# PROGRESSIO

## Emergent learner support at University of South Africa: An informal report

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## ABSTRACT

The University of South Africa (Unisa) is one of the mega distance education institutions in the world as it has approximately 250 000 learners. This article describes the developing learner support model being implemented at the institution. According to the authors, the existing learner support system is already well developed, but they show that there is still much to be done in order to make it comply with national priorities and international best practice.

**Keywords:** student support systems, mega universities, capacity development, open and distance learning

## BACKGROUND

The University of South Africa (Unisa) was founded in 1873 as a university college which offered courses to learners via correspondence. Subsequently, the university migrated through the various developmental stages of distance education (Seleetse 2002, 88–90) until in January 2004 it was constituted as a comprehensive open and distance learning university after amalgamation with two similar educational bodies. The 'new' Unisa effectively became the seventh largest mega distance education in-

stitution in the world, as it will soon service approximately 250 000 learners. At present the learner support model for the newly merged institution is emerging and will probably go through various designs in order to serve the comprehensive learner body of Unisa.

## Vision, mission and quality assurance

The *vision* of Unisa, namely 'Towards *the* African university in service of humanity' is to impact on societal development, through optimising its comprehensive character in relation to broad human resources, knowledge and capacity development. The vision is supported by its *mission* to function as a single, merged open and distance learning institution, which encompasses different higher education philosophies. Unisa serves the development needs of southern Africa, the Southern African Development community (SADC) region, Africa as a whole and, where needed international communities as explained in the *Manual for the University of South Africa* (Unisa) (www.unisa.ac.za).

The quality assurance drive at Unisa is in line with national requirements. The rapidly changing landscape that now constitutes higher education requires rapid responses (Higher Education Amendment Act 38 of 2003). 'The changes include a shift towards a more integrated yet differentiated public sector, a growing private sector, increased workbased training at higher education levels, an outcomes and impact orientation that requires new or vastly changed evaluation systems and a greater demand for demonstrating higher education responsiveness and relevance to social and economic reconstruction' (Council for Higher Education, Quality Assurance in Higher Education, Higher Education Quality Committee 2003).

## Geographical distribution of learners

Students studying at Unisa come from both rural and urban areas. This geographical difference impacts on the service delivery of Unisa. Higher education institutions have been mandated to enrol 'a large and diverse student body' (The Higher Education Act: Reauthorization Status and Issues). Not only is the infrastructure in these areas vastly different, but the level of exposure to, and availability of, modern technology impact on the level of technical support that can be given by the learner support system. It also needs to be noted, that Unisa has a large body of African students, which is part of the Africa Renaissance drive, with many more prospective learners. Learner support at Unisa takes this background into consideration.

## OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Unisa's open learning policy promotes open access to courses, flexibility in learning provision, flexibility in methods and criteria of assessing learning process and achievement, and lifelong learning as propagated by the Commonwealth of Learning (available at: www.col.org). The Unisa open learning policy complies with the South African Higher Education Act 101 of 1997. (Republic of South Africa 1997)

Open and distance learning (ODL) implies a shift from content to learner (Seleetse 2002, 87). Open access and the globalisation of ODL are also propagated by Russel (available at: www.westga.edu). This dictates that the needs of learners be addressed in a holistic manner (Seleetse 2002, 91). All learner support systems are interrelated and support one another. However, for the purpose of clarity and focus, the following sections address each of the main learner support function individually:

## ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

The administrative support relies on a well-functioning system in which the needs of the learners are addressed as they arise. The following services are included:

- *Web-based enrolment:* As the Unisa Website allows learners to enrol and make payments to Unisa from a distance.
- *Material sent by post:* Many learners physically come to the main campus to enroll. Once the registration process has been completed, they leave the campus with their study material. Those who enrol at one of the five regional offices or on the Website, receive their study material by post.
- *Regional offices:* There are five regional offices strategically placed around the country. These offices duplicate the services that are offered by the main campus and are used to present tutorials to large learner groups.
- *Call centre:* A call centre to deal with academic and administrative queries has been established.
- *myUnisa:* Linked to the Unisa Website, the virtual campus that was known as *Students-On-Line* (SOL) had more than 60 000 registered users in 2004 who intensively engaged in contact with the university at a rate of approximately 80 000 hits a month. As this service is now structured more effectively in myUnisa (2006), the learner support systems might be improved. Standard services currently include online discussion forums, announcements from Unisa and from lecturers, a calendar of events, queries directed at lecturers and administration departments, library books sent directly to the learners, links to official study material and other resources and Websites, electronic submission of assignments (which are returned by post), and applications for the Recognition of Prior Learning.

## PERSONAL SUPPORT

As complex as humankind is, so complex is the need of adult learners. Unisa has endeavoured to address many of the issues that challenge the typical Unisa learner.

### Bureau for Career Counselling and Academic Development

Students are typically guided through the selection of courses, helped to overcome their study problems, advised regarding their personal problems, presented with time management courses, reading skills, and general academic skills.

The Unisa peer help system is aligned with international programmes for peer help. In

this programme, students are trained as peer helpers. These helpers are monitored and portfolios are generated in which the peer helpers reflect on the service which they have rendered to their fellow students.

## ACADEMIC SUPPORT

Academic learner support covers all academic aspects of programmes offered at Unisa. It incorporates the

- inception
- registration of the qualification
- development
- delivery
- assessment
- recognition of the programme.

In this manner many of the quality assurance requirements are addressed (Seleetse 2002, 91–92).

### Institute for Curriculum and Learning Development

The Institute for Curriculum and Learning Development ensures that the open and distance Learning curriculum principles are entrenched in the courses offered by UNISA. This entails specific course design and development, the inclusion of learner support principles in the development of materials, as these reflect an essential part of Unisa's tuition policy.

The curriculum comprises the course content, suitable modes of delivery and assessment at the correct National Qualifications Framework level. The curricula are the result of cultural specific needs and situation analyses which are driven by the Institute for Curriculum and Learning Development. This is done by including the stakeholders (learners) in the assessment processes, thus contributing to the open and distance learning curriculum development process.

Courses are designed using a team approach. Teams consist of various specialists such as learning developers/instructional designers and subject specialists who are usually educators in the area of specialisation. Add to these, editorial services, layout designers and production specialists and the team is ready to function. Simultaneously, graphic and layout artists are involved, and even the typesetting and production specialists are brought on board at an early stage. Once the basic content and layout have been married to the open and distance learning curriculum principles, editors and translators, and media and online specialists are given the opportunity to finalise the product. Teams are flexible and are constituted according to specific course design needs.

The following figures reflect the volume of turn over at Unisa:

- *Production of study materials:* 515 million pages a year
- *Dispatch of materials:* Mail 2.5 million items a year

- *Students-On-Line (2004):* 263 100 logins a year
- *Library:* 1.7 million volumes
- *Examinations:* 442 examination centres worldwide
              2 624 different examination papers.

## Tutorial Services, Group Discussions and Work-integrated Learning

This department originated from the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE), which initiated tutor classes for learners who were enrolled at United Kingdom distance education institutes during the early 1950s. However, it soon became evident that the Unisa learners also required tutoring and SAIDE turned their attention to local distance education offerings. During the 1990s Unisa incorporated this practice into its learner support design.

Learners register for the additional service at a minimal cost per course. Contact sessions are arranged for all course-based groups of a minimum of 15 students who request tutorials. These are offered at the learning centres linked to the five UNISA regional centers in order to make the service cost effective.

Tutors clarify content issues with the learners, liaise with the Bureau for Career Counselling and Academic Development in order to assist learners with study problems, and they assist learners with assignments and examination preparation. However, their work is not an officially recognised part of the academic tuition or assessment system.

This service is extended at a non-formal level by various private initiatives. They run centres where Unisa materials are presented to learners who enrol on a full-time basis at great additional expense.

The Department Tutorial Services, Group Discussions and Work-integrated Learning works closely with organisations who offer student loans to students. Some of these loans are managed in such a manner that the students repay them by monthly salary deductions, thus limiting the risk involved to the organization and spreading the financial repayment expected of the student over a period of a year.

## Faculty staff

Faculty staff are part of the learning material development team. Thus they are expected to do research regarding the content of their materials on offer and be part of the team implementing the open and distance learning curriculum. This is done in close collaboration with the Institute for Curriculum and Learning Development.

Once the materials are on the shelf, they teach them, do research regarding their field of specialisation and are involved in community service in their field of specialisation. Faculty staff liaise with all the learner support mechanism in the distance education arena such as the library, tutors, Bureau for Career Counselling and Academic Development, administration and any other part of the academic life of the learner. This is done by means of telephone/facimile, e-mail, video-conferencing, regular tutorial letters and contact sessions (usually once a year).

In specialised postgraduate courses, the contact sessions can escalate to a total of six

weeks a year, and up to 30 assignments of extremely practical nature, depending on the professional requirements of particular regulatory boards. Computer facilities are available on the main campus for use by learners studying computer-oriented courses.

### Library

A vast amount of books are mailed to students throughout country. The cost of mailing is included in the initial registration fee, thus spreading the expense over the whole student body. Foreign students pay a foreign levy to cover additional postal expense.

The library offers research support by specialised subject reference staff, as it contracts to many journals and international sources of information.

## LEARNER SUPPORT PRINCIPLES

The basic management philosophy for learner support is the so-called 20 per cent/80 per cent principle (Louw 2004). This implies that the basic learner support system automatically is at the disposal of all learners, thereby addressing 80 per cent of needs of the learners, however, only using 20 per cent of the systems' available time and money. Thus the general learner support service must serve a wide spectrum of learners by giving them ready access to the university, the courses and the staff. In order to achieve this goal, the service has been decentralised, research is done to monitor its effectiveness and international best practice is implemented. As an example, the Open University's tutor system might be implemented in future. Success in learner support is ensured by continual adaptation of possible service deliveries and, where necessary, collaboration with other institutions enhances the learner support.

The remaining 20 per cent of the student body's learner support needs are particular problems that can be addressed in a second phase. Specific requests for materials in Braille, audio taped study material, placement in learnerships (such as for teachers through the School of Education), internships for psychologists and community service-related academic projects. In this proportion of the learner support service, the focus is on the unique context of the learner at a personal and academic level. Specific service providers can be involved.

### Collaboration

As Unisa is based on the African continent, it is involved in African initiatives to collaborate with African institutions to deliver internationally recognised programmes. This leads to innovation in open and distance learning delivery mechanisms.

South African academic institutions and non-governmental bodies, consortia and developments in innovative educational technologies keep Unisa's learner support systems at the cutting edge. Collaboration also allows for decentralised learning centres. Video-conferencing systems and online learner support are enhanced by collaborations.

The following is a list of academic collaboration agreements with which Unisa is/was involved in Africa:

- The University of Zimbabwe

- Tertiary Education Commission, Mauritius
- Makerere University, Uganda●
  South Valley University, Aswan, Egypt
- Universidade Eduardo Mondlane, Mozambique
- International University of Africa, Sudan
- Open University of Sudan (OUS)
- Egerton University, Kenya.

As a result of this, Unisa learners are spread over much of Africa. At an international level, collaboration has also lead to the following distribution of Unisa learners throughout the world in 2004:

- *America:* 344
- *Asia:* 493
- *Europe:* 1 700
- *Oceania:* 185

Collaboration leads to increased learner numbers. Learners are on average 30 years old, however, there is a tendency that shows an increasing number of younger students. Owing to the demand for high-quality reliable delivery, the number of full-time distance education students is on the increase. However, 80 per cent of the learners are still part time. The average number of years it takes a learner who studies part time to complete a B-degree, is nine years.

   All Unisa study material is produced in English and Afrikaans, the second official language in the pre-1994 apartheid era. This practice continues, as it is not possible to develop study material in all 11 official languages. However, there is a strong drive afoot by the Department of African Languages to help learners grasp study material by means of additionally translated study material. This is necessary, as more than 20 different mother tongues are spoken by Unisa learners. This means that only a small percentage of learners actually study in their mother tongue, English.

## Emergent learner support in context

The reader needs to take into consideration that at present Unisa is in a state of flux as it is responding to the Council for Higher Education's requirement to demonstrate higher education responsiveness and relevance to social and economic reconstruction.

   Joblessness is a world-wide phenomenon due to the prevailing economic climate. In order to create hope of survival, African families often club together at great personal expense to support a child at university. This places an immense burden on such a learner, and failure causes lack of self-confidence, loss of honour, stress, depression and even suicides. In the Unisa context, the merger has created the opportunity to refresh the learner support system. Unconventional strategies are called for to counteract failure. Learner support is more essential than ever before.

   A new breed of learner has spontaneously emerged in the process. Adult learners are more demanding, expecting information that is relevant to the African context and

insisting on clarity in the delivery process. Cultural sensitivity which recognises unique differences in race, gender and context of the learner who is proudly African is a minimum requirement for learner support.

The following sections focus on some of the areas that will receive attention in future:

## Learner support systems

These systems will be spelt out even more clearly to all learners. However, owing to the volume of material that they receive, many learners do not read the guidelines properly and remain unaware of the learner support service. A paper-based flow diagram which covers the academic year and a more focused use of the peer help system is planned. The possibility of satellite broadcasts is being investigated (Louw 2004).

## Diversity

The diversity of possible learner problems is recognised and addressed on the 80 per cent/20 per cent principle, thus giving each learner the opportunity to be serviced uniquely. Owing technological advantages, it might even be possible to track each learner individually.

## Co-operative, collaborative and experiential-based learner support systems

Programmes that require organisational, work-based or experiential learning will be linked to official processes of learner support. There is an inclination to give new meaning to co-operative education by referring to work-integrated learner, apprentice, article clerk, candidate, experiential learner, exchange learner, field-based learner, intern, or service learner (Groenewald 2004, 3). In this manner, industry *co-operates* with the academic world and ensures that the learner who completes the course is of acceptable standard. Courses that included co-operative education are tourism, real estate, human resource management and peacekeeping.

Further, learners *collaborate* with one another in learner support groups when working on tasks, such as the requirements for the Masters in Business Leadership (MBL).

Closely related to co-operative and collaborative systems are experiential-based approaches. *Experiential learning tasks* are used when learners have to complete

- assignments for the teacher training programmes (Advanced Certificate of Education). Practical work is reflected in reports and work books.
- logbooks with tutorial letters evaluated by the appointed industry mentor and moderated by the academic. Examples include Education, Real Estate, Mining, Engineering and Credit Management.
- projects with progress reports and logbooks validated by the industry mentor, evaluated by the academic, moderated by external industry mentor.
- practical projects completed in industry as for a final assessment mark, with a product presented to a panel of academic assessors, like the project plan in Information Technology.

- practical assignments for examination entry completed under supervision and assessed by industry mentor, with moderation by the academic, for example Safety Management, Office Management and Technology.
- portfolios are used in a self-reflective process where learners ascertains and present their findings regarding their own knowledge, attitudes and values in a programme: portfolio of evidence that is used as second examination paper (of the practical component), assessed by academic, with external industry moderator, for example Library and Information Studies; final examination defended to an assessor panel, for example, Safety Management, Public Relations Management, some Applied Natural Sciences courses; practical assignment, summarising observations and experiences supervised by a qualified industry practitioner, assessed by the academic, for example Child and Youth Development; evidence of work experiences or visits to companies, assessed by the academic who uses it as a basis for a letter of recommendation to industry, for example Human Resources Management and Tourism Management.
- applied research or mini thesis, for example, Educational Psychologist, M.Ed. (course work), Tourism Management, Economic Management Analysis, and Transport Economics.
- Practice-orientated assignments and industry case studies, written and presented for academic assessment, for example, Small Business Management.
- Practical sessions/workshops or laboratory work required by industry with observed competence assessed by the academic.

The new Unisa uses *experiential work-based* learning in the following disciplines: Science, Engineering and Technology, Economic and Management Sciences, Tourism, Real Estate, Human Resource Management, Agriculture and Environmental Studies, Humanities, Social Sciences and Education and Law and Justice.

*Recognition of Prior Learning* (RPL) supports learners in shortening the number of years they have to study, providing they can demonstrate that they have achieved the required outcomes of the course.

## CONCLUSION

The existing learner support system at Unisa is well developed, but much can be done to bring it even more in line with the requirements of national priorities and international best practice.

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