

CONTACT SESSIONS: THEIR ROLE IN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING AND CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE IN THE COLLEGE OF HUMAN SCIENCES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Since it started providing distance education in the late 1940s the University of South Africa (Unisa) has incorporated an element of face-to-face tuition in its educational strategy, first in the form of vacation schools, and later in the form of contact sessions by travelling lecturers. This paper explores the academic rationale underlying the practice, the history of face-to-face tuition at the university up to the challenges it faces today, and current practices in this regard in the College of Human Sciences at the university.

KEYWORDS: University of South Africa, College of Human Sciences, open distance learning, distance education, contact session, face-to-face tuition, vacation school

PROPOSAL

Ever since the University of South Africa (Unisa) embarked on its mission of providing tuition by means of open distance learning (ODL), it has been accepted that some form of face-to-face contact between student and lecturer was needed to supplement the published study material. The current practice at Unisa involves lecturers travelling to the various regional centres, usually once a semester. A historical overview of the way face-to-face tuition methods have augmented the traditional "correspondence" model at Unisa will provide some background to the situation the university, and more particularly the College of Human Sciences (CHS), faces today.

Even more fundamentally, we must consider the question of why it is necessary to provide such contact. Is it fundamental to the Unisa experience, or is it something that may have been important once, but which has been rendered obsolete by recent developments? What is the reasoning, if any, behind contact sessions?

WHY DO WE MAKE CONTACT?

Agboola (1993) distinguishes three ways in which distance teaching institutions approach face-to-face contact tuition:

Zero contact sessions: "Some institutions don't provide for contact teaching at all, because they believe that the students want to be left alone."

Supplementary contact sessions: "Most other distance teaching institutions believe in the provision of student support services ... In this case, contact sessions play a

supplementary role by providing only revision, tutorial, practical and seminar sessions. ... No new topics are taught."

Complementary contact sessions: "A number of DTIs share the view that education cannot be given without some face-to-face contact sessions. Hence, at these institutions contact sessions form one of the major delivery strategies. Students must attend either all or a stipulated proportion of the contact sessions" (Agboola 1993:17–18).

Unisa has not adopted a single approach from among these three. In certain disciplines, such as the natural sciences, the complementary approach has always been used. In the CHS, the main approach has been one of supplementary contact sessions.

There are studies on the effectiveness of (or rather, student satisfaction with) blended learning strategies (McKenzie et al. 2009; Vencatachellum & Munusami 2003), and on the costing (Banks et al. 2007) and design (Precel et al. 2009) of distance tuition curricula that touch upon the issue. However, just as Agboola's categorisation is based on the collective "views" and "beliefs" of institutions, such studies seem to take the existence of a face-to-face element, be it supplementary or complementary, as an unquestionable given and continue from that point onward. The debate is based on learning theories, personality theories, as well as socio-political theories rather than on hard data gained in carefully controlled quantitative studies.

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF CONTACT SESSION TUITION AT UNISA

The original way in which Unisa lecturers made personal contact with their students was the vacation school. This involved the students, rather than the lecturers, travelling to a single venue, where accommodation was provided for a two- to three-week period. The vacation school was normally held in June of each year, since this practice predated the adoption of a semester system. It was never compulsory for any student.

Unisa instituted this tuition practice almost immediately. There is no mention of the vacation school in the first typed and mimeographed newsletter sent to "external" students in 1947 (Universiteit van Suid-Afrika 1947). By 1949, however, the newsletter, now named *Die Eksterne Student/The External Student* and printed in regular magazine format, contained letters from students relating their experiences at that year's vacation school (Maree 1949). Needless to say, separate vacation schools were organised for "European" and "non-European" students.

By 1969, 3000 students were attending the vacation school (Vacation School 1969). One can only imagine how difficult it must have been to arrange classes, travel and accommodation for such a large number of students. By 1974, Unisa academics were questioning the efficiency of the system (Fourie 1974).

The very next year, *Unisa News* reported that Prof Hendrik Gous, head of the Bureau for University Research and Mr B.J. du Plessis of Student Affairs visited ten centres throughout the country to make contact with students and investigate the possibility of sending lecturers to the students, rather than requiring students to travel to a central point (Closer Academic Ties 1975). The notion of a vacation school did not die immediately: the Faculty of Theology, for example, conducted its own winter school in Hammanskraal well into the 1990s. In some disciplines (mostly outside the CHS) there are compulsory laboratory work or practical work sessions that constitute the equivalent of the vacation

school system even today. Nevertheless, we can take 1975 as the genesis of the present system. In passing, it should be noted that the demise of the vacation school in favour of contact sessions had one beneficial effect: as there was no need to arrange accommodation, separate sessions for "European" and "non-European" students were quietly dropped.

METHODOLOGY

Initially, it was thought that it would be necessary to compile a questionnaire and send it out to the various departments. Further investigation revealed that the required data already existed in the form of the tutorial letters sent out to students notifying them of the contact sessions to be held during the academic year and/or semester. We therefore asked the departments in the college to supply us with copies of those letters, in either printed or electronic format. We received a satisfying number of responses.

FINDINGS

It should be emphasised from the outset that this was not an attempt to "name and shame" any members of the Unisa community. We accepted that departments and individual lecturers want to do the best for their students and their disciplines, and that they are the best judges of whether contact sessions are worthwhile in a given context. The following analysis will therefore present only the broad outlines of the findings for public discussion, without naming specific disciplines or departments. More precise data, analysed by discipline and by department, are available on application from the author.

SIZE MATTERS

It will come as no surprise that departments with large numbers of students and faculty members tend to conduct more contact sessions than smaller departments. However, sheer size is not the only consideration: The departments that reported no longer conducting contact sessions are medium-sized departments whose students are fragmented among a number of disciplines. It would appear that the size of a discipline, rather than that of the department, is the determining factor in whether or not contact sessions are arranged. At the same time, there are smaller disciplines that are resisting this trend. These tend to be disciplines where practical experience is an essential part of the curriculum and assessment may be portfolio based.

NQF LEVEL DIFFERENTIATION

The vast majority of disciplines present contact sessions to students at NQF levels 5 and 6 (first- and second-year students). There is a sharp decline in the number of classes presented at level 7, and few disciplines present classes for level 8 (honours) students. Contact sessions for short course, diploma and certificate students are not included in this report. The implication of this practice is that Unisa faculty members appear to regard

contact sessions as a remedial practice for new students, the need for which disappears as students gain experience and weaker students are winnowed out.

SEMESTER EQUALITY

The disciplines that offer contact sessions and semester-based modules tend to be scrupulous about offering the same opportunities to students regardless of whether they are registered for the first or the second semester. There are a few instances where a contact session is offered in both Cape Town and Durban in one semester, but in only one of the two centres during the other semester. These instances are anomalous and can probably be explained as reflecting the availability of a particular lecturer. They do not affect the overall pattern.

PRETORIA STUDENTS BENEFIT THE MOST

If a discipline is able to organise only one contact session in a given academic period, this session is likely to take place in Pretoria. Conducting contact sessions in Pretoria makes a lot of sense. It is fairly central for students in Gauteng, which has the greatest population density in South Africa, and it is not completely out of reach to students in other provinces, at least in Limpopo, North West, Mpumalanga and the Free State. Holding sessions in Pretoria also costs Unisa nothing in terms of travel and accommodation for the lecturers.

Durban appears to be the second most popular regional centre in which to conduct contact sessions, with Cape Town in third place. Students within easy reach of these two centres will have about half as good a chance that there will be a contact session organised for them as students within reach of Pretoria.

Polokwane is the only other regional centre at which a significant number of contact sessions is held, but it nevertheless trails Durban and Cape Town. The other regional centres are rarely visited by Unisa CHS lecturers. If face-to-face tuition is provided there, it is more likely to be by means of a video conference. While no definitive reason for this trend can be given without specific research, we would like to make the following observations, in full awareness of their speculative nature.

1. Many of the present Unisa's regional centres were acquired through the merger of the old Unisa, Technikon SA (TSA) and Vista University, which created the new Unisa in 2004. Indeed, they are largely old TSA facilities. CHS lecturers are overwhelmingly from the old Unisa and may simply not be aware of these facilities and what they have to offer.

2. Lecturers may not know where their students are. It is certainly possible to extract student data from either the Student System or myUnisa and parse it to find out where the students registered for a specific module reside. However, this would require a large investment in time and effort on the part of each lecturer.

VIDEO CONFERENCING GROWING IN USE

The use of video conferencing is growing as an alternative to contact sessions. Although the use of video conferencing was not part of our brief, we would be remiss if we did not

mention that a number of disciplines have made the switch to electronic delivery of face-to-face communication with students. It is also notable that the smaller and rural regional centres are increasingly being served this way. For most disciplines, however, video conferencing serves as an addition to the traditional contact session, not as its replacement. Only one department seems to have switched to this mode of delivery entirely.

We did not, however, regard the use of satellite broadcasts as part of our brief. As the term “broadcast” implies, this is mostly a one-way form of communication, with limited possibilities for students to give feedback. It is noted, however, that there are disciplines that use this facility.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While there are three departments (the majority of them medium-sized departments with a variety of disciplines) that have suspended their use of contact sessions, on the whole this remains a method of instruction that is widely used in the college. Pretoria, Durban, Cape Town and Polokwane (in that order) host the vast majority of classes presented.

It is uncertain what effect the restructuring of the college will have on the practice of contact sessions. We have seen that departments in which the students are distributed across a large number of disciplines are more likely to abandon this form of instruction. However, such departments are the most likely result of the proposed merger of departments and disciplines in the college and its schools.

Module leaders and other Unisa employees who have the task of organising contact sessions would benefit from having better access to information about the facilities available to them and the demographics and distribution of the students in a given module. It is thought that having this information available would lead to a more equitable distribution of contact sessions. However, even if all regional centres were to receive regular visits by lecturers from all disciplines (a hypothetical state of affairs never likely to be attainable) there would be students unable to benefit from these classes. If contact between student and university is felt to be a necessity, the extension of the tutor system and electronic communications seem to present a more equitable means of achieving this than the contact session method.

There also seems to be a disconnect between the practical arrangement of contact sessions and their financial management. Budgeting for contact sessions has to be done on the departmental level, but our research indicates that the organisation of classes and notification of students about these classes always takes place on the level of the individual discipline. While this need not be fatal to the continued practice of contact sessions in the college, it does create the possibility of over- or under-budgeting, thus raising the level of uncertainty associated with the practice. The discipline, not the department, is the central reality in the contact session, and this should be recognised at every level of the institutional realisation of the practice.

A more extended (pre-publication) version of this paper can be obtained at <http://tinyurl.com/ct3znpX>.

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