulu-Natal.

These results may be indicative of the quality of service experienced in the various regions, but may also show that students closer to physical learner support centres (such as in Gauteng) experience higher levels of satisfaction.

Similar results were found with regard to the relevant department of study. The ANOVA results from Table 9 indicate that only the provision of learning materials showed any differences with regard to the mean importance scores. Each learner support area, however, showed differences with regard to the mean satisfaction scores.

Table 9: ANOVA results per department of study

Learner support area	Mean importance scores		Mean satisfaction scores	
	Result	p-value	Result	p-value
Support from Unisa	Don't differ	0.188	Differ	0.000002
Provision of learning materials	Differ	0.015	Differ	0.00001
Discussion/tutorial classes	Don't differ	0.261	Differ	0.020
Support facilities	Don't differ	0.061	Don't Differ	0.534
Administrative support	Don't differ	0.380	Differ	0.001

The mean importance scores of students from the Department of Industrial and Organisational Psychology, as regards the provision of learning materials, were significantly higher than those for students from the Department of Public Administration and Management.

Both the Departments of Financial Accounting and Taxation showed lower satisfaction ratings than the Department of Economics with regard to support from Unisa, while students in the Department of Taxation were less satisfied with the provision of learning materials than students in the Department of Economics. Also, responses from the Department of Public Administration and Management indicated less satisfaction with administrative support than responses from both the Departments of Financial Accounting and Management Accounting. Human Resource Management students showed lower satisfaction ratings with regard to administrative support than students from Public Administration and Management.

Summary of the results

The following findings were made in the study concerning student perceptions regarding satisfaction with student support:

- Support from Unisa received low satisfaction ratings from more than 30 per cent of respondents, while the provision of learning materials and support facilities received low satisfaction ratings from less than 14 per cent of respondents;
- Through log-linear analysis it was found that administrative support was expected to receive the greatest number of low satisfaction ratings from respondents, while the provision of learning materials was expected to receive the greatest number of high satisfaction ratings;
- The learner support issues in each learner support area expected to reflect the lowest satisfaction ratings, were
 - Support from Unisa : availability of counselling and advice;
 - Provision of learning materials: availability of prescribed books at the start of the year/semester;
 - Discussion/tutorial classes: teaching on assignments by tutors;
 - Support facilities: support by peer group;
 - Administrative support: helpfulness of administrative staff after registration.

The actual results of the study indeed indicated low levels of satisfaction in these areas, but also showed clearly that the satisfaction scores were affected by gender, age, previous failure, home province, as well as the department where the student studied (as discussed below);

- The median satisfaction scores show that most respondents were either highly satisfied or moderately satisfied with the learner support areas, although the standard deviation of the median satisfaction scores was quite high, which is indicative of a relatively large fluctuation. This means that some students rated learner support very low, while others rated it very high on the satisfaction scale;
- Male students regarded all learner support areas as less important than female students did, and were also more satisfied with the support from Unisa, the discussion/tutorial classes and the administrative support. Female students were more satisfied with the support facilities;

- Students who had failed a module at Unisa prior to 2005, regarded the provisioning of learning materials as less important than those who had not failed any modules, and were less satisfied with the discussion/tutorial classes and support facilities than those students who had passed all their previous modules;
- For all learner support areas, the large values of the Z-statistic indicate that the survey produced importance scores that were much higher than the satisfaction scores;
- There are significant differences between Gauteng and the other provinces with regard to the mean importance and satisfaction scores given by respondents for each learner support area;
- Relative to students in Gauteng, students in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape exhibited lower satisfaction ratings in respect of all five learner support areas; Western Cape students were less satisfied with the provision of learning materials, support facilities and administrative support; students from Limpopo rated support facilities lower, but administrative support higher on the satisfaction scale; while students living in Mpumalanga rated administrative support higher;
- Students living in the Western Cape regarded support from Unisa and administrative support as less important. Limpopo and the Eastern Cape showed lower importance ratings with regard to the provision of learning materials; while Mpumalanga students rated discussion/tutorial classes higher on the importance scale, than Gauteng students did;
- Apart from the provision of learning materials, the students' exam results had a significant influence on their perceptions of the importance of and their satisfaction with learner support. Students who had passed their course showed lower importance ratings with regard to support from Unisa, the discussion/tutorial classes and support facilities than students who had failed;
- Students between the ages of 20 and 29 regarded administrative support as more important than students aged between 40 and 44. They were also more satisfied with the administrative support received from Unisa, than those aged between 45 and 49;
- The students' home province did not play a significant role in how they perceived the importance of learner support. Students living in Gauteng were more satisfied with the provision of learning materials and support facilities than students from KwaZulu-Natal and were also more satisfied with the

support from Unisa, the discussion/tutorial classes and the support facilities than students living in the Eastern Cape;

- The department of study also had a significant influence on the importance- and satisfaction ratings. Students in the Departments of Financial Accounting and Taxation showed lower satisfaction ratings with regard to support from Unisa, while students in the Department of Taxation were less satisfied with the provision of learning materials, than students in the Department of Economics. Responses from the Department of Public Administration and Management indicated less satisfaction with administrative support than responses from the Departments of Financial Accounting and Management Accounting. Human Resource Management students showed even lower satisfaction ratings with regard to administrative support than the students from Public Administration and Management.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study on student perceptions of the quality of learner support was partly motivated by research done by NADEOSA (Welch 2003) on the quality of teaching and learning at distance education institutions (now called ODL institutions) and the subsequent benchmarking in the form of minimum requirements for distance education. This article has shown that the problem areas identified in said research by NADEOSA, still persist at Unisa.

The research results indicate which learner support areas showed low satisfaction among students, which means that the quality of these learner support areas needs to be improved. The results indicate that administrative support is the learner support area with the lowest quality. Support from Unisa was found to be a critical learner support area, of high importance but rating low in terms of satisfaction.

Students indicated that they require various forms of support, such as readily available counselling, advice and prescribed books; teaching on assignments; peer-group support; and more helpful administrative staff. It must, however, be taken into account that these findings are based on students' perceptions which can be influenced by variables such as exam results, gender, failing of a module, home province and department of study. The quality of learner support offered by Unisa in Gauteng and two of its neighbouring provinces (Mpumalanga and Limpopo) is higher than in the other provinces. Emphasis must, therefore, be placed on providing quality support to those students living further from Unisa's main campus. It can be concluded that the current quality of learner support

does not entirely meet the expectations of students, with areas of concern being administrative support and general support from Unisa.

Of extreme significance is the conclusion that the importance scores given by the students were much higher than the satisfaction scores, which indicates that the current level and quality of learner support are not as high as students would expect.

This research indicates, beyond any doubt, that there is a major requirement for much improved learner support of students in ODL in the CEMS at Unisa. In response to the research results, the Quality Assurance Committee in the CEMS initiated several projects in an attempt to address the identified shortcomings, such as the formulation and implementation of an academic quality assurance framework and the establishment of a quality forum to facilitate more open and continuous dialogue between the academic departments and the administrative support departments. More initiatives are planned by the college's Learner Support Committee to enhance learner support effectiveness and satisfaction.

Since Unisa has already initiated a major project to improve the quality of learner support through the provision of a better-quality learning materials, power courses, tutor support, optimised utilisation of technology and improved administrative support, it would be necessary to conduct follow-up research on this topic.

NOTES

1. In terms of Unisa's ODL policy, the term is defined as 'a multi-dimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, educational and communication distance between student and institution, student and academics, student and courseware and student and peers. Open distance learning focuses on removing barriers to access learning, flexibility of learning provision, student-centredness, supporting students and constructing learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed.'
2. This means just under 20 hours in a course of 120 notional learning hours. The 20 hours may be allocated to a single task, or may be distributed across a number of smaller tasks.
3. Virtual or face-to-face contact sessions.

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