

**LEARNER SUPPORT IN THE PROVISION OF DISTANCE TEACHING
PROGRAMMES FOR UNDER QUALIFIED TEACHERS**

BY

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SUBMITTED IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

IN THE SUBJECT

DIDACTICS

AT THE

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

PROMOTER: PROF. G.D. KAMPER

SEPTEMBER 2012

DECLARATION

I declare that LEARNER SUPPORT IN THE PROVISION OF DISTANCE TEACHING PROGRAMMES FOR UNDER QUALIFIED TEACHERS is my own work and that all sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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SEPTEMBER 2012

DEDICATION

To my beloved late father, Butiti Jacob Segoe, and my ailing mother, Tebogo Harriete Segoe; this is for you. I will forever cherish your love for education. You were both a solid, blessed base in my life.

Thank you!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my sincere thanks and gratitude to all who directly or indirectly contributed to the completion of this work. It would be impossible to acknowledge and thank each one individually. However, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to some people who contributed immensely to the success of this project.

My special thanks are due to my supervisor, Prof G.D. Kamper, for his expert advice, patience and his profound interest in my progress.

I am also profoundly indebted to:

My wife, Mpho, for her encouragement and many sacrifices she had to make in supporting me throughout this study, you are a shining star;

My two wonderful children, Aobakwe (son) and Refilwe (daughter), for their unwavering love and patience; thank you for encouraging me to persevere, I love you;

My sisters and my mother for constantly giving me moral support;

The Department of Further Teacher Education, UNISA, for allowing me to collect data from NPDE learners;

NPDE learners for participating in all data collection processes;

Centre Managers in Durban, Polokwane, Nelspruit and Pretoria for allowing me to enter their sites for data collection; and

Above all, My Creator, The Almighty God, for giving me the strength and good health to pursue this challenging study up to the end

ABSTRACT

Presently all over the world, there is a great concern among teachers, parents, organisations, community leaders and higher education lecturers about the problems that beset teaching and learning particularly in the teaching programmes, for example, for under-qualified teachers studying at a distance. Most distance education (DE) programmes are concerned with education of adults and it seems fairly obvious that the research plans should be informed by the theories and research about learning in higher education institutions. In terms of teacher education, such studies could, *inter alia*, focus on teacher development, curriculum planning, learner support programmes, communication and evaluation of DE.

DE itself refers to a field of education that focuses on teaching methods and technology with the aim of delivering teaching, often on an individual basis, to learners who are not physically present in a traditional educational setting such as a classroom. Distance learning is becoming an increasingly popular way of studying, and most universities now provide courses using this mode of teaching and learning. Today's learners, though, are demanding high quality, consumer-focused and flexible courses and learning resources, and active learner support. This means that providers of DE need to reconsider key issues about learner support systems, to ensure that this is delivered appropriately and effectively.

This study focuses on learner support in DE education for under-qualified teachers. The concept, learner support, can be traced far back to Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development, which refers to a learners' optimal developmental potential if assistance that is timely and appropriate is provided by another person (Vygotsky, 1978). The appeal of the concept of the zone of proximal development lies in the fact that it directs attention to the need for maximum support in the learning process, and does so in a way that emphasises that good teaching is necessarily responsive to the state of understanding achieved by particular learners.

Learner support systems may include the resources that the learner can access in order to engage in the learning process, for example, libraries or the resources that relate to the mediation of the communication process such as the media or

technology. This study acknowledges that there are different kinds of learner support structures, but argues that there are critical or main components of support services which are registration support, learner support services, contact sessions, technological support and feedback strategies. Therefore, this study focuses on the role played by these five learner support structures as used in the programmes of DE under-qualified teachers at The University of South Africa (UNISA).

Supported by empirical data, this study seeks to argue that instructional designers and tutors in the programmes of under-qualified teachers studying through DE need to ensure quality learning support as learning environments are increasingly designed according to the principles of resource-based and independent learning. In a sustainable learning environment, support must be designed according to principles that ensure that learners progress from teacher-directed activity to self-regulated activity. The challenge to deliver a high-quality learner support system, and for tutors and administrators to assume a central educational role in developing effective distance learning environments, the need for teaching and research is increasingly emphasised in research literature.

Finally, it is hoped that this piece of work will help to promote more discussion and debate about the use of learner support programmes in DE institutions in particular, and in teaching and learning in general.

KEY CONCEPTS

Constructivism

Contact sessions

Distance education

Feedback measures

Higher Education Quality Committee

In-service education

Learner support

Learner support services

Life-long learning

National Professional Diploma in Education

Open distance learning

Outcomes Based Education

Pre-service education

Professional development

Professional development of teachers

Registration support

Teacher Quality

Technological support

Under qualified teachers

University of South Africa

ABBREVIATIONS

BCCAD:	Bureau for Counselling, Career and Academic Development
CDE:	Centre for Development and Enterprise
CPD:	Continuous Professional Development
CPTD:	Continuing Professional Teacher Development
DE:	Distance Education
DoE:	Department of Education
ELRC:	Education Labour Relations Council
EPD:	Early professional development
FAB:	Financial Aids Bureau
HEQC:	Higher Education Quality Committee
ICT:	Information communication technology
INSET:	In-service training
IQMS:	Integrated Quality Management System
NPDE:	National Professional Diploma in Education
NQF:	National Qualifications Framework
ODL:	Open Distance Learning
PD:	Professional Development
PDT:	Professional Development of Teachers
PRESET:	Pre-service training
SACE:	South African Council of Educators
SAQA:	South African Qualifications Authority
TD:	Teacher Development
UNISA:	University of South Africa

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CHAPTER 1

ORIENTATION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Presently all over the world there is a great concern among parents, teachers, organisations, community leaders and lecturers about the problems that beset teaching and learning in teaching programmes, for example, professional development for under-qualified teachers studying through DE as a mode of delivery. Most distance education (DE) programmes are concerned with the education of adults and it is obvious that the research plans should be informed by the theories and research about learning in higher education institutions. This research study, therefore, focuses on learner support in the provision of distance teaching programmes for under-qualified teachers.

Learner support has often been an overlooked component in DE systems, yet it is one of the most influential aspects in any learning environment (LaPadula, 2003:119). What is increasingly clear is that learner support needs to be included into distance learning programmes at the initial planning phase and support should be “fit for purpose” (Mills, 2003:106). To emphasise this point, Phillips (2003:170) argues that learner support services need to be available at every stage of a learner’s career; at entry, during study, between courses and at the end of the study programme. Therefore, learner support should be driven by the development of the learner and should provide a framework to guide DE learners to be successful in their studies. Learners expect to make decisions themselves and to be “in charge” and it is essential that the support framework is always learner-centred (Kelly & Fage, 2002:83).

Wheeler (2006:175) contends that distance learners tend to require more support than their classroom-based counterparts and support needs in DE can be linked directly to individual motivation. As will be discussed in chapter 2, motivation is a key

factor in any learning enterprise, but for DE learners, it appears to be particularly crucial.

Nowadays, there are a variety of perceptions on how to best structure or plan an effective learner support system in DE or the Open Distance Learning (ODL) context. DE and ODL contexts in higher education are not necessarily similar, and their distinctions are so important that they require special examination here.

The distinction between DE and ODL is that DE begins with a method, i.e. a way of teaching which does not require the simultaneous presence of a teacher and learner and ODL begins with a purpose that develops the strategies of educational delivery, which at an affordable cost, can overcome barriers of access to education (Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) Report, 2008: 27). Furthermore, DE can be regarded as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and time from the learner. Open Learning, in turn, is an organised educational activity or an innovated modern approach, based on the use of teaching materials, in which constraints on studies are minimised in terms either of access, or of time and place, pace, method of study or any combination of these. To clarify this further, it can be said that while “open” education is the system in which the learner is free to choose the time and space, DE is a teaching methodology used when the learner and the teacher are separated by time and space.

This study further strongly argues that conventional DE has given rise to the new approach in education namely ODL. This study will confine itself to DE model of distance teaching and learning for under-qualified teachers because from its inception in 2002, the National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) programme was taught through the mode of DE. Furthermore, both DE and ODL often make use of the same learner support programmes, such as counselling, contact sessions, feedback strategies, administrative support, the internet, telephone calls, as well as occasional meetings with tutors and with other learners. It means that although there is a distinction between DE and ODL, there are numerous similarities.

In most DE settings, a compounding factor is the fact that very few tutors, particularly in higher education institutions, have formal educator training in tutoring learners studying at a distance. Most of them are appointed on their status within the academic discourse and discipline. A teaching qualification is not always a requirement to be appointed as a lecturer in such DE institutions. This results in tutors relying on templates, experts and so-called experts, as well as buying into quick recipes without understanding the philosophy of DE which, inter alia, lies behind the proper use of well-organised and effective learner support mechanisms.

Most DE lecturers feel safe when they are told how to compile study materials without critically reflecting on the use of effective learner support services as means of facilitating learning. Due to a number of factors, written study materials remain the only form of learner support or mode of delivery. Therefore, to facilitate deep and meaningful learning through well-planned learner support mechanisms in the provision of distance teaching programmes remains a serious challenge. Successful DE programmes boast with approaches such as allowing learners to study when, where and how they should study.

Many DE learners are faced with full-time jobs, domestic commitments and other agendas that compete with the amount of time available for their studies. Learners often cite time taken up by family and tiredness after work for non-attendance at tutorials (Fung & Carr, 2000:41). These factors highlight the importance for distance learners to receive support throughout their programmes of study. Learner support may therefore be regarded as the most important issue affecting the success or failure of any distance learning.

This chapter focuses on orientation and background to the study, rationale and motivation for the study, significance of the study, problem statement, research aim and objectives, research design and methods, limitation of the study, clarification of terms and chapter divisions.

1.2 ORIENTATION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Most DE institutions hold the view that teaching through the mode of DE, much of the time, is a matter of adapting the teaching styles and instructional methods the teacher has been using in the “traditional face-to-face” classroom for some time. This adaptation will obviously provide the traditional teacher with basic teaching principles and how to apply them in DE. Glennie and Mays (2009:4) agree with this when they state that

even traditional contact-based institutions involved in teacher education start to engage in new distance education issues, such as materials and learner support in order to improve their teaching modalities.... so interest in the use of distance education methods in teacher education has grown.

Craig and Perraton (2003:91) note that DE, backed by well-structured learner support has been used extensively for professional development of teachers and seems to have the following advantages (which would presumably also be true for the initial training of under-qualified teachers):

- an ability to reach teachers, who are often isolated, and provide them with professional development without taking them away from their home or workplace
- providing teachers with learning and teaching strategies
- the possibility of achieving a reasonable teacher-learner ratio

It is suggested that DE methods, coupled with a reconceptualised curriculum and well-planned learner support systems, could help to address what some countries have begun to identify as a crisis in teacher supply and development (Glennie & Mays, 2009:5).

Similarly, Moll (2003:21) argues,

In distance education, the central problem becomes one of how best to create a situation in which learners are able to engage in and be well supported in a particular, unfamiliar activity – a knowledge practice – without having to be in the constant presence of practitioners of that activity.

Based on the above discussions and citations, this study argues that a well functioning DE, supported by an effective learner support system, is clearly central to the development of teachers. In South African teacher development programmes, DE has long played a far greater role; at least in respect of numbers enrolled and graduating, than face-to-face education (Glennie & Mays, 2009:2). Glennie & Mays (2009:3) further note that this phenomenon may well be the case in other African countries like Kenya, Nigeria and Malawi which have seen large scale development of DE education provision. Therefore, DE may well be moving to centre-stage in teacher education programmes, not only in European countries, but in African countries as well.

Regarding the UNISA context, the institution acknowledges that students' learning journeys in a DE mode are characterised and shaped by many and interrelated factors such as learner support systems (Student Support Task Team 4 Report, 2010:7). A well structured learner support service coupled with well-organised activities of a DE mode of delivery may produce success in learning. In order to consider effective learner support for learners, it is important that UNISA provides continuous support for which the institution is responsible and makes available critical support structures for individual students during their studies. Hence, Student Support Task Team 4 Report (2010: 8) states:

UNISA is committed to provide optimal student support initiatives that are included in the registration fee (students with disabilities receive dedicated support at no extra cost). Students are provided with a menu of additional support services for which they can register. UNISA'S student support can therefore also be structured according to individual needs.

The researcher is and has been involved in the teaching of DE learners for many years and therefore intends making a contribution regarding the role played by and the importance of well-structured learner support (if any), in the study of teachers' learning at a distance. It is hoped that this will cast further light on what constitutes effective learner support measures in the learning of DE under-qualified teachers in higher education institutions.

A shortage of well-qualified and competent teachers, particularly in South Africa, is a matter of grave concern. New policies like Outcomes Based Education (OBE) have been introduced and yet many teachers struggle to deliver in class. DE for the in-service training (INSET) learners has also been employed as one of the strategies of improving the quality of classroom practice. The main challenge is that there is a need to develop DE that embraces ways of learning, such as a well-planned learner support mechanism. That support service has to ensure that learners, especially adult learners, participate in an active and challenging way in the learning process.

Although some DE institutions are gradually moving away from a pure DE model to Open Distance Learning, this study focuses on the learning of under-qualified INSET teachers studying via conventional DE. DE still assumes greater importance in the general scheme of education and training in many higher education institutions; therefore, it becomes increasingly important that more should be learned about the effects of learner support in DE courses. Wheeler (2002:421) holds the view that support for distance learners is a sensitive and important issue and therefore needs careful consideration and planning by all higher education institutions. One study by Visser and Visser (2000:112) highlights the need for further investigation in this area, suggesting that there is a divergence between what distance learners perceive and what they actually receive in terms of learning support.

DE has been used to teach, support and develop teachers for many years. Since 1994, for example, DE in South Africa was identified as one of the systems that can provide access to education and training for those people who did not have the opportunity to study full-time, either because they lived in remote rural areas or because they had full-time jobs (Qakisa-Makoe, 2005:45). Furthermore, DE has also been proven as a mode of delivery that can enable younger people to get access to

higher learning, specifically those who do not meet the requirements of campus-based institutions, such as financial resources.

Using DE particularly for under-qualified teachers' programmes has various potential advantages. Large programmes have brought economic advantages. In contrast to teacher college-based training, it can provide access to courses on a much larger scale and wider geographical reach. It can overcome regional differences in access to teacher education. In continuing professional development, DE can help avoid the cost of replacing a teacher who has chosen to study full-time. It can also open up access to development opportunities for teachers with family responsibilities who are earning an income and need to remain in their communities.

Singh (1989:34) strongly contends that well-organised learner support constitutes the mainstay of teaching and learning in any DE environment. Singh (1989:35) emphasises that even in advanced countries of the world, where Open Distance Learning and highly developed mass communication methods are used, support to learners is still regarded as one of the most important means of imparting instruction to thousands of learners at a distance. Special care, therefore, needs to be taken to ensure an academic standard while preparing, organising or compiling learner support strategies in DE. A DE programme must design and implement effective learner support services and systems if it envisages success. Most unfortunately, in many DE systems, more resources are invested in the technical services at the expense of the learner support system. Equivalent or more resources should be invested in learner support systems if the DE enterprise is to be successful (Usun, 2004:1).

Qakisa-Makoe (2005:46) argues that the main purpose of supporting learners is to provide an environment that improves learners' commitment and motivation to learn. Learners, like everybody else, need support as they go through life, especially when going through the big challenge of studying. Indeed, for many years, learner support has been placed alongside the educational process. It has been regarded by higher education providers as a facility that provides safety nets for those who fall, rather than the process that enhances the quality of the learners' experience. The researcher has identified five learner support structures which he regards as crucial

in DE programmes for under-qualified teachers and these have been fully covered in section 3.4.3. At this point, it is essential to give a brief discussion of each in the following paragraphs:

During registration DE learners need support. Tutors and programme co-ordinators may arrange group sessions with newly enrolled DE learners, where they provide orientation and motivate them to pursue their intended field of study. Series of workshops could be held to give learners some background regarding a particular programme so that when they register, they already know what is contained in their intended field of study. For many DE under-qualified teachers, entering higher education institutions is a major transition and yet they get little or no support as they attempt to deal with this new experience (Qakisa-Makoe, 2005:47). Learners need registration support especially if they experience entering into study programmes at university level as a major change.

In DE teaching contact sessions are regarded as the major form of support provided to under-qualified student teachers. These sessions may be based on a particular model, e.g. over weekends or during school holidays. The purpose of contact sessions includes providing learners with exposure to their study materials, giving feedback, paying individual attention to them and counselling them. During these sessions, learners can pick up important skills, such as communication skills and concentrate on them. Individual support from tutors is sadly lacking in DE programmes, leading to isolation of distance learners. Therefore, contact sessions can provide learners with an opportunity to meet tutors and deal with difficult tasks. During contact sessions DE learners may also get a chance to do some research work with peers or as individuals.

In addition, during contact sessions, tutors can interact with their DE learners so as to clarify issues, give advice, motivate and help in solving personal problems. The kinds of personal problems that are usually dealt with could be related to marriage, health, family and study. The importance of tutor-learner relationship in DE is supported by Wheeler (2002:420), when he emphasises that the interaction between the tutor and the learner is possibly the most important function of distance learning support. Wheeler (2002:421) also adds that even the most highly motivated and self-

directed DE learners can find their experience lonely, difficult and sometimes daunting if they are not given adequate individual support and motivation by their tutors. A lack of continuous, individual nurturing can be discouraging and may lead to failure.

Study support services such as the library, should be readily available on campus. There is usually a study student service division that houses such resources as admissions, learner records, registration and counselling. These services are regarded as part of the education process and their services have to be known to DE learners. A Financial Aid Office (FAO), where learners may access bursaries and loans could be part of this learner support mechanism. Like in traditional face-to-face higher education campuses, distance learners need to have access to all study support services such as a financial bureau, academic advice, personal counselling, career counselling and library services.

Technological support is an important aspect in a DE setting. The technology available today has made a wealth of knowledge available to DE learners, which offers great potential for speed and style of learning. Information is presented in so many ways that any type of learner, whether gifted or disabled, can find and use this necessary support material. This fact relates not only to the internet, but to all the many technological improvements in learning, from chalkboard usage to power point presentations. In DE telephones, faxes and e-mails could be used to obtain support from tutors or peers. DE learners can use computer programmes such as e-learning to seek for information as individuals; by so doing they can be assisted to be independent and life-long learners. Panda and Mishra (2007:323) conclude by asserting that ICTs, as support structures, play a crucial role in making an effective shift from traditional DE delivery to scientific, inquiry-based teaching and learning.

Feedback is regarded as an essential part of DE education programmes. It helps DE learners to maximise their potential at different stages of learning, raise their awareness of strengths and areas of improvement, and identify actions to be taken to improve performance (Parsoe, 1995: 36). Feedback can be seen as informal (in day-to-day encounters between tutors and learners or amongst learners themselves) or formal (in a written form). For example, there could be informal, verbal feedback

during contact sessions on the most common problems as well as sharing of good assignments or there could be formal, written feedback comments on marked assignments. Feedback comments, whether verbal or written, have to be directive, corrective, sufficient, timely, mutual and positive at all times.

As a result, the main purpose of feedback in DE could be summarised as follows:

- genuinely showing learners where they went wrong
- helping with further improvement
- clarifying and correcting issues
- encouraging and mapping the way forward

1.3 RATIONALE AND MOTIVATION TO THE STUDY

The National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) was one of the teacher development programmes at The University of South Africa (UNISA). The full UNISA NPDE programme comprised 240 credits at Level 5 on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). It was introduced at UNISA in 2002 to offer under-qualified teachers an opportunity to gain qualified teacher status; the programme was discontinued in 2011.

The primary purpose of the NPDE programme was to develop teachers as competent classroom practitioners (Mays, 2009:16). It was therefore necessary to examine and improve existing aspects such as instructional methods, assessment strategies, teaching resources, learner support structures or the attitudes of teachers. The history and origin of NPDE is fully discussed in section 3.5.1.2.

The researcher was part of the lecturing staff of NPDE learners from 2003 until 2010 and therefore came into contact with NPDE learners during contact classes from time to time. During that period, the researcher held informal discussions with NPDE learners about their problems, frustrations and experiences. *Inter alia*, learners complained mainly about learner support issues, including support offered at registration, services they got from support structures such as the UNISA library, the organisation of contact sessions or feedback they normally got from their tutors,

either by telephone, e-mails or through their marked assignments. Therefore, the researcher realised at first hand the enormity of the challenges the NPDE learners were facing.

As a lecturer, the researcher also observed that some of the support structures were either not used, under-utilised or not properly used. That kind of a situation seemed to affect students' studies negatively, and it prompted and motivated the researcher to embark on this particular research study. From the above, it became crucial to the researcher to investigate and design ways of facilitating meaningful learning through well-organised learner support systems in the provision of DE programmes for the upgrading of under-qualified teachers.

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The findings of this study might assist DE institutions to manage their support services as well as their programmes for teacher development more efficiently. The study might also fill some gaps in the manner that management of DE might be examined and assessed. This study could also help to raise the voice of DE learners pertaining to the implementation of learner support services available to them in their studies. The findings of this study could also contribute to the existing body of knowledge about what higher institutions of learning might consider to be vital aspects or critical learner support structures in DE courses with particular relevance to professional development of teachers.

The private and public institutions offering distance teacher programmes will benefit from this research in the sense that they will ascertain whether their training programmes need to be changed or improved. Through open-ended questionnaires and focus group interviews conducted, the researcher will investigate the role played by learner support structures with regard to NPDE learners studying through DE at UNISA. Conclusions, recommendations and suggestions in chapter six will help the DE practitioners to realise pitfalls and improve the management and planning of distance teacher education programmes. The research will emphasise the fact that proper and timely planning and implementation of quality learner support systems in

DE programmes are crucial because of the nature and speed of the changes affecting DE education nowadays.

It is assumed that the knowledge gained from this study will be used in other DE programmes over and above the NPDE; not only at UNISA but in other DE institutions as well. The study intends to investigate the extent to which learner support has been organised in the NPDE programme at UNISA. The strengths and weaknesses identified will be used to cast some light on how learner support services can be used or improved in DE education institutions.

The advancement of information obtained in this study might lead to the solution of practical problems or questions mentioned in section 1.5. This educational research was not primarily driven by the desire to resolve specific difficulties (Daniel, 1996:35) but to understand the role played by learner support in DE and to capture the perceptions of the NPDE teacher learners about learner support available to them during their DE studies. Therefore, this research mainly makes the learners' voice heard and creates an understanding of the nature of the phenomenon and its role in teacher development programmes such as the NPDE. The study furthermore will endeavour to provide a better understanding and handling of the phenomenon, which in this case is learner support.

1.5 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Learner support services are important for many reasons. They can enhance enrolment, decrease attrition rate and provide a well-rounded programme. In addition, they ease students' adjustment at colleges and universities, assist in their intellectual and personal growth and contribute to their academic success (Dirr, 1999:45). Even so, there is a general lack of empirical research guiding the design of effective student support systems in DE (Visser & Visser, 2000:110).

In some higher education institutions learner support services may be available but under-utilised, which means that some recommendations for the measure of improvement or innovation may be required. This study seeks to investigate the role

played by learner support structures in DE programmes for under-qualified teachers. The study is based on an assumption that under-qualified teachers need well-organised study support and guidance when studying at a distance. It is assumed, therefore, that teachers studying at a distance will adopt approaches to study that befit a complex nature of factors influencing the progress of their learning. Therefore, the main research question for this study has been formulated thus:

What are the main constituting elements of learner support and their role in the professional development of teachers through DE?

The sub questions were as follows:

- *What are the most important aspects of teachers' professional development?*
- *What is the role of well-organised learner support services in upgrading under-qualified teachers' qualifications through distance teaching?*
- *What do empirical data reveal on NPDE learners' awareness and perceptions of learner support?*
- *What recommendations can be made for the effective use of learner support services in DE for under-qualified teachers?*

1.6 RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The overarching aim of the research is to investigate the role played by the main components of learner support systems in upgrading under-qualified INSET teachers' qualifications in a DE context.

Auxiliary objectives supporting the above overarching aim are to

- 1.6.1 *establish, from literature data, how learner support measures facilitate learning in the provision of professional development of under-qualified teachers through DE;*
- 1.6.2 *capture the views of NPDE distance education learners on the strengths and weaknesses of learner support systems available to them during their studies; and*

1.6.3 *to suggest ways of improving the implementation of learner support in DE courses for under-qualified teachers*

1.7 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The target population for this research will be the NPDE learners upgrading their qualification through DE at UNISA. From the population of final year NPDE learners, a purposeful sampling frame, representing the population, will be used. As shown in Figure 4.1, the sample will be spread across the four NPDE contact session centres in South Africa, namely Durban, Nelspruit, Polokwane and Pretoria.

The research method will be purely qualitative, using open-ended questionnaires and focus group interviews as data collection methods. By using a qualitative approach, the researcher aims to gather an in-depth understanding of the feelings, experiences and views of INSET teachers about learner support services available to them in their studies. In this way, the *why* and *how* of their responses or behaviour will be investigated.

Data from open-ended questionnaires and focus group interviews will be analysed and interpreted through the identification of themes and broad categories. Verification of the results will be done through the research findings or arguments from literature and the researcher's informal observations and experience as a former NPDE lecturer. The results from the questionnaires will be used to verify those from the interviews and vice versa. The methods of data collection employed in this study, namely open-ended questionnaires and focus group interviews as well as the procedure of data analysis and interpretation, are discussed in detail in chapter 4.

1.8 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study focuses mainly on the role of critical learner support in DE programmes for under-qualified teachers. The other focus was on professional teacher development of NPDE learners studying through a DE programme because the

researcher was involved in this programme over a long period of time and observed how learner support services were used. Only NPDE final year learners at UNISA were included in the study. It follows that the researcher deliberately left out people who also had full knowledge about the implementation of learner support at UNISA such as staff members, lecturers and centre managers for contact session venues. Therefore, the approach in this study is from a learner perspective.

The sample of the participants for data collection came from four contact centres, namely Durban, Nelspruit, Polokwane and Pretoria which cater for learners from rural, semi-rural, urban and semi-urban areas. NPDE learners were selected because the researcher had access to them since he was involved in their studies as a lecturer for seven years.

The study is limited to five crucial learner support structures, namely registration support, study support services, technological support, contact sessions and feedback measures. These learner support structures will be fully discussed in chapter 3. The five support structures were selected because the researcher strongly argues that these are the “backbone” of any learner support system and also that the researcher regards them as the fundamental support structures of any DE development programme for under-qualified teachers.

1.9 OPERATIONAL CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

- *Learner.* Fraser, Loubser & Van Rooy (1990: 17) defines a learner as any person who is involved in all those processes which contribute to changes in behaviour brought about by the exercise and repetition of the desired response. Learning itself is an activity in which a person being taught wishes to benefit from the teaching and in fact acquires particular skills or knowledge so as to become a “life-long learner”. In literature, there is still debate about the meanings of the terms *learner* and *student*. In a South African context, the term *learner* is used extensively in the schooling system and *students* in higher education institutions. That is why UNISA prefers to use the term *student support* over *learner support*.

However, leading and international authors on the topic of *learner support* like Mills (2003) and Wheeler (2006) tend to use the term *learner* over *student* throughout, possibly because of the emphasis on the concept of *life-long learning* in education systems nowadays. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the term *learner* will be used to acknowledge the fact that support that is given to NPDE teachers may encourage them to be life-long learners.

Furthermore, (Mills, 2003:103) contends that student support mainly refers to administrative and personal support whereas learner support denotes “the totality of the provision by an institution to support the learner”.

- *Learner support*. Generally stated, learner support refers to the organised assistance offered to learners or educational institutions in order to promote educative teaching and learning. In the context of this study, learner support will be taken to refer to “the totality of the provision by an institution to support the learner, other than generic teaching materials produced by instructional designers or course producers” (Mills, 2003:104). In this way learner support can be provided through a range of media and by a range of people. But this study will only concentrate on five critical learner support services as outlined in section 3.4.3.

Didactically speaking, persons involved in providing support to learners may be educationally qualified tutors and the services exist for the benefit of educative teaching and learning, that is to say, their ultimate purpose is to enrich, support assist and amplify educative teaching and learning. Therefore learner support, in this study, is a term applied to a range of services that are developed by a particular institution to assist learners to meet their learning objectives and to gain the knowledge and skills to be successful in their studies. This concept is fully outlined in section 3.4.2.

- *Tutor or lecturer*. This study regards the word *tutor* to be synonymous with the term *lecturer*. Therefore, a *tutor* or a *lecturer* is regarded as a person

who is qualified to teach learners in one or more subjects. Such a person could be a member of academic staff at a particular institution or who is appointed on a part-time basis to look after the general welfare and development of a learner in his or her care. In DE, a tutor is a first point of contact and a source of support at any time during the learner's career. A tutor can provide assistance and advice on personal as well as academic issues or anything that has an impact on the learner's life. In this research, therefore, these words, namely tutor and lecturer, will be used interchangeably. Part-time tutors are those local persons who were not employed fulltime by UNISA and who tutored NPDE students occasionally (during contact sessions), and full-time tutors are those lecturers who are employed full-time by UNISA.

- *Part-time markers.* Those persons who are not employed full-time by UNISA and are regarded as qualified to mark assignments, examination scripts and other academic tasks for NPDE learners.
- *Full-time markers.* Those lecturers who are employed by UNISA on full-time basis, who are also NPDE tutors and who are charged with the responsibility of marking assignments and other learning tasks for NPDE learners.
- *Distance learning.* This concept refers to the process of learning through DE mode (Chiyongo, 2010:15).
- *Distance Education.* The term *distance education* grew out of a need for a concept broader than correspondence for the delivery of education at a distance. It is an over-arching concept that appears not to have any serious rivals for international usage.

While virtually every attempt to define DE refers to the separation of teacher and learner, many scholars have reflected other illuminating perspectives. Holmberg (2003:9), for example, emphasises the delivering organisation as a defining characteristic which perhaps reflects his origins in traditional correspondence only. He defines DE as "the various forms of study at all

levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises, but which nevertheless, benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial organisation". This definition has remained unchanged for many years. This concept, namely DE, is extensively dealt with in section 3.3.

- *Open Distance Learning (ODL)*. The Self-evaluation report for the UNISA Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) Institutional Audit (2008:27) defines ODL as a multi-dimensional system aimed at bridging the time, geographical and transactional distance between learners and institutions, learners and tutors/lecturers, learners and courseware as well as learners and peers. The main idea that one has to understand about ODL is that all systems (what we do, how we do it (processes) and why we do it) have fully integrated so as to support the entire academic enterprise and the learner. Furthermore, open learning is an approach or a philosophy which embraces learner-centeredness through:
 - life-long learning
 - flexibility of learning provision
 - removal of barriers to access learning
 - recognition of prior learning
 - sound provision of learner support
 - construction of learning programmes with the expectation that learners can succeed

- *INSET*. The term INSET can be defined in various ways. As Murphy (1985:6) observes, "there are as many definitions as there are INSET programmes". In the context of this study INSET in the teaching context includes aspects such as updating teacher skills and knowledge without change of role; preparation for new roles and positions; improvement in qualifications and status; external or internal school provision; focus on pedagogical needs; and support programmes available throughout the careers of teachers.

After numerous definitions were brought forward, Henderson (1978:163), attempted to advance an all encompassing definition in the following assertion,

“in-service education and training, may in the most general sense, be taken to include everything that happens to the teacher from the day he takes up his first appointment to the day he retires, which contributes, directly or indirectly, to the way in which he executes his professional duties”.

Even up to this day, the above definition is still accepted and applicable because it is in consonance with the general accepted view that INSET embraces all the experiences that a teacher may undergo for the purpose of expanding his professional and personal development (Murphy 1985: 6).

Furthermore, this study agrees with Hartshorne (1985:9) when he suggests a working definition. He adapted the proposition of A.R. Thompson in Education and Development in Africa (1981), as

...the whole range of activities by which serving teachers and other categories of educationalists (within formal school systems) may extend and develop their personal education, professional competence and general understanding of the role which they and the schools are expected to play in their changing societies. INSET further includes the means whereby a teacher's personal needs and aspirations may be met, as well as those of the system in which he or she serves

Hartshorne (1985:11) believes that, should the definition be amended by omitting the phrase “within school systems”, it could then be flexible enough for wider application. This idea is still relevant and valid up to this day.

In the final analysis, it must be borne in mind that while definitions of INSET may vary, INSET itself remains a pivotal element. It provides for the individual needs and aspirations of educators. It contributes immensely towards maintaining an effective and vibrant corps of educators and simultaneously improves their quality of development.

- *PRESET*. This refers to education and training provided to learners studying to become qualified teachers before they have undertaken any teaching. It means that during the PRESET stage, which normally takes place at the college or university, the pre-service teacher will learn how to use his or her knowledge to formulate lesson plans and develop professionally.
- *Under qualified teacher*. In the South African context, under qualified teacher refers to a teacher with a two-year professional certificate, but without sufficient post- matric academic qualification (Wildeman, 2000:3).

1.10 CHAPTER DIVISION

Chapter 1 introduces the focus of this study by providing a background to learner support in the provision of distance teaching programmes for under-qualified teachers. This chapter further elaborates on the problem statement, research aims and objectives, motivation for the research, research design and methods as well as clarification of terms.

Chapter 2 introduces and elaborates on the aspects of professional development of teachers (PDT) in DE as a conceptual framework for this study. In preparation for the full discussion of the NPDE programme as a teacher development programme used as an example in this study, theoretical issues and trends of PDT, as well as the key aspects that affect the process of PDT, are discussed. Finally, the context of PDT in a South African situation is outlined.

Chapter 3 discusses the development and trends of DE in relation to learner support and reviews the work done on the previous research on these concepts. Extensive literature review, as presented by different scholars, is provided so as to help argue about the importance of learner support in a DE context. This is followed by an exposition of a constructivist theory, which is regarded as a theoretical framework for this study.

The main components or critical elements of learner support, namely, registration support, study support services, technological media, contact sessions, feedback strategies in the provision of distance teaching programmes for under-qualified teachers are identified and fully discussed. The above learner support structures are contextualised to the programme of the National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) at UNISA.

In Chapter 4, the rationale for empirical research and the research design are presented. The nature of the research questions has necessitated the use of the qualitative research approach in this study. Therefore, the rationale for using such a method will be outlined. The chapter also provides details of data collection sources, data analysis and interpretation, trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

In Chapter 5, data collected through open-ended questionnaires and focus group interviews will be analysed and interpreted. The findings for each theme are discussed and corroborated by the literature reviewed in chapter 2 and 3. These themes are based on the five critical learner support structures available to NPDE learners at UNISA. The results of both instruments will be used to verify each other.

Chapter 6 consists of the summary of the study, conclusions and recommendations.

1.11 SUMMARY

This chapter introduced the theme of this research work and focused on the background and motivation to the study. The significance of the study, research problem, aims and objectives were outlined. The researcher also stated the research questions for this study. The methodological issues that will be discussed in detail in chapter 4 were highlighted as well. Finally, the researcher explained the limitations of the study and operational terms used in this research work.

CHAPTER 2

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: ASPECTS AND TRENDS

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on a literature review of professional development (PD) as a conceptual framework for this study. Thereafter, a generic discussion of this concept (professional development) is narrowed down to professional development of teachers (PDT). This is followed by the discussion of the issues and trends of PDT which culminates in the features and the nature of quality teaching. Then, the focus shifts to the literature foundation on the key aspects that generally affect PDT. For any professional development of teachers to yield fruit, these aspects have to be brought to the fore. Thereafter, an overview of different models of the professional development of teachers is given. The last section will contextualise PDT in the South African situation with particular relevance to the National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) as an example of a programme of teacher development in South Africa. By its very nature, this chapter serves as a background to the next chapter that is, chapter 3.

2.2 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The term profession originates from the Latin root, *professare*, which literally means to profess or to make a declaration based on one's beliefs with regards to knowledge, experience and values (Farrugia, 1996:28). In recent years the term has developed more attributes. Matee (2009:67) defines professions as those occupations whose competencies are based on theoretical or abstract knowledge, usually obtained through higher education. According to him, people performing such competencies of a particular profession are called professionals. He further declares that the activities of a profession involve an intellectual activity, which requires professional accountability where a practitioner in the profession adheres to certain ethical codes of conduct. Starr, in Wise (2005:319) defines a profession as an

occupation that regulates itself through a systematic specialised knowledge, which requires training and collegial discipline that has a base in technical knowledge which has a service provision orientation rather than a profit orientation.

Literature also suggests that professions have a history and reputation as privileged work with helpful and planned objectives (WordIQ 2008:123). Traditionally, professionals were characterised by occupational practices reflecting unusual, general and systematic knowledge attributes which entitled them to organisational and operational autonomy governed by an internalised code of ethics (Farrugia 1996:30). Such occupations, to a certain extent, were static and these professions formed a system in which the middle class established cultural control and social status (WordIQ 2008:123). This traditional model of defining a profession is quite rigid and fails to recognise the flexible and evolutionary progress developing within different occupations. Farrugia (1996:30) brings in a flexible model as illustrated in Figure 2.1 below:

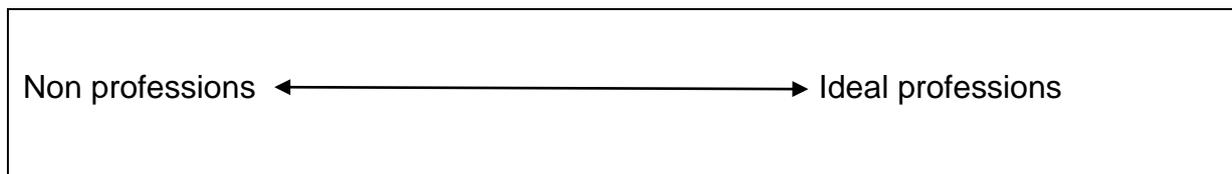


Figure 2.1: Two poles set at the opposite ends

Figure 2.1 illustrates two poles set at the opposite ends. Occupations exhibiting, to a greater degree, traits consistent with professions are placed close to ideal professions and those occupations that do not exhibit a profession's traits are placed on the other end of the continuum. Placing an occupation on a continuum would depend on its degree of substantive theory, validated practice, operational autonomy, organisational autonomy, its developmental quality, prestige and esteem. This model illustrates professions as non-static, and shifting their positions on the continuum as they improve or lose their degree of professional characteristics on the above-mentioned criteria.

Nicholls (2000:371), on the other hand, defines a professional as a person who has undergone a lengthy period of professional training in a body of abstract knowledge,

who is controlled by a code of ethics and professional values, and committed to the core business of the organisation. From the definitions above, indications are that a professional is a practitioner (like a teacher) who undergoes a period of training, through the help of structures such as learner support, in a specific mode of delivery such as distance education(DE), where an intellectually based body of abstract knowledge, together with practical skills, are learned and mastered. After such development, the practitioner uses the acquired related knowledge and skills to provide services which serve public interest.

Ferrugia (1996:28) explains the functions of a professional as a declaration, based on ones' beliefs, knowledge, experience and values. The functions of a professional have connotations of a vow or a promise, which adds to the meaning of the term *profession*. Once the vow has been made, acceptance into the particular society and recognition of the status of the profession is granted, although there are exceptions depending on the nature and the particular conditions under which a particular profession is operating. This view, therefore, regards the profession as greater than mere abstract knowledge acquisition and practice. Furthermore, this view contends that a profession involves a vow made, or a promise to abide by a certain code of ethics and values. Such a declaration signifies the existence of a contract, where the practitioner agrees to abide by a certain code of professional practice. Deviations from the terms of the vow may result in the disqualification of the practitioner from the profession (Matee 2009:19). Matee (2009:19) further emphasises that once the professional is admitted into the profession he or she has to comply with the practices within that profession, in order to maintain the status of such a professional.

Connely and Rosenberg (2003:3) indicate the following characteristic norms as a sum of requirements, to maintain or elevate an occupation to the status of a profession, which meticulously summarises the definitions given above, as follows:

- Prescribed periods of training and induction
- The degree and complexity of knowledge required in the provision of an unique, definite and essential service

- The development of a skill and knowledge base required throughout the career of the professional
- Code of ethics that is clear and well interpreted
- A comprehensive self-governing body of practitioners
- Determined salary scales based on certain criteria such as years of experience or a particular qualification within that profession
- Specialisation and acquisition of expertise in the field of practice
- Substantial authority over actions taken in practice and taking responsibility for judgement made within the scope of professional autonomy

From the above, it follows that society does however require of professionals to provide expert service to the public with excellence, competence and effectiveness in order for society to afford a particular occupation the trust and prestige status of a particular profession (Connely & Rosenberg 2003:3). Many professions would thus require the continuing education or upgrading, or recertification or renewal of continuous practice in order to maintain the professional status of that profession. As will be argued in Chapter 3 of this study, through the structures such as learner support backed by the delivery mode of DE, the re-certification or a continuous renewal of practice of a particular profession, for example teaching, can be enhanced and maintained. Since an attempt has been made to define the term *profession*, the following section will now discuss the term *development*.

Bopape (2006:28) refers to *development* as the process of developing or being developed, a special state of growth or advancement. The word *develop* means to grow and become more mature, advanced, effective or elaborate. The Dictionary of Education (2000:175) defines development as growth or change in structure, function or organisation, constituting an advance in size. For the purpose of this study, it is agreed that when teachers grow or advance further in their profession, there is development. This development can be achieved through pre-service and in-

service activities. This leads the discussion to a necessary concept for the professional, namely professional development (PD).

Van Niekerk (2002:2) defines PD as a process consisting of orientation, in-service education and continuing education for the purpose of promoting the development of personnel within any employment setting, consistent with the goals and the responsibilities of the employer and the profession. Nicholls (2000:371) explains PD as the enhancement of the knowledge, skills and understanding of individuals or group in a learning context that may be identified by themselves or their institutions. Nicholls (2000:372) further indicates that in higher education PD involves the improvement of quality of teaching and learning of the researcher or teacher. PD promotes the culture of lifelong learning where opportunities for individuals to extend their knowledge base, skills and teaching activities are provided. Simmonds (2003:169) notes that professional development involves activities that help the professional to keep his/her skills, knowledge and expertise current and up to date. Vrasidas and Zembylas (2004:326) further state that PD has certain common levels classified as:

- individual
- group/programme
- departmental
- divisional and
- the professional association

According to them, *the professional* (including employer organisations and professional organisations) thus has the responsibility to keep abreast with current development in the profession, in order to improve practice and keep up with peers in the profession. In-training learning experiences serve to enhance the knowledge and skills base of the professional in order that the service to consumers may be improved.

Ferrugia (1996:29) further explains that PD has certain implications for the practitioner. Firstly, it involves a long and progressive path where knowledge and practice are enhanced. Secondly, those individuals within the profession should be engaged in continuous vocational development beyond academic training and qualification. And thirdly, that a professional cannot operate in the wilderness; there is a need in all professions for collaboration and an appreciation of the professional services rendered. It is therefore essential that a community of professionals be established where networking and discussions are used to enhance quality development and practice.

Bringing focus more closely to PD of teachers, Matee (2009:72) defines PD as career-long, context-specific, continuous endeavours that are guided by standards, grounded in the educator's own work, focused on student learning, tailored to the educator's stages of career development. Similarly, Fishman, Best, Foster and Marx (2000:3) define professional development of teachers as fundamentally concerned with the educators' learning: changes in the knowledge, beliefs and attitudes that educators possess that lead to the acquisition of new skills, new concepts and new processes related to the work of teaching and learning. These scholars base their definition on teaching as profession. According to them, the purpose of PDT is, therefore, to develop, implement and share practices, knowledge and values that address the needs of the society utilising the services of the teaching profession. In the process, the educator's attitudes, beliefs and knowledge are transformed and integrated into teaching practice in order to maximise effective learning for learners.

Based on the above discussions, this study perceives PD as skills, attitude, practices and knowledge attained for both personal growth and career advancement. Thus PD encompasses all types of facilitated learning opportunities, ranging from school or college of education to formal coursework, conferences and informal learning. A wide variety of people, such as teachers, military officers and non-commissioned officers, health care professionals, lawyers, accountants and engineers continuously engage in PD. Individuals may participate in PD because of an interest in lifelong learning, a sense of moral obligation, to maintain and improve professional

competence, enhance career progression, keep abreast of new technology and practice, or to comply with professional regulatory organisations.

2.3 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS: ISSUES AND TRENDS

The continuous growth of professionals' knowledge and skills as well as the improvement of the attitude towards their responsibilities are essential parts of development in all professions, and teaching is no exception (Steyn, 2010:156). In education, PD focuses particularly on the teacher as the key to improving learner performance (Desimone, Smith & Ueno, 2006:178).

King and Newman (2001:86) believe that as "teachers have the most direct, sustained contact with learners, as well as considerable control over what is taught and the climate of learning, it is reasonably assumed that improving teachers' knowledge, attitude, skills and dispositions is one of the most critical steps to improving learner achievement". As stated in the preceding discussions, it is therefore necessary to find appropriate PD approaches so as to ensure that all teachers, even experienced teachers, are equipped with the necessary teaching practice strategies that will improve learner performance (Steyn, 2010:157).

Learning to teach, like learning in many other professions, is a lifelong process (Bartell, 2005:23). Bartell (2005:24) further explains that continued learning is the hallmark of most professions such as teaching and PDT is a crucial component of this process. The relationship between students' learning and teachers' continued learning (through PD activities) cannot be over-emphasised. PDT has changed during the past two decades from a "one size fits all" model to more continuing, content- and pedagogically-focused programmes (Brandt, 2003:13).

There are various definitions of PDT. For example, according to Maila (2003:19)

Teacher-educator professional development refers to institutional or non-institutional, professional and academic programmes aimed at improving the

curriculum development skills of teachers and their professional growth and professional advancement on an on-going basis.

This definition signifies that PDT goes beyond the classroom activities as it impacts not only on curricular issues but on the broader professional activities as well. Bopape (2006:29) maintains that, with PDT, teachers are being asked to master new skills, assume life responsibilities and improve their practices as well as their attitudes. In order to meet these expectations, teachers need to deepen their content knowledge and learn new methods of teaching. All these activities fall under the area of PDT. Therefore, PDT aims at a holistic view of the growth of a teacher from a novice to an advanced practitioner. This kind of development plays an important role in successful education reform as it serves as a bridge between where prospective and experienced teachers are now and where they will need to be in order to meet the challenges of guiding all learners in achieving higher standards of learning and achievement (Bopape, 2006:30). Once teachers have developed such strategies, continued learning will improve and in this way, teachers will practise or unlock activities characterised by quality teaching.

On the other hand, Kennedy & McKay (2011:554) define PDT as follows:

Professional development of teachers consists of all natural learning experiences and those conscious and planned activities which are intended to be of direct or indirect benefit to the individual, group or school and which contribute through these to the quality of education in the classroom. It is the process by which, alone and with others, teachers review, renew and extend their commitment as change agents to the moral purposes of teaching; and by which they acquire and develop critically the knowledge, skills and emotional intelligence essential to good professional thinking, planning and practice with children, young people and colleagues through each phase of their teaching lives.

This definition adopts a developmental, learning-focused conception of continuous professional development (CPD) of teachers, but it is worth noting that CPD itself is often associated with externally imposed accountability systems (Kennedy, 2007:96).

Furthermore, it is equally reasonable to assume that the lack of conceptual clarity relating to CPD, as suggested above, pertains to all stages of a PDT, including early professional development (EPD).

Kennedy and MacKay (2011:555), describe EPD as the early stages of a teacher's career (about two years after the induction period). However, they further state that "this is by no means universally agreed". These scholars further argue that CPD and EPD are two distinct phases in teacher development and therefore should be treated as such. Equally, they accept that the concept of EPD is an emerging area of interest, with a fairly limited body of literature addressing this stage of development explicitly.

Bartell (2005:22) says that during pre-20th century it was assumed that teachers would become fully qualified to teach by virtue of what they have learned in their college or university preparation programmes and that no further learning would be required. As time went on, the complexity of teaching expertise was recognised and it was generally agreed that even well-prepared or qualified teachers are still novices and still have much to learn. Currently policies in many countries recognise the need for teachers to continue to learn and develop throughout their teaching career. The old "lifetime credentials" that were once given to teachers when they completed a programme of studies is becoming quite rare. Most countries now require that teachers participate in PD programmes and renewal activities to keep their credentials informed and active (Bartell, 2005:22).

More recent policies in different countries have begun to address the induction phase as an important and distinct learning period. These policies, which are related to teacher certification, recognise that good or successful teachers need to keep on developing themselves if they are to be effective. Learning to teach, like learning in many other professions, is a lifelong process which can be achieved through the employment of effective learner support services. Van Der Merwe (2008:15) supports this view when he contends that development of teachers is required on a continuous basis since initial teacher education cannot contain all of the proportional knowledge that is needed if one is to become a successful teacher.

Bartell (2005:23) explains that even contemporary school reform efforts recognise the importance of PDT as a crucial part of the implementation plan. Therefore, when new curricular materials or a new instructional approach is adopted by a school or district, that adoption must include a developmental component in order to help all teachers, even experienced veterans, to successfully implement the new approaches. Bartell (2005:24) further emphasises that curriculum planners should know that implementation is highly dependent upon the understanding and the ability of the teacher to implement the new approach. From the above, it follows that PDT has to be integrated with any curriculum design of a particular teacher education programme right from the beginning.

Matee (2009:73) states that different scholars, in different periods, depending on specific contexts, used the term PDT differently. For example, terms like on-the-job training or teacher professional development (Lewis, 2004), staff training, in-service education and training (INSET) (Craft 1996), staff development (Bolam & McMahon 2004), professional growth (Van Der Merwe, 2008) or continuing professional teacher development (Steyn, 2010) that refer to teacher development, were used. In all these terms the common feature is that PDT always involves activities, actions, processes, policies, programmes and procedures employed to facilitate and support teachers so that their performance and potential may be enhanced.

For the purpose of this study, the term PDT is used, which suggests that this process (PDT) envisages scenarios such as a continuous career-long path in which teachers fine-tune their professional teaching strategies so as to meet their needs and those of their learners. As such, it directly addresses teachers' teaching styles and the kind of decisions teachers make when mediating their learners' activities (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004:5). Furthermore, the argument in this study is that PDT is to be understood as a job-embedded commitment that teachers make in order to further the purpose of the profession while addressing their own particular needs and those of the community they serve. This study also argues that among the forces driving the process of PDT, are learner support services like the use of technology for teaching and learning. It is equally argued that education reform efforts, over the years, have emphasised DE as an important option to carry out and accomplish the mission of PDT.

The vision of this study on PD is grounded in faith in teachers, that is, that teachers are positive and willing to develop themselves; the researcher further argues that the planners should strive for quality when designing a programme for PDT. It means that PDT should not just be a workshop or a seminar process for the sake of it. This study therefore agrees with Diaz-Maggioli (2004:6) when he outlines the characteristics of quality PDT as the following: a well-planned programme with clear objectives, systematic construction of the programme, teachers themselves take part in decision-making the programme should have adequate support systems, should be dominated by inquiry-based ideas and has to be growth-driven. In this way PDT will help teachers develop the content knowledge and skills they need to succeed in their classrooms. Quality or effective PDT, Vrasidas & Glass (2004:2) argue, is often cited as a key lever for moving education off “dead-centre” towards a better future. According to them:

math students whose teachers have received professional development in working with special populations outperform their peers by more than a full grade level, and students whose teachers have received professional development in higher-order thinking skills outperformed their peers by 40% of grade level).

The above citation shows that teachers who are continuously undergoing effective teacher development programmes throughout their careers will always act as real primary agents for change and innovation in education (Akkerman, Lam & Admiraal, 2004: 249). As Mule (2006: 205) explains, teachers who are exposed to quality development will always be recognised as active participants in their own professional growth, knowledge constructors, inquirers, and agents of change. Quality PDT is essential so as to increase teachers’ knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs so that they may enable all learners to learn in high levels and enjoy learning.

PDT that is most effective in improving teacher practice is results-oriented, well-planned, constructivist in nature and job embedded. Quality teacher development has the power to increase educators’ knowledge of academic content and teaching skills while changing what educators believe about learning and how learners can interact successfully with their peers. Powerful PDT can transform schools into

places in which all learners (such as upgrading teachers) are deeply engaged in learning and making meaning of their lives. As will be argued in the following section namely 2.4, it follows that effective and well-planned teacher development programmes may help to mould well-resourced teachers who will in turn deliver quality teaching.

2.4 THE NATURE OF QUALITY TEACHING

Quality teaching can be defined as teaching that maximises learning for all learners. Learning, in this definition, is comprehensive growth, continuing development in knowledge, skills and attitudes (Glatthorn & Fox, 1996:1). Fostering quality teaching can best be accomplished if teaching strategies and approaches are built on a sound PDT programme. Comprehensive growth is accomplished by teachers who have mastered the basic skills of teaching and are moving forward (with the help of teacher development amongst others) in their development towards advanced skills.

2.4.1 Characteristics of quality teaching

Based on the above definition, this study suggests the following as the main characteristics of quality teaching:

- Teaching towards understanding and helping learners become independent thinkers
- Teachers that share their expertise, learn from peers, and collaborate on real decision-making processes
- The use of a variety of teaching methods related to knowledge, skills, attitudes and practice
- Teaching methods that focus on deepening the learners' content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge
- Promotion of inquiry-based and active learning, individually and collectively

- Teaching that is continuously changing and is innovative (from basic to advanced teaching skills)
- Appropriate and maximal use of learner support services and resources
- Teaching strategies that have proactive assessment methods

2.4.2 Levels of teaching skills

In the course of their work, teachers enter a cycle of constant development such as mastering and using advanced skills, seeking new ideas, learning better ways of helping learners to learn and continuing to grow professionally. In this way they are on their way of executing quality teaching. As part and parcel of attempting to analyse quality teaching and the process of PDT, Glatthorn & Fox (1996:2) present a conceptualisation of teaching skills as embracing three levels: basic, intermediate and advanced level (see table 2.1 below).

Table 2.1: Levels of teaching skills

Behaviour category	Basic skills	Intermediate skills	Advanced skills
Model of teaching	Uses direct instruction	Uses model recommended by experts in field	Uses several models, especially constructivism
Curriculum	Implements district guide	Integrates within subject	Integrates two or more subjects, providing for enrichment and radiation
Content knowledge	Avoids content errors	Demonstrates sound and current content knowledge	Enables students to understand deep structure of subject
Classroom climate	Maintains orderly environment, uses most of class time for learning	Maintains learning-focused environment, maximises time on task	Varies environment to suit learning goal, providing for co-operative interaction, relates time use to learning priorities
Lesson structure	Provides overview, states objectives	Also makes transitions effectively and summarises lesson	Varies lesson structure when necessary to encourage discovery
Learning activities	Provides activities that relate to objectives	Varies activities	Emphasises and varies active learning activities
Assessment	Checks for understanding	Also uses assessment data to modify instruction	Uses authentic assessment measures, giving feedback to students
Communication	Explains clearly, questions sometimes ineffective	Uses learner answers to advance discussion	Also structures discussion to foster learner-learner interaction

As table 2.1 indicates, teaching skills are conceptualised as including eight categories of teacher behaviour. In each of the categories, it is hypothesised that teachers move through three levels, each one more complex and more comprehensive than the preceding one. It goes without saying that most novice teachers (as well as some less competent and inexperienced teachers) will be at the basic level. Teachers who have mastered the basic skills will move on to the intermediate level if they are motivated and have undergone effective teacher development programmes.

Expert teachers will function at the advanced level and these are teachers who are perceived to be involved in quality teaching. It needs to be pointed out that an individual teacher's progress may at times be uneven; that is, a possibility exists that a teacher may be functioning at the basic level with respect to learner assessment and at the intermediate level in lesson structure. Although this model could be useful to principals and teachers as they reflect about their improvement goals, it has never been tested scientifically. Furthermore, one doubts if all teachers acquire teaching skills in the same way as prescribed by this model. This study also argues that, in real life, there should be teachers who can move from basic skills to the advanced skill level depending on the motivation, capabilities, developmental programmes they are exposed to, as well as their passion for teaching. Surely, external factors such learner support services or teaching resources have a bearing on the advancement of a particular teacher from one level to another, something that has been ignored by this model.

Interestingly, this model suggests that teachers at the advanced level vary the methods of teaching, depending on the learners and the learning goals. Therefore, most teachers at the advanced level are probably using what has come to be termed as a constructivist model of teaching. Although this concept (constructivism) is discussed in detail in Chapter 3 (see section 3.2), it is so important that it requires a brief and special examination here.

A constructivist learning model is an intervention where contextualised activities (tasks) are used to provide learners with an opportunity to discover and collaboratively construct meaning as the intervention unfolds. In this way learners are respected as individuals and teachers act as facilitators rather than as the "know-alls" (Tobias & Duffy, 2009:90). Rather than being just one more learning theory, constructivism seems to be a major rethinking of learning and teaching, one that will have a lasting impact on both curriculum and instruction as learners are allowed to discover, enjoy, interact and arrive at their own, socially verified version of the truth (Glatthorn & Fox, 1996:5).

Knowing how teachers develop professionally can help principals in fostering and encouraging continued growth. As explained above, teachers vary in many other

significant ways, for example, in their level of motivation and passion, in their moral development, in the life stage in which they find themselves, and, most important of all, in their ability to teach. Novice teachers are those at the first stage of career development, those who use direct instruction and implement district guides for most of the time. Quality teachers are those who are competent and continue to grow; and who are mostly functioning at an advanced level of teaching skills. They are always high in motivation and functioning, the core of each successful teaching and learning encounter. However, principals should remember that teachers are professional individuals. No generalisation or classification system can ever take the place of sensitivity to the needs and strengths of individual teachers.

2.4.3 Developmental stages of teachers

Bearing in mind the levels of teaching skills as discussed above, this study will now introduce the developmental stages of teachers which can be enhanced by well-planned and effective teacher development programmes, coupled with well-planned learner support services. There are multiple theories in the literature that describe the process of learning to teach and the changes that a teacher experiences during these processes.

One theory that has been used to describe a teacher's movement through his or her career has incorporated developmental stages of teachers. Like any theory relating to developmental stages, the teachers' developmental stage theory assumes that stages are distinct phases that teachers experience, and are to a large extent hierarchical in nature (Stroot & Stedman, 2008:1). These scholars also agree that "it is important for principals and other officials to understand the stages of development in order to provide adequate support for teachers as they strive to be more effective in their classroom."

Stages describing the development of teachers have been created at the pre-service and in in-service levels, but for the purpose of this study focus will only be on the in-service stage. Stroot & Stedman (2008:3) consolidated the following four in-service teachers' developmental stages which were initially identified by Bartell (2005) as:

- *Survival stage.* The major concern of teachers is to cope on a daily basis, as teachers begin to question their personal and professional competence and their desire to teach. During the survival stage, the teachers are asking questions such as “Can I really do this work day after day?” or “Can I make it until the end of the week?” Therefore survivors are focused on themselves and their own needs, and have little understanding of their learners and their needs. In order to offer assistance to teachers in the survival stage, it is important to provide on-site support for specific teaching skills and suggestions to meet the group and individual needs of the learners. Often in the survival stage, teachers do not take responsibility for what occurs in their classroom. In the same vein, Glatthorn & Fox (1996:13) use the term “novice teachers”, that is, teachers who function at the basic level (see Table 2.1). These authors agree that the teaching style of teachers at the survival and novice stages is often teacher-directed and they operate with little innovations. To a large extent, they apply what they have learned at the college or university and have difficulty in incorporating new ideas. Therefore, argue Stroot & Stedman (2008:4), survival teachers also need adequate and well-planned support services so as to help them develop and assist them to present their lessons.
- *Consolidation stage.* By the second year, many teachers have entered the consolidation stage, and have begun to focus on instruction and the needs of individual children. Teachers in the consolidation stage may ask questions like: “How can I help a child who does not seem to be learning?” or “How can I deal with a child with specific discipline problem?” They start to consult their colleagues. These teachers are ready to exchange ideas with teachers in similar stages of development and network with other colleagues in similar areas of expertise to facilitate further exchange of ideas. Like survival teachers, this group requires a wide range of support services in order to have materials and ideas ready to meet specific needs of the children in their classes. Glatthorn & Fox (1996) call these “marginal” teachers. According to them, these teachers are still struggling to master several of the fundamental skills of teaching.

- *Renewal stage.* Teachers at this stage are in their third or fourth year of teaching and gradually becoming competent in the practice of teaching. Teachers have conquered various instructional strategies. They ask questions like, “What are new materials, techniques, approaches that I can try in my classroom?” or “What is the teacher in my area of specialisation doing in the next class?” Renewal teachers may share some of the ideas that they may be using in their classrooms, and brainstorm modifications or similar strategies with other teachers. They are often interested in professional development opportunities that are available through local, state or national organisations.

On the other hand, Glatthorn & Fox (1996) call teachers in this third stage “passive teachers”. Here they differ with Stroot & Stedman (2008), because they argue that their third stage of PDT refers to teachers who try several things out and as such may be frustrated by them and become de-motivated. They have mastered the basic skills, but are not interested in moving to a higher level of PDT (advanced level). It is this stage as identified by Glatthorn & Fox (1996) that is confusing and highly contradictory.

- *Maturity stage.* This stage is characterised by teachers who begin to question themselves and their entire teaching practice, and focus on insights into, and perspectives and beliefs regarding teaching and learners. They begin to ask deeper and more abstract questions about their philosophy of teaching and the impact they may be making in and out of the school setting. Questions include, “How will school change society?” or “What is my role to assist change?” Such teachers should be encouraged to attend conferences and seminars and to accept leadership positions in their schools, community or professional organisations. Glatthorn & Fox (1996) call these “productive teachers”. Here they tend to agree with Stroot & Stedman (2008) as they explain that productive teachers are those who are competent and continue to grow and who function at the advanced model (see Table 2.1).

A somewhat different perspective of stages of teacher development has been highlighted by Bartell (2005:27). Her argument takes us beyond the “teacher behaviour model” we have discussed above and focuses on the cognitive process of teachers, that is, how teachers think during their development. She explains that teachers think differently at different stages in their development. Furthermore, she emphasises that at each successive stage, teachers develop their teaching repertoire and think about their own teaching in more complex ways. The stages are described in Table 2.2:

Table 2.2: Cognitive levels of professional development of teachers

LEVEL	CATEGORISATION	CHARACTERISTICS
Stage 1 Novice level	Deliberate	Novices are learning the commonplaces and some context-free rules of teaching. This is the stage for learning objective facts and features of situations. Gaining experience seems more important than verbal information to the novice.
Stage 2 Advanced beginner level	Insightful	Experience becomes integrated with verbal knowledge and case knowledge is accumulated. Similarities across contexts are recognised.
Stage 3 Competent level	Rational	Teachers make conscious choices about what they are going to do. They set goals and priorities, plan and choose sensible means for reaching the ends they have in mind. They are able to determine what is important and what is not.
Stage 4 Proficient level	Intuitive	Teachers are able to holistically assess the situation and recognise common patterns. They largely draw on their rich case knowledge.
Stage 5 Expert level	Abstract	Experts have both an intuitive grasp of the situation and have accurate pattern-recognition capabilities. They act fluidly and effortlessly. Experts are flexible in their teaching.

Source: Adapted from Bartell, 2005.

This view of PDT, in some instances, is consistent with the models of Glatton & Fox (1996) and Stroot and Stedman (2008) as discussed above. All of them are unanimous in recognising the fact that teaching is a complex, dynamic, interactive and intellectual activity. Bartell (2005:28) emphasises that those professionals who seek to help teachers advance along this continuum of development need to provide appropriate support activities (services), rich dialogue and critical and thoughtful

discussions about teaching practice. Induction programmes that focus only on the survival stage do little to move the teacher beyond that phase.

It needs to be emphasised that the principal's knowledge and understanding of these stages and levels of thinking skills will help him or her to determine the type of interaction that will best facilitate PDT and mentoring. If educationists and principals know that the stages occur in a hierarchical pattern, it is logical that teachers in the earlier stages of development will have needs relating to individualising students' learning and pursuing their own PDT. The stage of development can also help determine the type of interaction that is most beneficial to that teacher. Therefore, it is very important that principals create strategies to identify a teacher's stage of development in order to provide appropriate assistance and support structures for the specific needs of such a teacher.

On the other hand, one cannot assume that a teacher's years of experience are directly related to the teacher's developmental stage, as individual teachers may move through the stages at different rates. In actual fact, few teachers may become expert in their early years. However, beginning teachers need to be exposed to models of expert teaching and also be given opportunities to develop in ways that will encourage expertise as an eventual, long-term goal. Once more, it is equally important to recognise that teachers do not pass through these stages independent of other conditions of their lives.

Depending upon changing personal and professional factors, it is likely that teachers will fluctuate among stages. For example, if a teacher goes through a major crisis, like a divorce process, it is likely that he or she will drop to a lower developmental stage while dealing with this traumatic event. Similarly, if an experienced teacher moves to a totally new school district, he or she is likely to begin the first year (at that school) at a survival or the novice stage of development. Of course this may pass quickly as the teacher draws on past knowledge and experience to begin to function in the new context. These teachers will need assistance with strategies that will help them adjust and become successful in this new context (Stroot & Stedman, 2008:6).

2.5 KEY ASPECTS THAT AFFECT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS

Just as teaching and learning are influenced by a variety of factors, PDT is also affected by variety of aspects that can help or hinder its quality and impact. Therefore, planners should always take aspects such as models, key features and characteristics into consideration when designing any teacher development programme.

2.5.1 Models of professional development of teachers

How PDT should be approached has changed over the last two decades. Traditionally, PDT has been offered from the top down. Ministries and departments of education in various countries decided what needs to be delivered to teachers and implementers in the bureaucratic hierarchy were directed as to how to deliver it (Vrasidas & Glass, 2004:3). Van Der Merwe (2008:15) states that this professional development paradigm focussed on a deficit-training-mastery model that implied a deficit in teacher skills and knowledge, and where change was a once-off event with teachers being passive participants. Van Der Merwe (2008:16) eloquently sums up the status of professional development efforts pre-1995:

Smith and Gillespie (2007:29) labelled this model of workshops, conference sessions, seminars, lectures and other short-term training events as the Traditional Professional Development model because it was the standard, most commonly offered type of professional development. It needs to be stated that in some quarters or institutions, this traditional kind of professional development is still being practised. In contrast to this, the Job-embedded Professional Development Model, which became popular during the 1990s, locates training within the school or local context and makes use of activities such as study circles or inquiry groups, thereby allowing teachers greater participation in shaping the content of teaching closely tied to their own contexts (Van Der Merwe, 2008:18). Clark (2002:44) argues that this model developed in response to research identifying the ineffective features of traditional professional development which is typified by conceptual vagueness, a non-collaborative approach as well as mere workshops that are void of inquiry-based

activities. It represents a key shift in agency when teachers became active learners, shaping their own professional growth through reflective participation in PD programmes and in practice.

Vrasidas and Glass (2004:3) call this new, modern approach of PDT “*Contemporary Professional Development*”. They also advocate that this approach strives to involve all stakeholders in the planning, development, presentation and evaluation of the programme at hand. Furthermore Vrasidas and Glass (2004:3) emphasise that this model is always co-ordinated with broader school improvements efforts rather than it being delivered in isolation. Effective follow-up activities are always structured to ensure that this approach makes a difference.

Villegas-Reimers (2003:76) conducted an extensive review of the literature on this new model of PDT which concisely sums up the main characteristics and viewpoints of it. She identifies seven characteristics of this new perspective from literature:

- The new model is based on constructivism rather than on a “transmission-oriented model”. It means that teachers are treated as active learners who are engaged in the concrete tasks of teaching, assessment, observation, social interaction and reflection. Furthermore, it is argued that teachers generate knowledge and meaning from an interaction between their experiences and their ideas.
- It is perceived to be a long-term process as it acknowledges the fact that teachers learn over time. Rather than one-off presentations, a series of related experiences are most effective as it allows teachers to relate prior knowledge to new experiences.
- It is perceived as a process that takes place within a particular context. Whereas traditional staff development opportunities did not relate “training” to actual classroom experiences, the most effective form of PDT is that which is based in schools and is related to the daily activities of teachers and learners. PDT opportunities that are most successful are “on-the-job learning” activities such as study groups, action research and portfolios.

- This process is one that is intimately linked to school reform, as PD is a process of culture building and not of mere skill training and knowledge accumulation. Teachers should be empowered as fully-fledged professionals. Therefore they should receive the same treatment that they themselves are expected to give their learners. A PDT programme that is not supported by the school or curricular reform is not effective.
- In this approach, a teacher is perceived as a reflective practitioner, that is, someone who enters the profession with a certain knowledge base, and who will acquire new knowledge and experiences based on that prior knowledge. In this sense, the role of PDT is to assist the teacher in building new pedagogical theories and practices and to help develop their expertise in the teaching field.
- The PDT programme is conceived as a collaborative process. Learning at its best involves interaction between learners, as meanings are shared, information is exchanged and problems are solved co-operatively. This approach argues that, while isolated, individual work and reflection are sometimes encouraged. The most effective PDT programmes facilitate meaningful interactions between teachers, administrators, parents, facilitators and community members. “Like the constructivist proponents argue, learning in this sense becomes a social arena for examining knowledge, for testing what one knows and for increasing one’s understanding” (Glatthorn & Fox :1996:6).
- The PDT programme ought to be different in diverse settings; and even within a single setting, it can have a variety of dimensions. It means that the needs, cultural beliefs and practices of a school determine which PDT model is most beneficial to their particular situation. Different factors in a workplace such as school structure and school culture can influence the teachers’ sense of efficacy and professional development. The importance of paying attention to context so that the “optimal mix” of PDT process can be

identified and planned is strongly argued here. As a result, a PDT programme must be considered within a framework of social, economic and political trends and events. Furthermore, a critical factor in education is the uniqueness of the individual settings. What works in one situation may not work in another because of the enormous variability in educational contexts. Each context will thus need its own collection of educational settings such as resources or learner support services.

Of particular importance and relevance here are the key terms, namely constructivism, context, communities of learners, reflective practitioner, collaborative process and diverse settings. Combined, they speak of PDT programmes taking into account and being developed around the context wherein the programme is offered. In addition, this model of PDT programmes affords teachers the opportunity to actively take charge of their own PDT programme, shared in a community of colleagues through collaborative reflective practices.

Table 2.3 summarises the features of a visionary (contemporary) teacher development model as opposed to traditional development model:

Table 2.3 Traditional vs visionary professional development of teachers

Characteristics of traditional professional development	Characteristics of visionary (modern) professional development
Top-down decision-making	Collaborative decision-making
A “fix-it” approach	A growth-driven approach
Lack of programme ownership among teachers	Collective construction of programmes
Prescriptive ideas	Inquiry-based ideas
One-size-fits-all techniques	Tailor made techniques
Fixed and untimely delivery methods	Varied and timely delivery methods
Little or no follow-up	Adequate support systems
De-contextualised programmes	Context-specific programmes
Lack of proper evaluation	Proactive/planned evaluation
Deficit-training model/short-term training	Flexible and continuous development

Adapted from Diaz-Maggioli, 2004.

Table 2.3 shows that traditional professional development advocates once-off training that encourages imposed activities which may not even be interesting and relevant to the teachers' needs. On the contrary, visionary professional development emphasises a growth-driven approach which involves effective support systems that foster inquiry-based learning on the part of the teacher.

It means that for a PDT programme to be effective and successful, it should heavily lean towards a visionary professional development model and be planned with the utmost care it deserves and should also take the following key factors and underlying principles into consideration:

2.5.2 Key features of a PDT programme

Planning and designing a teachers' development programme should not be taken lightly. One of the most pressing questions faced by the teaching profession today is whether the idealised vision of a PDT model can be realised. Much has been discovered in recent years about how humans learn. In this era of many challenges (such as advanced technology) and increased accountability, it is necessary to reposition PDT programmes so that the collective efforts of teachers, learners and administrators result in enhanced learning for all members of the teaching community (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004:1). Therefore, contends Diaz-Maggioli (2004:14), planners of PDT programmes should bear in mind the following facts when planning or repositioning these programmes:

- In order for teachers to develop ownership of a PDT programme, they need to be active participants in its planning and in tailoring so that it meets their needs.
- A PDT programme should not be regarded as an administrative duty, but rather as a career-long endeavour aimed at unlocking the potential that will contribute to the success of all learners and teachers. A mandatory PDT

programme that is offered only when it is convenient to the administrators or management structures has little to offer to teachers.

- A PDT programme will only have an effect on learning if it involves the entire school community. A PDT programme should involve all stakeholders in the planning, development, presentation and evaluation of opportunities it presents for teachers.
- Teachers fulfil different functions in their jobs. They are not only mediators of student learning, but also administrators of information, counsellors, facilitators, and resources for parents and the broader community. Their PDT programme should be embedded in their daily schedule; they should not be expected to devote their own free time to programmes that are divorced from the context in which they work. Therefore, the PDT programme should always be placed in the context of the teachers' environment.
- Transferring new ideas gained from a teacher development programme to the classroom is perhaps one of the most difficult tasks a teacher faces. For this to happen, well-structured learner support programmes, that are associated with the PDT programme, are needed. An attempt is always made in providing learner support services to pre-service teachers; yet there are inadequate services for in-service teachers at different institutions. For example, in a DE setting where a tutor is not always physically present, technological support (like the use of computer programmes) can help such tutors to provide the assistance learners need to engage in learning tasks that ensure successful completion of assignments and promote self-regulated learning. This instructional model suggests that tutors can use technological media to design tasks, relative to the skills gained during a PDT programme, consequently encouraging learners to assume responsibility for their own learning.
- Planners of PDT programmes should be aware that teachers are talented and devoted individuals who have pre-existing and enormous experience in teaching and possess a wealth of knowledge that must be explored and

shared. Therefore, professional development activities must always honour the complexities of teachers' practices and talents.

- Teachers differ from one another in terms of their professional knowledge, that is, each teacher is unique. In particular, planners should be cognisant of the fact that teachers could be in different stages (see section 2.5.3 above) in their careers. Thus, PDT activities should be planned around the stage(s) teachers find themselves in. This diversity demands of planners to design any PDT programme with care and rigour.
- There has to be a systematic evaluation of a PDT programme. Given the complex nature of teaching and learning, assessing development often seems difficult or impossible. Many PDT programmes are not evaluated, nor are their results communicated to the relevant professionals (in this case, teachers) that are supposed to benefit from them. A learning organisation should yield knowledge that enriches not only the immediate community, but the profession as a whole. It is a disservice to the teaching community when the effectiveness of a PDT programme is not probed and the results overlooked.

In order to ensure that a PDT programme is congruent with these or at least most of these factors, its organisational framework needs to be planned with the utmost care. Furthermore, for the framework of a PDT to function effectively, planners should promote collaborative reflection on learning data, which should be gathered and shared across grades and disciplines. Once the PDT data are shared, designers should involve as many stakeholders as possible, so that the PDT programme addresses the needs and aspirations of all affected. Finding a way of guiding own PDT, whether as a learner or as a qualified teacher, does not need to be difficult or complicated. Jasper (2006:32) cites five basic requirements which any teacher should bear in mind before being engaged in the process of PDT.

The development should be:

- relevant to the teachers' needs
- easily defined
- achievable in the time available
- cost-effective
- timely
- make resources/support services (technology) available to enhance learning

Jasper (2006:31) further explains that these key factors can easily be used to assess the practicality of any PDT activity that any teacher may be engaged in. Various questions can be asked within the framework of these features which will enable the teacher to understand why a particular programme has been identified and how to go about in achieving best results. This will help to direct any PDT activity, both by ensuring that whatever is chosen is relevant to teacher's work and adds value to his or her career. When phrasing such questions the following operative words should be remembered:

- What?
- Why?
- When?
- Where?
- Who?
- How?

Jasper (2006:33) refers to them as 6WH cues. Using these cues, the following questions can be asked before a teacher can embark on any PDT programme:

- What kind of professional activity do I want to undertake?
- Why do I want to undertake it?
- When will I find the time to undertake it?
- Where will I undertake it?
- Who will support me in undertaking it?
- How will the development be undertaken?

By analysing Jasper's (2006) model of PDT, it follows that activities that are chosen should enable a teacher to work better, and inform his practice as a teacher. This might seem obvious, but many practitioners have found that they start a programme of development only to find that they will not be able to use the new knowledge and skills in their work or they will not be appropriate or relevant for the work they are doing. It stands to reason that if the acquired knowledge is not used in some way, it can quickly become obsolete and forgotten; the new skills, if not practised, can become rusty and may be dangerous and clumsy. It is important, therefore, that teachers ask themselves a couple of questions (like the ones above) before starting with any PDT activity.

In making the decision to engage in a PDT activity, one needs to make a commitment to see it through, otherwise not only is one wasting time, but one is also risking to become disillusioned and to lose confidence along the way. It is far better to identify small activities that are achievable and successful, than taking on large activities and not being able to complete them. Furthermore, judgement needs to be made about any staff development activity about whether the costs involved overall will result in sufficient benefit to the work area to warrant the expenditure. Gone are the days when professionals come together, spend days in luxury hotels, consuming food without any achievable results that do not help the teacher to improve his work

and become a better equipped person in his or her profession. To conclude this argument, Jasper (2006:2) states:

Professional development means to advance ourselves as professional practitioners. It assumes that all professionals will continue to develop throughout their working lives – from becoming a student practitioner, to specialised and advanced practice. It assumes that all professionals are to progress beyond the levels of competence assumed at registration and qualification and become proficient or even expert practitioners. This needs the engagement of positive and dedicated instructors and programme designers.

This development does not happen by accident, nor does it happen solely through formal educational processes. The main ways in which practitioners develop professionally, are through the practice of their profession itself and through organised professional activities that come in the form of ongoing PDT that is linked to their daily practice. Professional practice and PDT are inter-dependent and therefore professionals' practice will not develop unless they develop as professionals.

Opportunities provided in a professional work or practice should promote active learning. Thus, it is important that these experiences or opportunities be united within a coherent framework that provides teachers with a clear view of the connections between what they learn during PDT and their practice (Vrasidas & Glass, 2004:3). In addition, there is no space in most professionals' lives for the luxury of PD activities that do not arise from and inform practice. The link between PDT and professional practice is therefore indistinguishable (Jasper, 2006:36).

However, PDT is a unique development activity which has to be implemented wisely. Therefore, Diaz-Maggioli (2004:20) and Vrasidas & Glass (2004:2) provide a list of characteristics that set PDT apart from other training processes:

- *Ongoing.* It has to be on-going since it has to respond adequately to shifting contexts. Teaching activities are not stagnant; therefore PDT processes have to change with demands of different times. The criterion is choosing the right activity at the right time in one's life.
- *Purposeful and clearly articulated.* The sense of purpose stems from the school community itself since they are the ones that better understand their needs and aspirations.
- *Participatory and collaborative.* A PDT programme has to include as many stakeholders as possible who could buy in to the process itself and should aim at ensuring that teachers adequately address the needs of learners.
- *Skill-based and knowledge-based.* Any PDT programme should be built around the pre-existing skills and knowledge of a teacher or a group of teachers. Hence, the programme has to be developmental in terms of both the participants and the staff development process itself. Guskey (2000:79) holds the same view when he suggests that teacher development is always intentional, developmental and systematic.
- *Analytic and reflective.* "The specific attention to analysis and reflection calls our attention to the importance of knowing one's path and paying attention as it is followed" (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004:22). This means that as one is involved in the process of teacher development, one has to constantly evaluate progress and check if he or she is on the right track. This will prevent a teacher who is involved in a development programme from taking directions which, although interesting, may have little relevance for what he or she really needs to know. The key to defining the activity is to be able to identify the parameters that set its boundaries. Being able to phrase these with clarity, and being crystal clear about what he or she is trying to achieve, will make the difference between success and failure. Defining his or her parameters will give the teacher both a direction and destination and guides all activities.

- *Context-sensitive.* Programmes should be built upon a strong professional culture of that particular school or cluster of particular schools, for example, the professionalism of teaching or the importance of shared vision and goals. Those that are attached to the school are better equipped to design the envisaged programme to be implemented.
- *Not complex or bureaucratic.* No PDT programme should be so complex or bureaucratic that it consumes inordinate amounts of the teachers' time. The PDT programme should always be user-friendly, with clear objectives and methods of implementation as well ensuring as well structured content. The activities must involve active participation with constructive feedback and teachers should not sit through long lectures that have little meaning to their daily work. As constructivists argue, PDT activities should be the ones that will have a lasting impact on both the curriculum and teaching (Glatthorn & Fox, 1996:5). The teachers play the key role in the functioning of a school and it follows, therefore, that any effort towards improving their contribution is of great importance. High priority must be given to staff development and should be part of a planned programme which is part of a healthy school organisation (Isaac, 2006:21).

PDT is often seen as a continuing learning process extending from initial training until retirement, "deep-rooted and lasting for the entire length of one's career in the field of education" (Lewis & Day, 2004:145). In view of the importance of the process of PDT discussed above, it goes without saying that moving towards a well-planned and well-designed programme is a priority in national systems around the world. In addition, Munonde (2007:51) suggests that when designing any PDT programme it is important to remember the following two important functions: improvement of performance in the person's present job; and preparing teachers for future opportunities, responsibilities and tasks as well for the tasks which include the need to stand back and take a broad, reflective look at the process of education in schools rather than the practice of teaching.

According to Steyn (1999:211), the design of PDT programmes has been found to include a number of steps. Hence, she argues that the designers have the responsibility to include the following most important steps in their task. These five steps, which will be discussed hereunder, are diagnosing, planning, implementing, evaluation and maintenance of a development programme.

- *Diagnosing developments needs.* Steyn (1999:212) believes that before planning any PDT programme, a thorough needs analysis, including staff needs, is required since these needs have differing degrees of impact and they reflect the gap between the existing and the desired condition. In addition, Welton (2000:4) points out that the main responsibility of the designers is to determine the development needs of individuals and to have the knowledge and ability to promote and support their development within the overall developmental operation of institutions. He further suggests that this can be done by making time available for informal discussions in which teachers may state their needs through formal interviews or the use of assessment forms.

Munonde (2007:52) maintains that the design for PD programmes for educators may involve a staff development cycle of the following six stages: the identification of staff needs; the analysis of staff needs; the creation and design of the staff development programmes in response to the data gathered and analysed; the carrying out of the staff development programmes; the monitoring of the programmes; and the evaluation of the programmes. Castetter (1996:238) indicates that one way of compiling a list of needs is by using staff meetings, informal discussions, structured interviews, questionnaires and educator observation and survey. To support this, West-Burnman and O'Sullivan (1998:99) maintain that a needs analysis provides the crucial information to ensure that professional learning is appropriate, valid and relevant and suggest a variety of techniques that are essentially concerned with the diagnosis on the basis of evidence in order to inform perceptions and determine action. These may include common

elements such as feedback from a coach or mentor through a diagnostic review, and results or outcomes of a particular part of the curriculum or course.

In attempting to address the above factors with regard to the South African context, for example, the South African Council of Educators (SACE) (2007:6) has formulated performance number five in the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) document as follows: “Training and development projects develop and support educators who identified areas of needs around this performance standard from their Professional Growth Plan and School Improvement Plan”. This means that in order to improve the school environment successfully, the designers have to rely on the IQMS report provided by schools at the end of the year cycle of IQMS in order to plan appropriate PDT programmes for educators and schools. The foregoing discussion indicates that the design of PDT programmes depends on the vision as well as policy needs of the school and the staff.

- *Planning for PDT programmes.* Munonde (2007:53) maintains that planning for a PDT programme should start by considering it in broad terms. Thereafter, it should be turned into a formal programme of events which involves careful thought about priorities, both for individual teachers and for the school as a whole. Isaac (2006:21) explains that it would seem appropriate to include all planned attempts to add to the relevant abilities of staff whether concerned with teaching skills or other work of the school.

Desimone *et al.* (2002:127) state that planning for teacher development activities can occur at any level of the formal school hierarchy and can involve educators and other school staff in a variety of roles. They further contend that the planning of teacher development often takes place in a cycle format. Therefore, they cite four broad phases that are important in the school development planning cycle as: an audit in which a school reviews its strengths and weakness (SWOT analysis), meetings in which priorities for development are selected and then turned into specific action plan, targets

and tasks, each with clearly identified criteria; implementation in which the planned priorities and targets are implemented and evaluation in which the success of implementation is checked.

In addition, Welton (2000:123) indicates that planning is of critical importance to the effective management and implementation of PDT programmes. Therefore, it is essential that designers should have a thorough understanding of the programme so as to manage and plan it effectively. According to Munonde (2007:55), the following components are important during the planning phase:

- *Programme content.* More consideration should be given to the content to ensure that it is relevant, that it addresses the needs of the teachers and that affected them buy into it.
- *Programme method.* This explains how the learning will take place.
- *Locus of programme.* The decision whether the process will take place on the job or off the job or as a combination of the two.
- *Participation.* The decision whether participation will be voluntary or compulsory
- *Resources.* Administrators, learner support services, facilitators, funds, time or materials needed.
- *Knowledge of the programme.* Learners, administrators and facilitators should be aware of and familiar with all the critical resources such as support structures, finances or programme materials to be used

From the above discussion, it is clear that before any attempt can be made to promote any effective development of teachers there has to be a stage, namely planning, during which problems and areas needing development are recognised. Programmes that lack proper planning and therefore may not relate to the needs of the teachers are unlikely to be successful, and work that does not contribute towards solving a problem in the school is wasteful of resources that are sometimes in short supply.

- *Implementing PDT programmes.* Welton (2000:20) indicates that good planning needs to give detailed consideration not only to innovation intended, but to the strategy which will be employed to implement it. This strategy of implementation was initially outlined by Steyn (1999:212). She indicated that the implementation of PDT programmes starts with the stage of determining how activities will be carried out in the school, selecting purposeful activities and determining the time span for the programmes, identifying the staff to be involved, determining how the money will be spent, selecting the resources required, putting the evaluation procedures in place and preparing structures needed to put the programme into effect. To support this view, Munonde (2007:58) points out that during the implementation phase of PDT programmes the following activities need to be considered:
 - Preparation in advance
 - Activities to be offered must be as clear as possible
 - All necessary arrangements for facilitators should be done in advance
 - Decisions about the length of the session(s) as well as the way in which time is to be allocated during the programme should be clear, enough and justifiable
 - Staff members should be grouped according to their professional development needs
 - Resources/materials/learner support structures should be assembled in advance
 - Arrangements for space should be done according to the course to be presented
 - Almost all implementation of the development programmes involve food; therefore, this has to be provided

- Where necessary, follow-up activities have to be arranged and agreed upon by all stakeholders
- Evaluation of the programme: planned evaluation helps to ensure that it actually takes place and that it is someone's responsibility to undertake it

In the light of the foregoing discussion, it is apparent that for the implementation of PDT programmes to be successful those responsible have to be cautious and careful. Furthermore, all resources and materials to be used have to be prepared in advance. The point here is that before implementation, all structures have to be in place for the process to be effective and for the smooth implementation.

- *Evaluation of PDT programmes.* An essential component of PDT activities involves ongoing and systematic evaluation procedures. Few efforts have been made to evaluate the results of the PD process beyond the brief responses normally requested at the conclusion thereof. Evaluation is a historic process which allows judgements to be made on the basis of evidence collected through monitoring and it can play a significant role in analysis of strategic options and in providing evidence for accountability purposes (West-Burnman & O'Sullivan, 1998:122).

According to Welton (2000:139), evaluation is a component of development planning and a prerequisite for the preparation of any subsequent plan and should focus on achievements as well as areas that require improvement. According to Gordon (2004:280) evaluation assists in helping the school to decide whether the PD programme should to be continued with minor revisions or major revisions or to discontinue the programme and design an entirely new one. Thus, the future of the PD programme lies in the outcomes of the continuous evaluation of such a programme.

Munonde (2007:60) argues that for evaluation to be effective, those involved in the process of PDT must know the reasons why it takes place so that they

can participate fully in the process. In addition, for effective evaluation it is important for evaluators to know and understand the importance for doing so in order to identify those important aspects when planning and designing the future evaluation process. It is equally important that teachers and administrators be informed about the reasons for doing so.

Day and Sachs (2004:294) and Bredeson (2003:151) contend that evaluation of PDT serves the following three purposes in schools. Evaluation

- provides valuable information for planning and goal setting;
- guides organisational improvement processes; and
- addresses important questions regarding the value of significant investment of resources in professional development in education.

In addition, Munonde (2007:62) asserts that the following are some of the purposes of a PDT programme evaluation. Evaluation

- identifies organisational changes which professional development programmes make necessary;
- assists programme developers in identifying future professional development activities; and
- gives rise to judgements about the success of the programme and how it affects teaching competence and student learning. For it to be accurate and effective, a teacher evaluation instrument has to be designed with the utmost care it deserves. That is why Bredeson (2003:145) argues that in order to design an effective teacher development evaluation instrument the following key questions can serve as guidelines:

- What is the purpose of evaluation?
- Why is the evaluation information important?
- Who is the audience for the evaluation?

- Who should evaluate?
- How will evaluation data be gathered and analysed?
- How will evidence be interpreted?
- How will the findings of the evaluation be implemented?

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that although PDT programmes are designed to affect the participants and in turn the learners, they typically have an impact on other stakeholders such as administrators or school counsellors. Therefore, it could be argued that, to be thorough, evaluation should be drawn from these sources as well as from the programme participants. A multifaceted approach, using different types of responses from a variety of sources, should always be employed. Thereafter, evaluation results should be presented in a format that can be understood by all stakeholders in the PDT process. Clear communication of the findings helps to ensure that the results are used to guide school improvement efforts and subsequent PDT activities.

Finally, it is equally argued that evaluation must be seen as an ongoing process that is initiated in the earliest stages of programme planning and continued beyond programme completion. This means that it is important for the professional development designers to know in advance what they need to evaluate and how they intend to do this so that they can be able to assess whether the set outcomes have been achieved or not, as well as assessing whether the programmes are being implemented as planned. The role of evaluation, then, is not only to provide information on the impact of a PDT, but also to provide data for refining and adjusting PD activities to ensure that services can be improved on an ongoing basis.

- Maintenance of PDT programmes: Steyn (2001:58) contends that this stage is very important for teacher development programmes to sustain and show their value. Since teachers often attend PDT programmes and learn new

techniques but never use them afterwards, it is suggested that the professional development designers should establish periodically whether the new techniques are being applied or not. For example Day and Sachs (2004:294) assert that many professional bodies in South Africa, such as the Health Professional Council, have set up systems of continuous monitoring and maintenance. This was also the case in South Africa when the South African Council of Educators (SACE) decided to introduce and co-ordinate the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) and Whole School Evaluation Policy as one way of monitoring and maintaining good or excellent teacher performances (Munonde, 2007:68). These processes also help to identify areas where teachers need PD and encourage the sustainability of good teaching practice.

Steyn (2001:47) explains that in order to maintain PDT programmes in schools, principals must consider their role as educational leaders, take a lead in creating a climate for PDT programme by providing opportunities for staff to discuss good teaching practice, create consensus on the vision of the school, model a commitment to professional growth, give maximum support by helping to provide the necessary resources, actively involve staff in PDT programmes as well as encourage the staff to work for change and innovation. Furthermore, principals must keep and maintain records of PDT programmes that have taken place and keep referring to them if need be.

The above discussion about the stages or steps of designing a PDT programme, namely, diagnosing, planning, implementing, evaluating and maintaining, emphasises the fact that this kind of a model is all about change for the better. This approach emphasises the fact that the purpose of a PDT programme is to improve learner achievement by changing teachers' behaviour so as to reach pre-determined goals. While learning about such innovations may be relatively easy, applying them in a consistent and insightful manner is another matter.

Sometimes practitioners appear to be most motivated to change the situation quickly after completing a particular programme. Of course they need to be aware that at

times, change cannot occur immediately. Furthermore, for PDT programme to be successful, it must be adapted to the complex and dynamic characteristics of specific teaching contexts. This change process takes time. Hence, it is unreasonable to expect that individual PDT activities will immediately result in altered long-term teaching behaviour, improved learner performance or changed organisational structures and practices.

The aim of this chapter is to investigate the nature of the PDT and to identify the criteria for the strategies for its implementation, through the study of the literature. The literature review revealed that PDT is a process that begins with initial teacher training and continues throughout the teachers' careers so as to provide them with relevant and sound knowledge, skills and a positive attitude to remain effective in the teaching and learning process. These skills and sound knowledge will bring about quality teaching that will enhance the overall school improvement.

From the above discussion, it is evident that for teachers to remain effective in teaching and learning, it is important that after receiving their initial teacher training during a pre-service education, they have to undergo continuous development that will upgrade and improve their teaching practices. Thereby they will be enabled to approach the teaching and learning situation with enthusiasm and will also be able to meet with full confidence the changes and challenges brought about by the education system. Effective PDTs programme can also assist teachers and the school to improve their personal performances and to remain competent.

The literature study also revealed that the approaches to a PDT programme depend on the identified needs for the school community that require urgent attention. For effective PDT to take place, the purpose of a PDT programme is very important since it will guide the design of the policy for the programme. This will in turn provide the guidelines as to which approach to use for a particular PDT programme with a specific purpose in mind instead of using the same approach to different PDT programmes. It was also emphasised that the role of principals in the PDT covers their roles as instructional leaders, creators of a positive climate as well as their roles as managers and promoters of PDT programmes.

The conclusion that can be drawn from the foregoing literature review is that PDT is characterised by three stages, namely, planning, implementation and evaluation. Furthermore, PDT programmes are underpinned by the belief that teachers are the essential drivers of change and that they lay the foundation for any good quality education system. International evidence shows that, in order to justify this belief, the process of ongoing PDT is of paramount importance to any country such as South Africa (DoE, 2006:5). From the above discussion, a case can be made that countries like South Africa need the kind of PDT programmes that will equip teachers, individually and collectively, as members of a wider professional community (e.g. doctors, nurses, lawyers) to act as shapers, promoters and well-informed critics of reform. In order to face the challenges of reform, teachers have to acquire good teaching practices through the process of PDT (Bopape, 2006:27).

2.6 THE CONTEXT OF PDT PROGRAMMES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Increasingly, the importance of teachers' experience and knowledge with regard to student learning has been realised (Knight & Wiseman, 2005:388). Most unfortunately many PDT programmes in South Africa concentrate either on the teaching content or on the teaching methods (Van Eekelen, Vermut & Boshuizen, 2006:408). Research indicates that many PDT programmes are unsatisfactory and have not met intended goals (Steyn, 2010:157). In addition, Steyn (2010) puts the blame for these ineffective PDT programmes squarely on research, since many programmes are based on faulty assumptions of such research or even no research at all.

The effectiveness of educational reform initiatives of any country depends on the quality of its teachers. PDT has therefore become a major focal point of school improvement initiatives. To improve education in different countries, it is necessary for teachers to be involved in PDT programmes in order to meet evolving educational challenges and needs. Teachers play a central role in determining the outcome of any education system and South Africa is no exception to this rule.

The process of PDT is not new to South Africa. Like most countries, South Africa has undergone a series of phases in the PDT processes in pursuit of producing teachers

who have improved teaching practices. A typical example was the introduction of the National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) course as an upgrading programme to develop under-qualified teachers' status. Ngidi (2005:34) explains that the NPDE as a PDT programme was a response to several recommendations that emerged from the Department of Education (DoE) reports such as The Norms and Standards for Educators (2000), which suggested that teacher education certificates, diplomas and higher diplomas from the earlier political dispensation were to be phased out. As will be fully discussed in Chapter 3, this programme for teacher development was to be delivered *inter alia* through a DE mode.

Many supporters of DE agree that it has the advantage of enabling learners to learn while working, thus relieving them and their families of large direct and indirect costs and foregone income (DoE, 2006:15). Furthermore the Department of Education report (DoE, 2006:15) argues that DE is also capable under certain conditions of being offered cost-effectively to a large number of students. It was assumed that learner support like Information and Communication Technologies, wisely used, offer immense promise of widening access to PDT programmes, improving learners' motivation, speeding up communication, responding to their complex teaching situations and enriching the environment available for learning.

Teachers are at the centre of South Africa's struggling school system and they continue to operate under trying conditions. The following section concentrates on the status of teaching in South Africa as well as conditions and challenges South African teachers are faced with.

2.6.1 The complexity of teaching

Teachers are the largest single occupational group and profession in South Africa, numbering close to 420 000 in both public and private schools (DoE, 2010:9). Table 2.4 reflects the number of teachers in schools in South Africa in 2010. Their distribution is broadly consistent with provincial population profiles, with Kwa-Zulu Natal, Gauteng and the Eastern Cape accounting for more than half of all teachers.

Table 2.4 Teacher statistics in South Africa

PROVINCE	NUMBER OF TEACHERS
Kwa-Zulu Natal	91 926
Gauteng	70 340
Eastern Cape	69 018
Limpopo	58 194
Western Cape	35 354
Mpumalanga	34 575
North West	26006
Free State	23 850
Northern Cape	8846
TOTAL	418 109

Source: Department of Basic Education, School Realities, Pretoria. 2010.

Table 2.4 shows that, as in many other countries, South Africa's teaching corps comprises a large number of personnel; far bigger than the workforce of any major South African corporation. It differs from the average corporate (or even government department) workforce in demographic terms. The most disturbing factor is that many of these teachers cannot execute their work competently and effectively due to unfavourable working conditions such as badly managed schools, under-resourced schools, ineffective implementation of learner support, and inappropriate union activities, to mention but a few (DoE, 2010:11). Some of these teachers have low motivation yet others are under-qualified. This suggests that they need, *inter alia*, extensive and continuous PDT programmes not only to improve their formal qualifications but also to improve their attitude, teaching roles and practices. The Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE) has examined the situation in South Africa surrounding teacher supply and demand. Its overall conclusion is that South Africa urgently needs more and better skilled teachers (DoE, 2011:4).

2.6.2 Teacher quality and its challenges in South Africa

The quality of teachers, measured in terms of formal qualifications, appears to have improved significantly since 1990 (as shown by percentages in Table 2.5 below),

with many teachers having upgraded their qualifications (but not necessarily their subject-specialities) - see Table 2.5:

Table 2.5: Teacher qualification improvement in South Africa

1990	1994	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	Change: 1990- 2010	Change: 2005- 2010
53%	64%	91.6%	92.2%	93.8	94.4%	93.7%	95.1%	79.4%	3.8%

Source: Department of Basic Education, Centre for Development and Enterprise, Pretoria: 2011

Notwithstanding the improved qualification profile of the teaching force since 1990, most reports on South African education indicate that the majority of teachers have not yet been sufficiently equipped to meet the education needs of a growing democracy in the 21st century global environment (CDE, 2011:10). According to Deacon (2010:16), research has shown consistently that many South African teachers fall well short of national and international norms and standards in respect of subject knowledge, teaching methods and productivity.

The role of teachers is of crucial and of strategic importance for the intellectual, moral and cultural preparation of South African learners (DoE, 2011:5). The political landscape from apartheid to the new dispensation has also placed more responsibility on the shoulders of South African teachers. Since 1994 South African teachers have had to cope with the rationalisation of the teaching community into a single national system, the introduction of new curricula, which emphasise greater professional autonomy and require teachers to have new knowledge and applied competencies, including the use of new technologies and radical change in the demographic, cultural and linguistic composition of the classroom (DoE, 2006:6). To respond to all these challenges, there have been many intensive teacher development projects in South Africa.

In this context, PDT in South Africa, as in many other countries worldwide, has seen increasing investment in recent years, resulting in in-depth investigations and the

development of a much more defined framework as the ones that existed previously (Kennedy & McKay, 2011:551). For example, the Report of the Ministerial Committee on Rural Education (DoE, 2006) identified limited access of rural teachers to TD. This report also noted a shortage of qualified and competent teachers, problems of teaching in multi-grade and large classes, and under-resourced school facilities (DoE, 2006:7).

Another project linked with TD is the President's Education Initiative research project which reported that the "most critical challenge for teacher education in South Africa was the limited conceptual knowledge of many teachers" (Steyn, 2010:157). The National Policy Framework for Teacher Education and Development was an attempt to address the need for suitably qualified teachers in South Africa (DoE, 2007:5). This programme focuses on two complementary sub-systems: Initial Professional Education of Teachers and Continuing Professional Teacher Development (Steyn, 2010:159). This project has the potential to change the quality of teaching in South Africa, but its success cannot be guaranteed without the support of educators in schools (DoE, 2007:6). Furthermore, the same project attempts to appropriately equip teachers to meet the challenges and demands of a democratic South Africa post 1994.

Steyn (2010:159) explains that Continuing Professional Teacher Development (CPTD) in particular, is underpinned by the principle that "teachers are the essential drivers of education". Its ultimate aim contends Steyn (2010:160), is to "enable learners to learn well and equip themselves for further learning and for satisfying lives as productive citizens, for the benefit of their families, their communities and the South African nation".

Furthermore, CPTD is most successful when teachers are actively involved and reflect on their own teaching practice; PDT is contextualised and school-based; developmental activities are well coordinated and when sustained leadership and well-structured learner support services are present (DoE, 2007:25). The CPTD system essentially strives to contribute to the improvement of teachers' teaching skills by equipping them to effectively execute their essential and demanding tasks,

to continue improving their professional competence and performance, and to empower them by improving their professional confidence (Steyn, 2010:162).

From the above discussion, it can be asserted that PDT is an important characteristic of teacher professionalism in the current educational reform of any country such as South Africa. Whilst it is true that PDT is an important process in many countries, at times there are challenges that are unique to a particular situation and as such, they need to be taken care of.

2.6.3 The responses to the challenges of PDT programmes

The DoE (2006: 20) cites the following responses to the challenges of PDT in South Africa which must be considered particularly during the planning stage:

- The requirements in all PDT programmes must emphasise the integrated development of learning area or subject content knowledge (particularly in scarce subjects like Mathematics), community engagement and pedagogical skills, together with a thorough understanding of the changing social character of schools and the skills required to manage learning in diverse classrooms.
- The link between language and learning must be promoted, including the use of indigenous languages. PDT programmes that promote language use in education will be supported and all teachers should have the opportunity of learning an indigenous African language.
- PDT programmes that will improve teachers' competence in the language of learning and teaching, and in the teaching of literacy and numeracy skills in all phases, will be supported.
- A CPTD system will be created that registers and quality assures all providers of professional development activities and combines incentives and obligations to ensure that teachers continually upgrade their knowledge and skills throughout their teaching careers

- The South African Council of Educators (SACE) will undertake the management of the CPTD system with the support of the DoE and provincial Departments of Education and will endorse CPTD providers, allocate PD points to their programmes, register teachers' PD points on a database, award recognition to successful teachers and apply an appropriate sanction to teachers who do not meet the PD points target after two successive three-year cycles.
- An electronic CPTD management information system operated on behalf of SACE will be established. The DoE is finally responsible for monitoring the performance of schools and teachers. In order to ensure coherence and co-ordination, the DoE and SACE will work closely on the implementation and monitoring of CPTD system.
- The objective of pursuing quality teaching and education for all requires the DoE to provide opportunities to advance the continuing professional development of teachers. In this regard, the DoE will commit itself to work collaboratively with all involved stakeholders within the education system.
- The DoE, as a principal employer of teachers, is responsible for ensuring that the teachers' conditions of service, working conditions, teacher development activities and career prospects meet appropriate standards and that the teaching profession becomes a desirable occupation for an increasing number of South Africans.
- The policy document, namely, *Norms and Standard for Educators* (2000), containing the principles underlying the envisaged teaching competencies will be made available to all South African schools.

Considering the NPDE teacher development initiative (see section 3.5.2.1 in relation to the above discussion), it is clear that the designers of NPDE attempted to follow the trail that recognised the above-mentioned challenges. For example, NPDE is concerned with developing the competency of teachers' personal literacy and numeracy skills, pedagogical content of teaching or quality classroom teaching,

assessment and teacher professionalism. Before the NPDE programme could be implemented, various stakeholders, such as teacher unions, ELRC and representatives from higher education institutions were consulted (DoE, 2006:4).

Furthermore, the NPDE requires a degree of integrated assessment that allows for the integrated and holistic evaluation of any teacher according to the applied competencies specified in the *Norms and Standards Policy Document* (DoE, 2006:6). These competencies require a teacher to be a:

- specialist in a particular learning area, subject or phase
- specialist in teaching and learning
- specialist in assessment
- curriculum developer
- leader, administrator and manager
- scholar and lifelong learner
- quality professional who plays a community, citizenship and also a pastoral role

The above discussion about the responses to the challenges faced by teacher education in South Africa, also seeks to provide an overall strategy for the successful implementation of PDT so as to meet the social and economic needs of South Africa. The DoE and SACE share exceptional responsibilities in the system of PDT programmes in South Africa. Their working relationship is, therefore, of the utmost importance and requires a high degree of mutual understanding and collegial engagement. This further implies a collaborative responsibility to ensure that sufficient and well-prepared teachers are available to deliver quality education to all. However, it is the responsibility of teachers themselves to take charge of their self-development by identifying the areas in which they wish to grow professionally, and to use all opportunities made available to them for this purpose.

2.7 SUMMARY

This chapter dealt specifically with the literature review on the nature of the concepts of PD and PDT. The conclusion that can be drawn is that the PDT is at the heart of maintaining and sustaining the quality of teaching of any nation. By having a well-designed plan and policy, various education institutions responsible for the PDT programmes can maintain and sustain the future of such institutions. All steps needed for the whole PDT programme as discussed in 2.5.2 above, are equally important and failure to follow them systematically can lead to the collapse of the PDT programme being implemented. Moreover, the literature has revealed that the knowledge about the PDT by those in charge is very important since lack of it can hinder the effectiveness of the whole process.

PDT as conducted by developing and developed countries has been briefly discussed. The role of different parties, such as school principals that normally take part in PDT activities has been outlined. The literature revealed that although much research has been done on the process of PDT, there are still serious shortcomings with regard to the planning and evaluation thereof. For example, Friedman and Phillips (2004:369) indicated that the legitimacy of PDT activities is often perceived in terms of formal training courses linked to work or merely gaining a desired qualification. However, an emerging paradigm is one that moves the PDT away from the practice of attending courses, workshops and training days to the concept of lifelong or continuing learning that is undertaken in a variety of ways, and where emotional and social as well as intellectual, attitudinal and practical engagement are viewed as co-existing and co-dependent (Day, 2004:19). It is also clear from the literature study that new strategies are still needed to provide effective PD programmes that will meet the aims and objectives of such programmes.

Coming to the context of South Africa, besides improving the supply of teachers, a key challenge is to improve the quality and the performance of existing teachers. The study conducted by The Centre for Development and Enterprise (2011:4) states that “many of the existing teachers particularly in Maths and sciences are not teaching well. This is partly because many of them have been badly trained”. This particular

study also supports the view that the poor performance of many teachers is a major reason for the dismal results of large sections of the South Africa's schooling system. Given the nature and scale of the challenge, it is clear that high-quality PDT programmes that focus on both subject-matter knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge, that immerse participants in enquiry based approach and that is fully supported by both the DoE and provincial governments can help to alleviate this problem.

The literature review in this chapter has also revealed that most PDT programmes, such as NPDE, can be conducted through a DE mode. In a DE mode of education, learners may not be required to be present in a classroom, but it can also be a question of meeting their tutors optionally during contact classes. For example, in the open universities in India, especially in the Indira Gandhi National Open University, week end contact sessions are held (Oliver & McLoughlin, 2001:150). These are optional, but for certain courses which have practical components such as those for computers, attendance is compulsory. It was also argued in this chapter that for PDT programmes to be intensive and successful, well structured learner support services are required. In this context, Chapter 3 will focus on the concepts of DE and learner support as important aspects of teacher development with the programme of NPDE as a case in point. Furthermore, Chapter 3 will deal with the relationship between DE and learner support in a NPDE teacher development programme based on the constructivist learning theory.

CHAPTER 3

DEVELOPMENTS AND TRENDS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO LEARNER SUPPORT

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to explore, define and trace the history of the concepts “*distance education*” and “*learner support*” in a PDT context. The focus will also be on the trends and the role played by five critical learner support services in PDT programmes, namely registration support, study support services, contact sessions, integrated communication systems (e.g. information communication technology (ICT)) or technological support as well as feedback measures through a DE mode. The context of these five crucial support structures, as were applied in the NPDE programme at the University of South Africa (UNISA), will be explored. This chapter will also highlight the marriage between learner support and DE based on the constructivist learning theory in a PDT environment.

Keegan (1996:44) identifies two distinct components in DE, namely course development and learner support services, which he characterises as the essential feedback mechanisms that are characteristic of any DE education environment. He further argues that these two have to merge so as to make a learning situation interesting and meaningful. He sees their roles as complementary.

While it is recognised that learner support services and course materials are intertwined and are regarded as integral parts of DE, this study is not concerned about learning materials *per se* but will confine itself to the above-mentioned five learner support services, as these are, from the researcher’s viewpoint, crucial in any PDT programme that is particularly conducted through a DE mode. This study also argues that learner support services, such as those mentioned above, are sometimes relegated to the back seat in teacher development programmes and this

may lead to under-achievement or dropouts of learners who study at a distance. Furthermore, this study emphasises the constructivist view of learning which points to a number of different teaching practice components such as the use of learner support. Therefore, the theoretical framework of this study, namely constructivism, will be discussed in the succeeding section. Through the proper use of learner support, the constructivist learning theory encourages learners to constantly assess how the learning activity is helping them gain understanding (Tobias & Duffy, 2009:9).

3.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: A CONSTRUCTIVIST THEORY IN LEARNING

The theoretical framework for learner support in DE used in this study is based on the constructivist philosophy which is generally attributed to Jean Piaget. This is a philosophy which presupposes that learners' logical and conceptual growth and meaningful learning are better enhanced by experiences gained from structures such as quality learner support services (Wadsworth, 1996:14).

The underlying concept of the constructivism learning theory is the role which experiences (which may be formed as a result of learner support structures), and the adjoining atmosphere (learning environment) play in the learning of any person. The constructivism learning theory argues that people actively produce knowledge and form meanings based upon their experiences (Kintsch, 2009:225). These experiences can come about as a result of the exposure to learner support services. Therefore, in a constructivist approach, learning is regarded as an active process with learners seen as architects building their own knowledge structures, rather than absorbing knowledge transmitted by the teacher (Payne, 2009:28). Faculties in higher education institutions may be seen as facilitators and constructors of knowledge; and learners are active, self-regulated and self-directed, with the capacity to search, select and synthesise information and also may construct their own knowledge and understanding through structures such as learner support (Tagg, 2003:44).

Two of the key concepts which, according to the constructivism theory, are essential to create an individual's new knowledge, are assimilation and accommodation (Wadsworth, 1996:16). Wadsworth (1996:17) contends that in a learning situation, learner support enhances assimilation, which causes an individual to incorporate new experiences into the old experiences. This causes the individual to develop new outlooks, rethink what were once misunderstandings and evaluate what is important and correct, ultimately altering his or her perceptions.

Accommodation, on the other hand, is reframing the world (environment) and new experiences into mental capacity already present. It means that individuals conceive a particular fashion in which the environment operates. When things do not operate within that particular context, they must accommodate and reframe the expectations with the outcomes (Kirschner, 2009:145). Therefore, it could be argued that in constructivist thinking, learning is also affected by the context, the beliefs and attitudes of the learner.

According to Glatthorn and Fox (1996:5) a constructivist approach proposes certain basic principles of learning:

- Learning should always be contextualised. Learners should carry out tasks and solve problems that resemble the nature of those tasks in the real world. Rather than doing “exercises” out of context, the learners should be encouraged to solve contextualised problems.
- Learning is not a passive receptive process, but is instead an active meaning-making process. It is the ability to perform complex cognitive tasks that require the active use and application of knowledge in solving meaningful problems. In this way it enhances self-dependence and problem-solving skills on the part of the learner.
- Thus, learning at its best involves conceptual change, modifying one's previous understanding of concepts so that they are more complex and more valid. Typically the learner begins with a vague or inaccurate concept and the learning process enables the learner to develop a deeper or truer understanding of the concept.

- Learning is always subjective and personal. The learner best learns when he or she can internalise what is being learned. This internalisation is enhanced by structures such as learner-generated symbols or learner support services.
- Learning is social. Learning at its best involves interaction between learners, as meanings are shared, information is exchanged and problems are solved cooperatively. The class in this sense becomes a social arena for examining knowledge for testing what one knows and for increasing one's knowledge.
- The nature of the learning task is always crucial. The best learning tasks are characterised by features such as optimal difficulty, relevancy, challenge and novelty.
- Learning is affective. Thinking and feeling are closely related. The extent and nature of learning are influenced, *inter alia*, by the following affective elements, namely self-awareness and beliefs about one's abilities, personal expectations, general state of mind and motivation to learn.
- Learning is strongly influenced by the learner's development. Learners move through identifiable stages of physical, intellectual, emotional and social growth that impact on what can be learned and in what depth of understanding. Learners seem to do best when the learning is at their proximal stage of development.

To summarise the above discussion, it is clear that constructivist learning theory promotes social and communication skills by creating a classroom environment that emphasises collaboration and exchange of ideas. In a constructivist model, learners engage in how to articulate their ideas clearly and also to collaborate on tasks effectively by sharing in group projects. Learners therefore exchange ideas and learn to negotiate with others and evaluate their contributions in a socially acceptable manner. This is essential to succeed in the real world, since they will always be exposed to a variety of experiences in which they will have to cooperate and navigate among the ideas of others.

The foregoing discussion also emphasises the fact that in constructivist learning, education concentrates on thinking and understanding, rather than on rote memorisation. Learners learn more and enjoy learning more when they are actively involved, rather than being passive listeners. In addition, by grounding learning activities in an authentic, real-world context a constructivist approach to learning stimulates and engages learners. Through the help of quality learner support services, learners in constructivist classrooms learn to question things and apply their natural curiosity to the world.

Yet, constructivism can be criticised on various grounds. Critics argue that there is little hard evidence that constructivist methods can work. The point made is that constructivists, by rejecting evaluation through testing and other external criteria, have made themselves unaccountable for their learners' progress (Kitching, 2008:28). Kitching (2008:28) further states that critics argue that constructivism and other "progressive" educational theories have been most successful with children from privileged backgrounds who are fortunate in having outstanding teachers, committed parents and rich environments. They conclude by saying that disadvantaged children, lacking such resources, benefit more from mere explicit instruction. The collaborative aspects of constructivist classrooms tend to produce a "tyranny of the majority," in which a few learners' voices or interpretations dominate the group's conclusions and dissenting learners are forced to conform to the emerging consensus.

Constructivism theory is divided into two main schools of thought, namely, social and cognitive constructivism. Cognitive constructivism holds the view that in order to construct knowledge internally learners learn through their past experiences and new knowledge they receive either by reading or from the teacher (Huang, 2002:30). Thus knowledge is not an "all or nothing" process; instead, learners learn new information that is presented to them by building upon knowledge that they already possess. Social constructivist discourse, on the other hand, holds the view that learning occurs through interaction with other people and in specific settings. Social constructivism also views each learner as a unique individual with unique needs and backgrounds. In this context, the learner is also seen as complex and multidimensional (Wertsch, 1997:23).

This study emphasises social constructivism because it (social constructivism) stresses the importance of the learner's social interaction with 'knowledgeable' members of the learning process such as tutors. Furthermore, Wertsch (1997) argues that without the social interaction with people in the immediate environment such as tutors or peers, it is always very difficult or almost impossible to acquire social meaning of an important concept and to learn how to use it. For example, young children develop their thinking abilities by interacting with other children, adults and the physical world. From the social constructivist viewpoint, it is thus important to take into account the background and the environment (e.g. learner support structures) of the learner throughout the learning process, as this background may help to shape the knowledge and the truth that the learner creates, discovers and attains in the learning process.

According to Wertsch (1997:28), social constructivism encourages the learner to arrive at his or her version of the truth, influenced by his or her background, culture, experiences or learner support services. Furthermore, social constructivism supports the learners' interaction with their materials, the construction and building of knowledge and the testing of this knowledge through interaction with others. This study subscribes to a social constructivist learning philosophy that sees learning as a result of several situated and dynamic connections between learners and the curriculum, the resources which support the curriculum such as ICT, lecturers, administrative and academic support functions offered by the institution and peers who are also studying for the same programme. This study also argues that for the learner to be successful and motivated in a learning endeavour, he or she needs to be exposed to, and also be in a position to interact with a well-organised learner support environment.

The learner, in a learning situation, has to engage with a conducive learning process, be it technological media, the teacher, peers or counsellors. The position taken in this study is that dialogue is at the heart of DE learning (Gravett, 2005:137). Therefore, in a DE setting, there is a need to plan for a dialogic space within which learners engage with the content of the subject matter, learner support services and the ideas of others (Mays, 2010:31). To this end, the social constructivist scholars

agree with and emphasise that individuals (learners) make meaning through the interaction with each other, with their tutors or with the supportive environment they live in and by so doing, entering into a dialogue.

McMahon (1997:7) emphasises that DE learning is a social process. According to him, any learning activity is not a process that only takes place inside our minds, nor is it a passive development of our behaviours that is shaped by innate and personal forces. He emphasises that meaningful learning occurs when individuals are engaged in social activities. For example, learners with different skills and backgrounds in DE, by way of supporting one another, could purposefully collaborate in tasks and discussions, based on a particular goal, in order to arrive at a shared understanding or a solution of a particular problem.

If we assume that constructivist learning involves learners in goal-directed, interactive knowledge building, then it is possible to identify instructional designs that enable the creation of effective environments that support learning. One of these designs could be well-structured learner support services with the expectation that learners can eventually succeed. According to McLoughlin (2002:152), the principles underpinning constructivist learning can best be summarised by stating that, in order to enhance learning, the task, the teacher and the environment must provide certain supportive conditions for learning. Levels of support may vary in form, substance and complexity depending on the context. Support may take the form of a teacher modelling the target performance of a task, or giving verbal explanations that identify the elements of the task and strategy.

Moore (2003:142) strongly contends that quite often, giving support to the learner is seen as one of the many functions of an instructor and “who would deny that learners will appreciate a teacher who communicates a supportive style rather than one that is not supportive?” Qakisa-Makoe (2005:44) argues that learners like everybody else need support as they go through life, especially when going through the big challenge of studying. On the contrary, for many years, learner support has been neglected as an important aspect of the educational process. It has been regarded by higher education providers as a facility that provides safety nets for

those who fall, rather than the process that enhances the quality of the learners' experience.

With increased demand for access to higher education, institutions of higher learning are now increasingly challenged to radically improve their understanding of how people learn if they are to develop learning services or programmes that are supportive and responsive to learners' needs. Therefore, asserts Tait (1995:240), learner support systems must indicate for whom they are designed and what is needed by the learners. In turn this should lead to determination as to how those needs can be met, within the constraints of costs, technologies and geography. It means that DE institutions, through their course developers and educators, should show interest in responding to their learners' needs by planning learner support structures that answer to those needs. In the following section, special attention will be given to the history of DE, different definitions of DE, its essentials as well as the association between DE and learner support in the context of PDT.

3.3 DISTANCE EDUCATION: HISTORY AND TRENDS

This study argues that understanding the history of DE is vital in that it shows that there was more than one historical path to DE and that the evolution of DE has not been easy. Many of the same problems facing implementation and acceptance of educational innovations today have been faced by DE throughout its history. DE is an old concept. Delling (1987:22) contends that the idea can be traced back to 1840 when Sir Isaac Pitman set up the first correspondence school for Shorthand in England. He used a combination of print-based technology and the mail services to connect with his learners. Since the early part of the last century, many definitions and theories of DE have been offered by different scholars.

According to Steyn (1995:2), a kind of formal recognition of the term "Distance Education" occurred in 1982 when the UNESCO-affiliated International Council for Correspondence Education changed its name to the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE). Hence, for the purpose of this study, the term "Distance Education" will be used instead of "Distance Learning" so as to avoid confusion that

may arise as a result of the modern approach known as “Open Distance Learning” which was fully explained in section 1.1.

There are many definitions of DE, each emphasising a slightly different aspect. By way of tracing the evolution and history of DE, which is widely used in many institutions today, only few definitions or theories (models) of some of the leading international experts on DE will be given, as well as a summary of the main elements of the definitions.

Wedermeyer (1981:36) was amongst the first group of scholars who attempted to define DE comprehensively. Wedermeyer’s theory reflected his convictions that DE should be equitable and flexible, must be provided to all and that it should be learner-centred in its approach. Hence his theory was later termed a ‘liberal-humanistic vision of DE’. He based his model on a mix of theory and practice, and offered ten guiding principles for good practice in DE. These are:

- Teaching and learning should be available any place where there are learners or even only one learner – whether or not there are teachers at the same place or at the same time.
- Instruction should place responsibility and emphasis for learning on the learner.
- The teaching plan or system should free tutors from custodial duties so that more of the tutors’ and learners’ time can be given truly to educational tasks.
- The instructional system should offer learners wider choices (more opportunities) in subjects, formats and methodologies.
- The instructional system should use, as appropriate, all the teaching and learning support as well as the methods that have been proven to be effective.
- The instructional system should mix and combine learner support, media and methods so that each subject is taught in the most effective way
- The media and technology (learner support) used should be clearly articulated in design and use, and these should reinforce each other.

- The instructional system, including learner support, should preserve and enhance opportunities for adaptation to differences among individual learners as well as among teachers.
- The instructional system should evaluate learner achievements by putting emphasis on the achievement of learning goals.
- The system should permit learners to start, stop and learn at their own pace.

Delling (1987:23) proposed a process model of DE which is based on a system of “helping organisation” – his name for a distance educational institution – and the quality management of artificial communication between learner and teacher. Delling agreed with other scholars of the social constructivist paradigm when he advocated that a distance course is an artificial dialogic learning opportunity in which the physical distance between the distance learner and the institution is bridged. According to him, DE is a multi-dimensional system of learning processes in the learner, in the institution and in the society and of the communication processes among the three by means of artificial carriers.

Furthermore, Delling (1987:23) emphasises that a two-way communication between the distant learner and the helping organisation (distance institution) is of utmost importance in any DE setting. With this definition, Delling attempts to emphasise the vital importance of two-way communication across physical distance and sees the dialogue or communication between the learner and tutor as the most important transaction of DE. As it will be discussed later in this section, this notion of ‘transaction’ in DE was further explored and broadened by Moore (1997:10).

Peters (1988:12) on the other hand, proposes that DE can be conceptualised and analysed by comparison with the industrial production of goods. He argues that from many points of view, conventional, oral, group-based education was a pre-industrial form of education, implying that DE could not have existed before the industrial era. Based on his economic and industrial theory, Peters suggested the following main categories (as terminology) for the analysis of DE:

- *Division of labour.* The division of a task into simpler components or subtasks.
- *Mechanisation.* The use of machines in a work place. Peters argues that DE would be impossible without machines such as technological ones.
- *Assembly line.* In DE programmes handling of materials for both teacher and learner are not supposed to be the product of one individual.
- *Mass production.* Because demand outstrips supply at colleges or universities, there has been a necessity for large scale operations such as DE courses.
- *Preparatory work.* Just like in an industrial setup, the success of DE depends on a preparatory phase of components such as learner support structures.
- *Planning and organisation.* The creation of general or permanent arrangements for purpose-oriented activities.
- *Objectification.* Just like in industrial situations, in DE teaching, functions must have a particular goal.

From the above, it goes without saying that Peters's model of DE exhibits many features that are familiar with industrial production systems. For DE to be effective, according to Peters (1988:14), the principle of division of labour is a critical element. Peters (1988:44) concluded that when decisions about the process of teaching and learning are made in DE, the industrial structures or characteristics such as organisation or standardisation should always be taken into consideration. While this theory was later criticised by scholars such as Holmberg in 1995, who argued that it is highly limited and incomplete, it is not devoid of explanatory power (Moore & Kearsley, 1996: 42). In fact, it elucidates essential characteristics of effective DE. For example, it can be argued that the development of any DE course is crucial and is just as important as the preparatory work that takes place prior to the production process in the industrial world.

Consequently, Moore and Kearsley (1996:43) refined Peters's model into one based upon a systems approach to DE. They stated that DE provides for planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from face-to-face teaching and as a result requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques,

special methods of effective communication, as well as special organisational and administrative arrangements. Some aspects of this definition, such as communication, influenced distance planners and educators to develop new techniques such as technological media, to support distance learning.

Holmberg (1989:19), who is regarded as international authority and a veteran of DE, defines the concept as covering the various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their learners in lecture rooms or on the same premises, but which, nevertheless, benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition of a supporting organisation.

From the above, it is clear that Holmberg's definition is grounded in his concern about the dialogue that takes place between learner and tutor during distance learning. This study supports this view as it argues that the quality of this dialogue, which is so paramount in DE, can be enhanced by well-organised and well-planned support systems. This dialogue between the learner and tutor which is so vital in DE, Holmberg (1989:87) calls "guided didactic conversation". According to Holmberg (1989:89) guided didactic conversation is characterised in the following ways:

- Feelings of quality relation between the teaching and learning parties promote study pleasure and motivation in a DE setup.
- Such feelings can be fostered by well-developed self-instructional material (through learner support) and two-way communication in DE.
- Intellectual pleasure and study motivation are favourable to the attainment of study goals and the use of proper study processes and methods.
- Conducive atmosphere and language of friendly conversation favour feelings of quality personal relations.
- Messages given and received in conventional forms are comparatively easily understood and remembered.
- The conversation concept can be successfully translated, for use by the learner support available (such as media) to distance education.

- That proper planning, including that of learner support, and guiding the work, whether by the teacher or the learner, is necessary for organised and successful learning and teaching in DE.

Without wishing to oversimplify Holmberg's theory on DE, it can be argued that he shows particular interest in the emotional wellbeing of the distance learner, with great emphasis on enjoyment in learning (pleasure) and motivation in studying successfully. Interestingly, Holmberg also considers that special conventions, such as learner support services, must be employed to ensure that the distance learning experience is as normalised as possible. Equally, Holmberg is concerned with the support the tutor can offer to the learner in DE in terms of guided didactic conversation. This dialogue or relationship between the tutor and the learner is paramount in DE and is also embedded in the social constructivist learning theory which argues that humans generate knowledge and meaning from an interaction between their social experiences (with fellow human beings or the supporting environment) and their ideas. Therefore, there is a need to plan for a dialogic space within which learners engage with the notional and organisational context and the ideas of others.

As a result of revisiting the concept of DE by different scholars, in 1995 Holmberg significantly revised and broadened his theory of DE in a comprehensive model. The model is divided into a number of parts incorporating his theory just stated above and the belief that DE serves diverse, individual learners who cannot or do not want to make use of face-to-face teaching. Thus, DE promotes learner's independence and freedom of choice (Holmberg, 2003:44). In his revised theory, Holmberg contended that personal relations, study pleasure and empathy between learners and those supporting them such as tutors or counsellors are central to learning in DE. In addition, he regarded a well-organised DE as an effective mode of training professionals (such as under-qualified teachers). Finally, he was very critical of the fact that DE must be organised and carried out in such a way that learners are encouraged to search, criticise and be independent thinkers.

Keegan's (1990:3) model is interested in defining the physical separation of the teacher from the distant learner and also implies that the learners spend the majority

of their time studying in isolation. He also emphasises the importance of designing and selecting good learner support services such as media and technology to enhance learning and teaching.

Furthermore, Keegan (1990:4) has offered five characteristics which he believes define DE namely:

- separation of teacher and learner
- absence of the learner group
- use of learner support such as technical media
- climate of two-way communication
- influence of educational organisation such as the nature of the curriculum

Sauve (1993:93) did a survey of definitions of DE for the purpose of developing an introductory postgraduate course on DE. Finally she came to the following conclusions:

- The main characteristic of DE is distance in the temporal, spatial or psycho-social separation between a learner and the institution. This separation does not necessarily imply the lack of personal or direct contact between learners and teachers. Accordingly, this study holds the view that this contact can be bridged or modified by services such as the technological media. Therefore, it is through the use of these communication techniques that transmission of information, learning and continuous support are assured.
- Communication between the learner and the tutor, whether it be by mail, telephone, e-mail, video conferencing or face-to-face meetings must always be present.
- The use of media (whether it is called technical support, delivery methods, technology or media) is of utmost importance to ensure learner support

Sauve (1993:95) emphasised the term “distance” in DE. This study argues that, as the DE learner is not always in the same study room with his or her tutor, there could

still be effective and personal contact by means of the learner support structures such as an e-mail or a telephone. Therefore the effects of this distance can always be minimised or curbed. Much as Sauve emphasised technological media as mechanisms that can bridge the distance between the learner and the tutor, she ignored other learner support services such as contact sessions and feedback measures that can also help to keep contact between the two (learner and tutor).

Rowntree (1994:29) uses the term Distance Learning instead of DE and defines it as follows:

...distance learning is learning while at a distance from one's teacher – usually with the help of pre-recorded, packaged learning materials. The learners are separated from their teachers in time and space but are still guided by them.

Rowntree's theory emphasises a learner dependent style of learning which suggests that it is the individual learner who is supposed to operate actively on the important factors using services such as learner support, in order to learn. Based on Rowntree's model, this learner-centred approach in education will lead to independence on the side of the learner. As emphasised in section 3.2 above, a constructivist learning theory is one good example for the learner-dependent learning approach because the learner in this case learns with the use of his previous experiences and previous learning. As a result, the learner will then construct, with the help of learner support, new information or new associations of the previous and the present experiences. Thus the outcome is the new constructed learning, hence the term constructivist.

To summarise the discussion thus far on DE, Keegan as quoted by Hein-Nieminen (1995:251) made the following synopsis of the characteristics, the nature and main elements of DE:

- the influence of an educational organisation both in the concurrent planning and preparation of learning materials and learner support

- the quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process (the idea of transactional distance)
- the use of technical media, e.g. print, audio or video in order to unite the tutor and learner and carry the content of the course
- the provision of two way communication so that the learner may benefit from or even initiate a dialogue (this distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education)
- the quasi-permanent absence of the learning group throughout the learning process so that learners are usually taught as individuals and not necessarily in groups
- the possibility of occasional meetings/tutorials for learning (didactics) and socialisation purposes

According to Hein-Nieminen (1995:252), DE therefore, is teaching and learning carried out in a situation where educators and learners are distant from one another both geographically and in terms of time. This separation is called “transactional distance”. In this context, learners are provided with study materials consisting of various forms of media, which are then integrated and supplemented with well-prepared learner support structures. Many scholars, including Hein-Nieminen (1995:252), explored the impact of the distance that is usually found between a learner and a tutor in a DE environment.

Consequently, the theory of transactional distance was presented by Moore (1997:28). This theory is grounded in the concept of transaction, derived from Dewey in 1949. As explained by Apps (1980:5), it “connotes the interplay among the environment, the individuals and the patterns of behaviours in a situation”. Moore (1997:29) argues that DE is not simply a geographic separation of learners and teachers, but, more importantly, is a pedagogical concept. It means that DE is a concept describing the environment of teacher-learner relationships that exists when learners and instructors or teachers are separated by space and time. This environment is continuously shaped by the structure of the teaching programmes, the interaction between learners and teachers and the nature and degree of self-directedness of the learner. Therefore, the transaction found in DE occurs between

teachers and learners in an environment that has the special characteristic of separation of teachers from learners.

This separation leads to special patterns of learner and teacher behaviours and Moore (1997:33) advocates that it is the separation of learners and teachers that profoundly affects both teaching and learning in any DE setting. With this separation, there is a pedagogical and communications space to be crossed, for example, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of the teacher and those of the learner. It is this teaching-learning space (with all its communication and pedagogical aspects) that is termed 'transactional distance'. Moore and Kearsley (1996:4) recommended that in order to overcome this transactional distance, which is pedagogical and not necessarily geographic in nature, teachers should plan, present content, interact, perform and organise all processes of teaching, such as learner support structures or teaching methods, in a systematic and well-formulated manner.

According to Suen and Parkes (2003:1), transactional distance is the most unique feature of DE. This has a number of implications for learning and assessment processes. The learner is isolated from resources, tutors and peers. Lack of contact with these support systems can have a significant influence on the learner's motivation. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL1999:51) views learner support services as important elements of any DE offering as they help to close the transactional distance between the education institution and learner. This view is supported by Mohono-Mahlatsi & Van Tonder (2006:386) when they argue that distance learners who study without the provision of quality support from their institutions are unlikely to be successful due to poor motivation or the lack thereof. To a large extent, the provision of learner support depends on the capacity and resources at the disposal of a particular institution, but it has to be effective in order to facilitate meaningful learning.

Evidently, programmes and courses need to be designed in such a manner that they acknowledge and overcome the challenges of transactional distance that characterise all teaching and learning in DE. It follows that when designing any DE programme, the emphasis should be on the organisational structures that support

learning, taking into consideration the fact that teachers and learners are not in the same place at the same time and that the transactional space needs to be managed meticulously. This view is supported by Mays (2010:9) when he stresses that the instructional designs of any DE course, including learner support, should aim at reducing the transactional distance between lecturer and learner in order to ensure an optimal fit between the aspirations, resources and abilities of learners and the offering and academic requirements in a distance education model. It could therefore be argued that an optimal fit between learners and institution at various stages of the student journey is crucial to ensure and sustain both the learner and institutional success. This study argues that learner support, in DE, should always enhance the conversation between the learner and the lecturer and motivate the learner in his journey of studying.

The modern approach in DE has shifted from the emphasis on teaching to an emphasis on learning and the needs of the learner (learner-centeredness). As a result, DE, to a large extent, is a field of education that focuses on the pedagogy and instructional system designs that aim to deliver education to learners who are not physically “on site” in a traditional classroom or campus. It can further be described as a process that creates and provides access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and transactional distance or both. In other words, DE is the process of creating an educational experience of equal opportunities for the learners to best suit their needs outside the classroom. Such opportunities can be created, *inter alia*, by means of providing DE learners with a well-designed learner support system.

Oblinger (2000:1), feels that DE offers the potential to provide alternative learning to “new audiences; for others, it offers the opportunity fundamentally to transform learning delivery and the competitive landscape”. Therefore, it stands to reason that DE has generated tremendous excitement both inside and outside higher education.

Mohono-Mahlatsi and Van Tonder (2006:386) assert that DE methods are increasingly used for initial training and the continuing professional development of teachers in most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. This view is supported by Rena (2007:149) when she states that presently all over the world, the distance mode of

education has gained momentum and has become more popular. In addition, DE creates the possibility of increased access to tertiary education at a cost effective level.

Since tertiary education is more expensive than conventional school education, countries like South Africa have developed different policy frameworks for the development of teachers at tertiary education level so as to control costs. Amongst others, DE has been identified as a force or mode of delivery in response to the above challenge, for example, upgrading and updating the skills and knowledge of the learners such as under-qualified NPDE teachers. Therefore, the use of DE for teacher development and training could be regarded as a viable option for consideration in many higher education institutions. In a DE setting, under-qualified practitioners such as teachers can further their studies while working, residing with, and looking after their families. These learners may be working adults who have to balance work and family responsibilities with their educational goals (Oblinger, 2000:3). Rena (2007:233) asserts that learners, even in developed countries, prefer distance learning rather than conventional face-to-face education.

Yet, sometimes the DE learner is deprived of the supportive physical presence of the lecturers and peers, which in a face-to-face institution a learner enjoys day in and day out. That is why Oosthuizen (1995:5) comments that a learner in a DE environment is not reinforced in his or her study by the competitive and sharing activities of group learning, or by direct help, or encouragement of a tutor. In DE, argues Qakisa-Makoe (2005:44), there is a strong correlation between support and learner motivation. A lecturer who offers regular support to DE learners helps to allay the fears and anxieties brought on by isolation. Supportive measures from tutors and other parties promote confidence on the part of the learner and make a learner feel that he or she is part of, and belongs to a group of people who care and who are supportive. Although it can be argued that a learner should be encouraged to be independent ultimately, he or she needs help and support in his or her learning path in order to realise that goal.

Learning flourishes when learners have an opportunity to develop and utilise their talents and perspectives to the fullest (Rainey & Kolb, 1995:39). This is how learners

become empowered or how they become independent and therefore, in control of their learning activities. Learner support is regarded as an important structure in any DE environment. In a true DE situation, learner support should be geared towards ensuring that the difficulties “isolated” learners encounter are managed and used as a learning experience (Qakisa-Makoe, 2005).

The above section has introduced the importance of learner support in a DE setting; the successive section will concentrate on learner support as an important component in DE programmes for upgrading teachers.

3.4 ASPECTS OF LEARNER SUPPORT IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

There are many approaches to providing a learner support system in DE. The ways in which this support is provided will vary considerably depending on a wide range of factors (Creed, Allsop, Mills & Morpethl, 2005:9). For example, the quality of any learner support structure is informed by the nature and philosophy of the total DE system of the country and the institution concerned (Nonyongo, 2003:123).

This section focuses specifically on the discussion of the five important learner support services in any DE offering, namely, registration support, study support services, contact sessions, technological support and feedback measures. These five learner support systems are regarded by the researcher in this study as key and critical in any DE programme. Furthermore, this study strongly argues that without nourishing any or some of the five structures mentioned above, teaching and learning in a DE environment will be impaired.

However, in many parts of the world, many DE institutions are still seriously constrained and therefore they still rely on text materials. Some scholars, such as Keegan (1996:44), regard course materials as part and parcel of learner support services in a DE setting (see section 3.1). As a result, this study has encompassed the importance and a short discussion of study materials. In this study it is also argued that learning material, be it print or web-based, should always be of a high quality if it is to complement learner support services effectively in the DE

environment. This section will further cast some light on different definitions of learner support as advanced and developed by different scholars over the years and this discussion ultimately leads to the recent trends and understanding of the concept of learner support in DE. The following discussion concentrates on learning materials as part of learner support in a DE setting.

3.4.1 Course materials

In a DE setting learners can use study materials prepared for them by their institutions. These materials are supposed to be supportive in that they are developed to be accessible to DE learners in terms of languages, illustrations, design and the integration of study skills. Therefore learners can integrate learning, from the materials, with services of learner support and in this way learning is enhanced.

The study materials can be in the form of a module (study guide) and/or general tutorial letters. The module course material outlines the content of the learning area at hand and tutorial letters clarify certain issues or give more information about the course or the programme. Clearly, it follows that the language used in the study materials has to be simple, avoid ambiguity and be user-friendly.

Prior to the development of the course material, it is important to determine who the learners are and what they are required to achieve, with the assistance of well-structured learner support services, on completion of the course. Therefore, Qakisa-Makoe (2005:45) asserts that the challenge of developing learner-centred study material is based on the following questions: Who benefits from the course? What are the learners going to use the course for? What do the learners hope to achieve? Which learner support services will complement these course materials?

These questions are important in forming the basis of developing course materials, because course designers and developers need to know who they are developing the course for and why they are developing the course. They also need to ask themselves if the information contained in the course is relevant and is also

recognised by the students' community. In other words, is the course addressing the needs of the learners? What types of support do they need?

Qakisa-Makoe (2005:47) further postulates that there are four stages of course development focusing on an analysis of a distance education learner. Learner support in these stages is highlighted in the following table (Table 3.1)

Table 3.1 Stages of course development in distance education

ANALYSIS	Who are our learners? How do they learn? What is their background? How do they understand distance education learning? What type of support do our learners need? How do we meet the needs of our learners?
DESIGN	Determine the objectives of the course Formulate outcomes Select teaching/learning resources/learner support services Identify assessment criteria
DEVELOP	Formulate behavioural objectives of each unit Select the content material Classify the material and learner support services Structure the content Provide learning guidelines Elicit performance Provide feedback
EVALUATE	Determining criteria for evaluation Piloting the course Evaluating learner performance and learner support effectiveness with the view of innovating Analysing the content of the course Monitoring how learners are progressing

From the above, it is clear that learner support is a common denominator in all four stages of the development of the course materials. During analysis of course design, the type of learner support services to be used have to be determined and during the design stage, the appropriate support mechanisms have to be introduced so as to be integrated with the actual teaching. This is followed by the development stage where these support services are now classified based on particular aspects of each course or module.

Finally, the functionality or the impact of the learner support structures can now be evaluated so as to improve the usage in the next cycle of course or module development. It follows, therefore, that learner support services have to be integrated with the compilation or development of any course design. To a large extent, learner support structures in DE are to complement or should be complemented by course content at any given time. However, this study does not include course materials in its investigation of learner support services.

3.4.2 The concept of learner support

The term “*learner support*” can be traced to Vygotsky’s concept of the zone of proximal development, which refers to a learner’s optimal developmental potential, if assistance that is timely and appropriate is provided by another person (Vygotsky, 1978:23). LaPadula (2003:119) supports Vygotsky’s view when she defines learner support as “the assistance and guidance that learners are offered above and beyond the learning materials”. The above assertion is echoed by Barker and Crawley (2005:3) when they define learner support as “assistance or strategies used so as to empower learners to establish and fulfil their learning career and personal potential”.

Garrison and Baynton (1987:10) define learner support as the resources that learners can access in order to carry out the learning process. Garrison (1989:45) further observes that in DE “support is concerned with a wide range of human and non-human resources that guide and facilitate the educational transaction”. Here he agrees with scholars such as Delling (1987:66) and Garrison (1989:49) when they emphasise that the most important form of support in an educational transaction is the teacher, who through guidance and direction can assist learners to achieve their goals and develop control of the educational process.

The South African Institute of Distance Education report (SAIDE, 2000:1), describes learner support as “the interface between the institution and its students”. As such, learner support is developed for a particular population of learners within a particular context (unlike other elements of course production which are largely context

independent, e.g. production of a text book which might be used for several different purposes).

Traditionally, learner support was seen as that which happens after the course has been developed and this created a serious problem, namely, a separation between learner support and the course material. This dilemma raises the question of where the boundaries lie between learner support and course design and development. In the modern context, the nature and use of learner support is to be integrated with course material and therefore perceived as an instructional activity or resource which enables learners to study successfully so as to develop their own understanding of the material. Therefore in this study, learner support is regarded as including activities or interventions other than those that are mass-produced and pre-packaged learning materials for a general audience (Mays, 2010). Mills (2003:104) argues similarly for a broad conception of learner support as:

..the totality of the provision by an institution to support the learner, other than generic teaching materials produced by instructional designers/course producers. It is to be absolutely clear, where learning materials are produced for numbers of students, e.g. print. This is regarded as the academic teaching and is considered to be outside the framework of learner support. Learner support is designed to help the individual student learn from the teaching materials, may be academic, administrative or personal. It can be provided through a range of media and by a range of people.

Lentell & O'Rourke (2003: 24) suggests that, too often, learner support is conceived narrowly as the administrative support and services as provided, for instance, in many distance learning systems. On the other hand: Barker & Crawley (2005:3) argue that the term learner support can be seen to mean considerably different things in different contexts depending on the institution defining it. Barker & Crawley (2005:3) further contend that most definitions tend to be situated along a continuum which has the notions of supporting learners with disability and/or additional needs at one end, and a life-empowering growth towards personal autonomy on the other. This suggests that, in some cases, there is little clarity in an overall definition of learner support, resulting in the potential for considerable confusion.

Recently learner support has gained more attention and interest in DE institutions. High quality support in DE remains a key issue in current thinking, debate and research particularly in the twentieth century (Phillips, 2003:170). Barker & Crawley (2005:3) contend that this interest and need for high quality learner support, is evidenced in a range of previous research projects including Fletcher (2002), Green (1998 and 2001) and Macleod (2003). This renewed interest reaffirms the fact that nowadays learner support is regarded as an integral part of the delivery of quality distance education experiences (LaPadula, 2003:119), and as Barker and Crawley (2005:3) argue, “the role of effective learner support could be considered to be fundamental to the development of appropriate strategies to raise the retention and achievement rates of learners studying at a distance”. It follows therefore that well-organised learner support is frequently accepted as having a positive impact on the learning experience of a distance learner.

In addition, one important means of ensuring the effectiveness of learning activities in DE is the provision of effective learner support. This recognition, that learning has a supportive dimension, particularly in DE, has long been recognised (Biggs, 1999:18). Support systems contribute to the process of learning and assist the learner in developing competencies and confidence in self-regulated learning and personal growth (McLoughlin, 2002:149). As a result, this study strongly argues that learner support services in DE should never be relegated to the back seat.

Learner support services can enhance enrolment, decrease attrition and provide for a well-rounded programme (LaPadula, 2003:120). Since learner support is no more supposed to be regarded as an add-on to a predefined course, but itself defines what the course becomes, the popular model of course design first, learner support second, as practised in many educational institutions, should be questioned and possibly reversed. Thorpe (2002:106) supports this view when she asserts that DE practitioners have developed the term ‘learner support’ to identify a distinctive and important set of practices carried out by course designers right from the beginning up until the use of collaborative learning and assessment.

Learner support focuses on providing learners with the assistance they need to achieve their desired outcomes in a distance learning environment (Ukpo,

2006:253). Furthermore, Carnwell (2000:124) argues that although learners have particular needs for constant support and guidance when learning at a distance these aspects are not always catered for in distance learning provision. This study, therefore, argues that curriculum designers and teachers, particularly in DE institutions, need to ensure quality learning support for learners as learning environments are increasingly designed according to the principles of resource-based and independent learning. This view is supported by McLoughlin (2002:59), when he argues that “in a distance learning environment, learner support must be designed in a principled way in order to ensure that learners progress from teacher-directed activity to self-independent activity”.

Learner support includes activities or interventions other than those that are mass-produced, and pre-packed learning materials designed for a general audience of learners. Given the wealth or variety of material already available on course design for printed materials, this form of service to learners will not form part of the definition of learner support applied in this study. As a result, this study proposes to adopt a combination of the above definitions of learner support as they all emphasise the notion that support mechanisms in a particular learning environment assist the learner to unlock his or her maximum potential so as to enhance personal growth.

To further elucidate the learner support concept, this study agrees with Kelly and Fage (2002:56), when they view learner support as being characterised by the following principles:

- Learner support is regarded as the assistance and guidance that learners are offered above and beyond the learning materials.
- Learner support is an integral part of the planning and delivery of quality distance education courses and should never be regarded as an added-on aspect.
- The integrated approach suggests that there is an organic relationship between DE and learner support.

- All support possibilities need to be tailored so as to be most appropriate to meeting learners' needs.
- No one form of support should be used at the cost of another.
- The learner support service needs to be available at every stage of a learner's career.
- Learner support should provide a framework to guide learners through their studies.
- Learners are expected to make independent decisions and to be in charge and it is essential that the support framework is always learner-centred.

As a consequence of the above principles, the argument in this study is that learner support deserves more attention than it has received in the past, and that, for learners studying at a distance, such as under-qualified teachers, dedicated and focused learner support is desirable so as to meet a number of their needs. For example, Phillips (2003:170) asserts that learners in DE may need:

- correct information and admission guidance prior to enrolment;
- a friendly atmosphere particularly during registration periods;
- guidance and support about course choices and qualification planning;
- careers guidance to enable them to link study plans to their career interests;
- guidance about study requirements and available facilities and resources;
- induction advice to these learners as some of them could experience their first exposure to study at a distance;
- guidance and support about the institution's administration and functioning;
- advice about, and opportunities for, study preparation and the development of learning and study skills;
- opportunities to monitor and review own progress; and

- academic and tutor support

Based on the above assertions, it is clear that learner support services offer advice, guidance and study support as developmental factors in the whole learning process and aim to identify and remove barriers of learning. Equally, the support mechanisms have to ensure that learners, and especially DE learners, participate in an active way in the distance learning process. What a learner needs in distance study, are support services or someone who can help him or her organise learning opportunities, who learns with him or her and who, for example, explores and examines study activities with him or her. The methods of providing support in DE should always attempt to address that space created by transactional distance which is often not experienced in a daily, face-to-face contact tuition model.

3.4.3 Critical learner support structures in DE

As Tait (1995:232), summarises, the common assumption is that learner support is “the whole range of services both for individuals and for learners in groups which complement the course material and which are often perceived as the major offerings of institutions using distance education”. This study argues that registration support, study support services, contact sessions, technological support and feedback measures are major offerings in DE and have to be regarded as crucial. Critical learner support structures generally assist to break the isolation of DE learners and reduce the high drop-out rate normally associated with DE system (Nonyongo, 2003:139). Indeed, these critical learner support services play a critical role in improving the performance of DE learners.

This study regards critical learner support services as the key means through which uniform course materials are articulated with the interest of diverse groups of learners, as individuals and as learning groups. Research into the experiences of individual learners has stressed how important this dimension of enjoyment and relationship can be in fostering personal transformation (Lunneborg, 1997:23). To further elucidate their importance and their critical nature, the five types of learner

support services mentioned in this study, namely registration support, student services, contact sessions, technological support and feedback strategies, will be discussed in the following section. Later in section 3.5.2, these five critical learner support services will be contextualised to NPDE programmes at UNISA.

3.4.3.1 Support offered at registration

A key conventional DE organisation has been, and still is, proper learner support systems that are given before, during and after registration and therefore enhancing a smooth registration process (Kuboni, 2009:363). Prior to registration in DE, tutors and programme co-ordinators should conduct workshops or orientation sessions with target learners, where they familiarise and motivate them about their intended field of study. Apart from that, at registration, there is a clear need for high quality information, advice and guidance from the registration personnel (Barker & Crawley, 2005:10). Barker & Crawley (2005:10) further contend that particularly at first registration, DE learners need information on aspects such as their course structure and organisation or planning their work load, thereby gaining an overview of the course.

Research shows that providing intensive and well-organised support for beginning learners through friendly atmosphere, mentoring, accurate information, counselling or teacher –induction programmes, can lead to high rates of retention (Brewster & Railsback, 2001:22). For example, series of workshops or orientation programmes could be organised to give learners some background regarding a particular programme so that when they register, they already know what their intended field of study entails.

Kretovics (2003:1) warns that DE learners have to receive adequate support at registration from both academic and administrative staff as this can be of great benefit to them. These can be in the form of registration materials brochures and calendars) and study materials (tutorial letters, study guides or prescribed books). These support services could clarify regulations, help in choosing relevant courses, motivate, build self-esteem, improve campus identity, create opportunities for interpersonal contacts and provide access to other learning support services.

Kretovics (2003:2) further emphasises that learners have to get all registration and study materials right at registration, that is, in time so as to embark on their studies as early as possible. Kretovics (2003:4) concludes by stating that the provision of proper support, particularly at registration, will increase the probability of academic success.

For many learners, entering higher education institutions is a major transition and yet they sometimes get little or no support as they attempt to deal with this new experience. All DE learners must be given proper guidance and accurate information during registration as this will make them feel more comfortable (Qakisa-Makoe, 2005:46). In addition, learners need proper registration support as they go through life, especially when undergoing a major change such as entering into study programmes at university level. It goes without saying that South African DE institutions such as UNISA should be service-orientated in order to address access needs. In a service-orientated institution, a learner or a client would be central to the learning process.

Support may also take place at registration where prospective learners are supported by a counsellor dealing with their initial inquiry. They are usually given an overview of the course so that they can carefully decide whether the course is in fact suitable to them. The advisor answers queries learners may have and even helps them with the completion of registration forms. The advisors have to be trained continuously so that they can display a measure of acceptable ethics to learners, friendly atmosphere and be approachable. At this stage, learners require encouragement and they also need their confidence boosted (Mishra, 2003:249).

3.4.3.2 Study support services

In this research, study support services refer to those services that are concerned with the creation of an overall enabling environment and tend to be more generic in nature, such as libraries, financial aid offices, career services or counselling services. Study support services are important for many reasons. They can enhance enrolment, decrease attrition and provide for a well-rounded programme (Dede, 2003:8). In addition, they ease learners' adjustment to higher institutions, assist in their intellectual and personal growth and contribute to their academic success.

Dirr (1999:88) contends that as institutions are now serving larger numbers of learners over a wider range of academic disciplines and across state lines, individual learner support services are no longer regarded as being effective and this Dirr (1999:89) regards as a serious shortcoming, particularly in DE courses. Many study support services, therefore, need to be completely reconceived to serve learners at a distance. In this case learner support may be concerned with a range of strategies that can be employed to mediate what Prinsloo (2009:6) calls the 'fit' between the learner's transforming identity as a learner and the evolving goals and understanding of the institution as a learning organisation.

Various forms of study support services such as the library, financial aid unit, career guidance and counselling unit, and peer support underpin all aspects of the learner support services and the journey towards building success in DE. Of importance is that learners should be able to access these services at their own convenience. Therefore, study support services are supposed to be readily available to all DE learners of any institution. Besides, learners have to be made aware about all support services that are available to them, how to access them and how to make fruitful use of them (Kretovics, 2003:2). There is usually a learner service division that houses such resources as admissions, learner records, registration and counselling. These services are regarded as part of the education process. A financial aid office, where learners access bursaries and loans, could also be part of this study support mechanism.

One of the biggest gaps in higher education is institutions' inability to provide time- and location-independent access to a complete array of study support services. In *Beyond the Administrative Core: Creating Web-Based Student Services for Online Learners*, a three –year (2000-2002) project funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (McLouglin, 2002:152), it was found that when learners services are considered, the most common services that are incorporated into time- and location-independent format are those within the administrative core, such as admissions and registrations. Study support services such as the library or career orientated services are normally neglected.

Like traditional campus-based learners, distance learners need to access other support services such as career services. Implicit in the above scenario, once more, is that learners should be made aware of all support services that are available to them. This suggests that, in a particular institution, programmes and modules will favour different mixes of learner support strategies depending on particular disciplinary needs, contexts of learning and student profiles. Therefore, curriculum designers need to agree on a basic set of strategies that apply to all modules or programmes and that have the necessary scope for flexibility to address particular needs and all these must be made available to DE learners.

3.4.3.3 Contact sessions as learner support measure

For contact sessions to be successful they have to be well-planned. For example, learners have to be informed on time about the dates and appropriate contact venues. The venue has to be well-prepared in advance and has to be big enough to accommodate all learners. Resources to be used have to be readily available. Tutors have to be well-prepared and identify the activities they will be engaged in during a prospective contact session. In this way, tutors will be able to give effective support to the DE learners.

Support from tutors is sometimes lacking in most DE programmes, leading to further isolation of distance learners. Even the most highly motivated and self-directed DE learners can find their experience lonely, difficult and sometimes daunting if they are not given adequate individual support and motivation. A lack of continuous, individual nurture from tutors can be discouraging and may lead to failure. This can be accomplished during well-organised contact sessions.

Lentell (2003:66) argues that if we were to accept that DE tutors are merely markers of their learners' work during contact classes, it would be to fundamentally misunderstand what their real roles are. She emphasised the fact that during contact sessions tutors must facilitate and guide learning of their DE learners so that these learners could gain knowledge and deeper understanding. To achieve this, tutors should develop and practise multitudes of skills and strategies through the use of learner support structures. The implication for the tutor role during contact sessions

is very significant in that he or she can give guidance to learners, clarify issues, give motivation or encourage group work.

Lentell (2003:73) further emphasises that the role of the tutor is intensive and personal to each DE learner. Furthermore, tutors have to be able to help the learners articulate their learning needs and help them acquire the skills of reflection and independence. Tutors, during contact lessons, have to be able to help or accompany DE learners translate real world problems experienced at home or at work into a form from which they could learn and by so doing playing roles of coaches and mentors.

As discussed above, in DE settings periodic face -to-face contact (particularly between a tutor and a DE learner) is the answer to attending to some of the learning problems and this has also long been the cornerstone of educational practice and mediated learning experiences (Mays, 2010:131). This type of contact allows for immediate interaction or dialogue between educator and learner and even between learner and learner. Continuous face-to-face contact also enables educators to monitor aspects such as moods, participation, attendance, progress and levels of engagement with relative ease. The educational purpose of a face-to face contact session, the way in which it is designed and the number of learners and educators involved, influence the nature of this interaction, as do the personalities of the individuals involved.

Learners having personal problems or seeking individual assistance can visit tutors or *vice versa* so as to attend to problems that haunt them. By special arrangements, learners can meet their tutors at designated times during contact sessions to discuss urgent matters pertaining to their studies. The kinds of personal problems that are usually dealt with could be related to marriage, health, family and study. The discussions have to be cordial and frank so as to alleviate learners' problems or solve them completely.

Contact sessions may also provide learners with an opportunity to meet tutors and deal with challenging tasks. For example, in this situation the constructivist tutor or teacher is supposed to provide tools such as problem-solving and inquiry-based

learning activities with which learners formulate and test their ideas, draw conclusions and inferences, and pool and convey their knowledge in an active or collaborative learning environment (Mayer, 2009:188). In this way this constructivist approach to teaching and learning could transform the learner from a passive recipient of information to an active participant in the learning process and this can be realised by the inclusion and proper use of well-formulated learner support services.

Always guided and supported by the teacher in a DE model, learners have to construct their knowledge actively rather than just mechanically absorbing knowledge from the teacher or the textbook. Teachers have to guide or support learners to construct knowledge rather than to reproduce series of facts. This view is supported by Qakisa-Makoe (2005:46) when she states that “an understanding of what distance learners need requires a new mindset, a shift away from educators being controllers of the learning process to being facilitators of learning”. To summarise the roles of a DE tutor, Lewis (1995:244) indicates that:

... your role as tutor is to complement the learning materials and extend the learners' understanding of them through marking and grading assignments and help with general study problems. You are the first port of call if the learner cannot make sense of the material and you act as the link between the course material and the learner, initiating and taking part in a dialogue with them.

To meet the requirements of the above roles, Lewis (1995:245) emphasises that the tutor in DE needs:

- Some knowledge of the subject the learner is studying, though not necessarily expertise in all areas
- A willingness to work supportively alongside DE materials
- An understanding of adult learning and how to facilitate it

- Ability to communicate with the learner mainly at a distance, for example by post, e-mails or telephones
- The ability to give quality feedback on the learners' progress, usually through marking tasks such as portfolios or assignments

In some cases the role could be extended to that of an educational counsellor or tutor counsellor, covering areas such as study skills, careers guidance and acting as a friend and advocate for the learner within the DE system. From the above discussion, it is evident that the tutor could also be regarded as the main source of support for the DE learners not only during contact sessions, but at any time during their studies.

Similarly, learners can meet during contact sessions and give one another peer support. Simpson (2000:23) quotes a small scale research which suggests that support from family and friends and from fellow learners is more valued by learners than from tutors. In this case learners can form study groups and meet from time to time or during contact sessions to give feedback and raise pertinent and challenging issues. This is why this kind of support should always be geared towards ensuring that the difficulties encountered by learners are raised in individual groups and used as a learning experience during contact lessons. In addition, the constructivist learning theory holds the view that learners should interact with other learners so that they can learn from the incorporation of their experiences (Bertman, 2003:20). Study groups can be formed during scheduled contact sessions. Bertman, (2003:23) concludes by stating that these study groups are vital from an affective perspective as they provide learners with motivation and support.

Contact sessions enable individual interaction between educators and groups of learners and, in some instances, between individual learner and educator. This face-to-face contact allows learners to be taken to different locations where the learning experience is designed around the immediate environment of the group. Its strength, when employed effectively, lies in the nature of human interaction. Bertman, (2003:24), asserts that from an academic perspective, the groups do seem to help an

individual learner achieve a certain level of learning, to know the content and in many instances, to pass the exam. It is also clear that study groups can provide self-made deadlines for learners which keep them on track with their studies.

Social interaction, which is frequently beyond the scope of course material, can be very useful during contact sessions. Both social interactions and related learning experiences can be monitored and assessed while sessions are in progress and instructional designs, if need be, can be adapted immediately (Mays, 2010: 131). Potentially both learners and educator can read how a situation is progressing, and can choose to intervene during the session.

3.4.3.4 Technological support

Bates (1995:5), rightly mentions that the earliest form of distance tuition, an educational experience that separates the instructor and learner from each other by distance and time, was paper based (print). The technology of the time was paper and pen. Therefore, older models of DE utilised regular mail to send written material, videos and audiotapes to learners for teaching and learning. As mentioned in section 3.4.1 above, for teaching and learning to be meaningful in this kind of a situation, the course material must be of very high quality and completeness.

Nowadays ICT may refer to various technologically enhanced delivery strategies which include a range of multi-media such as computer-based programmes, audio and video conferencing, telephones or cell phones, television broadcasts and radio – to deliver live or recorded material to both individual home-based learners and groups of learners, particularly in a DE setting (Nonyongo, 2003:129). Most DE programmes use computer-based technology in their learner support services. DE has traversed four to five “generations” of technology in its history. These are print, audio/video broadcasting, video teleconferencing, computer aided instruction, e-learning/online learning, computer broadcasting or pod casting (Minnaar, 2000:15). Yet the radio remains a very viable option, especially in the developing nations, because of its reach. For example, in India the FM channel is very popular and is being used by universities to broadcast educational programmes of variety on areas

such as teacher development, rural development or programmes in Agriculture for farmers (Oblinger, 2000: 4).

Developments over time led Fowell & Levy (1995:273) to postulate that the combination of skills required for effective provision of technology in DE as a learner support measure would encompass IT expertise by both the tutor and the learner, as well as expertise in the educational applications of information and communication technologies. As a result, Latchem (2010:89) contends that successful results of ICT in education institutions will be realised if everyone else involved is intensively trained in its usage. Hence Brewer, Dejonge & Stout (2001: 34) argue that when the computer is used to move beyond traditional classroom walls, opportunities for learning expand. Education is becoming an experience of learning and sharing for students and teachers as a community of learners online. Brewer *et al.* (2001:35) strongly contend that the modern computer, with its rapid change and development, in the world of DE has made it possible for learners and teachers to easily access information. The same technological media can also be used to deliver instructional material prepared by the course designers. Modern DE, therefore, heavily relies on well-planned technological strategies and support.

Within a context of this rapid technological demand (such as for computers) and shifting markets conditions, different education systems throughout the world face the challenge of providing increased educational opportunities within limited budgets (Payne, 2004:232). Many educational institutions are answering this challenge by developing DE programmes. As stated before, at its most basic level, DE takes place when a teacher and a learner are separated by geographical distance and time, and technological support, often in concert with face-to-face communication, is used to bridge this instructional gap (Ravhudzulo 2003:77). In this way ICT support programmes can provide DE learners with the opportunity to receive or access information, thereby enjoy learning, while at their places of employment.

Technology is increasingly being adopted in many DE institutions to support the distant teaching role and to meet the growing demands from such learners (Thatcher, 2007:348). That is why McCall and Piterman (2001:134) argue that developments in DE and advances in ICT have made access to knowledge and

educational services around the world feasible. When using ICT in DE, information sharing possibilities are much better online – much faster, cheaper and multi-directional than by means of surface mail. For remote and scattered learners such as many of UNISA's learners, possibilities for peer support, sharing of ideas and for a feeling of belonging to a learning community are far greater in a course supported by technological media (online) compared with the traditional print. In this way, argues Pennells (2001:182), constructivist approaches to education can be brought to course design, so that courses can be anything but simply 'pumping knowledge'.

According to Jaffer, Ng'ambi & Czerniewicz (2007:1) information and communication technologies (ICTs) can and do play a number of roles in DE education. These include providing a catalyst for critical thinking, developing the kind of graduates and citizens required in an information society, improving educational outcomes (especially pass rate) and enhancing and improving the quality of teaching and learning. On the other hand Gulati (2008:1) asserts that using technology in teaching and learning has become a global phenomenon as it makes learning more interesting and valuable. According to Gulati (2008:2), however, technology is often seen as a value-added tool that potentially allows learners to overcome the constraints of traditional "elitist spaces and gain unhindered access to learning". Furthermore, Gulati (2008:2) feels that technological use in education helps to address issues of educational equity and social exclusion, and open up democratic and accessible educational opportunities particularly in a DE environment.

Through the use of ICT, learners have the opportunity to experience and evaluate online learning of others, which constitutes part and parcel of the learning process. Furthermore, contends Pennells (2001:183), learning through technological media allows for variation to suit individual DE learners and groups, including supplementation of core materials as the course progresses. For example, the new tools coming essential nowadays include mobile phones which in many developing countries are more pervasive than personal computers. Trials in schools in India reveal that mobile phones can play a valuable role in basic learning, calculation, reminding learners, updating information, correcting mistakes, recording of visual data, peer-to-peer learning and home-to-school communications (Latchem,

2010:76). It is especially suitable in this regard for encouraging learners to contribute and use their own experience as a resource in the course.

Latchem, (2010:79) concludes by stating that the use of telephones by learners can deepen their knowledge thereby enabling them to be better information seekers, analysers, problem-solvers and better communicators. Therefore, where telephones are appropriate and financially feasible to assist with tutoring, it is recommended that they be used and encouraged (Corry & Lelliot, 2003:38). The use of ICTs, including telephones has to be properly planned particularly by tutors as a learner support service in DE. This will help tutors to assist their learners to interact with them and take part in collaborative knowledge-building (Stevens, 2010: 93).

Technological course approaches are not without challenges. Pennels (2001:184) cites salient examples of these challenges as the following:

- Learners who are remote from facilities and/or those that are poorly resourced may be excluded
- Dependence on technology for course mediation is likely to fail some learners as they are often separated (by space and time) from their tutors, peers and providing institution
- Some learners and probably lecturers may not be conversant with the technical skill or with the use of the technological media
- The cost of course materials is pushed from the providing institution onto the learner. This includes the cost of printing and binding material if desired or having to update and service the computer that is used by the DE learner

Furthermore, Lentell (2003:73) mentions another challenge by arguing that the role of the tutor, when using technological support, should never be undervalued and poorly understood. Lentell (2003:74) further emphasises that managers, in higher education, should never look at the potential of using new technology to replace the role of tutor as facilitator, coach and mentor.

3.4.3.5 Feedback measures as form of learner support

Feedback in education refers to an objective description of a learner's performance intended to guide future performances (Brookhart, 2008:56). Therefore, feedback is an essential part of education and development programmes. It helps learners to maximise their potential at different stages of development, raise their awareness of strengths and areas of improvement and identify actions to be taken to improve performance. Learners value feedback, especially when it is given by someone credible who they respect as a role model for their knowledge, attitudes or competence. Failing to give feedback sends a non-verbal communication in itself and can lead to mixed messages and false assessment by the learners of their own abilities, as well as a lack of trust in the teacher (Parsloe, 1995:157).

It is a truth universally acknowledged that feedback is vital for any learner (Bedford, 2007:1). Researchers have recognised for years the strength of its impact on learning and achievement (Hattie, 2003; Vollmeyer & Rheinberg, 2005; Biggs & Tang, 2007). According to Bedford (2007:1), without adequate feedback comments DE learners may feel a bit disconnected and this may create a feeling of insecurity hence, these learners need ample opportunity for guided practice. Just like any other fruitful learning activity, feedback has to be well-prepared and be meaningful. Through constant and well-planned feedback strategies learners can feel more connected to the class, making them more comfortable.

According to Kintsch (2009:230), tutors must provide feedback that allows learners to assess their current level of understanding, hints about what to do when their understanding is inadequate, and tutors must carefully select new texts to be studied that afford the learners opportunities to learn more advanced strategies. For example, if tutors want to teach learners how to summarise, they must give them sufficient feedback (either written or oral), about what they have written, hints on how to improve it and give learners the opportunity to work on more and more difficult tasks. Using this content-based feedback, learners not only improve the quality of their summaries, but the benefits will persist over time, even when learners

summarised without tutor support. DE, therefore, must provide learners with ample opportunity for guided practice or profound and corrective feedback.

Wilkinson (2003:1) contends that corrective feedback is needed so as to enable learners to understand whether attempts to improve learning and experience lead to improvement. Corrective feedback helps learners to realise errors and learn how to correct them by providing explicit and informative feedback when returning learners' marked work.

Most DE institutions, like in the UK, use end of module questionnaires to gather feedback on learners' levels of satisfaction (Cowan, 2002:6). This is feedback from learners which is equally important and informative in that it helps lecturers to improve their feedback strategies which will in turn enhance teaching and learning. The argument here is that a two-way feedback and communication are vital particularly in a DE setting. Where a two-way communication is implicit in a feedback strategy, the atmosphere of developing a supportive approach, relaxed and mutual respect will be created.

Kasprzak (2005:1) argues that feedback is an indispensable part of the process of teaching in any learning context, but it seems to be acutely sought after by DE learners, compared to their face-to-face counterparts. DE learners may be new to their environment and unfamiliar with the dynamics and organisation thereof. As such, constant feedback, particularly from the tutor, becomes handy in this kind of a situation. Chetwynd & Dobbyn (2011:67) assert that in DE, effective feedback on learner assessment plays a vital role in retention and in the development of self-regulating learners, particularly in the first year.

Feedback can be provided through technological media such as telephones, e-mails, SMS's or during face-to-face sessions. For example, a personal and positive comment from the tutor on the performance of learners (either verbally or by e-mail) does much to give them reassurance, motivation and confidence. Hence feedback is regarded as one of the ways in which the tutor can support the learners in the learning process. Furthermore, positive and well-constructed feedback can play a crucial role in that it opens and maintains a dialogue between learners and tutors.

This can be carried out by providing quality feedback to DE learners on their assignments which might give them the opportunity to ask a teacher for more clarification about their assignments; by so doing improving learning.

Limited contact opportunities, like in DE, particularly with tutors, necessitate constructive and continuous feedback on learners' work. Feedback has to be precise and unambiguous if tutors are to help their DE learners effectively.

According to Bedford (2007:1) and Tshaka (2011:3), the following are the two methods most highly favoured for providing feedback to learners in DE:

- Giving oral feedback during class discussion
- Written feedback

3.4.3.5.1 Oral feedback

Oral feedback is frequently used for conventional institutions but it is equally or even highly needed for DE learners who can meet their peers and tutors whenever time permits, for example during contact sessions. Oral feedback can include activities such encouraging questioning or responses from learners, working through problems in class or pursuing a controversial point by debates and rigorous discussions. Bedford (2007:3) advocates that learning happens best when learners can work collaboratively and in dialogue with others, both peers and teachers, by so doing giving feedback to one another based on their discussions. In addition, this study argues that involving learners in discussion also stimulates thinking and problem solving, as well as enabling lecturers to ascertain the level of their learners' understanding.

3.4.3.5.2 Written feedback

Feedback on assignments or any other task for that matter is mainly written by markers on individual work. Tshaka (2011:9) contends that written feedback should always be constructive, clear, unambiguous and motivating. For example, there

could be written feedback which could be discussed in contact sessions on the most common problems as well as sharing of good assignments. Some learners may stay behind after contact sessions thereby holding discussions with the tutor, and by so doing integrating written and oral feedback; where one will complement the other. Written feedback on assignments should be structured in such a way that it helps learners to know where they have gone wrong and how they can improve. Therefore feedback comments must always be elaborate, constructive and encouraging.

3.4.3.5.3 Principles of giving effective feedback

Emphasising that feedback is vital and fundamental to effective teaching and learning, Parsloe (1995:149) suggests the following principles of giving feedback:

- Focus on positive measures
- Feedback must be timely, therefore, the teacher should give feedback as soon after the event as possible
- As far as possible, negative feedback should be given in private
- Feedback is supposed to be corrective in nature, therefore the teacher should focus on behaviours that can be changed, not personality traits
- When giving feedback, suggest alternative behaviours
- Feedback is for the recipient, not the giver- be sensitive to the impact of your message
- Talk about and describe specific behaviours, giving examples where possible and do not evaluate or assume motives
- Be clear about what you are giving feedback on and link this to the learner's overall professional development or intended programme outcomes
- Be careful about the wording and phrases used when giving feedback
- Do not overload- identify two to four key issues that should be commented on
- Feedback must be a two-way communication that will ultimately lead to appropriate action in the context of developing competence. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to describe feedback as “the fuel that drives improved performances”.

From the above discussions, it can be concluded that the main aims of any quality feedback may be summarised as the following:

- showing learners where they went wrong
- helping with the furthering of own study
- clarifying challenging or difficult concepts
- encouraging and mapping the way forward
- making significant difference or improvement in the learner's work

The above discussion has clearly demonstrated the importance of five critical learner support structures from the literature study. The importance of learner support in PD is further emphasised by Leach (1996: 104), who maintains that learning in the broad sense of being a life-long exercise, should have central place in learner support such as ICTs. Leach (1996:123) concludes by asserting that learner support is more of a “process” that enhances learning than just an “added provision to be managed”. That is why Corry & Lelliot (2003:39) strongly maintain that development of conventional learner support activities such as face-to-face tutorials, counselling, detailed feedback on marked tasks, telephonic contact with tutors, support in the formation of study groups and support from peers, tutors and family are more important for the majority of DE learners from developing countries, who are still yet to benefit from the technological revolutions taking place in the developed world.

3.4.4 Summative remarks on the nature of learner support in a DE setting

It is worth noting that one of the major problems of DE is that of isolation on the part of the learner. The learner may feel isolated from other learners, from teachers and from the DE institution itself. To attempt to address this feeling of loneliness, learner support should be learner-centred and also be regarded as a process of mediating between the learner and the learning environment (Qakisa-Makoe, 2005:56). Whereas DE resources and processes are designed generically for a particular learner population based on general trends in the learner profile, learner support is

also concerned with how the individual learner, or a particular category of learners, interacts with the learning process and the learning environment (Mays, 2010:2).

As a consequence, Qakisa-Makoe (2005:55) asserts that a good support service in DE should address the following factors in relation to the distance learner:

- Motivate the learner
- Encourage group activities by facilitating communication among learners
- Provide sufficient feedback
- Bridge a gap between the tutor and learner

From what Qakisa-Makoe (2005:58) said, it means that learner support activities may take place through a range of activities, a variety of mediums, a range of support staff, and a range of places as well as at varying stages (pre-course, during course and sometimes even after course). While there are many central activities that are integral to a well functioning DE system, learner support activities are aimed at meeting the unique needs of the individual (although this may occur in groups) and have as their specific goal to ensure maximum learning opportunities for success and a quality educational experience in DE.

The success of any DE programme depends on the planning, quality and implementation of its learner support services, particularly the critical learner support services as described in section 3.4.3. Most unfortunately, in some DE systems, more resources are invested in the technical services at the expense of the learner support systems (Usun, 2004). Equivalent or more resources, such as the integrated communication technology, should be invested in the learner support system if the DE enterprise is to be successful in any DE institution activities such as UNISA.

3.5 LEARNER SUPPORT CONTEXTUALISED TO THE NPDE PROGRAMME AT UNISA

The challenge of any educational institution is that of accommodating changing educational needs that confront the education system from time to time. In recent

years there have been fundamental changes to teacher education in South African higher education institutions. One of the major changes in teacher education has been, according to the policy document, *Norms and Standards for Educators* (2000), the phasing out of old teacher education certificates, diplomas, higher diplomas and further diplomas and the introduction of new ones (Ngidi, 2005:34). One of the newly introduced diplomas was the National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE), which caters for under-qualified teachers who wish to upgrade their qualifications. In this section, a short history of UNISA (as a DE institution) and the NPDE will be given, as well as how the five crucial learner support structures mentioned earlier (see section 3. 4.3) are implemented in the NPDE programmes at UNISA.

3.5.1 The origin and historical background of UNISA and the NPDE

This section deals with the origin of UNISA and introduces this institution as a DE education institution in South Africa. Thereafter, the focus falls on the origin, nature and implementation of NPDE as a DE teacher development programme at UNISA.

3.5.1.1 University of South Africa: Historical background

UNISA was originally formed in 1873 as The University of the Cape of Good Hope. The name of the university was changed in 1916 to The University of South Africa and the university moved to Pretoria. It became a dedicated DE institution since 1946 and is thus “the first public university in the world to teach exclusively by means of distance education” (Nonyongo, 2003:128). UNISA was one of the higher education institutions in South Africa, which was requested to incorporate NPDE programmes in its DE curricula since 2002.

3.5.1.2 The National Professional Diploma in Education: Historical background

The NPDE is a 240 and 360 credit qualification, on level 5 of the National Qualification Framework (NQF). Its curriculum was structured in such a way that it focuses on classroom activities and also equips upgrading teachers with the foundational, practical and reflective competencies required for study at NQF level 6.

At its inception, the Department of Education emphasised that the NPDE is not just another “paper chase” to obtain a qualification. It is a new qualification that has been designed not only to upgrade the qualifications of under-qualified teachers, but also to equip them with the professional competencies relating to teaching and learning in schools as regulated by the Norms and Standards for Educators (DoE, 2000:1). It was agreed that the mode of delivery had to be DE. The nature of the NPDE programme, the way in which the curriculum has been developed and the requirements for effective implementation, have all challenged established thinking regarding the professional development of classroom-based teachers by DE (Mays, 2001:3).

The NPDE is the upgrading qualification or the intervention strategy by the DoE specifically designed to help those teachers with two year qualifications to upgrade to relative education qualification value (REQV) 13, previously known as M+3. The relationship between the M+ classification and the modern REQV classification is therefore roughly as follows:

- M+0 = REQV 10
- M+1 = REQV11
- M+2 = REQV12
- M+3 = REQV13
- M+4 = REQV 14

However, contends Welch (2009:1), the awarding of an REQV level is more complex than simply counting the years of teacher training after Matric or Senior Certificate. For example, an additional REQV level may be awarded for a maximum of two approved qualifications at the same NQF level. To explain this point further, Welch (2009:2) has this to say:

A teacher may receive REQV recognition for a maximum of two post-professional qualifications at the same level (for example an old Further Diploma in Education and an Advanced Certificate in Education) provided they are in different fields of specialisation.

This means that a teacher with a three year Teachers' Diploma (M+3), as well as Further Diploma in Education (M+4) as well as ACE, could be evaluated as REQV 15. It is not the qualification itself that carries the REQV level. Instead, it is the qualification in relation to other qualifications that the teacher has obtained. Right from the inception of NPDE in 2001, the DoE made it clear that NPDE is a temporary measure aiming at upgrading under-qualified teachers to the status of REQV 13, and it would be phased out when it is no longer needed (Welch, 2009:5). This qualification was to be available at selected DE institutions like UNISA and would be accredited by the DoE.

All stakeholders who took part in the planning and implementation of NPDE, like the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC), Provincial Governments or designated institutions such as UNISA, were asked by the DoE to give NPDE learners as much educational support as possible, including financial support (Wildeman, 2000:6).

In October 2000, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) registered the NPDE as follows in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF):

Table 3.2: NPDE qualification in the National Qualification Framework

NQF Level	General Vertical articulation		Horizontal & Diagonal articulation	Career-focused Vertical articulation
8 (8c)	PhD 360 credits (360 at 8c)			
8 (8b)	Master of Education (by research)	MEd (structured) 180 (60 at 8b)		
8 (8a)	MEd (by research) 180 (120 at 8b)	Masters Certificate MCE 120 (120 at 8a)		

7	Bachelor of Education (Honours) BEd (Hons) 120 (120 at 7)				
6		Graduate Certificate in Education (GCE) 120 (96 at 6)	Bachelor of Education (BEd) [UG BEd year 4] 480 (204 at 6)	Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) 120 (96 at 6)	
5 (5b)			Professional Diploma in Education (PDE) [UG BEd year 3] 360 (228 at 5 & 72 at 6)		National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) [Upgrading qualification] 240 and 360 credits
5 (5a)		Certificate in Education (CE) [UG BEd year 1] 120 (72 at 5)	[UG BEd year 2)		
4	FETC				

(Source: Standard Generating Body 05, 2001: 70)

As Table 3.2 indicates, the NPDE was envisaged as a 240 and 360 credit programme primarily at NQF Level 5. In order to access the NPDE, in-service teachers would need already to have some form of initial professional qualification evaluated at least at REQV 10, 11 or 12 (e.g. Std 8/Grade 10 + PTC/STC). For 360 credit programme, which was introduced in 2004, Matric (Grade 12) plus three years teaching experience were needed as entry qualification. These teachers are

supposed to upgrade themselves to REQV 13 status, which was regarded (in 2001) as a qualified teacher status in terms of the Employment of Educator's Act, 1998.

Following the registration of the qualification, the Department of Education was able to secure funding to offer bursaries as an incentive to educators to enrol in the NPDE programme. The ELRC was engaged to manage the bursary process and opted for a regional model of provision. Some Higher Education Institutions in South Africa submitted proposals to offer the programme. UNISA followed this process and was accredited as provider in 2001. In March 2002, UNISA was chosen as preferred provider of the NPDE to national bursary holders in Gauteng, Kwa-Zulu Natal and Mpumalanga, in addition to the self-financing learners who had already registered in other provinces of South Africa.

In its March 2000 edition of *Edusource Data News*, the Education Foundation (2001:12) reported as follows on teacher qualifications:

The total number of teachers employed by the DoE countrywide at the end of February 2000 was 347 982. Almost 24% of teachers (85 501) are under-qualified, and 80% of these teachers are in rural primary schools. Thus the 'poorest of the poor' in rural areas and in the least resourced provinces have the least qualified teachers.

The following table reflects the geographical distribution of these teachers:

Table 3.3 Under-qualified teachers by province

Eastern Cape	18 716
Free State	6 537
Gauteng	4 614
KwaZulu-Natal	20 853
Mpumalanga	5 651
Northern Cape	1 131
Northern Province [Limpopo]	10 595
North West	14 682

Western Cape	2 722
Total	85 501

Adapted from Edusource (2000), in Mail and Guardian (08/12/2001)

Following this report, the Education Trust was commissioned to undertake a more detailed review of the need. In the final version of its report in the Education Trust (2001:1) concluded as follows:

According to the Persal database 2000, there were a total of 76 839 under-qualified educators in South Africa, who have an REQV9-12. The Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal have the highest number of under-qualified educators, while the North West has the highest proportion (39% of its educators fall in this category).

As a result of the above findings the NPDE programme, as a PDT programme, was implemented in different higher education institutions in 2002. It was designed to help teachers to reflect and improve upon classroom practice on their way to gaining qualified teacher status and it also provides an alternative route into further professional development via the 2nd part of a B.Ed or via an Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) and the entry into a Bed (Hons) degree (see Table 3.4). As an interim measure, NPDE will be finally faced out from all institutions in 2014.

The NPDE programme focuses mainly on classroom activities (Ngidi, 2005:2) such as lesson preparation, and therefore, it requires evidence that teachers demonstrate applied competencies of the exit level outcomes in the real classroom setting. According to Ngidi, (2005:3) these competencies are:

- Competencies relating to fundamental or foundational learning: The first component is concerned with developing teachers' personal literacy and numeracy skills. This is based on the recognition that many of the target teachers will not have been involved in studying for a long time and may need to revise those skills. It is also based on the understanding of the

weaknesses of many earlier teacher development programmes which ignored this need.

- Competencies relating to the subject and content of teaching: This component is concerned with the knowledge, skills and attitudes that teachers need to develop as a foundation, intermediate or a senior phase teacher
- Competencies relating to the teaching and learning process: This component deals with general learning and teaching issues and processes, such as assessment, inquiry-based learning programme design, use of a variety of teaching and learning strategies and learning resources
- Competencies relating to the school and teaching profession: This component largely emphasised issues outside the classroom, such as the South African Schools Act (SASA), Developmental Appraisal System (DAS) or the South African Council of Educators (SACE).

Considering that these teachers have to satisfy all or most of the above competencies, that they are situated at the entry point of NQF level 5-qualifications and that they are studying at a distance, it follows that maximum and well-functioning support is needed for them to achieve these intended competencies. Nonyongo (2003:136) supports this view when she contends that integrated and well-functioning learner support services are one of the central distinguishing factors in any DE environment. Therefore, the assumption in this study is that learner support services and in particular critical learner support structures are regarded as important components of the NPDE programme at UNISA.

3.5.2 The implementation of critical learner support services in the NPDE programmes at UNISA

This section seeks to discuss the nature or the role played by the five critical learner support services employed at UNISA, *inter alia* for the benefit of the NPDE learners. There is a variety of learner support services such as the Ombudsman Office, the

Dean of Students' Office or the Students Representative Council Office used at UNISA, but this study will focus on the five critical ones as discussed in section 3.4.3, namely registration support, study support services, contact sessions, technological support and feedback measures. AS a former tutor in the NPDE programmes at UNISA for seven years, the researcher has been exposed to different learner support services hence much of the information supplied here will be drawn from his experience and personal observation. The study will also give examples of how such support is provided in a wide range of circumstances in the NPDE programme at UNISA.

3.5.2.1 Support offered at registration

At UNISA Curriculum materials are normally made available during registration and registration forms are checked after completion and feedback given to the applicants. These advisors are provided with manuals on the different services of learner administration for their own perusal and reference.

In processing applications for registration, the student system and exemption database are important sources of information. The relevant policies are supposed to be strictly adhered to in all processes that are governed by the information in the university calendar. The registration facilities (at the main campuses and regional offices) are learners' first point of entry. However the operations of these facilities are hampered by issues such as the following:

- Lateness of pertinent information (such as the calendars) that impacts on staff training and service delivery
- Lateness of study materials such as tutorial letters 101 (with assignments), prescribed books and study guides
- Institutional communication that is often unidirectional, for instance, registration staff not kept abreast of developments and changes
- Language barriers; registration staff not conversant with some of the languages, for example, Afrikaans

- Congested or small areas that are not conducive to registration delivery
- The long queues and time that learners have to wait to finalise their registration (HEQC Institutional Audit, 2008:138-139).

At UNISA regional centres are regarded as decentralised sites which assist the two main campuses in Pretoria and Florida with support services such as registration. As will be seen in the following table (Table 3.2) there are about twenty-three UNISA regional centres in South Africa which also serve as registration centres. Figure 4.1 (section 4.4.1), which is the map of South Africa, shows nine distinct provinces of South Africa and their major cities.

Table 3.4 UNISA regional centres in South Africa

REGION	REGIONAL CENTRE/AGENCY
Gauteng	Johannesburg, Ekurhuleni and Vaal Triangle
KwaZulu-Natal	Durban, Pietermaritzburg, Newcastle and Mbizane
Cape Coastal (incorporating the Western Cape and Eastern Cape Provinces)	Parow, Port Elizabeth, East London, Mthatha and George
North Eastern (incorporating Limpopo and Mpumalanga Provinces)	Polokwane, Nelspruit, Middelburg, Thohoyandou and Giyani
Midlands (incorporating the North West, Free State and Northern Cape)	Rustenburg, Bloemfontein, Kimberley, Kroonstad, Mafikeng and Potchefstroom

As support structures to DE learners, regional centres have as their core purpose, to extend and expand the university's registration capacity to the local crop of learners. In addition, the main purpose and focus of the regions are the efficient and effective decentralised delivery of services (such as registration) to enhance a quality learner support experience and to position the university in the regions as a DE leader in Africa. Regional leadership is charged with creating an enabling and user-friendly environment, particularly at registration, to new and returning learners.

UNISA provides registration information to learners in the form of the university calendar and information brochures that are in print and electronic format. In order to serve their intended purpose of providing correct information to learners prior to registration, the calendar and registration information brochure have to be submitted to print production by August of the preceding year. This requires that all the calendar information has to be updated and submitted to Senate for approval by July. This does not always happen and sometimes the information is presented for approval after the calendar has been submitted to print production. This sometimes results in the printed calendar containing incorrect information.

At present, learners can register online, through the post or in person. This study concentrates on learners who register personally at different UNISA registration centres as mentioned in section 3.2. Learners registering in person can be assisted or supported by student-aids or full-time staff members. Learners can register at the main campus in Pretoria (Sunnyside) or at any other UNISA regional service centre in South Africa.

After registration, UNISA sends learners a package of study materials, e.g. cassettes, videos, tutorial letters with course outlines and assignments, a programme for the contact sessions for the current year and prescribed books. Unfortunately, in some cases, these do not reach students on time. As a result, some students miss the first session of contact classes and do not submit the first assignments in time. In some cases, these assignments are returned to the learners unmarked (because they are late) and this affects their year marks. This problem can adversely affect the throughput rate.

What needs to be stressed is the interdependence of the various despatch systems at UNISA. If material (from a lecturer) is submitted late to the Planning and Coordination section, it obviously will arrive late in Print Production section and might not be on the shelves in the Despatch section when learners register at the beginning of the year.

If the Despatch section notices that stocks are becoming depleted, the Department of Print Production or the Directorate: Sound, Video and Photography

have to ensure the availability of materials to learners. It is the complexity of this despatch system that is cited as a cause of late delivery of study materials to the NPDE learners.

Notwithstanding the improvements that have been made in line with technology upgrades and institutional changes, the operational methodology and process flow are seemingly in need of a major overhaul and re-engineering. In reviewing these operations, it is clear that a cohesive process flow that arises from a re-engineering exercise would be highly beneficial, coupled with documentation of integrated standard operating procedures.

3.5.2.2 Study support services

There are many study support services in DE in different institutions but this study will limit itself to only three, which the researcher regards as crucial in DE, namely, libraries, the Bureau for Counselling, Career and Academic Development (BCCAD) and the Financial Aid Bureau (FAB).

3.5.2.2.1 UNISA library

UNISA library services are developed according to international guidelines for distance learning library services, i.e. intended to meet the needs of all DE learners, the researchers and the academic, professional and administrative staff regardless of where they are located (HEQC Institutional Audit 2008).

By adhering to international standards, the library is positioned as a leading provider of quality distance information service through a range of information products, resources and services that aim at supporting a DE learner. Above all, the library through its online version, aims to enhance service delivery to remote DE learners and to facilitate the best use of resources for decentralised services. The library uses technology in various ways to enhance access to resources and services and to support the needs of its users, including NPDE learners. Aligned with the university's vision, the library's vision is to be the leading distance education library in Africa. At registration, NPDE learners are issued with library cards, enabling them to use the

library at any time. Apart from the main library at the main campus, there are other branches in the regional centres of which students can make use.

3.5.2.2.2 The Bureau for Counselling, Career and Academic Development (BCCAD)

The BCCAD as a support service at UNISA has counsellors who are available at registration and post registration for learner consultations. The organisational structure consists of two divisions: a counselling division based on the Pretoria Main Campus and the academic development division which is situated in Florida. Both divisions also have direct links with the regional offices. As a support service at UNISA, the BCCAD is tasked with the following;

- Counselling for learners on career, academic and personal development
- Resource development to support counselling which focuses on the provision of materials that learners can use

NPDE learners at UNISA are given brochures which give them information about the use of this support facility.

3.5.2.2.3 The Financial Bureau

The Financial Aid Bureau (FAB) specifically focuses on the effective administration and facilitation of financial assistance to undergraduate and postgraduate students. Learners who meet FAB criteria, such as those with outstanding academic performance or those who are very needy financially, can be assisted with this support in the form of free or loan bursaries schemes.

3.5.2.3 Contact sessions as learner support measure

Contact sessions are cited as one major form of support provided to learners at UNISA. The sessions for NPDE programmes at UNISA are held for eight days per year over weekends or during school holidays. In 2010 they were held at different centres namely Durban, Nelspruit, Polokwane and Pretoria.

Attendance was not necessarily compulsory but learners were encouraged to attend. This, in itself, was a loophole as only those that were interested or those who could afford it financially would choose to attend. Learners had to pay for food and own transport to the venues. Attendance registers were normally kept. Attendance varied from one area to the other. It is interesting to observe that attendance in urban areas such as Pretoria was much better than in remote areas such as in Nelspruit and surrounding areas.

From the researcher's observation and experience, the average attendance in urban areas was 70% and rural areas about 40%. Part-time and UNISA lecturers facilitated the contact sessions. Part-time tutors were given training (once a year) by UNISA full-time lecturers. This training seemed not to be adequate as the NPDE learners complained about the level of tutoring of some part-time tutors. The purpose of contact sessions included providing learners with exposure to their study materials, giving feedback, individual attention and academic counselling. During these sessions, learners were encouraged to form study groups and they could also meet their peers and share ideas on different issues affecting their studies.

However, the researcher held informal discussions with some NPDE learners and was told, particularly by those living in far remote rural areas that contact sessions were expensive as they had to travel to the central places or contact session venues from time to time. Furthermore, the tendency of some lecturers to use contact sessions in DE to merely communicate the curriculum to learners, was ill-suited both educationally and financially and as a result, it discouraged some learners from attending.

3.5.2.4 Technological support

One of the objectives of the UNISA 2015 Strategic Plan is to “establish service-oriented, technology-enhanced learner support to increase retention and throughput” (HEQC Report, 2008:160). An element of UNISA's mission is that it “addresses the needs of a diverse learner profile by offering relevant learner support, facilitated by appropriate information and communicative technology”. To this end, the Department of ICT and other departments at UNISA have to work together to make the best use

of education technology so as to support all learners such as those in NPDE. At UNISA it is argued that a technological teaching and learning environment is not technology for the sake of technology, but firmly embedded in the university's policies of learner support services, the planning of learner support structures, as well as their quality.

The complex electronic communications and information environment for higher education today is bringing into sharp focus a new educational role for the services and staff with the responsibility for promoting skilled use of technological information services. Basic technology skills have become a requisite for lecturers and learner affairs professionals (Kretovics 2003: 4). This notion is supported by Latchem (2010:89) when he emphasises that both DE tutors and learners need to be prepared and trained in the technical skills of using ICT. These skills include, *inter alia*, an ability to utilise a standard office software package that contains word processing and being able to use other technological support programmes available to be used in the NPDE programmes at UNISA.

It means that tutors and administrative staff at UNISA are supposed to have basic skills in using technological media to effectively support their DE learners including those in the NPDE programme. At UNISA NPDE learners are exposed to educational support services such as audio-conferencing and video conferencing, satellite broadcast, telephone, e-mails and faxes and the tuition portal (*MyUnisa*).

3.5.2.4.1 Audio conferencing and video conferencing

Audio and video conferencing are technologies that have been used by UNISA over many years. Some of UNISA's (about thirteen) regional video conferencing venues are equipped with new "state of the art" Tandberg video conferencing units to allow better quality audio and video outputs teaching and learning interventions (HEQC Institutional Audit Report, 2008:168). With these technological media, systems can be easily integrated into the NPDE programme with minimal adaptation to the course and are designed to support two-way video and audio communication between learners and lecturers/tutors or between students in multiple locations. This type of bridging transactional distance is integral to UNISA'S DE model. The "bridge

connection”, which is one-to-many, allows the lecturer to communicate with many groups of learners who are located at decentralised venues.

Video conferencing first, has to be booked by academics and then scheduled and confirmed by the administrators to take place on a specific date and time. This sometimes poses a serious problem as most lecturers do not get a chance to deliver their own sessions as the facilities are totally insufficient to accommodate all lecturers in each year. Furthermore, booking, even if is well in advance, is not a guarantee that one will be given a slot to broadcast one’s lesson. Video conferencing at UNISA is commonly used for a variety of functions, such as interviews, meetings, lectures/tutorials, oral examinations, group discussions, workshops and demonstrations. However, this technological facility was minimally used by NPDE tutors.

3.5.2.4.2 Satellite broadcasts

Satellite broadcasts are a fairly new delivery system at UNISA. This medium is used for “live” or pre-recorded presentations of lectures, tutorials, scientific experiments and training programmes to learners at remote venues via a television screen. Every “live” broadcast session is recorded, edited and reproduced on DVD. The DVDs are then duplicated and sent to the regional centres and libraries for learners to view as and when they need to. As in the case of video conferencing, these transmissions are first booked by academics, and then scheduled and confirmed by the satellite administrators. On weekdays the transmissions are usually booked from 09:00 to 19:00 and on Saturdays from 0:900 to 13:00 (as determined by the academics).

All academics who have indicated an interest in conducting satellite classes are first exposed to a one day training session on the use of the technology. The training is planned and executed in collaboration with the Directorate: Staff training and Development, which is located in the Human Resources department. The one day training for lecturers is not sufficient. As a result, most tutors do not use this learner support facility maximally – to the disadvantage of learners. The effectiveness of these technological support systems (video conferencing and satellite broadcast) is questionable, as most of UNISA NPDE learners (about 60%) live in remote rural

areas and therefore have difficulties in accessing these facilities. Therefore, most of NPDE learners still submit hand-written assignments by post. Furthermore, NPDE tutors used this facility very minimally. From his informal discussions with NPDE tutors, the researcher was informed that NPDE tutors were not familiar with the use of the satellite broadcast and video conferencing.

3.5.2.4.3 Telephone facilities

One of the main methods by which UNISA communicates electronically with its NPDE learners is through both desk and mobile phones. At UNISA, desk telephones are used to clarify certain issues or to discuss certain matters concerning learners' studies. Learners may phone the lecturers or *vice versa*, hence this remains a two-way communication.

If the time is of the essence to communicate with learners, then the SMS application (through the mobile phones) may be used, for example, to supplement an email announcement or information which was sent to learners through a formal communication channel such as tutorial letters. Up to this day, SMS application can also be used in times of emergencies or to communicate urgent matters to NPDE learners. This service should be considered as a value added service only. As a matter of policy at UNISA, the SMS application cannot be used for formal communication to learners. Written communications, learner emails and messages via *myUnisa* are methods of formal communication. Examples of appropriate use for considering SMS to supplement formal communications include

- notifying learners when classes have been moved or cancelled at the last moment;
- notifying learners if there has been a crisis on the campus/centre which may affect them;
- last minute changes to examination timetable/venue;
- notifying learners that results are available;

- notifying learners that their assignments have been received; and
- reminding learners of assignment deadlines

The SMS application has an auditing application which records the following information:

- who sent the message
- when the message was sent
- the recipients of the message
- the message content

The ability to contact learners via SMS is restricted and any staff requiring access to this service will have to get approval from their cost centre manager. Staff will need to provide cost centre information when applying to use the application. The application will summarise the total cost for the message being sent, and this cost will be charged back to the cost centre that the user provided. However, at times the SMS application is used for promotion of non-university related events or for personal use. Furthermore, it is not always possible for all learners to receive these messages for a variety of reasons, for example, they may

- have bad reception; particularly those in deep rural areas;
- have opted not to receive SMS communications when they registered;
- not possess mobile phones or
- have not have their mobile phones switched on.

The SMS facility was used maximally by all NPDE tutors and they found it to be very helpful to learners. By communicating through SMS messages, NPDE tutors indicated that they were able to reach many learners, even those in remote rural areas.

3.5.2.4.4 E-mails and faxes

Emails and faxes are another means of communicating with NPDE learners at UNISA. Lecturers can communicate with learners from their offices using these communication services. Each department at the university has its own fax machine which lecturers share. From his/her own work station, each lecturer can send an email message to a learner. *Inter alia*, these facilities can be used to

- respond to a problem raised by a learner;
- answer a question raised by a learner;
- clarify or correct a matter in own module/course; and
- give advice to learners pertaining to the examination or assignment

Once more, not all NPDE learners had access to these online facilities due to lack of resources and this posed a serious challenge. It follows that where communications were sent to learners or to a large group of learners via these electronic means, consideration was also needed where appropriate methods of communicating the same information to learners without access to online facilities could be established.

3.5.2.4.5 *myUnisa* facility

The first version of *myUnisa* went live in January 2006 (HEQC Report, 2008:161). *myUnisa* provides a collaboration and learning/teaching management platform that supports learners at UNISA. It provides interaction, communication, and resources that support all areas of the learning/teaching intervention. *MyUnisa* development is based on the needs of the organisation, the uniqueness of the challenges of DE, worldwide best practice, many years of combined experience, and student and lecturer input (HEQC Report, 2008:163).

Through *myUnisa* links itself (i.e. the lecturers) with all learners who have computers (email facilities) in a particular course or module and links learners so that they can

communicate amongst themselves. In this way, learners can help one another and are able to communicate (as individuals or as a group) with their lecturer at any given time. Through *myUnisa*, learners are able to form study groups, and to motivate and advise one another. Therefore, learners have the opportunity for engagement with the university and one another through technology.

The University provides a one day training opportunity for UNISA staff so as to be able to use the facility of *myUnisa* effectively. Not all lecturers have been trained thus far. Furthermore, the *myUnisa* that is currently in place requires significant improvements in learner-lecturer interaction – a goal of any DE model that focuses on decreasing transactional distance between lecturers and learners, learners and the institution, and learners (HEQC Report, 2008:165). The way in which it is used and adapted to each course is the choice of the individual academic staff member who is responsible for the course. The adoption rate is low among lecturers because the feeling from several of the academic staff is that it is additional work and because some learners are not online, it is regarded by them as optional. On the contrary, those learners that have access to it regard it as a valuable support structure and those that do not have computers, are gradually starting to purchase them so as to be on line.

It needs to be stated that sometimes serious difficulties are experienced in trying to deliver quality service through *myUnisa*. High peaks during assignment submission due dates tend to place severe strain on the general UNISA ICT infrastructure to the extent that the whole system becomes dysfunctional. The nature of *myUnisa* as a teaching/learning, collaboration and administrative platform and its current growth and acceptance amongst learners requires that the University views it as a mainstream learner support structure and as core component of the institution's academic activity. It can no longer be regarded as an "add-on" service. It is therefore imperative for all institutional stakeholders (including senior officials) to recognise its importance and ensure that adequate priority, appropriate improvement and funds are allocated towards this initiative. NPDE learners used *myUnisa* very minimally and NPDE tutors also indicated that they were not familiar with the operations of this facility.

3.5.2.5 Feedback measures as form of learner support

In NPDE programmes at UNISA feedback strategies are employed in different ways. Some of the assignments were marked by part-time markers who were trained once a year. Those markers were encouraged to provide quality and comprehensive feedback after marking each piece of work. UNISA NPDE full time lecturers were supposed to moderate any marked work. Whether this monitoring was always adequately done, is indeed doubtful.

When it comes to providing feedback on assignments, it appeared to be difficult to figure out the best way to provide individual comments to learners and return their written work with meaningful and adequate feedback. With meaningful feedback learners get a better sense of what content they have mastered and what area they are weak in, allowing them to focus their efforts where they are the weakest. In some cases, a blanket guideline was designed by NPDE tutors, which gave general comments or an overview of where learners performed or did not perform well. This route was always followed in different modules and the reason cited by NPDE lecturers was a high number of learners in the programme. This was not helpful to NPDE learners as some complained that they could not understand or follow the so-called guidelines. Learners indicated that they needed to be given more specific comments on their marked assignments or portfolios.

During contact lessons NPDE learners were given oral feedback by tutors. For example, a tutor could give them feedback on the task they had completed. In turn learners could engage with others or with the tutor where they could provide feedback on the sections that were challenging or on the work they had completed as individuals or as groups. Apart from contact lessons, tutors could give feedback through technological media such as *myUnisa*, e-mails or telephones.

3.6 SUMMARY

This chapter has set out both the concepts of *distance education* and *learner support* in a PDT environment. Learner support systems, it has been argued in this chapter,

must address the question for whom they are designed and, therefore, what the DE learners need. In turn this should lead to determination as to how these needs can be met, within the constraints of costs, technologies, time and geography. This chapter has also argued that, at any given moment, learner support services should be geared towards learner-centeredness. This seems not to be the case with regard to the NPDE learners at UNISA as these learner support services, from the researcher's own observation and experience, rarely met their educational needs and aspirations. Furthermore, these support structures were not adequately evaluated so as to determine the extent to which learner support structures meet the demands and aspirations of these learners. Not all NPDE learners had access to the five critical support services at UNISA due to travel costs to the resource service centres such as the library, and financial constraints to purchase technological equipment such as computers.

Particularly if we take the practical application of the constructivist approach to learning as our starting point as is the case in this study, we cannot present mere ready-made support models for action in a DE setting such as that of the NPDE learners. The emphasis must always be that of delivering a total service and of meeting the needs of learners at hand (Reid, 1995:265). The mere notion of constructivist learning implies a rejection of the kind of thinking which does not take the learner into consideration (Aalto & Jalava, 1995:264). The educator has power and responsibilities, but the real power is vested in the DE learners who are constructing their unique interpretation of the world with their own personal experiences, derived from learner support services, as the point of departure.

The rationale for learner support in DE has been weakly conceived over the years, and not surprisingly, in many institutions (such as UNISA), weakly realised and subject to wild fluctuations in terms of financial support (Tait, 2000:292). As was highlighted in section 3.4.2, learner support should not be regarded as an add-on expense but should be given its own legitimate budget like any other aspect in any education system.

An institutional challenge to operate a high-quality learner support system, and for staff to assume a central educational role in developing effective distance learning

environments, teaching and research, is increasingly emphasised in research literature and in this study. Education in general continues to be a crucial means to national development and a well educated and trained population is found to contribute meaningfully to the socio-economic development of any country (Marope, 2005:7). Many countries have therefore recognised that DE, backed by high quality learner support services, is a powerful tool for achieving the country's educational and training needs and a potent instrument in creating a learning society capable of bringing about scientific, technological and economic development.

From the foregoing discussions, it can be concluded that in a constructivist environment, teaching is learner-centred and it places the attention squarely on the individual learner and on teaching that is aimed at facilitating learning. This can be enhanced, as has been argued, by the use of a well-organised learner support system. The literature review in this chapter also emphasised the fact that when DE learners have learned something (through the use of effective learner support services), they will always have a clear mental picture of it, are able to talk about it or explain it to another person (social constructivist situation) and can use it to solve new and challenging problems. Therefore, learning for understanding is better than simply memorising facts, because facts may become obsolete, they tend to be rapidly forgotten, they do not help in problem solving and they do not provide a sound basis for life-long learning.

From the literature discussions in this chapter, it can be argued that the conventional system of full-time, contact-based colleges of education and education departments in universities is unable to meet the growing need for PDT programmes such as NPDE. Some of the reasons for this include that the numbers of learners exceed the physical capacity of institutions to accommodate them and that learners need to be able to continue to work while they learn. DE methods, which facilitate learning that does not require learners and teachers to necessarily be in the same place at the same time and can support the expansion of school-based PDT programmes, are seen as a logical solution to this challenge. Coupled with a well-planned learner support system, DE can add quality and positive results in any PDT programme. Therefore, for useful and effective professional development to have a meaningful effect on teacher learning and classroom improvement, the focus should be placed

on providing high-quality learner support structures, backed by a well-planned DE mode of delivery.

The use and implementation of the five critical learner support structures, namely, registration support, learner support services, contact sessions, technological support and feedback measures in the PDT programme for NPDE course have been elucidated. The question of how and to what effect they are implemented in PDT programmes, such as NPDE remains, imply that there is a need for an empirical investigation as was undertaken in this study. Therefore, by way of investigating this question, the next chapter explains the research design and methods of the empirical study pertaining to the implementation of the five critical learner support services employed in NPDE programmes at UNISA.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The focus of this chapter is on the description and discussion of the research design and methodology used in collecting data regarding the implementation of critical components of learner support services in DE as used in NPDE programmes at UNISA. This chapter describes the research process that informed this study. It also gives details of the rationale for empirical research, the choice of the research design, and the selection of participants and research sites. Furthermore, the chapter provides a detailed description of the data collection processes, the procedures for data analysis, the measures for trustworthiness as well as ethical guidelines that were considered throughout the study.

4.2 THE RATIONALE FOR EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

In the literature on learner support in DE, description and prescription outweigh empirical enquiry on research. Robinson (1995:222) contends that publications on learner support are often in the form of “how to do it”, guidance or reports of experience. These can have practical value but may be theoretical, unsubstantiated or lack validity when transferred to other contexts. While many accounts express the conviction that learner support services make an improved difference to outcomes in teaching and learning, demonstrations of the relationships are less easy to find. Robinson (1995:227) asserts that learner support as a teaching-learning strategy, has so far received less research attention than other aspects of DE.

From the researcher’s experience, there are four possible reasons why learner support may be perceived as a less glamorous activity than some other aspects of DE. They are:

- support staff often has less power, status and say
- learner support is often regarded as peripheral to the “real business” of DE
- it is an element particularly vulnerable to financial cuts
- more often than not, learner support services are ignored by lecturers and curriculum designers during planning and lesson presentations as a result of poor training in the use thereof

Furthermore, in the literature on learner support there are few reviews of research. Of these, some take a wider focus than learner support alone and not all distinguish between empirical research and other kinds of writing. Therefore a critical review of the research carried out so far on learner support, particularly in five critical learner support services as discussed in chapter 3, in DE is still needed.

Roger Mills (2003:102) contends that a paradigm shift in DE, which is often conceived as a triangle with tutor, learner and materials at the vertices, is necessary. Mills (2003:104) further emphasises that there has to be transformation as to the approach and positive consideration of using learner support in DE. Thorpe (2003:204) supports this notion by emphasising that these transformations require that learner support be integrated into course design from the very beginning. As a consequence, this study seeks to investigate all relevant aspects of how learner support strategies facilitate learning of under-qualified teachers in DE programmes.

From the above discussion and particularly the literature study and arguments on DE and learner support in Chapter 2 and 3, it can be asserted that DE programmes, together with learner support services, planned wisely, can show a positive impact on teacher development and classroom teaching. Yet there is a general lack of empirical research guiding the design and implementation of effective learner support systems in DE (Visser & Visser, 2000:46). The empirical investigation in this study is an attempt to respond to this situation.

McMillan and Schumacher (2010:6) cite a guiding principle that relates to the quality of a research question that can be investigated empirically. They contend that the quality of a posed research question, in empirical research, often determines

whether a study will eventually have an impact on the current state of knowledge. McMillan & Schumacher (2010:10) further suggest that a research question may serve to fill a gap in prior knowledge, seek new knowledge, identify the cause or causes of some phenomenon or formally test a hypothesis. Similarly, a research question may reframe a prior research problem in light of newly available methodological tools or theory. The significance of a question can be established by citing prior research, relevant theory and important claims regarding practice or policy. Finally, a new research question may be articulated at the end of a study, when the researcher has a better understanding of the phenomenon. The empirical research questions that are investigated by empirical research in this chapter are the following:

The main research question was:

What are the main constituting elements of learner support and their role in the professional development of teachers through DE?

The sub-questions were as follows:

- *What are the most important aspects of teachers' professional development?*
- *What is the role of well-organised learner support services in upgrading under-qualified teachers' qualifications through distance teaching?*
- *What do empirical data reveal on NPDE learners' awareness and perceptions of learner support?*
- *What recommendations can be made for the effective use of learner support services in DE for under-qualified teachers?*

Basing the above research questions on the guiding principle as suggested by McMillan & Schumacher (2010:6), it can be stated that these questions were investigated so as to seek new knowledge about the implementation of critical learner support services and the perceptions of NPDE learners pertaining to learner support in their programmes at UNISA. In addition, the questions also attempted to identify the causes of the attitude (whether good or bad) of NPDE learners with regard to learner support programmes at UNISA. Based on the above research questions, the overarching aim of the empirical research in this study was to

investigate the implementation of learner support system for under-qualified teachers in a DE mode.

4.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

Empirical educational research is essentially concerned with exploring and understanding social phenomena which are educational in nature, mainly pertaining to formalised and/or spontaneously occurring social, cultural, and psychological processes which could be termed education. In doing so, it deals with educational questions (as stated in 4.2 above) that can be investigated in a scientific manner, the methods which enable such scientific investigation, and the utility of results emanating from such investigation (Dash, 2005:1). Therefore, a research design is analogous to a plan or a map used in the process of finding solutions to the research questions (Merriam, 1998:44), and underlies all the decisions made in undertaking the study.

The designs used by qualitative researchers differ, depending on the purpose of the study, the nature of the research questions and the skills and resources available to the researcher. In addition, each of the possible designs has its own procedures and perspectives, reflected in the research process selected. There are no fixed rules to follow, or step-by-step guides to qualitative research design, but rather the choices and actions of the researcher determine the strategy (Fouché, 2011:268). Accordingly, the researcher in this study has created the strategy best suited for this research and has also designed the entire research project around it. For the purpose of this study, a phenomenological design was adopted as the use of learner support structures was elicited and the researcher wished to generate guidelines that will inform their implementation in the programmes of under-qualified teachers.

4.3.1 Phenomenological study

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010:24) a phenomenological study describes the meaning of a lived experience. Ary, Jacobs and Razavieh (2002: 447) explain that a phenomenological study is designed to describe and interpret an

experience by determining the meaning of the experience as perceived by the people who have participated in it. The assumption is that there are many ways of interpreting the same experience, and that the meaning of the experience to each individual is what constitutes reality. This belief is characteristic of all qualitative studies, but the element that distinguishes phenomenology from other qualitative approaches is that the subjective experience is at the centre of the inquiry (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2002: 23).

Phenomenology relates to understanding and interpreting the meaning that subjects give to their everyday lives (Fouché, 2011:270), and a phenomenological study investigates peoples' perceptions, perspectives and understanding of a particular situation, asking questions like "What is it like to experience this particular phenomenon?" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:139). McMillan & Schumacher (2010:24) assert that phenomenology aims to transform lived experience into a description of essence, and allows for reflection and analysis. It may involve the researcher in repeated and lengthy interviews with the participants, on a direct face-to-face basis.

This study is phenomenological in the sense that it deals with the lived experiences of, and meanings attached to the implementation of learner support in the learning of under-qualified teachers studying through DE. It seeks the interpretations of NPDE learners, made against their personal ways of thinking and value systems. The constructivist paradigm upon which this qualitative research is built assumes that reality as interpreted by individuals is interactive and is a shared social experience (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001:396). Since theoretical questions in educational research emerge from different conceptions and interpretations of social reality, different paradigms have evolved over the years so as to determine the criteria according to which a researcher would select and define problems for inquiry.

4.3.2 Research paradigm

Patton (2002:28) defines a research paradigm as a world view, general perspective, and as a way of breaking down the complexity of the real world. He further states that it is an interpretive framework, which is guided by "a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied". Webster Dictionary

(Cohen *et al.*, 2002:397) defines a paradigm “as an example or pattern: small, self-contained, simplified example that is used to illustrate procedures, processes and theoretical points”.

According to Creswell (2002:7), the most quoted definition of research paradigm is Thomas Kuhn’s (1970) exposition, which states that “a paradigm is the underlying assumptions and intellectual structure upon which research and development in a field of inquiry is based”. According to Kuhn (1970), a research paradigm is a model or pattern, according to which scientists view the objects of research. The purpose of research and how research will be conducted are all influenced by the researcher’s paradigmatic beliefs.

Furthermore, a paradigm may be viewed as a set of basic beliefs that deal with ultimate or first principles. It represents the worldview that defines, for its “holder”, the nature of the “world” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994:107). To support this view, Denzin and Lincoln (1998:200) regard a paradigm as a set of basic beliefs that deal with ultimate first principles. They also assert that a paradigm represents the world view that defines for its holder the nature of the “world”, the individual’s place in it and the range of possible relationships to that “world” and its parts. Therefore, a research design or a plan cannot be isolated from the researcher’s paradigmatic perspective on the world of research. When defining paradigmatic perspective as a researcher, the interplay between the ontological, epistemological and methodological underpinnings, become prominent (Mason, 2002:59). Denzin and Lincoln (2003:34) describe those three elements as follows:

- *Ontology*. It deals with the question of what is real, for example, how we think the social world is constituted is our ontology
- *Epistemology*. It is the branch of philosophy that studies the nature of knowledge and the process by which knowledge is acquired and validated
- *Methodology*. The methods used to search for that knowledge or how knowledge is gained

Dills and Romiszowski (1997:46) state the functions of paradigms as follows. They

- define how the world works, how knowledge is extracted from this world and how one is to think, write and talk about this knowledge
- define the types of questions to be asked and the methodologies to be used in answering
- decide what is published and what is not published
- structure the world of the academic worker
- provide the meaning of the paradigm and its significance

During the past century, different paradigms came to the fore due to the remarkable growth particularly in social sciences research. Dash (2005:1) and Hatch (2006:498) assert that there are mainly four main paradigms to the verification of theoretical propositions, namely positivism, post-positivism, constructivism and critical theory. The following table (Table 4.1) illustrates these paradigms in research with each adopting its own ontological, epistemological and methodological interplay.

Table 4.1: Paradigms in research

NAME OF PARADIGM	ONTOLOGY- Nature of reality	EPISTEMOLOGY- What can be known	METHODOLOGY- How knowledge is gained	PRODUCT- Forms of knowledge produced
Positivist	Reality is out there studied, captured and understood	How the world is really ordered. Knower is distinct from the known. Knowledge is based on observation and reason	Experiments, quasi-experiments, surveys or correlation studies. Mainly quantitative methods	Facts, theories, laws and prediction
Post-positivist	Reality exists, but it is never apprehended	Approximation of reality, researcher uses data collection instruments. Multiple interpretations	Rigorously defined qualitative methods, frequency counts and low level statistics. Biographical, phenomenological or ethnographical	Generalisations, descriptions, patterns, grounded theory

Constructivist	Multiple realities are constructed out of own experiences and the environment	Knowledge is regarded as a human construction. Researcher and/or participants construct understandings or facts	Naturalistic qualitative methods	Case studies, Narratives, interpretations, reconstructions
Critical	The apprehended world makes a material difference in terms of race, gender and class	Knowledge is regarded as subjective and political. Researchers value frame of inquiry	Transformative inquiry. Action research	Value mediated critiques that challenge existing power structures and promote resistance

Adapted from Hatch (2006)

Dash (2005:3) suggests that in order for the researcher to select an appropriate paradigm and corresponding methodology, he may raise the following questions:

- What is the nature or essence of the social phenomena being investigated?
- Is the social phenomenon investigated objective in nature or created by the human mind?
- What are the bases of knowledge corresponding to the social reality and how can knowledge be acquired and disseminated?
- What is the relationship of an individual with his/her environment? Is he/she conditioned by the environment or is the environment created by him or her?

For this study, the constructivist paradigm is the appropriate research approach and relevant since assumptions identified in this research hold that individuals seek understanding of the world or phenomena in which they live and work; they develop subjective meaning of their experiences and that meaning is directed towards certain objects or things (Creswell, 2003:8).

During interaction with various phenomena such as learner support services, human beings (tutors and fellow NPDE students), the students themselves interpret them and attach meanings to different actions or ideas and thereby construct new experiences (Dash, 2005:2). Therefore, the researcher in this study had to develop empathic understanding in order to know the process of interpretation by individuals so that he (the researcher) could reproduce in his mind the feelings, motives and thoughts that are behind the action of others.

4.3.3 Research approach

In the light of two previous chapters, namely Chapter 2 on PDT, and Chapter 3 on the implementation of learner support services in a DE mode, the researcher decided to conduct a qualitative investigation of learner support services as implemented in the NPDE programmes at UNISA. The researcher worked from the premise that effective and well-planned learner support services are a key to bringing about success in any professional development of teachers, *inter alia* those studying at a distance. Moreover, the researcher worked in the constructivist research paradigm. Using constructivism in this study, the researcher acknowledges the fact that the experiences of NPDE teachers in the implementation of learner support at UNISA are socially constructed, not given. Therefore, the following section will deal with constructivism as impetus for the qualitative research approach of this study.

4.3.3.1 Constructivism

Constructivist thinking has become very influential since 1980, branding the term *qualitative research* (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:6). By way of explaining the term *constructivism* Kitching, (2008:7) gives this analogy:

Several scientists and researchers see a close connection between constructivism and modelling and simulation. A model is a purposeful abstraction and simplification of a perception of reality, captured as a formal but implementation independent specification of the resulting conceptualisation of things, processes and relation. Simulation implements the model, often on a digital computer. The result is a constructed reality in

the computer from which new ideas can be generated. As these ideas, however, are rooted in the implementation of a model, hence being derived from a constructed reality, the principles are strongly connected with constructivism.

Constructivists believe that the mind is active in the construction of knowledge and that knowing is not passive; knowledge and truth are created, not discovered by the mind (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998:236). According to these scholars, reality is expressible in a variety of symbol and language systems, meaning that it is pluralistic and equally plastic, in the sense that reality is stretched and shaped to fit purposeful acts of intentional human agents. Furthermore, constructivism criticises objectivism, which embraces the belief that a human being can come to know external reality (the reality that exists beyond one's mind). Therefore, constructivist epistemology holds the view that the only reality humans can know is that which is represented by human thought. Meaning or knowledge is thus always human construction.

Strict constructivists will attest that there is no way to confirm the matter one way or another, since the goal of inquiry (namely reality) must be assumed at the outset. Constructivism proposes that knowledge that forms a new paradigm is based on inter-subjectivity instead of the classical objectivity and also on viability instead of the truth (Hatch, 2006:430). Furthermore, constructivists believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work, they develop subjective meaning of their experiences and this meaning is directed towards certain objects or things.

In qualitative research design, constructivists rely on the participants' views of the situation studied; participants are then able to construct meaning of a situation, a meaning typically forged in discussions or interactions with others (Creswell, 2003:8). Therefore, the constructivist point of view is pragmatic and it is always the responsibility of the researcher, using a qualitative approach, to look at different places and at different things in order to understand a phenomenon (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004:21).

Bearing the above discussion in mind, this study argues that there are multiple realities as each individual's perceptions of reality are important and valid. There are numerous realities that exist and people observe and interpret the world differently. One person's interpretation of an issue may not be the interpretation of another person of the same issue. Furthermore, reality is mutually and socially constructed and a diversity of interpretations can be made. In this study, the researcher is not the knower. The participants that the researcher are connecting with, in this case the NPDE learners, are collectively termed the knower (source of knowledge) and therefore this knowledge is made known by exploring their views, meanings, experiences and actions that happen in their daily educational lives. Therefore, knowledge is constructed not only from observable phenomena, but also from descriptions of people's intentions, values, beliefs and reasons that make meaningful self-understanding (Henning *et al.*, 2004:20).

All constructivists agree that the mind is active in the construction of thought (Denzin, 2000:199). From this statement it goes without saying that the mind of a human being is not passive; it actively constructs knowledge and ideas. Furthermore, Denzin (2000) contends that human beings do not construct their interpretations in isolation, but in relation to the environment in which they find themselves. In the context of this study, NPDE learners at UNISA do not exist in isolation from their educational environment which may consist of peers, tutors and learner support services. This implies that the researcher has to look at different places and different things so as to understand the phenomenon of *student support*. Researchers using this kind of epistemology inquire about the kinds of things people do, how they do them, what purpose activities serve and what they mean to them. In other words, researchers in this case become interested in meanings, symbols, beliefs, ideas and feelings given or attached to objects or events, activities and others by participants in the setting (Bailey, 2007:53).

To summarise the above discussion, Crotty (2003:9) suggests three principles of the nature of constructivism:

- People engage with their world and make sense of it based on their social perspectives. Humans are born into the world of meaning bestowed upon

them by their culture, and the interpretation made by qualitative researchers is shaped by their own experiences and backgrounds

- The process of constructivist qualitative research is inductive, with the inquirer generating meaning from the data collected in the field. The intent of the researcher is to make sense or interpret the meanings others have about the world.
- Meanings are constructed by human beings as they are engaged with the world they are interpreting. Therefore, constructivist researchers using a qualitative approach tend to use open-ended questions so that participants can express their views freely and at length.

However, the common criticism about constructivism is that it does not focus on an ontological reality, but instead on a constructed reality alone. In defence to that, the proponents of constructivist epistemology argue that “a basic presupposition of constructivism is that reality (ontological reality) is utterly incoherent as a concept, since there is no way to verify how one has finally reached a definite notion of reality” (Schilling, 2006:30). Another criticism levelled against constructivist epistemology is raised by Guba and Lincoln (1994:110), when they argue that “the limitation of the social constructivist research approach is that the researcher is not able to exclusively study an individual because all individuals are always members of a greater society. An individual cannot totally be isolated from the environment in which she or he lives, but the researcher can interpret an individual’s views in conjunction within his or her environment”. It means that it is difficult to isolate NPDE learners from their environment in which they study, which are their homes or the institution they are studying at.

4.3.3.2 Qualitative research

Qualitative research is an umbrella term covering various forms of inquiry during which the researcher builds a complex and holistic picture, reports detailed views of informants and conducts the study in a natural setting (Merriam, 2001:5). Qualitative research approaches are helpful for the understanding of and explanations of the

meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption or control to the natural setting as possible. Creswell (2009:175) also asserts that qualitative researchers prefer to study the world as it naturally occurs, without manipulating it. Researchers in this instance, view human behaviour as dynamic and changing and hence they advocate in-depth research, over an extended time span.

Qualitative research takes place in a natural setting and the researcher has face-to-face interaction with participants over time. McMillan & Schumacher (2010:23) support this naturalistic nature of the qualitative approach when they contend that “the qualitative research approach emphasises gathering data on naturally occurring phenomena. Most of these data are in the form of words rather than numbers, and in general, the researcher must search and explore with a variety of methods until a deep understanding is achieved”.

Qualitative research design is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human phenomenon (Matee, 2009:169). McMillan and Schumacher (2010:320) concur with this view when they assert that a qualitative research design is concerned with understanding social phenomena from the participants’ point of view, and data is collected in a setting that is sensitive to people and places under study. Similarly, White, (2005:81) supports this view and he says:

Qualitative research is more concerned with understanding a social phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants, and this happens through the researcher’s participation in the daily activities of those involved in the research, or through historical empathy with participants in past social events.

The researcher in qualitative studies can never be detached from the phenomena under investigation, as the researcher gets closely involved with the meaning and understanding of concepts and data that surface during the investigation. The researcher is thus expected to suspend a prior theoretical knowledge that she or he brings into the field (Flick, 1998:41). In this study, the researcher is expected to

suspend his prior knowledge about the implementation of learner support structures in the courses of under-qualified teachers.

The emphasis in qualitative research is on comprehensive meaning and understanding of a phenomenon within its unique context, rather than within the universal context. The main interest is therefore in the meaning that people have constructed and how the people make sense of their world and the experience they have in the world (Matee, 2009:171). The whole in this regard would include the past, the present and is inclusive of the historical aspects as a means to construct relationships. Qualitative research does not make attempts to predict the future, but it attempts to understand the nature of settings where a phenomenon occurs.

Unlike quantitative research designs, which are fairly uniform in structure, qualitative designs can vary significantly, depending on the theoretical framework, philosophy, assumptions about the nature of knowledge and field of study. These factors result in somewhat different definitions of what constitutes qualitative research (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:320). Educational researchers are likely to use the term *qualitative* in a generic sense as an approach that has certain characteristics. An excellent definition of qualitative research is provided by McMillan & Schumacher (2010:320):

Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflectivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem.

This definition emphasises the fact that in qualitative research, data analysis is inductive and establishes patterns or themes and it also stresses the importance of assumptions and the worldviews that provide the basis of the design. In a qualitative

study, the researcher often makes knowledge claims based primarily on a constructivist perspective that is socially and historically constructed with the intent of developing a theory or a pattern (Creswell, 2003:18). In addition, qualitative research is linked with phenomenology and interpretivism, known for its in-depth inquiry.

In a qualitative study, the variables are usually not controlled because it is this freedom and natural development of action and representation that it intends to capture (Henning *et al.*, 2004:3). People's individual and social actions, beliefs, thoughts and perceptions are analysed. In this research study, the perceptions and beliefs of NPDE learners at UNISA pertaining to the use of learner support services during their studies come under such a spotlight.

The researcher in this study adopted a qualitative approach. In qualitative study, the voice of the individual is of cardinal importance (Denhart, 2008:483). The qualitative design was the main approach used in this study because, as opposed to the quantitative research, the qualitative researcher uses multiple voices to bring across the main message. Through these numerous voices, the researcher strived to "convey naturalistic, complex, varied and expansive meanings" and even accommodated the silence between the multiple voices (Thody, 2006:109). In this study, the qualitative design aimed at exactly doing that; collecting, presenting and analysing multiple data through multiple voices of NPDE learners at UNISA. The researcher approached the use of learner support services from the point of view of NPDE learners and therefore needed a methodological approach in which learners' voices could be heard. Therefore, the qualitative design was chosen to fulfil this particular need.

Understanding of qualitative research was acquired by analysing the context of the participants and narrating participants' meanings for the actions and events. Qualitative research is concerned with understanding the social phenomena from the participant's perspective, feelings, beliefs, ideas, thoughts and actions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001:396). McMillan & Schumacher (2001:397) further stress that qualitative researchers become immersed in the situation and the phenomena studied.

The researcher is in agreement with Neuman (2003:396) who argues that, in qualitative research, the involvement of the researcher in the lives of his or her respondents has the likelihood of creating numerous ethical dilemmas which demand from him or her to make moral decisions on the spot. These decisions entail decisions placing the respondents highly on the priority list. In this study, the researcher was aware that conducting research with human participants' placed great responsibility on the researcher himself, and any inappropriate handling of respondents or the data could impair the validity of his whole research. Therefore, the researcher maintained the basic principles of research ethics, which are humility, right to privacy, respect, confidentiality and voluntary participation (Bloom, 2002:313).

Acknowledging that qualitative research gives dominant power to the researcher, the researcher in this study made sure that he did not misuse his power to drive data in a direction he would have liked it to go; a direction that would affirm his assumptions. The researcher was empathetic to the NPDE learners and took their situations (as learning participants) into account (Thody, 2006:143). This is very important in this NPDE setting and more so where the researcher was at some point a lecturer of the same learners and therefore was in a more senior position or of higher academic "status" than the respondents. Given the social cultures, there was a power distance in two aspects: academic status and age (Suwanabroma & Gamage, 2008:55).

From the foregoing discussions the nature of qualitative research can be summarised by the following characteristics (see Table 4.2) as postulated by McMillan and Schumacher, (2010:321):

Table 4.2: Characteristics of qualitative research

CHARACTERISTIC	DESCRIPTION
Natural settings	Study of behaviour as it occurs naturally
Context sensitivity	Consideration of situational factors
Direct data collection	Researcher collects data personally and directly from the source
Rich narrative description	Detailed narratives that provide in-depth

	understanding of behaviour
Process orientation	Focus on why and how behaviour occurs
Inductive data analysis	Generalisations are induced from synthesising gathered information
Participant perspectives	Focus on participants' understanding, descriptions, labels and meanings
Emergent design	The design evolves and changes as the study takes place
Complexity of understanding and explanation	Understandings and explanations are complex, with multiple perspectives
Research paradigm	Constructivist and interpretivist

Adapted from McMillan and Schumacher (2010)

It needs to be stressed that these characteristics are typically present to some degree in any qualitative study, and not all of them may be evident (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:322). Table 4.2 emphasises the fact that a distinguishing characteristic of a qualitative research approach is that behaviour is studied as it occurs naturally. This implies that there is no manipulation or control of behaviour or settings, nor are there any externally imposed constraints. The situational context, in a qualitative study, is based on the belief that human actions are strongly influenced by the settings in which they occur. Furthermore, Table 4.2 suggests that in a qualitative study the investigator usually acts as an observer in the setting that is being studied, either as the interviewer, the observer or the person who studies and analyses documents.

Table 4.2 also emphasises the fact that qualitative researchers approach a situation with the assumption that nothing is trivial or unimportant. Every detail that is recorded is thought to contribute to a better understanding of behaviour. Qualitative researchers want to know how and why behaviour occurs. Therefore, qualitative studies look for the process by which behaviour occurs as well as explanations, not just the outcomes or products.

Qualitative researchers do not formulate hypotheses and gather data to prove or disprove them (i.e. deduction). Rather, the data are gathered first and then synthesised inductively to generate generalisations. Therefore, in qualitative research, the emphasis is on inductive reasoning. Qualitative researchers try to construct reality from the standpoint of participant perspectives, that is, “as the participants they are studying see it”. They do not apply predetermined definitions or ideas about how people will think or react. Qualitative researchers are also interpretive researchers because they analyse the text and look for the ways in which people make meaning in their lives as well as the kind of meaning they make (Creswell, 2008:122).

Finally, qualitative researchers have a plan or design for conducting the desired research. This suggests that, in qualitative studies, researchers enter the investigation “as if they know very little about the people and places they will visit and they attempt to mentally cleanse their preconceptions” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:323). Because of this perspective, they do not know enough to begin the study with a precise research design. Rather, they normally use an emergent design.

This study necessitates a qualitative research, acknowledging that there are different and varying ontological assumptions about the world. With other qualitative researchers, this researcher does not assume that there is a single unitary reality apart from our perceptions (Krauss, 2005:758). As was argued above, each and every person experiences the world differently. Qualitative research is based on a relativistic, constructivist ontology which contends that there is no objective reality; rather, there are multiple realities constructed by human beings who experience a phenomenon of interest (Krauss, 2005:760). In this study, NPDE students are thus not regarded as objects, but as human beings who can speak and think for themselves and who can define things from their own point of views.

Furthermore, a qualitative research approach was considered suitable because this study is aimed at gaining in-depth understanding from the perceptions of NPDE learners about the five critical components of learner support services, namely support at registration, student services, contact sessions, technological support and feedback strategies as implemented during their studies at UNISA. According to

Bitzer (2004:5) qualitative research emphasises the type of inquiry in which the qualities and the characteristics or the properties of a phenomenon are examined for better understanding and explanation. The researcher chose this approach because he could talk directly with the participants (NPDE learners) and, in so doing, could see their reactions and facial expressions as they responded to different interview questions.

According to Leedy and Ormrod (2001:101), qualitative researchers are often described as the research instrument because the bulk of their data collection is dependent on their personal involvement in their setting. The problem being investigated in this study necessitates a qualitative research approach because it is concerned with how people (NPDE learners) think and how they act in their everyday lives. Since human behaviour cannot be understood outside the context of its natural occurrences, NPDE learners at UNISA, who have been exposed to learner support services, understand what it means to be in that particular natural situation, what their lives are like and how the world looks like in that particular setting. Capturing the insiders' perspectives of actors in a specific setting was the researcher's primary concern as he would be gathering information from the educational environment in which NPDE learners are studying.

Moreover, in this study the researcher followed a research design based on a constructivist approach with the purpose to interpret, describe and reconstruct information in such a way that the meaning participants attach to learning experiences are understood (Schurink, 1998:240). It involves a logical jump beyond the data. The constructivist approach made it possible for the researcher to go beyond the evidence at hand and produce logical explanations (Gall, Gall and Borg, 1999:298). The research design influenced the role the researcher played. It brought the researcher into contact with the common activities of the participants' educational everyday life in order to learn about the "real thing" (Cohen *et al.*, 2002:22). Consequently, the following section briefly concentrates on the role of the researcher in this study.

4.3.3.3 The role of the researcher

The researcher has occupied a management position at two colleges of education in South Africa for about six years. The colleges trained both pre-service (through face-to-face contact) and in-service teachers (through DE). Prior to the management positions at both colleges of education, the researcher acted as a tutor in different teacher education courses for about seven years. For about eight years, the researcher has been a lecturer in NPDE courses at UNISA. Therefore, over a period of twenty years in teacher education, with close involvement and additional studies in the field of teacher education, the researcher has observed how teachers, as distance learners, struggled through their studies partly because of poorly organised learner support services. This situation led to severe learning problems with damaging effects on the learners' self-image.

The researcher's experience in teacher education over an extensive period of time on various levels of management and tutoring made him aware of the concerns of learner support in upgrading the qualifications of under-qualified teachers. Equally, the personal experiences of the researcher helped in determining the research design for this study (Newman, 1997:354) and made it possible to notice and understand the concerns of the participants about learner support structures for under-qualified teachers studying through DE.

The researcher chose an appropriate research design to accommodate the aforementioned considerations. Moreover, in the light of Swindler's (2000) views, the researcher paid attention to stories told by teacher learners at all levels of education as experienced over a period of time. Swindler (2000:553) points out:

....interest stems from narrative's potential to access the research subjects' voices and to offer deeper, sensitive and accurate portrayal of experiences that have escaped positivist quantitative research and less sensitive, objectivist qualitative research.

The researcher considered the then prevailing DE situation at UNISA, which included the different perceptions of NPDE teacher upgrading learners towards

learner support, as a starting point so as to add to the distinct strength of this qualitative study. In this vein, the researcher considered the views of Baszanger and Dodier (1997:11), Swindler (2000:553) as well as Wengraf (2001:80) that the quality of information depends on the quality of the research questions and research design.

In a qualitative approach, the researcher is the main data collector, going to the site to collect data personally. In this study, the researcher personally administered open-ended questionnaires and interviewed NPDE learners and analysed all documents and transcripts using triangulation strategies. Triangulation allows for cross-validation among data sources and data collection strategies, time periods and theoretical schemes (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001:478). To find regularities, the researcher compared different sources, situations and methods to see whether the same pattern kept recurring. For this study, written responses were triangulated by verbal references where an open-ended questionnaire and focus group interviews were respectively used. The reliance on corroboration amongst these different methods served to enhance the validity of this investigation.

Furthermore, the researcher's prolonged engagement with the participants, both as a lecturer and as a researcher, helped him to observe and understand the implementation of learner support structures from the participants' perspective. Consequently, the researcher strove for in-depth understanding of each participant's viewpoint. The following discussion will focus on the procedures and methods used in the process of data-gathering in this study.

4.4 RESEARCH METHODS

In educational research, research methods may refer to that range of measures used to gather data. The data serve as a basis for inference and interpretation, for explanation and prediction (Cohen *et al.*, 2002:44). Matee (2009:166) contends that research method is the most important measure for advancing knowledge, for promoting progress and for enabling man to relate more effectively to the environment, to accomplish his or her purpose and to resolve his or her conflicts.

Cohen *et al.* (2002:45) argue that, if it is agreed that research methods refer to a series of procedures used in the process of data-gathering then the aim of research methods in a qualitative study will be:

to describe and analyse these methods, throwing light on their limitations and resources, clarifying their presuppositions and consequences, relating their potentialities to the twilight zone at the frontiers of knowledge. It is to venture generalisations from the success of particular techniques, suggesting new applications, and to unfold the specific bearings of logical and metaphysical principles on concrete problems, suggesting new formulations.

In summary, the aim of methodology is to help the researcher to understand, in the broadest possible terms, not the products of scientific inquiry but the process itself, that is, how the process of inquiry or research takes place. In research, methodology may include a description of the proposed population and sampling procedures, methods of data collection (inclusive of instruments used) as well as the data processing procedures (Ary *et al.*, 2002:495).

4.4.1 Population and sampling procedures

According to Ary *et al.* (2002:163), the term *population* refers to all members of any well-defined class of people, events or objects in a research. McMillan & Schumacher (2010:129), define the concept *population* as a group of elements or cases, whether individuals, objects, or events, that conform to specific criteria and to which the results of the research are to be generalised. These definitions suggest that a research population consists of group of individuals or objects that possess the same characteristics and which are classified or identified to perform a uniform function. This group is also referred to as the *target population* or *universe* (McMillan & Schumacher (2010:130). In this study, the population refers to all NPDE learners that are exposed to the same learner support structures at UNISA.

Factors such as expenses, time and accessibility may frequently prevent researchers from gaining information from the entire population. Therefore, they often need to be able to obtain data from a smaller group or subset of the population

in such a way that the knowledge gained is representative of the total population under study (Cohen *et al.*, 2002:92). This smaller group or subset is called the *sample*. Therefore, a *sample* may be defined as a group of subjects or participants from whom the data are collected (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:129) or a portion of the population that is actually observed in a study (Ary, *et al.*, 2002:163). These definitions imply that these sampling elements of the population are always considered for the inclusion in the study. The sample can be selected from a larger group of persons (population), or can simply refer to a group of subjects from whom the data are collected. Therefore, questions of sampling arise directly out of the issue of defining the population on which the research will focus. A sample must be selected in such a way that it is representative of that population. Furthermore, researchers must take sampling decisions early in the overall planning of a piece of research.

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010:325), qualitative sampling is “selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study when one wants to understand something about those cases”. It requires that information be obtained about variations among the sub-units before the sample is finalised. The researcher then searches for information-rich key informants, groups, places or events to study. In other words, the sample is chosen because it is likely to be knowledgeable and informative about the phenomena the researcher is investigating.

For the purpose of this study, UNISA final year NPDE learners, in different geographical locations (namely Durban, Nelspruit, Polokwane and Pretoria), from different age groups, sexes, teaching experiences and teaching in rural, semi-rural and urban areas, constituted the sample. Figure 4.1, which is a map of South Africa, shows where the four centres are situated.

According to Cohen *et al.* (2002:92), when determining a desired sample for a research project, judgements have to be made about the following four key factors:

- the sample size
- the representatives and parameters of the sample
- access to the sample

- the sampling strategy to be used

These key factors identified above suggest that the purpose of drawing a sample from a population is to obtain information concerning that population. As stated above, it is extremely important that the individuals included in a sample constitute a representative cross-section of individuals in the population. This careful representation will enable the researcher to generalise with confidence from the sample to the population. The correct representation of the population will determine the acceptable sample size. In addition, McMillan and Schumacher (2010:328) assert that when determining sample size, the following guidelines should always be borne in mind:

- *Purpose of the study.* A case study that is descriptive or exploratory may not need as many persons as a self-contained study. Furthermore, a phenomenological study, like this one, usually has fewer participants than are needed in grounded theory to generate dense concepts.
- *Availability of informants.* Some informants may be rare and difficult to locate; others are relatively easy to identify and locate.
- *Primary data collection strategy.* Qualitative researchers are guided by circumstances. For example, a study may have a small sample size, but the researcher may be continually returning to the same situation or the same informants, seeking more information
- *Focus of the study.* A process-focussed study at one site may have fewer participants than an interview study using network sampling

The above guidelines suggest that qualitative inquirers view the sampling process as dynamic, *ad hoc*, and flexible rather than as static or *a priori* parameters of populations (Walford, 2001:12). McMillan & Schumacher (2010:328) explain that qualitative samples can range from 1 to 40 or even more. The logic of the sample size is related to the purpose, the research problem, the major collection strategy and the availability of information rich cases. Arguably, the insights generated from qualitative inquiry depend more on the information richness of the cases and the analytical capabilities of the researcher than on the sample size. Because it is

usually not possible to deal with the whole target population, the researcher must identify that portion of the population to which he or she has access. That is why Walford (2001:14), concludes that “researchers must settle for a research site to which they can easily gain convenient and ready access rather than thinking through the implications of particular choices”.

The researcher must make an inferential “leap of faith” when estimating population characteristics from sample observations. The likelihood that such inferences will be correct is largely a function of the sampling procedure employed. According to McMillan & Schumacher (2010:140), there are different kinds of sampling procedures in research, such as simple random, systematic, proportional stratified, non-proportional stratified, cluster, convenience, purposeful and quota sampling. Since this study has identified *purposive sampling* as a suitable sampling procedure, the following discussion will concentrate solely thereon.

Best and Kahn (2006:248) define *purposeful sampling* as a technique used to select certain persons, settings or events on the grounds that they can provide the information desired. In purposeful sampling (sometimes called *purposive sampling*), the researcher selects particular elements from the population that will be representative or informative about the topic of interest (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:138). On the basis of the researcher’s knowledge of the population, a judgement is made about which subjects should be selected to provide the best information to address the purpose of the research. This kind of sample is useful in answering the questions raised by the researcher, which in qualitative research, involves purposefully choosing participants or sites that best achieve the aim (Creswell, 2003:185). Purposive sampling does not include accessible or convenient sampling, but incorporates those from which the most can be learned and who would most accurately help the researcher to answer the research questions (Silverman, 2002:105).

In purposive sampling, researchers handpick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgement of their typicality. In this way, they build up a sample that is satisfactory to their specific needs (Cohen *et al.*, 2002:103). As its name suggests, in this study, the sample was chosen for a specific purpose. A group of

NPDE learners were chosen because the research is studying the implementation of learner support as employed in under-qualified teachers' programmes.

As indicated before, UNISA NPDE learners were chosen as a sample because the researcher had been attached to this group both as a lecturer and as an administrator for seven years and therefore he had complete access to them and to their sites. The researcher had been observing the implementation of learner support services to the very group over time hence they were regarded as information rich. As alluded to already, this group is representative of old and young teachers, males and females, those teaching in rural and those teaching in semi-urban and urban areas as well as those that teach in Foundation, Intermediate and Senior Phase.

Furthermore, final year NPDE learners at UNISA were identified as an appropriate sample because they had been exposed to learner support services for at least three years and therefore they were regarded as the best group to give rich, sufficient and accurate information. In order to make sure that these NPDE learners participated fully, NPDE students were requested to form a sample for both the open-ended questionnaires and focus group interviews, but the characteristics of the required sample, for example, gender as mentioned above, were always maintained. Both open-ended questionnaires and focus group interviews were administered during contact sessions throughout the year of 2010. These contact sessions took place in March, July, and September school holidays at different contact centres, namely Durban, Polokwane, Nelspruit and Pretoria.

As shown in Figure 4.1 below, Durban is situated in Kwa-Zulu Natal Province, Polokwane in Limpopo Province, Nelspruit in Mpumalanga Province and Pretoria in Gauteng Province. The sample of the Durban centre was the highest with seventeen participants because it had the highest population of the final NPDE learners in 2010. Durban is followed by Pretoria with twelve, then Polokwane and Nelspruit with a sample of eight participants each.

Figure 4.1, which is the map of South Africa, shows where the four contact session centres are situated in different provinces of South Africa:



Figure 4.1: A map of South Africa showing the location of the 9 distinct provinces and the centres for NPDE contact sessions in 2010. (SA-VENUES.com.online, Retrieved 11 December 2011).

The following section moves to a closer-grained account of measures for collecting data.

4.4.2 Data collection methods

The step of data collection is another important phase in qualitative research. Ary *et al.*, (2002:430) assert that there are different data collection methods used in

qualitative research. They further state that the researcher may use one or more of these methods in a particular study.

4.4.2.1 Open-ended questionnaire

An open-ended questionnaire poses open-ended questions and leaves a space for a free and comprehensive response from the respondent. As a result, an open-ended questionnaire puts the responsibility for, and ownership of the data firmly into the respondents' hands (Cohen *et al.*, 2002:255). Cohen *et al.* (2002:257) further argue that an open-ended question can catch the authenticity, richness, depth of response, honesty and candour which are hallmarks of qualitative research.

In this study, and as indicated in Table 4.3 above, forty-five NPDE final year learners were purposefully selected, during contact sessions, to respond to open-ended questions in all four centres, namely, Durban (17 learners), Pretoria (12 learners), Polokwane (8 learners) and Nelspruit (8 learners). The purpose of the research and the importance of the participation of NPDE learners were clearly explained to them. Thereafter, participants were given written, open-ended type of questions, in the form of topics, as stated in 4.2.1, 4.2.2 and 4.2.3 above, and they were requested to respond in writing. This means that participants were each given a preformatted instrument in the form of questions and blank sheets to respond, to write as much as they could and were allowed enough time to respond. This questionnaire was used to assist the researcher to obtain clarity about the participants' perceptions pertaining to their studies in general and about the implementation of learner support structures in NPDE programmes at UNISA in particular.

4.4.2.2 Focus group interviews

An interview schedule refers to the interchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest, sees the centrality of human interaction for knowledge production and emphasises the social nature of research data (Cohen *et al.*, 2002:267). The interview involves direct interaction between individuals and as a data collection technique, is flexible and adaptable (McMillan & Schumacher,

2010:205). The interview schedule lists all the questions that will be asked, giving room for the interviewee to respond.

Interviews enable participants, be they interviewers or interviewees, to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view. In these senses, the interview is not simply concerned with collecting data about life: it is part of life itself and as a result, its human nature is inescapable (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:205). This study chose a focus group interview, which followed the first phase which involved an open-ended questionnaire.

At this stage, three steps embedded in the concept *focus group interview* need to be explained. These concepts are focus, group and interview. A group can be defined as a number of individuals between whom a distinguishable pattern of interaction exists (De Vos, 1998:314). Interview signifies the presence of a trained person who can skilfully facilitate the discussion that takes place between all members in the group to elicit information on the desired topic. Focus implies that the discussion that takes place in the group is limited to the specific topic under investigation (Steward & Shamdasani, 1990:10). The focus group interview is thus conducted as an open conversation on a specific topic in which each participant makes comments, asks question or responds to comments of others, including the moderator (Ferreira & Puth, 1988:167). In line with the qualitative research paradigm, in this study the researcher allowed the topic under discussion to continue until it was saturated.

For the sake of this study, thirty NPDE learners were interviewed, that is, 10 from Durban, 8 from Pretoria, 6 from Polokwane and 6 from Nelspruit immediately after the open-ended questionnaire session through the purposive sampling technique (see Table 5.3). Each group was interviewed at its individual learning centre. This sampling consisted of some of the same learners that were exposed to the open-ended questionnaire. According to Topor (1997:2), a focus group interview comprises a representative sample of a target. In other words, a focus group may be four, six, eight, ten or twelve respondents, carefully selected, who represent a specific target group.

In conducting a focus group interview, the following important steps as suggested by De Vos (1998:320) were adopted:

- *Purposeful talk.* The researcher should create an atmosphere of trust, friendliness and openness from the moment the participants are identified, because purposeful small talk facilitates a warm and friendly environment and this puts participants at ease.
- *Physical arrangement of the group.* The participants should be asked to sit around in a circle to ensure maximum opportunity for eye contact with the researcher as well as other participants.
- *Handling unwanted participants.* People who are not invited to be interviewed may not be allowed in the interview session because they may affect the interview negatively. The researcher may need to convince the participants to be patient until the interview is over. In this study, the researcher never experienced such challenges.
- *The beginning of the focus group interview.* The beginning of the interview sets the tone and the agenda for the rest of the procedure. Therefore, it is crucial that the researcher creates a thoughtful, permissive and friendly atmosphere. The goal is to direct the focus group with limited intervention. It becomes imperative that participants are to be made aware that their opinions count and that they are valued.
- *Techniques employed by the researcher.* To ensure participation by each and every member, the researcher should encourage all participants to speak and ask follow-up questions or probes. The researcher must also help by asking more questions or probing.
- *Managing problems during group interview.* During the interview session, problems such as being needed outside or receiving emergency telephone calls may arise. Although the researcher cannot anticipate all problems during the interview, he or she must be prepared for the unexpected, and

when confronted with such, he or she must swiftly and firmly guide the group back to its task.

- *Group dynamics.* According to De Vos (1998:322), a focus group interview does not consist of individuals lumped together in a group; it consists of different facets of people shaped by intra- and interpersonal as well as environmental factors, for example, it could be predicted that the physically attractive person with an extrovert personality would communicate more easily in a group situation than a physically disabled personality. This is to say that difference in groups with regard to economic status and religion can influence participation by the individual and group cohesiveness. The more homogeneous or compatible a group is, the easier it will be for the researcher to make the group dynamic work in service of the goal and objects of the research.
- *Roles of the researcher and interview styles.* Steward & Shamdasani (1990:89) point out that different styles of interviews found in focus group interviews vary according to personality differences among researchers, different roles, different types of groups and different research aims, but one important dimension is the degree of direction emanating from the researcher. The second important dimension along which interview styles may vary is the role of the researcher as perceived by him or her. In some cases, the researcher takes an objective, distanced stance with respect to the groups and in other cases she or he may facilitate discussion by offering personal examples (De Vos, 1998:323). Finally, the interview style may vary with respect to the use of discussion aids.
- *Concluding the focus group interview.* The researcher must, after the interview, thank the participants for having sacrificed their time to attend the interview. Kruger (1994:68) points out that it is advisable to have the main points summarised and to verify the information with the participants. The summary typically may last for few minutes, after which comments are invited. The researcher should thank the participants and wish them a safe journey back home (De Vos, 1998:324).

Therefore, during the interviewing stage a round- table discussion was held and participants were encouraged to speak freely and as much as they could. During this phase of data collection, in-depth questions were raised and this helped the researcher with flexibility in terms of responses and follow-up questions so as to obtain clarity and more in-depth feedback from the participants. Equally, this enabled the researcher to delve deeper into some subject areas for critical information to be obtained. To enhance reliability in the analysis of data collected, from each group of the participants a scribe was asked to volunteer to write notes (inclusive of resolutions) of what was discussed. The interviewer led and initiated discussions and did some probing and made follow-ups with the necessary questions. An audio recorder (tape recorder) was deliberately avoided so as to ease tension in the participants and to allow them to air their views as freely as possible.

4.4.3 Data analysis and interpretation

Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the mass of collected data (Nemutandani, 2004:40). Nemutandani (2004:40) adds that the most fundamental operation in the analysis of qualitative data is that of discovering significant classes of things, persons, events and the properties that characterise them. Furthermore, the process of qualitative data analysis is described by Lekalakala (2007:45) in terms of meanings, which are mediated through language and action and tied to a particular context. Smit (2003:82) says that to analyse literally means to break down the data and Lekalakala (2007:45) asserts that analysis is a process of resolving data into its constituent components so as to reveal its characteristic elements and structure. Analysis of qualitative data includes the following issues: making sense, interpreting and theorising data (Smit, 2003:80).

Analysis involves reducing and organising the data, synthesising, searching for significant patterns and discovering what is important and relevant to the research questions (Ary *et al.* 2002:465). According to Bassey (2002:84), the process of data analysis is an “intellectual struggle” with the raw data collected. Bassey, (2002:85) further emphasises that the aim of data analysis is to yield significant and valid

answers to the research questions. The task can appear overwhelming, but becomes manageable when broken down into stages. Qualitative data analysis takes place throughout the data collection process, with constant reflection on impressions, relationships and connections (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:330).

With qualitative data, the data analysis is almost inevitably interpretive, hence the data analysis is less of a completely accurate representation (as in the numerical, positivist tradition) but more of a reflexive, reactive interaction between the researcher and the data that are already interpretations of a social encounter (Cohen *et al.*, 2002:282).

After considering a number of data analysis methods, the researcher in this study came to the conclusion that the typological analysis (Hatch, 2002:152) would do justice to the nature of this study. Typological analysis can be described as a method through which researchers categorise data into groups or themes that will bring them closer to providing answers to the research questions (Hatch, 2002:156). As a result, data was recorded (in writing) by different participants (see 4.4.2 above) and a scribe who volunteered. Thereafter, data was organised through a process called coding which followed Tesch's approach as explained below (Ary *et al.*, 2002:467).

Coding has been defined by Cohen *et al.* (2002:283) as "the translation of question responses and respondent information into specific categories for the purpose of analysis". Furthermore, Hennink *et al.* (2011:227) contend that the process of coding involves carefully reading and rereading data, considering which codes are discussed in that section of data and then labelling this section with relevant codes. It involves continually identifying what is being said, assessing the context of the discussion, following the line of argument and then deciding which codes are appropriate.

This coding system may facilitate further reviews of the data. The goal was to come up with a set of themes or sub-themes that provide a reasonable reconstruction of the data that had been collected. This procedure is termed Tesch's model of analysing data. Therefore, the process of data analysis and interpretation were inductive. In analysing data through the coding system, the researcher was guided

by the following principles which are outlined by Smit (2003:81) and which are regarded as appropriate for most types of qualitative research analysis:

- Qualitative analysis takes place throughout the data collection process. As a result, the research will reflect continuously on impressions, relationships and connections while collecting the data. The search for similarities, differences, categories, themes or typologies, concepts and ideas forms part of the continuous process:
- Analysis commences with reading all the data and then dividing the data into smaller more meaningful units.
- Data segments or units are organised into a system that is predominantly derived from data, which implies that the analysis is inductive.
- The researcher uses comparison to build and refine categories, to define conceptual similarities and to discover patterns.
- Categories are flexible and may be modified during the analysis.
- Importantly, the analysis should truly reflect the respondents' perceptions or views.
- The result of an analysis is a kind of higher-order synthesis in the form of a descriptive patterns or themes or emerging substantive theory.

The next step was to summarise and interpret the data collected. In interpretation, the researcher went beyond the descriptive data to extract meaning and insights from data based on literature study and own experience. The researcher examined all entries with the same code and then merged these themes and categories into patterns by finding links and connections among themes and categories. This process further integrates the data, and the researcher could then make statements about relationships in the data. In that way, the researcher confirmed information he thought he knew as this was supported by the data; and by so doing, eliminating misconceptions. Furthermore, the researcher illuminated new insights and important points that were brought to light. Finally, the researcher adhered to the principles of

trustworthiness throughout the process of data analysis and interpretation, which will be discussed in the next section.

4.5 MEASURES FOR TRUSTWORTHINESS

Golafshani (2003:597) contends that sustaining the trustworthiness of a research report depends on the issues discussed as validity and reliability. *Validity*, in qualitative research, refers to the degree of congruence between the explanations of the phenomena and the realities of the world. This implies that an instrument used to measure a phenomenon, should measure exactly what it is meant to measure (Matee, 2009:174). *Reliability*, on the other hand, refers to the consistency of the instrument and test administration in the study, the consistency of researcher's interactive style, data recording, data analysis, and interpretation of the participants' meaning of data (Matee, 2009:175)

Although the terms validity and reliability were traditionally associated with quantitative research only, the concepts of making valid inferences and the consistency of the data, referred to as *rigor*, later became important issues in qualitative research (Ary *et al.*, 2002: 451). In searching for the meaning of rigor in qualitative research, Davies & Dodd (2002:281) find that the term in this kind of research appears in reference to the discussion about validity and reliability. Davies & Dodd (2002:282) further argue that the application of the notion rigor in qualitative research should differ from that in quantitative research. While "accepting that there is a quantitative bias in the concept of rigor, we now move on to develop our re-conception of rigor by exploring subjectivity, social interaction of interviewing coupled with reflexivity".

Descombe (2002:107) says that the matter of accuracy is often linked to the notion of validity. This notion carries a lot of weight as far as social research is concerned. *Validity* is a word that has a definite positive connotation. For anything to be characterised as valid, it has to be described in positive terms. If it is valid, then it has gone a long way towards gaining scientific acceptance. The questions asked were clear and accurate. Claims to validity also involve some demonstration that the

researcher's data and analysis are firmly rooted in the realms of things that are relevant, genuine and real.

For this study, reliability too was ensured through giving respondents the same instructions and the same amount of time to complete research activities. The same introduction, questions and explanations to the research procedures were used as far as possible. The same research procedures were followed in all four centres, namely Durban, Polokwane, Nelspruit and Pretoria. The researcher is convinced that the data collected for this study is, as far as humanly possible, reliable. In addition, the researcher in this study is confident that the results he obtained are not affected by a research instrument which can throw up different results each time it is used.

Interim consistency checks reliability, in terms of the way responses to individual questions or items exhibit a pattern of consistency. Consistency, in this instance, requires that the same person would find the same thing in a very similar situation and, more challengingly, that another participant would observe or record the same events and emotions if investigating the same situation (Descombe, 2002:110). Furthermore, Descombe (2002:111) maintains that it is no good producing results which are reliable, but wrong; the data need to be reliable and right. Only if they are right, can the data be deemed valid.

According to McMillan & Schumacher (2010:332), reflexivity refers to rigorous self-examination of the researcher in order to enhance validity and reliability. In addition, reflexivity includes critical examination of the researcher's personal and theoretical commitments to see how they serve as resources for framing the research problem, generating particular data, relating to participants and developing specific interpretations. In other words, reflexivity is rigorous self-scrutiny by the researcher throughout the entire study. The researcher's very act of posing questions to himself or herself assumes that he or she cannot be neutral, objective or detached from the entire research process. Thus, researchers do not deny human subjectivity, but rather take it into account through various strategies to ensure validity and reliability.

In this study, the researcher recognised his own background as a lecturer in NPDE and therefore had to shape his interpretation and position himself so as to

acknowledge how his interpretation flowed from own personal, cultural and historical experiences. Therefore, the researcher made sense of the meaning which NPDE learners attached to the implementation of learner support services in their programmes at UNISA. Cohen *et al.* (2002:141) state that reflexivity is the assumption that researchers are as much a part of research as the individuals being researched. Therefore, reflexivity involves the idea of awareness, that is, that researchers are reflexive when they investigate. Furthermore, reflexivity implies a shift in the way the researcher understands data and data collection (Berg, 2001:139). To achieve reflexivity in this study, the researcher made use of internal dialogue or ongoing conversation with himself, repeatedly asking himself what he knows or does not know about the proper implementation of learner support in teacher education courses. The researcher also acknowledged the possibility of own biases, values and interests during the research process (Creswell, 2003:182).

Although validity and reliability are often treated separately in quantitative studies, these terms are not viewed separately in qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003:600). However, in order to present and understand the meanings of validity and reliability in qualitative research design, it is nevertheless advisable to discuss the two concepts separately.

Validity in qualitative research concerns the accuracy or truthfulness of the findings, that is, their credibility. Furthermore, reflexivity is an important procedure for establishing credibility. Credibility or truth value involves how well the researcher has established confidence in the findings based on the research design, participants and context (Ary *et al.*, 2002:452). In this study, the responses of all participants were checked to find out if some of them or most of them produced the same description of how learner support structures are used at UNISA. When most of all participants respond similarly to a question raised, the researcher concluded that he had evidence of credibility. *Validity* is an important key to effective research. If a piece of research is invalid, then it is worthless.

Validity addresses questions like: Did researchers actually observe what they report to have observed? Did researchers actually hear the meaning that they report to have heard? In other words, *validity* of qualitative designs is the degree to which the

interpretations have mutual meanings between the researcher and the participants (McMillan & Schumacher: 2010:331). Thus, the researcher and participants agree on the description or composition of events and especially on the meanings of these events. In this qualitative study, *validity* will be addressed through the honesty (of the researcher and participants), depth and richness (of data) and the academic level of participants approached (i.e. final year NPDE learners).

In qualitative research *reliability* can be regarded as a fit between what researchers record as data and what actually occurs in the natural setting that is being researched, that is, the degree of accuracy and comprehensiveness of coverage (Cohen *et al.*, 2002:119). Matee (2009:177) explains that “although unreliability is always present to a certain extent, there will generally be a good deal of consistency in the results of a quality instrument gathered at different times. This tendency towards consistency found in repeated measurements is referred to as *reliability*”.

Although the term *reliability* was originally regarded as a concept used for testing or evaluating quantitative research alone, it actually applies to all kinds of research (Golafshani, 2003:601). For example, in qualitative methodologies, *reliability* may include fidelity to real life, context and situation-specificity, authenticity, comprehensiveness, consistency, honesty, accuracy, depth of responses and meaningfulness to the respondents (Cohen *et al.*, 2002: 120).

A major component of validity of any measuring device is its reliability. If reliability on the instrument is lacking, then validity is compromised (Wiseman, 1999:98). In other words, if reliability is low, the meaning of the results may not be accurate, thus not valid. In this study, the same researcher collected and analysed data in a uniform manner, using reliable research procedures. The use of a combination of data collection strategies reduces the threats to reliability. Hence, with regard to this study, during focus group interviews the scribe volunteered to collect data in the written form, while the researcher was freed to steer discussions and do some probing.

The notion of trustworthiness has four basic tenets, namely *credibility*, *dependability*, *conformability* or *transferability* (Guba & Lincoln, 1994:110). The following section will discuss these concepts individually.

4.5.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to the “adequate representation of the constructions of the social world under study” (Bradley, 1993:436). According to Guba & Lincoln (1994:112), credibility in qualitative research is the ability of the researcher to demonstrate a prolonged period of engagement with participants, so as to provide evidence of persistent observation and to triangulate by using different sources, different methods and sometimes multiple investigators.

Credibility in qualitative research concerns the truthfulness of the researcher’s findings (Ary *et al.*, 2002:452). It means that credibility or truth value involves how well the researcher has established confidence in the findings based on the research design, participants and context. To show that credibility is ensured in this study, the researcher conducted several in-depth interviews (focus group and individual interviews) as well as administering questionnaires with final year NPDE learners throughout the year of 2010. In this way the researcher spent a prolonged period of engagement with NPDE learners. Besides, the researcher was a lecturer in the NPDE programmes for almost seven years and therefore that prolonged engagement was maintained throughout this lecturing period. In this way, it can be concluded that rapport, trust and confidence was gained by the researcher.

4.5.2 Dependability

In qualitative research, consistency is regarded as the extent to which variation can be tracked or explained. This is referred to as dependability (Ary *et al.*, 2002:455). Therefore, dependability of data is the extent to which similar findings could be expected if the same research instruments were used with equivalent participants under similar conditions (Creswell, 2003:220). In this study, the researcher used questionnaires and interviews to investigate the implementation of learner support in

NPDE programmes through the mode of DE at UNISA. The results of these data collection methods were to be used to verify each other so as to detect consistency through a coding and recoding strategy.

4.5.3 Conformability

Conformability is the extent to which the research is free of bias in the procedures and interpretation of results (Guba & Lincoln, 1994:115). During the process of data collection, the researcher kept a field journal (diary) and recorded all issues that could influence or affect him, for example, personal attitude, emotions or emotions of participants. As a lecturer in NPDE programmes, the researcher was cautious not to be influenced by his experience, observation and knowledge of the implementation of learner support in such courses. To avoid bias, the researcher critically examined his own views, feelings and attitudes to determine how they would influence the investigation.

4.5.4 Transferability

Transferability is the degree to which the findings of a qualitative study can be applied or generalised to other contexts, settings or to other groups (Ary *et al.*, 2002: 454). Qualitative researchers argue that it is possible to apply qualitative findings to other people, settings and times to the extent that they are comparable to the people, settings and times in the original study. The researcher holds a firm belief that the experience gained out of the findings of this study can be generalised or transferred to a wider population of under-qualified teachers (other than NPDE) or to other DE programmes in other institutions, not only in South Africa but throughout the entire world. However, transferability of a set of findings to another context depends on the similarity or “goodness of fit” between the context of the study and other contexts.

4.6 ETHICAL MEASURES

Ethical considerations serve as standards and a basis upon which each researcher ought to evaluate his or her own conduct, and the guidelines should be internalised in the personality of the researcher (De Vos, 2005:57). Qualitative researchers need to plan how they will handle the ethical dilemmas in an interactive data collection process (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:338). Most qualitative researchers use discussion and negotiations to resolve ethical dilemmas in collecting data. These negotiations revolve around obtaining consensus on situational priorities between the researcher and the participants. With human beings as the objects of this study, the following ethical measures were observed:

4.6.1 Permission and access for collecting data

The researcher requested permission from UNISA (Department of Further Teacher Education) and from the tutors of the NPDE learners as data collection was done during contact sessions. The researcher collected data after lessons on the last day of a particular contact session. Furthermore, permission was also sought from centre managers as data collection was done after lessons, that is, late in the afternoon as the researcher did not want to disturb contact lessons.

4.6.2 Informed consent

Consent should be voluntary, informed and given by a competent individual. Obtaining consent is more than simply having potential research participants signing a form (Ary *et al.*, 2002:510). In this study, a discussion was held with all participants (i.e. NPDE learners) where it was explained what the purpose of the research was and why they were requested to participate. They were also requested to give honest answers and encouraged to ask questions in order to be enlightened where possible. Furthermore, research participation remained optional and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage.

4.6.3 Confidentiality and anonymity

Respect for privacy, anonymity and confidentiality are at the heart of the conduct of this study. Participants were assured that neither their names nor their identity would be disclosed. Following this, participants were not required to reveal their names during the entire process of the collection of data. The use of an audio-tape was deliberately avoided so as to minimise tension; instead, notes were taken by skilled scribes.

4.6.4 Caring and fairness

A sense of caring and fairness must be part of the researcher's thinking, actions and personal morality (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:339). In order to promote fairness, open discussions and negotiations were held with participants prior to the research inquiry and data collection processes. Assurances were also given on the issues of human dignity, protection against harm, freedom of choice and expression and that written information would be guarded by keeping it in a secured place at all times.

4.7 SUMMARY

This chapter has summarised the major aspects of qualitative research including natural settings, context sensitivity, direct data collection, rich narrative description, process orientation, induction, participant perspectives, emergent design and complexity. The rationale of much of this chapter is located in the notion that qualitative studies, such as this one, are normally situated in a constructivist paradigm which suggests that there are multiple socially constructed realities. Rather than trying to be an "objective" outsider, the researcher's professional experience, judgements and perspectives were considered in the interpretation of data.

This chapter also emphasised the fact that data collection and analysis are interactive and occur in overlapping cycles. Therefore, the use of adaptable research strategies rather than rigid procedures allows for flexibility to study and corroborate each new idea as it occurs in data collection. This chapter dealt extensively with the data collection strategies which were followed in this study, and the measures which

were taken to ensure trustworthiness and ethical accountability. In the following chapter the analysis and interpretation of the data are presented.

CHAPTER 5

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 4 discussed the research design and methodology for this study. This chapter sets the scene for the presentation and discussion of data in relation to the research questions as mentioned in section 1.5. The focus is on the analysis and interpretation of the data collected through the process of open-ended questionnaires as well as through the process of focus-group interviews. The findings are presented and discussed under categorised themes, and where possible, are supported by data from the literature study. The chapter thus takes the reader through a journey of NPDE learners' experiences about learner support structures that were available to them throughout their studies at UNISA.

5.2 ANECTODAL OVERVIEW OF FIELDWORK

In this section, the researcher presents the steps followed in obtaining data for the research. The main aim is to relate a story, starting from where the researcher identified the research sites, through to the process of seeking permission from UNISA as well as centre managers, up to the actual process of data collection.

5.2.1 Background information about the research sites

In 2010 there were four UNISA centres which were used as sites for NPDE contact lessons in South Africa. Those were Polokwane, which is a town in the Limpopo Province, Durban, a city in the Kwa-Zulu Natal Province, Nelspruit, a town in Mpumalanga Province and Pretoria which is a city situated in the Gauteng Province. Figure 4.1 shows the map of the location of four NPDE venues in 2010. In Durban the venue was UNISA Regional Centre, in Pretoria the venue was Tshwane FET

College, in Nelspruit the classes were held at UNISA Regional Centre and in Polokwane the venue for contact sessions was UNISA Regional Centre.

South Africa has nine provinces which are Limpopo, Mpumalanga, Gauteng, North West, Free State, KwaZulu-Natal, Northern Cape, Eastern Cape and Western Cape (Refer to Figure 4.1). Durban mainly catered for learners from Kwa-Zulu Natal, Eastern Cape, Western Cape and the Free State. Pretoria accommodated learners from Gauteng, Northern Cape and North West, Nelspruit catered for all the learners from the Mpumalanga Province and Polokwane accommodated learners from the entire Limpopo Province. The researcher identified and used all four centres as the research sites.

5.2.2 Seeking permission

The NPDE programme at UNISA was placed under the department of Further Teacher Education. After identifying the research sites, the researcher personally sought permission firstly from the Head of the Department of Further Teacher Education before visiting the above-mentioned venues for NPDE contact classes. Thereafter, letters were sent to all centre managers of the four research sites to request permission for gaining access to their centres for data collection (Appendix A). The letters specified the dates on which the researcher would visit each centre. Finally, verbal permission was obtained from NPDE tutors and arrangements were made with them so as to accommodate the process of data collection during contact sessions. Therefore, the process of data collection in different centres took place during different contact session dates.

5.2.3. Initial preparation and sample procedure

Upon arrival at each centre, the researcher liaised with the centre managers as well as NPDE lecturers to arrange the actual venues and suitable times for the open-ended questionnaire and the focus group interview data collection sessions. In all centres, the NPDE lecturers agreed to make available the entire afternoon for the researcher to embark on the process of data collection. Initially, the researcher had a

session with all NPDE final year learners and purposefully chose the sample that was to participate in the research data collection process. The researcher purposefully made sure that at each centre, the sample consisted of final year learners, males and females, learners from rural and urban schools, teachers from primary and secondary schools as well as learners of different ages and different years of teaching experience.

5.2.4. Providing information

The researcher started typically by introducing himself and describing the purpose of the research to all NPDE learners. Learners were informed that the purpose of the research was to obtain information about their experiences pertaining to learner support during their studies. They were further made aware that the information would help UNISA to review or assess the use of learner support services with the aim of improving its implementation, not only for NPDE learners, but even for other learners in other programmes of DE institutions, not only in South Africa, but throughout the globe as well.

During qualitative data collection a multitude of ethical issues may arise. As the qualitative researcher prepares for data collection, he or she has to consider issues such as those that can affect the trustworthiness of the study at hand. In this case, the researcher ensured that participants were provided with sufficient information about the study and the procedures during the open-ended questionnaire and the focus group interview sessions. In particular, the researcher had to make sure that NPDE learners were aware of, and had verbally consented to responding to the questionnaire topics and the written transcripts of the agreements and discussions of the focus group interview process. To this end, participants were asked to complete a consent form (Appendix B) before they could proceed with responding to the topics in the open-ended questionnaires.

In addition, participants were assured that anonymity and confidentiality would be adhered to. To this end, participants were not requested to reveal their names so as to make the transcripts anonymous and were also assured that written records would

be put in a safe place and would be accessed by the researcher alone. Instead of writing down their names on the open-ended questionnaire transcripts, the researcher requested the participants to replace their names with identification numbers. The researcher also made the participants aware that they were not coerced to participate. For the focus group interviews, the participants were further informed that for the sake of the freedom of speech and for them to air their views voluntarily and to give information with honesty, a tape recorder would not be used.

5.2.5 Preparing for data collection

During the open-ended questionnaire phase, participants were given the liberty to sit as they wished in the classroom, but during the focus group interview session, participants were requested to sit around the table for the proper eye contact and in both phases, the researcher asked them to give as much information as possible. The researcher collected data in a face-to-face situation that involved interaction with participants (NPDE learners). In all centres, potential participants were given an equal chance to participation; were briefed in detail about the procedures and they had access to the researcher throughout the research process if they had any doubts or questions.

After all those preparations, the researcher commenced with the first stage of the data collection process, namely, an open-ended questionnaire which was immediately followed by the focus group interview session in the same afternoon at each centre. The researcher kept a file for the open-ended questionnaires and a file for the focus group interview data. These processes preceded data analysis.

5.3 DATA ANALYSIS

In this study, the researcher read and reread all the data from the open-ended questionnaires and interview data and sorted them by looking for units of meaning such as phrases, sentences, nature of thinking, behaviour patterns and events that seemed to appear regularly and that were regarded as important. This classification of similar ideas, concepts, activities, or setting represents a theme. The researcher

identified each unit of meaning (theme) by choosing a word or phrase that described the essence of the category and these words became the codes for the themes.

Next, the researcher went through all the data and marked each unit (paragraph or sentences) with the appropriate code. As the codes developed, the researcher counted the frequency with which those codes appeared. That helped to give some insight into the importance of that category of meaning. Codes were assigned numbers and the number of times codes appeared in data was numerically tabulated. This cyclical process started immediately after the initial data collection process and continued until all interviews had been conducted. In summarising the above discussion, it can be asserted that in this study data were analysed according to the following eight steps as described by Schulze (2000:49):

- Read through all transcripts several times to get a sense of the whole. In support of this, Nemutandani (2004:41) adds that when analysing data the researcher reads and re-reads the data in order to become familiar with it in an intimate way.
- Select one report and think about the underlying meaning of the information.
- Do this for several reports and then make a list of all topics. Cluster similar topics together in categories.
- Return to data again. Topics are abbreviated as codes and written next to the appropriate text. The researcher then checks and sees if new categories emerge.
- Try to reduce the number of categories by showing interrelationships between categories.
- Make the final decision on the abbreviation of categories/topics and alphabetic codes.
- Assemble the material for each category or topic and group together.

Data analysis of this study is based on its theoretical framework as outlined in section 3.2, namely constructivism as a learning theory, which presupposes that learners' intellectual and social growth, including meaningful learning, are enhanced by experiences gained from structures such as well-organised learner support services. Furthermore, constructivism argues that people actively produce knowledge and form meanings based upon those experiences. This data analysis, which derived from research questions and literature study, opened the door for reading and internalising what is said and even what is not said by NPDE participants. The latter is a process which Creswell (2008:153) describes as "examining silences". The report on the data analysis will be presented according to the two data collection methods followed, namely open-ended questionnaires and focus-group interviews.

5.3.1 Open-ended questionnaire

During this phase, the following three open-ended questions (in the form of topics) were given to 45 NPDE purposefully selected learners (17 in Durban, 12 in Pretoria, 8 in Polokwane and 8 in Nelspruit) for their response:

- *Mention the positive aspects of doing the NPDE through distance learning.*
- *Mention the negative aspects (frustrations) in doing the NPDE through distance learning.*
- *Write down your recommendations on the improvement of learner support for distance learners.*

As discussed in 4.4.2.1, the participants were given a preformatted instrument (broad topics and blank sheets – see Appendix C) to respond to as much as they could in writing and were allowed enough time for this exercise. This process took place during each contact session in all four centres during different contact session dates in 2010 as outlined in section 5.2.2 and was facilitated by the researcher himself. The procedure followed in each centre was exactly the same. The aim of the

open-ended questionnaire was to establish the overarching conceptions and views of the NPDE learners about learner support at UNISA.

The following table (Table 5.1) provides the profile of the sampling for the open-ended questionnaire in each centre for this particular study:

Table 5.1: Sampling profile for the open-ended questionnaire per centre

CENTRE	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	YEAR OF STUDY	LEVEL OF STUDY
DURBAN	17	2010	Final year learners
PRETORIA	12	2010	Final year learners
POLOKWANE	8	2010	Final year learners
NELSPRUIT	8	2010	Final year learners
TOTAL	45		

For the analysis of the open-ended questionnaire data and as indicated in section 5.3 above, the researcher read the transcripts from the four centres several times in their entirety in order to get a sense of the responses as a whole before dividing them into parts to determine the emerging categories and themes. Thereafter, coding commenced.

Similar topics were clustered together in all the transcripts. Data were compared to establish themes, trends and patterns. Emerging themes, patterns and trends were identified and written down. Emerging themes were cross-referenced with the research questions and the theoretical framework to ensure that the investigation stayed on track. The themes were categorised into topics. Related topics were categorised and data materials belonging to each category were grouped together.

In the final analysis, the researcher arrived at the following five broad themes that emerged from the data that was collected from the open-ended questionnaires:

- *Learner support related to registration.* In this study, this theme refers to all the support offered to the learner by any institution right from first registration

up to the last registration of his or her entire study. This form of support could be offered by personnel such as administrators, counsellors or learner aids found at each registration centre.

Personnel at registration are supposed to handle all registration inquiries and give advice to UNISA clients or learners during each registration period. Registration personnel are also charged with the responsibility of distributing reliable and relevant information to all learners at registration as well as capturing learners' data on to the computer system. After analysing this theme, the categories that were arrived at by the researcher were as follows: information given at registration, attitudes of administrators, congestion during registration, registration materials and study materials (see Table 5.2).

- *Study support services available to NPDE learners.* This theme refers to the actual services that can be offered by any DE education institution to its learners so as to enhance teaching and learning. In this case, learners are supposed to visit these structures from time to time in order to obtain the necessary assistance and support. The categories that derived from this theme were the following: knowledge of the support services as well as the library services (see Table 5.2).
- *Contact sessions as a learner support measure.* This broad theme refers to the initial planning of contact sessions for NPDE learners and the actual activities that took place during contact classes. Therefore, the categories that were identified by the researcher for this theme were organisation of contact sessions, tutor support, peer support, the use of ICTs during contact sessions, travelling, costs or finances and sleeping accommodation (see Table 5.2).
- *Technological support offered to NPDE learners at UNISA.* This theme refers to the use of computers, the internet and an expanding range of teaching

and learning software and information and communication technologies that have revolutionised many DE institutions nowadays. The pedagogy underpinning learning in a technological atmosphere requires the tutor to be a facilitator of learning with a view of the curriculum as something that is enjoyable and flexible. By analysing data based on this theme, the researcher identified the following categories: telephone facilities, computers, e-mails and faxes and *MyUnisa facility* (see Table 5.2).

- *Feedback measures.* This study holds the view that feedback is an essential part of education and development programmes as it helps learners to maximise their potential at different stages of development. This study contends that constructive feedback raises learners' awareness of their strengths and weaknesses and identifies actions to be taken to improve performance. In addition, feedback plays an important role in retention and the development of DE learners, particularly in the first year of study (see Table 5.2).

This theme refers to the feedback that can be given by the tutor to the learner verbally or in written form, after marking a task or assignment, from the learner to the tutor or from a learner to the learner. This study further argues that in DE, constructive and adequate feedback is always necessary in order to enhance learning. Moreover, feedback has to be precise, unambiguous and be done at the right time. The categories identified from this theme are negative feedback, insufficient feedback, timely feedback, corrective feedback and mutual or reciprocal feedback (see Table 5.2).

Table 5.2 summarises the above discussion on the five themes and their categories as identified from the open-ended questionnaire data.

Table 5.2: Themes and categories derived from open-ended questionnaire data

THEME NUMBER	NAME OF THE THEME	CATEGORIES
THEME 1	Learner support related to registration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Information given at registration and orientation - Staff attitude - Congestion - Registration materials - Study materials
THEME 2	Support services available to NPDE learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Knowledge of the services - Library services
THEME 3	Contact sessions as learner support measure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organisation of contact sessions - Tutor support - Peer support - The use of ICT during contact session - Sleeping accommodation - Costs - Travelling
THEME 4	Technological support offered to NPDE learners at UNISA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Telephone facilities - Computers - E-mails and faxes - <i>myUnisa</i> facility
THEME 5	Feedback measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Negative feedback - Insufficient feedback - Timely feedback - Corrective feedback - Mutual feedback

The following section will concentrate on data analysis based on the focus group interviews in this study.

5.3.2 Focus group interviews

Immediately after the questionnaire session at each centre, namely Durban, Pretoria, Polokwane and Nelspruit, NPDE volunteers were asked to take part in the focus group interview session. Before the participants for the focus groups could volunteer, the researcher quickly scanned through the transcripts (responses) from the open-ended questionnaire data. The researcher then made notes on the points he wished to make as an immediate follow-up during the interviews so as to seek clarification on participants' responses that were provided during the questionnaire session. Participants for the focus group interviews who volunteered came from the same group that was exposed to the open-ended questionnaire process. This was done in order to allow the researcher to probe so as to go into more depth about issues raised in the open-ended questionnaire data.

During a focus group interview, participants tend to feel more comfortable and secured in the company of people who share similar opinions, views and behaviour than during an individual interview. Therefore, participants were allowed to interact with one another rather than with the interviewer, in such a way that the views of the participants could emerge. As a result, the participants, rather than the researcher's agenda, predominated. At each centre, a scribe volunteered with the view to capture all the resolutions and agreements reached during the focus group interview session.

The aim of the focus group interview was to ascertain the views and perceptions expressed by NPDE learners about the implementation of learner support at UNISA. With this kind of interview the researcher focused on distinguishing between reality as contained in the literature with what exactly transpired at UNISA, that is, what participants exactly said they know about the use and role of learner support in NPDE programmes at UNISA.

The following table (Table 5.3) shows the number of the participants who volunteered from each centre for the focus group interview session:

Table 5.3: Sampling profile for the focus group interview at each centre

CENTRE	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	YEAR OF STUDY	LEVEL OF STUDY
Durban	10	2010	Final year learners
Pretoria	8	2010	Final year learners
Polokwane	6	2010	Final year learners
Nelspruit	6	2010	Final year learners
TOTAL	30		

The researcher initiated the discussions with a key question related to each theme and probed with series of successive questions basing these on the research questions as stated in section 5.3.2 and on the broad topics contained in the open-ended questionnaire mentioned under section 5.3.2.1. It means that the interviewer had a constant conversation with the participants with the sole purpose of creating, identifying, discovering, explaining and generating their thoughts, feelings and behaviours about learner support used in NPDE programmes at UNISA. During the interview session the researcher engaged all the members of the focus group in order to avoid dominance, shyness, disruptive and deceptive responses. Where participants were not in agreement about a particular point, the researcher allowed them to engage in rigorous debates until they came to some level of consensus.

In analysing the data for the focus group interview, the researcher followed the same approach as employed in the open-ended questionnaire (see section 5.3.1 above) that is, by clustering all emerging and similar topics together in order to form themes. The notes of the scribes and those of the researcher were read several times and the contents were compared and analysed. After analysing the data for the focus group interview, the researcher arrived at the following seven themes:

- learner support at registration
- support services available to NPDE learners

- contact sessions as learner support measure
- technological support offered to NPDE learners at UNISA
- feedback measures as form of learner support
- knowledge of NPDE learners about learner support structures intended to help them
- learners' needs for learner support

During the focus group interview phase, the researcher based his probing and conversation mainly on the three topics contained in the open-ended questionnaire as stated in section 5.3.1 above. As a result, the researcher arrived at the same five themes (with two additional ones) and categories as those in the open-ended questionnaire. This approach helped the researcher to triangulate and verify the findings from the open-ended questionnaire session with those from the interview process and *vice versa*. In this way the researcher was led to one valid, reliable and diverse construction of realities.

As mentioned above, the researcher identified two additional themes namely *knowledge of NPDE learners about learner support structures intended to help them* and *learners' needs for learner support*. The following table (Table 5.4) displays the seven themes, together with their categories that emerged after the analysis of the focus group interview data.

Table 5.4: Themes and categories derived from the focus group interview data

THEME NUMBER	NAME OF THE THEME	CATEGORIES
THEME 1	Learner support related to registration	-Orientation and counselling -Information given at registration - Staff attitude - Congestion - Registration materials - Study materials
THEME 2	Study support services available to NPDE learners	-Library services -Financial Aid Bureau -Bureau for Counselling, Career and Academic Counselling
THEME 3	Contact sessions as learner support measure	-Organisation of contact sessions -Tutor support -Peer support -The use of ICT during contact session -Sleeping accommodation Costs -Travelling
THEME 4	Technological support offered to NPDE learners at UNISA	-Telephone facilities -Computers -E-mails and faxes - <i>myUnisa</i> facility -Video conferencing -Satellite broadcast
THEME 5	Feedback measures	-Negative feedback -Timely feedback -Corrective feedback -Mutual feedback
THEME 6	Knowledge of NPDE learners about learner support structures	-Video conferencing -Satellite broadcast -BCCAD -Financial Bureau -Library
THEME 7	Learners' needs for learner support	-Advice and guidance -Encouragement -Planning own work load -Life demands -Study skills -One-to-one support

The following table, (Table 5.5) is a combination of data analysis derived from both the open-ended questionnaire and the focus group interviews. Therefore, the following section 5.4, which will focus on data interpretation and discussion, is based on this comprehensive table (Table 5.5).

Table 5.5: A comprehensive table of the data analysis derived from open-ended questionnaires and focus group interviews

THEME NUMBER	NAME OF THE THEME	CATEGORIES
THEME 1	Learner support related to registration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Orientation and counselling - Information given at registration - Staff attitude - Congestion - Registration materials - Study materials
THEME 2	Study support services exposed to NPDE learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Knowledge of the services - Library services - Financial Aid Bureau - Bureau for Counselling, Career and Academic Counselling
THEME 3	Contact sessions as learner support measure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organisation of contact sessions - Tutor support - Peer support - The use of ICT during contact sessions - Travelling - Costs - Sleeping accommodation

THEME 4	Technological support offered to NPDE learners at UNISA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Telephone facilities - Computers - E-mails and faxes - <i>myUnisa</i> facility - <i>Video conferencing</i> - Satellite broadcast
THEME 5	Feedback measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Negative feedback - Insufficient feedback - Timely feedback - Corrective feedback - Mutual feedback
THEME 6	Knowledge of NPDE learners about critical learner support structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Registration support -Learner support services - Technological support - Contact sessions - Feedback strategies
THEME 7	Learners' needs for learner support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Tutor and peer interactions - Advice, guidance and counselling -Encouragement/ motivation - Planning own work load - Study skills - Accurate information - Life demands - Technological support

5.4 DATA INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

In this section data collected during the open-ended questionnaire as well as the focus group interviews are interpreted based on the themes and categories that are mentioned in table 5.5, which represents a comprehensive analysis of the two data collection sets. Moreover, after interpreting the data, a short discussion will be presented for each category in the particular theme.

In this section, the researcher will interpret the data within the context of the literature study and the research questions. In the light of this, there is a need to revisit the following main research question and sub-questions for this study as mentioned in 1.5. The main question was:

What are the main constituting elements of learner support and their role in the professional development of teachers through DE?

The sub questions were as follows:

- *What are the most important aspects of teachers' professional development?*
- *What is the role of well-organised learner support services in upgrading under-qualified teachers' qualifications through distance teaching?*
- *What do empirical data reveal on NPDE learners' awareness and perceptions of learner support?*
- *What recommendations can be made for the effective use of learner support services in DE for under-qualified teachers?*

To understand the perspectives of learner support in the provision of distance teaching programmes for under-qualified teachers, the researcher closely examined the questionnaire and the interview data of the NPDE learners who participated in this project. In what can be referred to as a "thick description" and triangulation as outlined in section 4.3.3.3, the following discussion is based on the broad areas identified during these two distinct phases of data collection methods:

- Learner support at registration
- Support services available to NPDE learners
- Contact sessions as learner support measure
- Technological support offered to NPDE learners at UNISA
- Feedback measures as form of learner support
- Knowledge of NPDE learners about learner support structures
- Learners' needs for learner support

5.4.1 Theme 1: Learner support offered at registration

In this section the researcher presents the findings on learner support as it was made available to NPDE learners at registration based on the categories mentioned in table 5.5 above:

5.4.1.1 Orientation and counselling

During the open-ended questionnaire, only few participants, particularly those from Pretoria, indicated that they received minimal orientation and counselling at registration. The majority of the participants said nothing about orientation. By way of probing, all focus groups were asked the following question at the beginning of each focus group interview session: *“What is your experience about orientation and counselling during registration process at UNISA?”* Participants in all centres, except for those from Pretoria Centre, were unanimous that there was no orientation session prior to or after registration. In the participants own words:

...we were not guided in how to study our new courses and how to write assignments.... we were not even given the opportunities to ask questions and to connect with hundreds of new classmates.

Learners said that during registration, there were administrators who attempted to explain rules and regulations governing the NPDE programme. From their observation, some of them “looked like students”. Based on this response, it was clear that NPDE learners needed full information from well-trained personnel through well-organised orientation sessions. Section 3.4.2 of the literature study emphasises that through meetings with academic advisers, and engaging in orientation programmes, new NPDE learners would learn the values of UNISA’s academic life.

Participants felt that they needed counselling particularly during first year registration so that these counsellors could coach and orientate them as to the “university life” such as new study methods or writing of assignments. The above sentiment, agrees with Phillips’s (2003: 170) view (see section 3.4.2) that “learners in DE education seriously need quality information and admission guidance prior to enrolment as well as support about their course choices and qualification planning”.

Emphasising the needs for first year DE learners, Phillips (2003:170) states (section 3.4.2) that course induction is vital as some of the learners could be experiencing their first exposure to study at a distance. In section 3.4.3.1 Qakisa-Makoe (2005:47) supports the above sentiment when she contends that, prior to registration in DE courses, tutors or programme co-ordinators should conduct informative orientation sessions with prospective learners, where they induct and motivate them about their intended field of study. For many learners, entering higher education institutions is a major transition and therefore effective registration support such as counselling is needed in order to reduce attrition and enhance retention. During the focus group interview sessions the majority of the participants indicated that they did not receive counselling at registration and that discouraged them. In the participants’ own words:

We need to be advised by counsellors concerning our studies and how to approach our work...this will help us to be successful.

DE programmes have been one of many educational innovations related to teacher development processes in higher education institutions such as UNISA. The provision of sound orientation and counselling support at the very beginning, that is,

at registration, will go a long way to motivate the learners to persist with their studies in later years. Learners need to be guided and orientated properly, particularly at first registration of their programme, so as to understand and be familiarised with what they are just about to be involved in. Support may be given by a trained counsellor who may deal with the learners' initial inquiries and who can also give them an overview of the course.

5.4.1.2 Information offered at registration

NPDE learners' responses (from all centres) with regard to information they got at registration showed much dissatisfaction. The majority of the participants indicated that they did not receive satisfactory information prior, during and after registration. They reported that most of the personnel at registration venues were confused and did not understand the rules and regulations governing NPDE as a programme. As a result, the wrong information was disseminated, to the extent that some of them were registered either for a wrong academic level, for wrong modules or for an incomplete number of modules. This they mainly attributed to the incorrect information they received at different UNISA regional centres and in particular, Durban. One of the participants from Durban described it this way in an open-ended questionnaire transcript:

... Not enough information when you come to register. Assistants do not know anything about NPDE. Please train them. For example, when I came to register for the first time in 2007, they put me in level 2. After I had finished level 2 and 3, I received a letter from UNISA which stated that I had to do level 1 modules. I had to do them to complete my diploma.

One participant, from Nelspruit, echoed the above by remarking as follows:

For registration, I found difficulties. When I went for my first time of registration, I told the lady who was there in the computer room that I wanted to register for Foundation Phase, but she registered me in Senior Phase. Now I have got a life problem. In my school, I am in the Foundation Phase but I am completing my Senior Phase programme this year.

This is equally evident from Polokwane participants as one of them actually stated as follows:

Now this is my third year and I have a big problem, based on registration department where the university placed an unprofessional adviser to help us. Since I started teaching, I have been placed in Intermediate Phase and that is why I registered as an Intermediate Phase student. This year, instead of giving me the Intermediate Phase modules, they registered me for Foundation Phase. They opposed me when I told them that I am an Intermediate Phase student. As from that time, I am not able to change this situation and I study things that are not relevant to what I teach at my school.

Literature study reveals that transferring new ideas gained from a teacher development programme to the classroom is the most important benefit that can be gained by the teacher taking part in such a course (see section 2.5.2). For this to happen, planning and designing the curriculum or the contents of a teacher development programme should not be taken lightly. It means that information gained from any professional development teacher's programme has to be transferred and be relevant to the classroom activities. If not, then such activities are irrelevant and do not add value to learning and teaching.

Another participant from Nelspruit stated that:

... administration support was a nightmare, because I was always wrongly registered or registered in the wrong language. When I tried to fix it at Nelspruit, I was always referred to Pretoria. They said I must go to the main campus to fix it there. In most cases, I did not have the time and money in my hands to go to Pretoria. At the end, I ended up leaving it.

The above findings show that what is advocated by Brewster & Railsback, (2001:22) and Barker & Crawley (2005:10) (see section 3.4.3.1) when they state that learners at registration need to be given quality and correct information has not been put into practice. According to them, correct and quality information for beginning learners can lead to high rates of retention. Qakisa-Makoe (2005:46) concurs by stating that

first year DE learners in particular, are in a transitional phase as they attempt to deal with new experiences. As a result, information supplied by administrators at registration has to be accurate and beneficial to DE learners. Failure to supply this may result in learners registering for wrong modules or for wrong levels of study.

The underlying principle is that the administrative personnel dealing with registration matters need to be properly trained and well informed about the rules and regulations of the particular programme so that they can discharge quality information to the DE learners during registration.

On the other hand, a number of participants indicated that they were fairly satisfied with the information they received from administrators during the registration process. Interestingly, most of those learners are the ones who normally registered at the main campus in Pretoria. One of the participants from Pretoria described the information process as follows:

People at administration are doing very well. The support from these people is very good. They will welcome you, give you proper information and show you the queue so nicely and with due respect.

Pretoria learners stated that personnel at registration points helped them with things such as completion of registration forms, choice of courses and gave them the necessary registration materials such as calendars and registration brochures.

5.4.1.3 Staff attitude

Most participants complained that the administrators at registration centres were not approachable and could not answer most of their questions. Learners alluded to the fact that some administrators, particularly in Durban and Nelspruit, were short-tempered and unfriendly and as a result could not give them enough information and guidance they needed. This was evidenced by the following comment from one of the participants in the open-ended questionnaire:

*People at registration do not speak to us nicely. Their attitude is not good.
They give us insufficient information and they are not friendly to us.*

The comment above shows dissatisfaction of NPDE learners concerning staff attitude which emerged as a dominant feature amongst Nelspruit, Durban and Polokwane participants. Most participants said that the staff working at registration counters is either not properly trained or not motivated as some of them seemed to be rude and short-tempered.

When probed with questions during the focus group interviews, participants stated that some of the registration personnel were not familiar with the contents of NPDE registration brochures which made them to be agitated when asked for clarifications about something. To a large extent, learners were fed with wrong information, for example with incorrect number of modules for which they were supposed to register. This affected them negatively, as some of them had to spend more years than expected at their studies. The above sentiment was shared by participants from Durban when they said echoed:

... during registration rules and regulations are not properly communicated to us and this is frustrating. When asked a question, the staff became angry.

To confirm this, the focus group from Polokwane stated as a problem:

*Incorrect registration and the negative attitude we receive during registration.
In most cases, we are ill-advised during registration. No friendly approach is received at registration.*

The literature study (see section 3.5.2.1) has revealed that registration advisors and administrators need to be friendly and show positive support and respect to the learners at all times. This will help the learners to feel accepted and in this way, their confidence will be boosted. The communication must be cordial, but effective and a positive relationship between administrators and registering learners is of utmost importance during registration. This kind of cordial relationship will increase the probability of academic success and build positive self-esteem.

Participants from the Pretoria centre indicated that they were satisfied with the attitude of administrators conducting registration duties. The majority of NPDE learners from Pretoria felt that the process of registration was well-organised. These participants said that the process of walk-in registration was fairly quick and the administrators were ready to help them, for example by showing them the correct queues to stand in. This, they echoed, was done in a friendly and courteous manner.

5.4.1.4 Congestion

From the data collected from the open-ended questionnaires, it was clear that in some registration centres, like Durban, congestion and long queues were experienced during various registration periods. Participants indicated that they struggled to locate relevant advisors for their particular levels as the place was packed to capacity. Some of them even stated that in some instances, they had to stay the whole day in the queue and went home without having registered. All learners agreed that in order to register, they had to arrive at the registration centre at about five or six in the morning “so as to be the first in the queue”.

This sentiment was expressed by a participant during the focus group interview who said:

The registration centres are always full. We struggle to register in most cases.

With follow-up questions during the focus group interview phase, it became clear that learners were totally dissatisfied with the procedures and arrangements at registration centres. Participants indicated that because of congestion, there sometimes were pushing and stampeding when some learners tried to place themselves in front of others in the queues.

Literature study reveals that congested or small places that are not conducive to registration delivery can hamper the smooth registration process of an institution (see section 3.5.2.1). A registration centre has to be well ventilated and be able to provide each registering learner with free movement. These are crucial matters as

they will assist the learners to contact their advisors or fellow learners with ease so as to discuss the issues and matters about their intended programme of study.

5.4.1.5 Registration materials

UNISA provides registration materials to learners in the form of the university calendars and information brochures that are in print and electronic format. Each NPDE learner registering personally was supposed to get printed material at registration so that he or she could at any given time familiarise himself or herself with the rules and regulations of the development programme. Besides, learners were to be given envelopes and assignment pads as part and parcel of the registration materials.

From what was gathered from the open-ended questionnaire and the focus group interview data on registration materials, most participants agreed that information in the printed calendar was mostly incorrect, outdated and confusing. In most cases, envelopes and assignments pads were not available at registration. Envelopes and assignments pads were sent very late or were not sent at all. As a result, learners had to purchase them and that brought a lot of dissatisfaction. This was confirmed by the following written comment from one of the participants in the open-ended questionnaire data:

Most of the time I registered at the beginning of the year but I always received my study material in May with no writing pads and envelopes. I had to buy for myself. This is not fair.

The above sentiment is supported by participants from the focus groups when they echoed that:

.....insufficient or no supply of study materials e.g. envelopes and assignment pads... affected us badly.

From the above citations it is evident that some NPDE learners did not receive enough envelopes and assignment pads or did not receive them at all. This was unacceptable to them. Some of the learners indicated that at times they waited for

envelopes and assignment pads for a long time and that delayed their assignment submission dates. As a result they ended up submitting late.

During the focus group interviews, most participants indicated that they needed to get all the necessary support materials such as assignments pads, assignment labels and envelopes early in the year so that they could start with their assignments as soon as possible. In this way (see section 3.4.1), NPDE learners would be provided with “the assistance they need to achieve their desired outcomes in a distance learning environment” (Ukpo, 2006:253). The majority of the participants complained that the costs of all assignment pads and envelopes were included in their fees and it was totally unfair to be required to buy them while they had already paid for them. Some of the learners said that in some cases, they received envelopes or assignments pads from UNISA very late, that is, after they had purchased them.

It would appear that UNISA regarded assignment pads and envelopes as insignificant or as “added on materials” needed to support meaningful learning in DE. This negated the principle of proper planning of effective learner support structures as advocated by Kelly & Fage (2002:56) (see section 3.4.2) when they emphasise that “any learner support material should be perceived as an integral part of the planning and delivery of quality DE courses and should never be regarded as an added-on aspect”. Kelly & Fage (2002: 56) (see section 3.4.2) further contend that learner support material must be available at every stage of a learner’s career and that all support possibilities need to be timely and be tailored so as to be most appropriate to meet learners’ needs.

5.4.1.6 Study materials

Study materials such as tutorial letters, which normally contain assignments and study hints, as well as study guides and prescribed books, are supposed to be given to learners during registration. Most participants felt that they did not get all study materials at registration. Some tutorial letters and study guides arrived late, which impacted negatively on their submission dates, to an extent that they handed in their

assignments late. Ultimately, their marked assignments were sent to them late, sometimes even after they had written the examinations. Participants were not happy as one of them from Polokwane concurred:

My assignments were always late because of tutorial letters and study guides that came late.....this affected my studies and I failed.

The literature study (see section 3.5.2.1) revealed that the late receipt of study materials affected the studies of learners negatively. In some cases, NPDE learners had to write their examinations without the necessary feedback and guidance from their marked assignments. Some handed in their last assignments late and their marks were not captured as the computer system was already closed for data capturing for that academic year. In this case, learners had to battle for such marks to be captured, even if it was not their fault.

From the above analysis, it can be concluded that the support received at walk-in registration, particularly at regional centres such as Durban, Nelspruit or Polokwane, was not satisfactory. While acknowledging the favourable comments by few NPDE learners, the areas of dissatisfaction are to be considered as a cause for concern. Based on some of the comments from the participants, it is astonishing to realise that some NPDE learners ended up giving in and deciding to live with the problem (such as registering for wrong phases) without solving it.

All participants from the Pretoria centre were unanimous that, generally, the support they received at registration was satisfactory, whereas the majority of their counterparts from other centres (Durban, Nelspruit and Polokwane) complained bitterly about the assistance they received prior and during registration. It can be assumed that the personnel dealing with registration matters in Pretoria seemed to be well conversant with the rules and regulations governing NPDE programmes. Apparently, they received regular training and support pertaining to ever-changing registration procedures, unlike their colleagues at regional centres, who seemingly got minimal or no support at all.

In some cases, at regional centres like Durban, learners were registered for wrong modules or wrong levels and this adversely affected their teaching performance at their prospective schools and their future studies. For example, an NPDE learner who was wrongly registered for an intermediate phase, but taught a foundation phase class at her school, would be negatively affected in her daily teaching work. Obviously, some of the teaching techniques or strategies were not applicable to the phase she was teaching.

Given the general dissatisfaction of NPDE learners pertaining to the support they got at registration, it follows that these learners had serious difficulties in proceeding with their studies. If any learner was wrongly registered, particularly at first registration, he or she was likely to fail or drop out. For example, some of the NPDE learners indicated that during their first year registration, they were wrongly allocated second year modules. After passing the second year modules, they were requested to revert back to first year modules. According to them, this was not only frustrating; but adversely affected their performance.

5.4.2 Theme 2: Study support services available to NPDE learners

Sections 3.4.3.2 and 3.5.2.2 referred to support services in this study as those structures that include UNISA library, Bureau for Counselling, Career and Academic Development (BCCAD), Academic Counselling and the Financial Bureau. These services are essential in nurturing and shaping the environment for any learner so that he or she can experience a favourable atmosphere in order to study successfully. In section 5.4.2.1 the researcher will discuss learners' knowledge about the three services, namely the BCCAD, Academic Counselling and Financial Bureau. For the sake of this study, these services will be discussed together. Section 5.4.2.2 will present a separate discussion on learners' knowledge about the library services.

5.4.2.1 Learners' knowledge about the study services

Based on the data from the open-ended questionnaire, no participant mentioned anything about the BCCAD, Academic Counselling and the Financial Bureau. Few participants touched on the library services and mentioned that they use them rarely. To initiate the discussion on this broad topic, the following key question was asked to each focus group at different centres: “*What can you say about each of the following services at UNISA?*”

- Bureau for Counselling, Career and Academic Development (BCCAD)
- Financial Bureau

Each participant was requested to talk about any service he or she knows anything about. Most learners did not know anything about the BCCAD which includes academic counselling and career guidance services at UNISA centres. A few that knew about them, did not use them at all or used them minimally.

Only a few of the participants said that they visited the Financial Bureau at the main campus in Pretoria to request financial assistance. In this category, participants remarked that only a few of them got financial help (loan) from this service. When probed as to why only a few of them, participants stated that they did not know anything about the usage of the service. The few that got a bursary loan highlighted that it covered the tuition fees and they had to repay it upon completion. Some learners indicated that they got “free” bursaries from provincial departments, through the university, and appreciated and welcomed that financial assistance.

However a group from Nelspruit indicated that in most cases the payment to UNISA was done late by Mpumalanga Province, for example, in February of the following year. In these cases, UNISA would always withhold their end-of-year results and that resulted in them missing supplementary examinations which took place in January or February of the following year. In that way, they would be forced to repeat the module they had missed. Participants complained that this increased their workload

as they had to register for more modules than anticipated. The bursary covered all their tuition fees and was renewable each year depending on performance.

It needs to be pointed out that surprisingly, most participants did not mention anything about the BCCAD. When probed with questions, participants elaborated that no one informed them about such services. Few participants remarked that even if they heard about them, they did not know what they were used for. Literature study (see section 3.4.3.2) revealed that DE learners need to be aware about all the support services that are available to them and should also know how to access and use them. Becoming familiar with these support services and the most effective ways of using them will help DE learners to fulfil their mission and meet their educational obligations.

5.4.2.2 Library services

In all centres, most participants indicated that they were aware about the existence of UNISA libraries although it is evident that they were not interested to use them effectively. One of the learners in Nelspruit described it this way:

In level two I was so frustrated when coming to NPD0014, NPD043 and NPD0066. I was struggling, especially when it comes to the exam. I tried to visit the library but could not find the books I needed. The library is far from my place and it is always so difficult to find the books I need.

The above citation from the open-ended questionnaire data confirmed the fact that the Nelspruit library ran short of enough and relevant books and that learners were not familiar with the technical use of the library. This situation did not make access to the library resources easier to NPDE learners and also did not create hospitable, physical and virtual environments for their studies.

The above scenario is confirmed by data from the focus group interviews. In this regard, most participants, particularly from Durban and Polokwane stated that they did not use UNISA libraries at all or they used them to a limited extent. When probed

with questions, these groups responded that for their assignments and the examinations, they used their study guides and tutorial letters. Just as was revealed in the interpretation of the open-ended questionnaire data, some learners cited long distances from their places to the UNISA libraries as a reason for not using the libraries and when probed further, others indicated that “*no-one told us anything about the library*”.

Literature study (see section 3.4.3.2) suggests that support services such as the library should be accessible and also be user-friendly as these two aspects underpin the journey towards building success in DE.

From the above exposition, it can be concluded that most NPDE learners did not use the library adequately or did not use it at all. Most learners cited long distances they have to travel as the main reason for not visiting the libraries. It can also be concluded that apparently, most NPDE learners were not familiar with the general procedures and the technological use of the library. These therefore, discouraged them from using the library services.

On the other hand, most of the participants from Pretoria centre explained during the focus group interviews that they used the library mainly for their assignments and portfolios. Participants said that they found the library at the main campus very helpful. It would appear that learners that attended at the Pretoria centre did stay within a reasonable distance from the UNISA library, so they accessed the UNISA library at Pretoria Campus with ease.

5.4.3 Theme 3: Contact sessions as learner support measure

This section will deal with the discussions or findings of the categories of contact sessions as a support measure in NPDE programmes based on the open-ended questionnaire as well as the focus group interview data.

5.4.3.1 Organisation of contact sessions

From the open-ended questionnaire data it was apparent that an overwhelming majority of the participants noted that the contact session time, which is eight days a year, is too short. According to them, as DE learners, they needed more time to interact with their study materials, tutors and peers. One of the participants had this to say:

The bad thing about NPDE is the contact session. We do not get much time to discuss about the contents of our modules. Some modules are not clear. Therefore, we need more time with our tutors so that they can explain fully to us, but it takes too long to meet them. When we want to do assignments we struggle and we end up failing.

The open-ended questionnaire data also revealed that contact sessions were not properly organised. Participants stated that in some cases they had to wait for more than an hour before the venue could be released to them. The Durban group indicated that the centre was always congested and they struggled to locate classes allocated to them as there was no signage that directed them to their venues. In Nelspruit, participants commented that sometimes they could not get the classes as there were clashes as result of double bookings.

Based on the above comments from the NPDE participants, it can be said that NPDE contact sessions were not well-organised. From the researcher's experience as a former NPDE lecturer, it could be confirmed that during registration and contact session periods, the Durban centre was always filled to capacity with learners from different UNISA programmes. To this end, it was difficult to locate the classes and during tutorials, there was always a lot of noise that disturbed NPDE tutors and learners.

With regard to the focus group interviews, the researcher posed the following question to the groups at different centres: *What is your feeling about contact sessions you have been attending as an NPDE learner?* More questions were asked as the discussion developed and the main resolutions for each sub-theme were

recorded by the scribe. It is interesting to note that the findings of the focus group interviews confirmed those of the open-ended questionnaires and *vice versa*.

As stated in the discussion based on the open-ended questionnaire data, all participants in the focus groups were concerned about the duration of the contact sessions. Their general concern was that the time given to contact sessions was not enough. When summarising this concern, the group from Polokwane said: *“The duration of contact sessions is not enough”* and the Durban group remarked *“short contact sessions”*. It would appear that NPDE as a PDT programme did not align its contents with the notional hours of contact time. These concerns are not in line with the literature review (see section 2.5.2) in which Munonde (2007: 59) states that in any PDT programme, decisions about the length of the session(s) as well as the way time to be allocated should be clear, sufficient and justifiable.

The majority of the participants alluded to the fact that contact sessions were poorly organised. In particular, the Durban group stated that there was a lot of congestion during contact sessions. They asserted that in most cases, their contact sessions in Durban clashed with other contact sessions of UNISA programmes and they struggled to secure lecture rooms. In some instances, they were allocated small rooms which could not house all of them. Acknowledging the situation they experienced in Durban, the group concluded as follows:

The Durban centre was always full of students...we always experienced problems.... sometimes our venues were occupied or we were given small classrooms.

As a result of the above state of affairs, NPDE lecturers struggled to secure venues in Durban and in most cases, they ended up starting late with tutorials. This means that the time was indirectly shortened which impacted negatively on the already insufficient time for the contact classes as highlighted above. The group from Pretoria also pointed out that at times they could not start with lessons in time as “in some cases there were poor arrangements between Tshwane FET College and UNISA”. As a result, most of their lessons started late particularly during the first day of the contact sessions.

The above comments by participants pertaining to the organisation of contact sessions illustrated the widely held view in literature (see section 3.4.3.3) that contact sessions have to be planned carefully taking into consideration aspects such as space and resources to be used. Munonde's (2007:58) view, (see section 2.5.2) concurs with the above when he asserts that for any PDT programme to be successful, proper arrangements for space and time should be carefully organised according to the number of participants as well as the activities to be executed. In this way, contact sessions will add quality that will indeed help learners to learn in a meaningful manner, and in this way resulting in improved learning in classrooms (Glennie & Mays, 2009:20).

Only the Polokwane group agreed that, in most cases, contact sessions were well-organised. Participants indicated that when they arrived at the contact session centre in Polokwane, the centre manager with his assistants were always present with the signage that indicated where they were supposed to attend. As a former NPDE lecturer, the researcher can also attest to the fact that Polokwane centre was always welcoming, hospitable and well-prepared. At the start of each contact session, the centre manager personally welcomed NPDE lecturers and was willing to solve any problem that could arise. This means that Polokwane staff members and the centre manager seemed to be well-organised as well as aware of their responsibilities as they arranged the classes well in advance.

5.4.3.2 Tutor support

The findings in this section focus on the role of part-time and full-time UNISA tutors during contact sessions. The findings from the open-ended questionnaire data revealed that the majority of the participants held the view that during contact sessions, most tutors offered good support and the majority of UNISA tutors came to class well-prepared. This view was held mainly by participants from Pretoria and Nelspruit. This was firmly confirmed by one of the participants from Pretoria who stated that:

NPDE tutors support us during contact sessions. We gain a lot of knowledge and we communicate directly with them. Our tutors support us. Each tutor takes time to explain and respond to our questions if we do not understand.

Implicit in the above comment is the fact that most participants acknowledged the importance of tutor support during contact sessions, when he or she said: “we communicate directly with them”. Tutor support is crucial in DE as it has direct impact on the extent and quality of the relationship and transactional distance between the tutor and the learner.

Of interest is that all the issues mentioned by the participants during the interview schedule, confirmed what was mentioned in the questionnaire instruments. Generally, participants from various focus groups agreed that tutors assisted them a lot during contact sessions. For instance, participants from Durban mentioned that tutors were very supportive and guided them in how to approach their studies. According to the participants, tutors are not only mediators of learning, but are also administrators of information, facilitators and motivators who endeavoured to unlock the setting that contributed to their success. This idea supports Lentell’s (2003:73) assertion (see section 3.4.3.3) when he describes the role of the tutor as intensive, valuable and personal to each DE learner. In this way, tutors are able to help learners articulate their learning needs so that “these learners can acquire the skills of reflection and independence”.

With the support from tutors, particularly during contact sessions, participants’ active learning and professional development were promoted. The statement above is equally confirmed by the literature review (see section 2.5.2) when Jasper (2006:2) indicates that the positive role of tutors in DE assumes that all professionals should continue to develop throughout their working lives—from becoming learner practitioners, to specialised and advanced professionals.

The literature study also revealed that support from tutors is very important for all learners in any DE setting. Even the most highly motivated and self-directed DE learners can find their experience lonely, difficult and sometimes daunting if they are not given adequate support and motivation by their tutors (see section 3.4.3.3). In

addition, social constructivism as a theoretical framework of this study, stressed the importance of the learners' social interaction with tutors in any learning situation. From the social constructivist viewpoint, it is imperative to recognise the role of the tutor in the learning process as this helps to shape the knowledge that the learner creates, discovers and attains in his or her intellectual development (see section 3.2).

The conclusion that can be drawn from the above analysis on the roles of tutors during contact sessions was that for DE learners to profit from these sessions, tutors have to come to classes prepared and should also show that they care about their learners. NPDE learners met their tutors mainly during contact sessions. During that time tutors were able to respond to their questions, helped them with good study methods, guided and motivated them even during difficult times. In this way, contact sessions allowed for a dialogue amongst learners and immediate interaction between a learner and a tutor. That is why Mays (2010:131) (see section 3.4.3.3), argues that, through the support learners get from tutors, contact sessions mediate learning. He also regards these sessions as a cornerstone of educational practices in all DE programmes.

The participants' responses seemed to confirm what Lentell (2003:66) advocates (see section 3.4.3.3), when she emphasises that "the main responsibility of the tutor during contact sessions in a DE setting is to give guidance to learners, clarify issues, provide motivation and encourage togetherness as peers". In section 3.4.3.3 Lewis (1995:244) also asserts that tutors in DE are regarded as the main source of support as they are supposed to cover areas such as facilitation of knowledge, study skills, careers guidance, motivational talks as well as educational counselling for learners.

5.4.3.3 Peer support

From their open-ended questionnaire responses, the majority of NPDE learners valued peer support highly. Most of the learners indicated that they managed, with the help of tutors, to form study groups during contact sessions. Members of the groups met from time to time to share ideas concerning challenging aspects of their

modules, coach and motivate one another. This, they said, brought about improvement in their performances. Wertsch (1997:19) supports this view (see section 3.2) when he emphasises that without the social interaction with people sharing a common goal such as peers, it is very difficult or almost impossible for a learner to acquire social meaning of an important concept and learn how to use it. This view is also held by Simpson (2000:23) (see section 3.4.3.3) when he argues “support from family and friends and from fellow learners is more valued by DE learners than from tutors”.

In addition, the constructivist learning theory as discussed in section 3.2 holds the view that learners should always be encouraged to interact with others so that they can learn from the incorporation of their experiences. For example, the difficulties encountered by DE learners at their individual places could be raised during contact sessions, be discussed, and be used as a future learning experience.

The importance of peer support was emphasised by one of the participants from Nelspruit when he commented that:

the contact session is good because I always gained a lot of things and shared ideas with other learners. We formed study groups during contact sessions...we also solve our problems together.

Most participants in focus groups such as those from Nelspruit and Gauteng agreed that as peers they supported one another throughout their studies. A group from Pretoria remarked as follows: “*Study groups assisted a lot. They instilled confidence and evoked passion for studying*”. Participants said that they formed study groups during contact sessions and met from time to time so as help one another. One participant from Gauteng commented that “*Study groups broadened my skills and knowledge*”. However, when probed further, participants complained about the long distances they had to travel to meet their peers for discussions and report backs.

Participants from Polokwane said that they were not able to form study groups. When asked why, participants indicated that, much as they were advised by their tutors to form study groups that never materialised. Seemingly, some participants did

not see the value of forming study groups. One participant indicated that she was staying far from the rest of her peers and that discouraged her from initiating a study group.

Participants further mentioned that during contact classes they used to share their views with peers particularly during group work and this enhanced their knowledge and also helped them to adjust or improve their study habits at once. The above responses support what Mays (2010:131) highlights (see section 3.4.3.3) when he states that peer interactions and related learning experiences can be monitored and assessed while sessions are in progress and instructional designs or learning methods, if necessary, can be adapted immediately. In this way, learner-teachers will always act as real primary agents for change and innovation at their schools in particular, and in education in general (Akkerman *et al.*, 2004:249). Finally, learning at its best involves interaction between learners, as meanings are shared, information is exchanged and problems are solved cooperatively. The class in this sense becomes a social arena for examining knowledge, for testing what one knows and for increasing one's knowledge.

5.4.3.4 The use of ICT during contact sessions

This discussion is limited to crucial technological support offered during contact sessions only, thus exclusive of the ICT support throughout the study period of NPDE learners. Literature study (see section 3.4.3.3) suggests that during contact sessions, established ICTs can play a key role in the success of DE teacher development programmes such as in NPDE courses.

When contextualising industrial production of goods to DE (see section 3.3) Peters (1988:12) argued that the effective implementation of DE is impossible without the use of machines such as technological ones. Therefore, in the DE teaching context, the quality of learning experience is heavily dependent upon the use of ICTs at hand to facilitate and enhance teaching and learning, and also on the skills and commitment of the tutors and learners to use these resources. Where all these work well, the technology will truly enable "the defeat of distance".

The majority of the participants in both the open-ended questionnaire and the focus group interview data indicated that during contact sessions, tutors did not use ICTs such as power point presentations and computers, adequately. Some learners state that a few tutors used overhead projectors as the only means of enhancing teaching and learning. According to them, the majority of tutors used print and the chalkboard as teaching resources.

When asked why do tutors not use technological resources during contact sessions, participants answered that it would seem that some tutors were still holding on to the traditional way of teaching. For that reason NPDE tutors were comfortable with the use of chalkboards and flip charts. In their own words:

...at times those trying to use power point presentations struggled to set up computers and data projectors...it seems as if they are not familiar with these technologies.

From the above comment, it is clear that some NPDE tutors did not have the skill of operating and using technological resources as learning and teaching support during contact sessions. This challenge of lack of technological skills, particularly by tutors, should always be taken into consideration by planners before the start of any DE programme (see section 3.4.3.4). In addition, literature study (see sections 2.5.2 and 3.4.3.4) revealed that for DE programmes to succeed well, technological support, often in concert with face-to-face communication, should be used so as to bridge the institutional gap or distance between a tutor and a learner.

5.4.3.5 Travelling

In 2010 the number of NPDE contact session venues was reduced from seven to four due to the decreased number of the registered NPDE students. The four centres were Durban (Kwa-Zulu-Natal Province), Polokwane (Limpopo Province), Pretoria (Gauteng Province) and Nelspruit (Mpumalanga Province), catering for all NPDE learners from all over South Africa (see Figure 4.1). As discussed elsewhere, (see

section 5.2.1) there were no contact venues in the provinces of North West, Free State, Northern Cape, Western Cape and Eastern Cape and therefore, some NPDE learners had to travel very long distances from one province to the other to attend contact lessons. For example, there were learners who had to travel from Eastern Cape to KwaZulu-Natal, from Northern Cape to Gauteng, from Free State to Mpumalanga or from Western Cape to KwaZulu-Natal. All participants complained that contact sessions were highly expensive and as a result, some of them did not attend.

Learners were advised to attend at the “nearest” centre. The majority of the participants in this study were highly concerned about the long distances they had to travel for attending contact classes. This was emphasised by one of the Durban participants in the open-ended questionnaire data who wrote that:

centres for contact sessions are far away from us. I was shocked when the centre at Dundee was closed for contact sessions.

The comment above suggests that the closure of, for example, the Dundee contact centre, which seemingly was closer to that participant, created a situation where many NPDE learners had to commute long distances to contact classes. As a result of this unfortunate situation, some learners were forced to commute from their homes to the contact centres daily as they could not get the places to stay near the contact centres. Such learners could even travel up to two hundred kilometres per single trip. Apparently, this resulted in low attendance or non-attendance by some learners. Participants indicated that they had to wake up early, which suggests that they arrived at the contact centres being very tired and sometimes very late.

Participants in all the focus groups from the four contact centres were unanimous that most of them travelled long distances from their respective places to attend contact sessions. When asked about the reason for closing other centres, the participants said that they were not furnished with valid reasons and were shocked by this top-down decision. This is in conflict with one of the characteristics of visionary professional development (see section 2.5.1) which contends that collaborative decision-making is very important if a PDT programme is to yield

desired results. Participants were in consensus that extensive travelling discouraged them from attending contact sessions and this affected their performance negatively as they missed the tutor guidance and peer support they could have received at contact classes.

5.4.3.6 Costs

Most of the participants in this study agreed that they had to spend a lot of money to travel to contact venues. They indicated that they had to provide money for food, travelling and accommodation, yet they earned very little. This was acknowledged by one participant who had this to say:

Contact venues are very far..... we have to pay a lot of money to travel and buy foodwe cannot afford as we are paid low salaries.

With regard to the focus group interviews, most participants concurred with what was revealed in the open-ended questionnaire findings when they complained that they had to spend a lot of money for travelling, accommodation and food. The above sentiments show the lack of the basic requirements described by Jasper (2006:32) (see section 2.5.2) when he suggested that PDT programmes should be presented in the time allocated to them and should also be as cost-effective as possible. Similarly, this situation does not support what Tait (1995:240) advocated (see section 3.2) when he contends that in DE, any learner support structure should attempt to meet the needs of learners but this should “be done within the constraints of costs, technologies and geographical locations”.

Section 2.5.2 also describes key features which must be taken into consideration when engaging in a PDT programme. One of the features is that a PDT programme has to be as cost effective as possible, taking into account the background and the nature of the participants involved. Therefore, designers of any PDT programme should involve as many stakeholders as possible, so that the programme addresses the needs and aspirations of all affected.

5.4.3.7 Sleeping accommodation

Most participants said that they struggled to secure sleeping accommodation. Some of them had to seek accommodation from friends or relatives whereas others had to stay over in hotels or guest houses. A comment from a participant:

During contact sessions we struggle with accommodation.....we sometimes sleep in hotels ...but it is expensive. At times we hire [rooms] in private houses and they ask a lot of money from us.

Participants indicated that this kind of a situation discouraged some of them from attending contact sessions, thus contributing to the process of learner dropout, which the researcher observed as prevalent during his involvement as an NPDE lecturer.

Steyn's (1999:212) view (see section 2.5.2) contends that diagnosing the needs and problems of learners in a PDT programme is very crucial. This can be done by making time available in advance for informal discussions in which learners can state their needs and challenges, through formal interviews or through the use of assessment forms. This needs analysis can provide the crucial information that will ensure that teacher development is appropriate, valid and relevant. In addition the needs analysis can suggest a variety of techniques that are essentially concerned with diagnosis on the basis of evidence in order to inform perceptions and determine action on issues such as sleeping accommodation, travelling and costs that were crucial factors during NPDE contact sessions.

5.4.4 Theme 4: Technological support offered to NPDE learners

In section 3.4.3.4 it is mentioned that technological support or ICT in this study refers to various technologically enhanced delivery strategies which include a range of multi-media such as computer-based programmes, audio and video conferencing, telephones, televisions and radio broadcasts to deliver live or recorded material to learners. For remote and scattered learners such as many of NPDE learners at UNISA, technological support can play a major role in providing knowledge and

educational services to them. Furthermore, and as emphasised in the literature review (see section.3.5.2.4), ICTs are very important in any DE environment as they can provide any learner anywhere with captivating knowledge appropriate to his or her needs. Under this theme, the following categories of the findings will be discussed, namely telephone facilities, computers, e-mails and faxes, and *MyUnisa* facility:

5.4.4.1 Telephone facilities

The majority of the questionnaire participants felt that telephones were not adequately or properly used by NPDE tutors so as “to support them in updating and extending their knowledge and skills”.

Concerning the use of telephones, one of the participants stated that:

the negative aspect in doing the NPDE through distance education is when you call the lecturer concerning a particular problem you encounter. Even during office hours, in most cases, there are no answers. Some of them when you call them in their private phones they do not like it.

From the above comment, it is clear that some NPDE lecturers were not keen to use their mobile phones to communicate with learners as they regarded them as their private property. This comment also revealed that generally lecturers rarely answered their office phones. That affected tutor-learner communication which is so important in any DE setting, as outlined in section 3.5.2.4.3.

Furthermore, the majority of the participants felt that phoning both their part-time and full-time tutors seemed to be very costly. Some participants raised the issue that some tutors are unfriendly when communicating by phones and therefore learners could not get the necessary help and guidance from them. One participant said:

NPDE is frustrating because sometimes when you phone for help, lecturers do not speak nicely to you. They shout at you and you feel very bad. It is not nice.

The focus groups were not in agreement with regard to the telephone service they received from their tutors. Some, like those in Durban, felt that they got a raw deal from their tutors and those from Polokwane and Pretoria said that their tutors responded positively and in time. Participants from Durban explained that when they made telephone calls, they would be made to hold on for long periods of times or the phones would ring without any responses.

Furthermore, participants from Durban agreed that the telephone service they received from UNISA call centre was not only useless, but also totally discouraging. The Durban group remarked as follows:

UNISA call centre is useless.... when you phone you will wait and wait until you give up. Sometimes people working there cannot give correct answers.

The most important function of the call centre was to provide prompt service to UNISA clients as well as to focus on service delivery and enhancement of an overall functioning that is offered to both internal and external parties. The comment above clearly indicates that NPDE learners did not get prompt and quality support from the UNISA call centre.

However, the majority of the participants in the open-ended questionnaires perceived the SMSs to be very helpful. They contended that the SMS facility updated and reminded them concerning things such as the dates for the contact sessions, receipt of assignments by UNISA, the final dates for submitting assignments, examination dates and venues or referred them to an important section in their study guides or prescribed book. The following was a remark from one of the participants from an open-ended questionnaire data, *'The SMS service is working very well for me. I love it'*.

The participants of the focus groups were also unanimous that the SMS service was working very well and that it did help a great deal, particularly with regard to updating them about the latest developments at UNISA such as changing contact session dates or venues and also about their modules or contact sessions. They further

stated that SMS facilities were used to correct certain sections in their tutorial letters or study guides. Consequently, the focus group from Durban had this to say, “Yes....*technological support is not effective except for SMSs*”.

The majority of the learners seemed to have mobile phones and that is why they had access to the SMS service. The literature study (see section 3.4.3.4) revealed that telephones and especially mobile phones can be used to update learners about recent information or developments, correct mistakes, e.g. in the study guides, assignments or tutorial letters. Apart from that, Latchem (2010:79) asserts that through telephones, learners can communicate with fellow learners, by so doing, assisting one another, deepening their knowledge and using their own experience as a resource in the course. Telephones can be used in DE to supplement print-based interactions. A characteristic of this means of DE by telephone is that communication is synchronous in nature. That is, the participants in the discussions are online at the same time, although they may be separated by distance. Used wisely, this form of learner support can play an increasingly significant role in DE institutions.

5.4.4.2 Computers

Computers in the context of this study could be used by NPDE learners to send assignments and to access information. Most NPDE learners (about 60%) came from rural areas. Based on the open-ended questionnaire data, most participants alluded to the fact that they did not have any access to the computers at home or in their immediate surroundings and therefore could not use the computer facilities such the internet. Concerning this, one of the participants wrote as follows:

In my place we are faced with a problem of not having access to the computer....there is no internet and I stay in a rural village, very far from UNISA..... I do not know how to use computer and obtain information from the internet.

Concerning data from the focus groups, most participants felt that the usage of computer support during their entire studies was minimal. Generally, participants reported that computers were used during registration but not so with activities

directly linked with their studies. The following remark was raised by the group from Durban: “*No technological support was used during our studies*” and the same feeling was echoed by participants from Pretoria when they concluded that “*technological material was not satisfactorily used*”. The statements above are discordant with what was advocated by Diaz-Maggioli (2004:14) (see section 2.5.2) that technological support, such as the use of computers, can help learners engage in the learning situation that can ensure successful completion of tasks or assignments and promote self-regulated learning.

Moreover, in the literature study (see section 3.4.3.4) , it was stated that for the computer to be successful as learner support in DE, tutors and learners must be trained in how to use it. This training should be motivating, illuminating and likely to translate into sound and innovative practice when it deals with the pedagogical as well as the technological issues, involving digital and human interaction and includes hands-on learning in DE institutions such as UNISA. It means that NPDE tutors and learners must be highly motivated and proficient and literate in computer operation before they can successfully function in a computer-based distance learning environment.

5.4.4.3 E-mails and faxes

E-mails in NPDE course could be used for exchange of messages and information with peers and tutors. E-mail as a learner support service is popular in DE programmes because it is quick, easy and cost-effective. Similarly, paper-based faxing was one of the mechanisms used by NPDE learners to communicate with tutors.

The open-ended questionnaire data revealed that tutors did not respond on time or did not respond at all to the enquiries learners sent to them via fax messages and e-mails. Some NPDE learners said that in some instances they received the responses from their tutors very late.

Members of the focus groups also said that when they inquired through faxes or e-mail, they would seldom get the necessary feedback. This situation violated one of the basic principles of technological support such as e-mails and faxes in DE as raised by McCall and Piterman (2001:134) (see section 3.4.3.4) when they concluded that the adoption of technology has “made access to knowledge and educational services around the world feasible”. Furthermore, Thatcher (2007:384) (see section 3.4.3.4) supports this view when she emphasises that e-mails and internet facilities are increasingly being accepted in many DE institutions and should be properly used so as to support the distant teaching role and to meet the growing demands from learners studying at a distance.

5.4.4.4 *myUnisa* facility

As discussed in section.3.5.2.4.5, using the *myUnisa* facility effectively as a learner support strategy at UNISA requires that NPDE learners must have computers, have the skills to use the facility and be linked to the facility at the main campus in Pretoria. Very few participants indicated that they were familiar with the use of *myUnisa*. Most NPDE learners alluded to the fact that they knew nothing about this facility and that they could not use *myUnisa* facility either because they did not possess computers or were not trained in how to use it.

Rural NPDE learners did not have access to computers and this rendered services such as *myUnisa* or communication by e-mails very difficult for them. As a result, these learners did not benefit from such services. On the other hand, learners who could access these services were able to communicate with their tutors as well as their peers at any given time and this helped them to improve their performances. The literature (see section 3.5.2.4.5) indicated that *myUnisa* serves as collaborative strategy amongst tutors and learners and serves as a learning-teaching management platform that supports learners at UNISA. In this way, learners can assist one another and are able to communicate (as individuals or as groups) with their lecturers and peers at any given moment.

From the above findings on technological support as a form of learner support for NPDE learners at UNISA, it is obvious that technological media was not used or was not adequately used by NPDE tutors to aid learners throughout their studies and even during contact sessions. In some instances, UNISA used community halls or schools as contact session venues and the technological resources such as electricity or computers were not always readily available. Therefore, NPDE tutors were forced to use chalkboards or flip charts as a means of facilitating teaching and learning.

The researcher, as a former NPDE tutor, periodically held formal discussions with fellow NPDE tutors and some of them confessed that they were not trained to use resources such as computers and power point presentations and therefore could not use them effectively. This affected their teaching and learner performance adversely as they resorted mainly to the formal lecture method. Finally, most of the sentiments expressed by participants about technological support in the focus group interviews confirm what was raised in the open-ended questionnaires with regard to aspects such as SMS service, e-mails, telephones, faxes and *myUnisa*.

5.4.5 Theme 5: Feedback measures as form of learner support

Feedback plays an important role in helping learners to assess their performance, identify areas where they are right on target and providing them with guidance on what they can do in future to improve in areas that need correcting. Particularly for NPDE learners, tutors were supposed to give them positive feedback so as to improve their performance, enhance their educational actions, goal achievements and personal satisfaction. Under this theme the following categories, which were identified during the open-ended questionnaire and the focus group interviews, will be discussed namely negative feedback, insufficient feedback, timely feedback, corrective feedback and mutual feedback:

5.4.5.1 Negative feedback

Most participants in this study (both open-ended questionnaire and focus group interviews) commented that their tutors did not give motivating feedback, that is, feedback that clearly explains where and why learners have made errors and where and how they had to improve. In most cases, cited the participants, the feedback they received did not enhance learning as it was not positive, responsive to specific aspects of their work and did not provide specific and related suggestions.

The above finding is supported in the literature study (see section 3.4.3.5.2) which emphasised that feedback comments must always be elaborate, constructive and motivating. This kind of feedback will extend the opportunity to teach by alleviating misunderstanding and will reinforce learning. In this manner, learner achievement may improve.

The majority of the open-ended questionnaire participants felt that feedback given after marking their assignments was, in some cases, negative or undermined them. One participant had this to say:

The comments that we get from some lecturers are destroying us. For example, one lecturer commented that my work does not show that I am an educator. This is a bad remark to me.

What is implied with the above remark is that in some instances, tutors were not very sensitive and careful when commenting on certain mistakes committed by the learner. The golden rule about any feedback given, be it written or oral is that tutors should phrase the comment with caution. When highlighting principles of giving effective feedback (see section 3.4.3.5.3), Parsloe (1995:149) suggests that when giving feedback, the teacher should be very careful about the phrasing and wording used.

Poor handling of any feedback strategy may result in the learners losing respect for and trust in the tutor or in feedback being disregarded thereafter. The above remark

by the NPDE participant could have been upsetting to the particular learner and that might have damaged the tutor-learner relationship. Tutors should not create a shopping list of faults that could overwhelm and discourage the learner.

The focus groups from Pretoria and Nelspruit agreed that there were always “*poor or no comments on marked assignments*”. Participants associated the word “poor” with negative comments that were written down by some tutors after marking their work. For example, one Nelspruit participant in particular, strongly felt that she failed the portfolio twice as a result of negative or “poor” feedback she received from the marker; the comments did not advise her correctly in how to rectify her mistakes.

The statements echoed by the participants above showed that feedback practices do not concur with what Tshaka (2011:6) advocates (see section 3.4.3.5.2) when she argues that written feedback, particularly on marked tasks, should always be constructive, unambiguous, elaborate and motivating. The above assertion by Tshaka (2011) is supported in section 3.4.3.5 in the literature study which advocates that feedback is valued when it is given by someone credible and whom the learners respect as a role model.

Furthermore, one of the principles of providing positive feedback as contended by Parsloe (1995:149) (see section 3.4.3.5.3) is that feedback should be regarded as being a delicate offer to the recipient, hence the teacher must be very sensitive to the impact of the message he or she is sending to the learner at hand. Positive feedback, by its very nature, ought to acknowledge the learner’s strengths and motivate him or her to work on areas of weaknesses. Any learner wants and needs positive feedback to move forward in his or her career.

5.4.5.2 Insufficient feedback

With regard to the open-ended questionnaire data, most participants felt that the feedback they received with their marked assignments was totally insufficient. Participants emphasised that markers gave ticks and allocated a mark without the necessary feedback. Therefore, participants commented that they sometimes

obtained a high or a low mark without any feedback that justifies such a mark. This was emphasised by one of the participants who contended that:

I like to receive enough feedback on my assignments because it teaches and motivates me. But in most cases, there are ticks and a mark with no comments on my assignment. This does not help me.

It was evident from this citation that NPDE learners needed comments that were informative and sufficient. For instance, it would appear that learners were more interested in informative and sufficient feedback than in the marks they obtained.

The majority of the NPDE participants from the focus groups supported the views expressed by participants in the open-ended questionnaire process. They indicated that they did not receive any or sufficient feedback from tutors on their marked tasks or assignments. In addition to that, participants said that they could not see the value of the mark because they did not know how they obtained it. In this regard, a group from Durban identified as a deficiency: *“Insufficient feedback or comments after marking our assignments”*. In support of this sentiment, participants from Polokwane had this to say: *“No sufficient comments on marked assignments in some modules”*.

This finding confirms the researcher’s own experience as a former NPDE lecturer, that in most cases, learners used to complain that some markers did not allocate appropriate marks to them and that the comments like “Good” are not sufficient and did not tell them anything. Once feedback comments are informative, they will help the learner to realise his or her mistakes and where to improve.

5.4.5.3 Timely feedback

From the open-ended questionnaire data, some participants stated that they did not receive any feedback from the markers and in some instances the feedback arrived late, that is, after writing the examinations. To this end, those learners felt frustrated. One of the participants commented as follows:

We received some of our marked assignments late... after writing the exams.....markers delayedand this did not help us.

The above comment emphasises the fact that for feedback to be effective, it has to be timely. Delay in providing learner feedback diminishes its value for learning. This fact is emphasised in the literature study (see section 3.4.3.5.3) where it is stated that “feedback must be timely, therefore, the teacher should give feedback as soon after the event as possible”. Prompt feedback will go a long way to cement the relationship between a learner and a teacher. For example, if learners receive feedback no more than a day after a test or homework assignment has been turned in, it will improve the relationship between the tutor and the learner and also increase the window of opportunity to learn.

However, participants from Pretoria indicated that they received their assignments in time. This could be attributed to the fact that all assignments were marked by external and internal UNISA markers who resided around Pretoria. Obviously, Pretoria learners received their assignments earlier than their counterparts who, for example were in Durban or Nelspruit. Finally, participants stated that in some modules, there were NPDE markers who marked and returned the assignments within specified periods and those that failed to meet deadlines.

5.4.5.4 Corrective feedback

As stated in section 3.4.3.5 Wilkinson (2003:1) asserted that corrective feedback is vital as it enables learners to understand whether attempts to improve learning and experience lead to improvement. From the data collected in the open-ended questionnaire and focus groups, it became clear that the majority of the participants did not receive corrective feedback from tutors. Participants stated that in most cases feedback received did not count and did not give guidance on how to rectify mistakes committed. A noteworthy finding is that most participants indicated that in some instances, written feedback was too generalised and was not related to specific facts and observations.

5.4.5.5 Mutual feedback

Participants in the study had consensus that in their NPDE studies, feedback was a one-way process, from the tutors to the learners. For example, participants highlighted that they were not given a chance to reflect on the contents of study materials, let alone on the comments they got from their marked assignments. From my experience as a former NPDE tutor, there was little time created for learners to give feedback on their studies or marked assignments. During contact sessions, which were very short, tutors mainly concentrated on trying to “cover the syllabus” and ignored to use feedback maximally as a form of support strategy.

The literature study (see section 3.4.3.3) revealed that in any DE setting, the provision of two-way communication is of utmost importance as it builds a good rapport between a learner and a tutor (Hein-Nieminen, 1995:251). In section 3.4.3.5 of the literature study, it was also emphasised that effective feedback is a result of the overall dialogue or interaction between the teacher and the learner or the learner and the learner, not a one-way communication.

Bedford (2007:3) (see section 3.4.3.5.1) contends that learning becomes effective when learners can work collaboratively and in dialogue with one another. This means that enough opportunities must always be created where learners are asked to provide feedback to other learners as well as comparing their work to the stated criteria. As far as possible, learners should be allowed to engage other learners in reviewing their work and reflecting on it. Moreover, the teacher should give learners opportunities to raise issues, interact amongst themselves, ask questions after receiving feedback, try again and get it right. One of the principles of effective feedback postulated by Parsloe (1995:149) (see section 3.4.3.5.3) is that feedback must be a cordial interaction that will ultimately lead to appropriate action in the context of developing competence in a learner.

However, some participants admitted that, to a limited extent, tutors gave positive verbal feedback about their work or marked assignments during contact sessions. In addition, peers also gave informative feedback individually or as groups, about the tasks that were given to them in the previous contact sessions.

The conclusion that can be drawn from the above analysis is that NPDE learners agreed with what Bedford (2007) and Chetwynd & Dobbyn (2011) (see section 3.4.3.5) assert, when they perceive positive and adequate feedback, particularly after marking assignments, as an important motivating factor in any DE studies. It was clear from the interpretation of the open-ended questionnaire and focus groups that learners received negative and insufficient feedback and this situation was not motivating them at all.

As alluded to in section 5.4.5.4 above, participants shared the view that, in some modules, they received feedback on marked assignments after writing their examinations. It follows that marked assignments were sent back to learners without honouring the turnaround time which was two weeks after receiving assignments to mark. From the researcher's observation as a former NPDE lecturer, in some modules, marking was outsourced (done by outside markers) and UNISA lecturers were reluctant to hold them to the submission dates. This delayed the process of sending back marked assignments to the learners.

Another observation by the researcher as a former NPDE lecturer is that it remains questionable whether or not outside markers were trained adequately in marking assignments and giving sufficient, corrective, positive and timely feedback. Markers received training only once a year and some markers, like those who were employed late in the year, did not receive training at all. Therefore, learners complained bitterly about their marking.

When one studies the points mentioned in the open-ended questionnaires and the focus group interviews, to a large extent, most of the findings confirm one another. For example, in both phases participants mentioned that peer group support was vital and it did help them a lot and that feedback on marked assignments was either insufficient or largely negative. Moreover, in both instances, participants confirmed that the SMS facility was excellent as it *inter alia* kept them informed about the latest developments such as change of an examination dates or venues. Participants in both research methods also agreed that in some venues, contact sessions were not properly organised.

The discussions on the following two broad topics, namely *knowledge of NPDE learners about learner support intended to help them* and *learners' needs for learner support* emerged from the data of the focus group interview. Since most sub-themes (categories) in section 5.4.6 and 5.4.7 could not be easily separated from one another, the researcher has decided to discuss them as a unit, that is, without necessarily putting them under their sub-headings. By way of steering the discussion in each case, the researcher started by asking a broad, thought-provoking question.

5.4.6 Theme 6: Knowledge of NPDE learners about the critical learner support structures intended to help them

During the focus group interview phase, the researcher started the discussion by asking the following two key questions to the interviewees in all centres: *What is learner support?* In each focus group, participants gave different definitions of learner support until they agreed on the one they thought accurately captured what learner support is. For example, participants in Durban, after fruitful discussions, agreed that learner support could be defined as *“the assistance given to learners in order to progress in their studies”*. With the first question, the researcher wanted to make sure that all participants were familiar with the research topic under discussion and also prepared them for the discussions that were to follow under this theme. After participants gave their answers and after agreeing about a particular definition the researcher posed a successive question.

The second question was: *Which main components or services of learner support are you entitled to as a learner?* Concerning the second question, the researcher wanted to find out if participants were aware about the main components of learner support, such as the ICTs or contact sessions that were supposed to be accessible to them throughout their studies. Participants mentioned components of learner support services such as tutorial letters, study materials, tutor and peer support, overhead projectors, e-mails, faxes, telephones, *myUnisa*, SMSs and the library.

The interviews contained unmistakable evidence that participants knew very little about some of the main learner support structures intended to help them. Learner support services they were conversant with included the library, faxes, telephones and the SMS facility. These findings confirmed those from the open-ended questionnaires, as only few NPDE participants stated that they knew anything about the *myUnisa* facility. Furthermore, the few NPDE learners that could use the *myUnisa* facility indicated that they used it to communicate with peers and tutors and to solicit support from their study mates concerning their modules. Most participants indicated that they did not use *myUnisa*, partly because they did not have computers and partly because they did not know how to use it or that they were not familiar with the procedure of being registered on the *myUnisa* system. One group had this to say:

....yes....we have heard about myUnisa... but we do not know how to use it. Some of us do not have computers.

Most participants had full knowledge of the SMS facility. Once more, the importance and value of the SMS facility and its effective use by UNISA as a support service emerged as a predominant theme. When probed with further questions, most participants' views were that they knew nothing and very few of them indicated that they knew very little about services such as video conferencing, satellite broadcast, the BCCAD or the Financial Bureau which could have helped them to progress in their courses. From these findings, it was clear that many NPDE learners were not fully aware about some of the main learner support services available to them, or how to access them. In actual fact, there were mixed and variable levels of understanding about what constitutes learner support; from clear and precise to virtually non-existent. This raises the question: "*How do learners know what learner support structures are entitled to them if they are not aware that they exist?*"

From the foregoing findings, it was evident that many NPDE learners lacked adequate knowledge about some critical learner support services they were entitled to and those that could have supported them to achieve more in their studies. Even though some participants were aware about support services such as *myUnisa* and the Financial Bureau, they could not use them to their maximum benefit.

5.4.7 Theme 7: Learners' needs for learner support

To kick-start the discussion on this theme the focus groups in all centres were asked the following question: *As an NPDE learner, do you need support in your studies?* Participants confirmed the notion that learner support is highly needed in any learning situation as “it assists us to facilitate learning, enjoy our studies, gain knowledge and understanding”.

NPDE learners were convinced that learner support such as peer assistance and tutor assistance were vital to their academic life. For instance, participants were aware about the academic effectiveness and social benefits of studying together as peers. Participants felt that interacting with their peers provided them with the opportunities to articulate their understanding and discuss issues with other learners. Therefore, peers were regarded as a powerful means of support. “In a group, peers motivate one another”, one NPDE learner commented.

NPDE learners also stated that tutor support offered them an additional and powerful means of achieving their desired educational goals. Course tutors remained their main source of support; therefore NPDE learners agreed that tutors needed to be accessible at any time, not only during contact sessions. Section 3.3 of the literature survey contends that a lecturer who offers regular support to DE learners helps to allay the fears and anxieties brought on by transactional distance or isolation. Qakisa-Makoe (2005:44) also confirms this when she states that constant tutor support promotes confidence on the part of the DE learner and makes such a learner feel that he or she is part of, and belongs to a group of people who care and who are indeed supportive. Furthermore, learners strongly indicated that they needed tutors who could provide one-to-one support.

Participants had consensus that they needed advice and guidance from tutors, administrators and counsellors and throughout their studies. Some learners stated that that support could also come from other course members (peers). Participants also recognised that prompt and quality advice and guidance were needed so as to

sustain their motivation to learn. Where the quality of counselling and guidance was low, so was the quality of their learning, their interest and motivation.

Some learners stated that they needed guidance and counselling, particularly at registration. Section 3.4.3.1 emphasises that DE learners need continuous guidance and counselling which is based on the principle that “learning occurs more effectively when persistent efforts and favourable attitudes towards success are created”. Phillips (2003:170) (see section 3.4.2) believes that DE learners need career guidance to enable them to link study plans to their career interests.

Learners were unanimous in that they needed encouragement particularly at the start of each course or level and that they needed their confidence boosted throughout their studies. Participants explained that they needed tutors and university personnel who created a warm and accepting atmosphere as this situation would encourage them to exert themselves and would equally promote favourable attitudes towards learning.

Participants echoed typical views as:

...some tutors are good and they really encourage us to work hard... they prepare for us and are ready to guide us properly.

The above finding confirmed what Holmberg (1989:89) stated (see section 3.3) that the positive learner-tutor relationship and learner achievement are guided by the tutor’s motivation of the learner. To Holmberg (1989), motivation and enjoyment in learning are inseparable and they both lead to success.

Most participants highlighted the fact that they had particular needs for information, such as study skills, how to form study groups as well as how to pace and plan own work load. Learners stated that they needed help in planning their work load so that they could submit assignments on time. When probed further, participants said that accurate and complete information about their course structure and organisation, thereby gaining an overview of the course, could help them to plan their work and meet deadlines. Therefore, the ways in which learners received information about

their NPDE course, needed to include opportunities to reflect on and review the information they had received, how they used it and if there were still things they needed to know about their institution, namely UNISA.

Participants mentioned that as they were adults and DE learners, they had many demands made on their time and they sometimes had to prioritise those demands. Their course may not always be their first priority. Life-work balance issues were a serious concern for NPDE learners. For example, the pressures of work, money and family life could result in a lack of time for study. This could also result in stress that could cause late submission of assignments. As a result, participants stated that they needed tutors who could recognise those other demands (for example, family commitments). This was confirmed by one of the participants who said that:

Some lecturers just give us a lot of work ...it looks as if they do not know that we have families and have to study at the same time.

What was evident from the above citation is that tutors needed to understand the fact that tuition in the NPDE courses had to be context-sensitive (see section 2.5.2). It means that course design and tuition needed to be built upon a strong DE culture that takes into account aspects such as other life demands and time constraints facing learners studying at a distance.

Most NPDE learners mentioned that they needed the use of technological media, such as computers, to be integrated in their studies. Learners also stated that they needed to be equipped with the technical knowledge and skills of using ICTs. Participants felt that these technical skills, like computer skills, would enable them to access and investigate facts and ideas, solve problems and reach meaningful conclusions as individuals.

With technological support at their disposal, learners felt that “lessons would be made more interesting, enjoyable and beneficial”. This sentiment was echoed by a group from Durban. As mentioned in section 3.4.3.4 of the literature study, Ravhudzulo (2003:77) and Gulati, (2008:1) feel that using technology particularly in distance teaching has become a global phenomenon as it makes learning more

meaningful, more interesting and valuable. To them, ICT support programmes can provide DE learners with the opportunity to receive or access information, thereby enjoying learning, while at home or at their places of employment.

From the above discussion, it was evident that NPDE learners agreed that they needed support in their studies. Even if NPDE learners knew nothing or very little about the existence of some of the learner support services such as video conferencing and the BCCAD as revealed and discussed in section 5.4.6, they were in agreement that, in order to foster high quality learning, they needed support such as peer support, tutor support, technological support or quality guidance and counselling as alluded to above.

The above finding is in agreement with what Tait (1995:240) asserted (see section 3.2) that DE institutions, through their course developers, should show interest in responding to their learners' needs by planning learner support structures that answer to those needs. Qakisa-Makoe (2005:44) supports this view when she emphasises that DE learners, like everybody else, need support as they go through life, especially when taking up the big challenge of studying.

5.5 SUMMARY

This chapter has attempted to highlight the important findings in the empirical research, whereby the analysis and interpretation of the open-ended questionnaire and the focus group interview data were extensively reviewed. This chapter has also indicated as has been cited in the literature study (see section 3.4.2), that the role played by learner support structures, such as contact sessions and registration procedures, in DE is of utmost importance.

The analysis furthermore revealed that the participants' responses could be categorised within particular themes, namely learner support related to registration, support services available to UNISA NPDE learners, technological support offered to NPDE learners at UNISA, feedback measures as a form of learner support, knowledge of UNISA NPDE learners about learner support intended to help them

and NPDE learners' needs for learner support. These themes helped the researcher to reveal and capture the perceptions and views of NPDE learners concerning learner support intended to meet their needs at UNISA.

All of the above-mentioned broad themes were linked with the social constructivist learning theory (see section 3.2) and research questions (see section 1.5) of this study. The constructivist theory emphasises the opportunity for learners for social discourse and interaction with others or with the support structures themselves. Social constructivism itself acknowledges the importance of the role of peers, family members and tutors, as well as of the dialogue amongst them in exploring, explaining and validating one's own knowledge.

The findings in this chapter revealed that providing a high level of registration support be it by way of teacher-induction programmes or counselling, particularly for new under-qualified teachers studying at a distance at higher education institutions, can lead to high rates of retention (Brewster and Railsback, 2001:22). The findings also revealed that the support given by libraries and other study support services such as BCCAD or the Financial Bureau need to be made known to learners particularly at first registration.

According to the findings in this study, ICTs, such as e-mails or telephones in DE, can support the writing of assignments and out-of-school hours' tuition. The findings further revealed that feedback, as a form of support strategy, should be well-planned, positive and be exercised with utmost care and caution, particularly on marked assignments. It was also discovered through the interpretation of focus group interview data that most NPDE learners were not conversant with some of the critical learner support structures that they were entitled to.

Generally speaking, this chapter suggests that all DE support structures need to be wisely planned. The planning will obviously impact on the implementation of learner support services, if they are to deliver what they intend to do. Well-planned and quality implementation of learner support programmes in DE can result in higher learner achievement levels, higher quality teaching and stronger connections among the teaching staff (Brewster & Railsback, 2001:25). Through such PDT programmes,

teachers can learn effective teaching strategies and develop stronger classroom-management skills, often resulting in increased job satisfaction. Yet, the overall findings of this study revealed serious implementation problems of learner support structures which resulted into significant operational flaws that merit considerable attention (see section 5.4.1-5.4.7). In the following chapter, an overview and conclusions from the main findings will be presented and recommendations concerning the implementation of learner support structures for under-qualified DE learners will be provided.

CHAPTER 6

OVERVIEW, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the study conducted. This is done firstly by providing a summary of each chapter of the thesis in order to give an overall impression of the implementation of learner support structures in the provision of DE programmes for under-qualified teachers. Secondly, the conclusions of this study are drawn, based on the literature study in chapter two and three, and on research questions as stated in sections 1.5 and 5.4. This will be followed by the recommendations on the implementation of learner support in DE courses for under-qualified teachers. Finally, the researcher will end this chapter by suggesting some areas for further study and giving concluding remarks.

In this study a qualitative approach was used to answer the research questions, that is, to highlight the main important aspects of PDT programmes, to explore the role played by the critical constituting elements of learner support structures in DE, to find out if NPDE learners were aware of learner support intended to meet their needs, to capture the views of NPDE learners with regard to learner support provided to them during their studies as well as to present recommendations concerning the implementation of learner support in DE programmes for under-qualified teachers.

In answering the research questions, open-ended questionnaires and focus group interviews were used as methods of data collection (see section 5.4.1-5.4.7). The findings were consistent across all sets of data collected. During the open-ended questionnaire phase the NPDE learners were given broad topics to respond to (see section 4.4.2.1) and during the second phase, participants were subjected to the focus group interviews, to support or negate the findings (see section 4.4.2.2). The

research enabled the NPDE learners to relate their experiences regarding the implementation of learner support structures available to them at UNISA.

6.2 SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

The environments in which many DE higher education tutors have to work and learners have to learn are often not optimal for learning. Some issues can be addressed through appropriately designed DE interventions but a considerable level of learner support needs also to be in place to make it possible for tutors to perform increasingly better. This study argues that quality learner support is an area in which a DE programme can be made very beneficial as it will ensure that the tutor, at least, has enough support that can make information meaningful to the learner and also help to break down the learning barriers that a learner could be facing.

6.2.1 Chapter 1

Chapter one presents an outline and a brief literature overview of learner support as an important component in education for facilitating teaching and learning in a DE context for under-qualified teachers. Furthermore, chapter one explains how learner support systems are essential for DE learners.

In the background to the study attention is paid specifically to the integration or the marriage of learner support and DE (see section 1.2). It also investigated the nature of DE in African states, including South Africa and particularly at UNISA. The importance of well-organised learner support structures in the DE context is emphasised. In this section (see section 1.2) , a short description of each of the five critical learner support structures is presented, namely registration support, contact sessions, study support services, technological support and feedback measures.

The motivation of the study lies in the fact that the researcher was once involved in the tutoring of NPDE learners at UNISA for a period of seven years. As a result, the researcher realised the enormity of the challenges NPDE learners face and that motivated him to embark on this study (see section 1.3). The relevance of the study

lies in the emphasis the researcher placed on learner support in that the findings might assist Learner Support Departments in DE institutions across the world to manage learner support programmes for teacher development programmes as well as other educational programmes more efficiently (see section 1.4).

The information revealed in the brief literature overview, using primary and secondary sources, indicated how quality and well-organised learner support can play an important role in the upgrading of under-qualified teachers enrolled in DE. The problem statement followed on the literature overview. With the research problem or questions as focus (see section 1.5), the researcher strived to reach specific research aims and objectives (see section 1.6); to create an understanding of the role played by critical learner support structures in the studies of under-qualified DE teachers and to generate an understanding of various perceptions of role players or participants.

An outline of the qualitative methodology (see section 1.7) described the research design and methods used in this study. With qualitative research, the researcher sought to understand the phenomenon at hand by focusing on its entire scope and by concentrating on the depth of understanding of learner support in a DE setting. The scope of the study was outlined in section 1.8 and this was followed by a clarification of key terms in section 1.9. To summarise the programme of the study (see section 1.10), the researcher overviewed and highlighted the contents captured in different chapters.

6.2.2 Chapter 2

In chapter two a literature review of the aspects and trends of professional development as a conceptual framework of this study was explored. At the outset, the origin and nature of professional development (section 2.2) and professional development of teachers (section 2.3) were fully discussed. This was done in order to build a foundation, thereby preparing for the discussion of the NPDE course as a professional development programme in section 3.5. Chapter two also argued that a well-planned PDT programme leads to quality teaching as outlined in section 2.4.

Key aspects that affect the professional development of teachers were discussed in section 2.5. These included a model for a quality PDT programme as well as the proper planning of such a development programme. The discussion of the context of professional development of teachers in South Africa is presented in section 2.6. Like most countries, South Africa has undergone a series of phases in the PDT processes in pursuit of developing teachers who have quality teaching practices. The typical example is the NPDE programme which was introduced in 2002. This chapter is concluded with its summary in section 2.7.

6.2.3 Chapter 3

Chapter three firstly discussed the concept of constructivism as a theoretical framework for this study. Constructivist theory argues that knowledge or different learning outcomes are differentially constructed based on different types of social interactions with environmental factors such as learner support services (section 3.2). Section 3.3 traced the definitions and history of the concept of DE as advocated and developed by different scholars such as Wedermeyer (1981), Delling (1987), Peters (1988), Holmberg (1989), Keegan (1990) up to Mays (2010) and the concept of learner support (section 3.4) as portrayed by authors such as Garrison & Baynton (1987), Garrison (1989), Tait (1995), Biggs (1999), Nonyongo (2003), Lentell (2004), Qakisa-Makoe (2005) or Ukpo (2006). This section on DE and learner support concluded by arguing that learner support is vital in a DE setting as it focuses on providing learners with the continuous assistance they need throughout their studies in order to achieve their desired outcomes (Ukpo:2006:253).

Section 3.4.3 argued that in any DE environment, registration support, study support services, contact sessions, technological support and feedback measures are critical and very important. The discussion in sections 3.4.3.1-3.4.3.5 gave a detailed theoretical discussion of these five critical learner support services as mentioned in section 3.4.3, based on the literature consulted. Section 3.5 presented the origin and historical background of UNISA and NPDE and this culminated in the full discussion of five critical learner support services and their components and finally these were

contextualised to NPDE programmes at UNISA (see sections 3.5.2.1-3.5.2.5). To conclude, chapter three ended by giving a short summary in section 3.6.

6.2.4 Chapter 4

In chapter four, the rationale for the empirical research for this study was introduced (see section 4.2). This discussion was followed by that of the research design (see section 4.3), which was underpinned by aspects such as the phenomenological approach (see section 4.3.1).

In addition, chapter four discussed elements and characteristics (Table 4.2) of qualitative methodology and procedures (see section 4.3.3.2). The qualitative design was chosen because of the exploratory nature of the study. The researcher in this instance, viewed human behaviour (NPDE learners) as dynamic and changing and hence advocated for in-depth understanding. Most of the data was in the form of words rather than numbers and the researcher searched and explored the phenomenon with a variety of data collection methods such as open-ended questionnaires (see section 4.4.2.1) and focus group interviews (see section 4.4.2.2) until a deep understanding was achieved. The use of various research methods ensured the provision of rich data and information. Assembling and organising data according to themes and categories, as well as discussing the research findings, were parts of the data analysis and interpretation (see section 4.4.3).

The statement of subjectivity added to the foundational substance of qualitative inquiry in this study and the detailed description of the settings as well as the purposeful sampling process (see section 4.4.1) laid the ground for the measures for trustworthiness (section 4.5) such as credibility, dependability, validity and reliability to be adhered to, as well as for sound ethical procedures such as permission and access, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, caring and fairness (see section 4.6). This chapter concluded with a summary in section 4.7.

6.2.5 Chapter 5

Chapter five defined the themes and categories as they emerged from the field during the data collection process. These themes and categories were linked to the literature reviewed in chapter two and three as they emerged. The construction was done around tendencies and patterns found in the data (open-ended questionnaire and focus group interviews) in order to underline the reality of the implementation of learner support in DE for the programmes of under-qualified teachers. After reading and re-reading data from the open-ended questionnaires and the focus group interviews, the following pertinent tendencies (see sections 5.3.1) and findings (see section 5.4) , as displayed in table 5.5, emerged:

- **Learner support at registration:** Data analysis revealed that generally, NPDE learners at UNISA did not receive enough orientation and counselling during registration. Learners received incorrect information at registration (see section 5.4.1.2) and the staff attitude was not satisfactory (see section 5.4.1.3). Learners echoed that they received study materials late (see section 5.4.1.4). Given the general conditions of NPDE learners at registration pertaining to the support they were supposed to receive, it is obvious that they were faced with trying times which could even have affected their academic performance negatively.
- **Study support services available to NPDE learners:** It was clear from data analysis that NPDE learners were not familiar with some of the important study support services such the BCCAD and the Financial Bureau (see section 5.4.2.1). Therefore, they could not make full use of the facilities.
- **Contact sessions as a learner support measure:** The findings in this theme revealed that the duration of contact sessions was very short, to an extent that enough ground could not be covered (see section 5.4.3.1). In some centres, contact sessions were not properly organised and as a result classes started late. From the findings, it is clear that NPDE learners

received quality support from peers during contact sessions. They valued peer support very highly and they also indicated that this support brought about improvement in their performances and also assisted them in forming study groups (see section 5.4.3.3). Learners complained about long distances they had to travel to different contact session centres (see section 5.4.3.5) and this situation affected their finances very negatively (see section 5.4.3.6). Most NPDE learners had to pay for sleeping accommodation during contact sessions and that further exacerbated their already high costs (see section 5.4.3.7).

- **Technological support offered to NPDE learners:** In summary, the findings in this study for this theme revealed that ICTs in NPDE programmes were minimally or not used properly by UNISA administrative staff and tutors. Learners were not satisfied with the services they got from fax or e-mail facilities (see section 5.4.4.3). Most learners did not use the *myUnisa* facility as they did not have computers or even if they had computers, they could not use and access the facility as they did not know how it worked (see section 5.4.4.4). Most tutors were also reluctant to use *myUnisa*.
- **Feedback measures as form of learner support:** According to the findings based on this theme, NPDE participants commented that they received feedback that did not encourage learning as it was not positive (see section 5.4.5.1) and in some instances, feedback they obtained from tutors pertaining to marked assignments was equally insufficient (see section 5.4.5.2). Feedback responses on marked assignments sometimes arrived very late (see section 5.4.5.3) and in other cases NPDE learners alluded to the fact that feedback comments were not remedial (see section 5.4.5.4) as they did not give guidance on how to rectify mistakes made.
- **Knowledge of NPDE learners about the main learner support structures intended to help them:** To summarise the findings on this theme, it became evident that NPDE learners knew very little or nothing about some of the main learner support structures that were available to them during their

studies (see section 5.4.6), such as video conferencing, satellite broadcast or *myUnisa*. This confirmed the findings in section 5.4.2. On the other hand, NPDE learners had knowledge about structures such as the library, SMS facility or contact sessions as services that were there to support them during their studies.

- **Learners' needs for learner support:** The findings on this theme clearly revealed that the NPDE learners expressed the need for learner support services such as the Financial Bureau, the library, SMS facility or technological support such as computers to be integrated in their curriculum design (see section 5.4.7). Furthermore, NPDE learners emphasised the importance and the need for tutor and peer support. NPDE learners also stated that they needed advice and guidance from tutors and counsellors (see section 5.4.7) which could impact on learning activities such as study skills or life-work balance strategies. In the final analysis, it meant that NPDE learners needed a course design and tuition that were built upon a strong DE culture that took into account aspects such as life demands, transactional distance, financial and time constraints facing learners studying at a distance.

From the above discussion, it is evident that chapter five highlighted the important empirical findings in this study, by analysing and interpreting data obtained from open-ended questionnaires and the focus group interviews based on the themes and sub-themes that emerged. Identified themes helped the researcher to investigate the implementation of learner support programmes in NPDE courses at UNISA, and to capture the views of NPDE learners concerning the five critical learner support services intended to help them during their studies. The themes were linked to the research questions of this study as will be highlighted in research conclusions in section 6.3.

6.2.6 Chapter 6

Chapter six, this chapter, deals with the summary of the entire thesis by briefly discussing the gist of each chapter (see section 6.2). Pertinent findings are drawn from the literature review in chapter two and three and also from the data gathered during the investigation as described in chapter five (see section 6.3). These conclusions are related to the main research questions as contained in section 1.5. Finally, recommendations on how to implement and improve learner support services in DE programmes for under-qualified teachers are presented (see section 6.4).

6.3 CONCLUSIONS

In this section the research conclusions are made as answers to the original research questions. These answers, as conclusions, are based on the literature reviewed and supported by the empirical findings of this study. The original research questions for this study were as follows (see section 1.5):

The main research question was:

What are the main constituting elements of learner support and their role in the professional development of teachers through DE?

The sub-questions were as follows:

- *What are the most important aspects of teachers' professional development?*
- *What is the role of well-organised learner support services in upgrading under-qualified teachers' qualifications through distance teaching?*
- *What do empirical data reveal on NPDE learners' awareness and perceptions of learner support?*
- *What recommendations can be made for the effective use of learner support services in DE for under-qualified teachers?*

The first three sub-questions are the building blocks of the main research question and therefore, the researcher will address them first and thereafter the conclusions relating to the main research question will follow. The recommendations of this study are presented in section 6.4.

6.3.1 Conclusions relating to the research question: What are the most important aspects of teachers' professional development?

Literature study revealed that a well-planned PDT programme, with clear outcomes, systematic implementation and relevance to classroom activities, is always effective and brings about quality teaching (see sections 2.3 & 2.4). Planning a PDT programme in a DE setting, must be taken as an important starting step and should be wisely considered as it will set the tone of such a programme. Embedded in planning are aspects such as participants, delivery method, funds, duration, space, materials and learner support structures which have to be included right from the beginning (see section 2.5.2). Literature study also emphasised that for any PDT programme to be successful, it has to be collaborative that is it has to involve all participants, such as learners, right from its inception (see sections 2.5.1 and 2.5.2).

The strategy for the implementation of effective PDT programmes starts with the stage of determining how activities will be carried out selecting purposeful activities, determining the time span and preparing structures to put the programme into effect (see section 2.5.2). All activities that are planned and chosen for a particular PDT programme should be implementable, that is, they should enable the participants to work better, and inform the teachers' practices in class using resources such as critical learner support services (see section 2.5.2). In this way, such a PDT programme is intimately linked to broader school improvement efforts rather than delivered in isolation (see section 2.5.1). Follow-up activities may be structured to ensure that this PDT programme indeed makes a difference. Literature study emphasised that if the acquired knowledge is not used in some way, or is not relevant to the classroom, it can quickly become obsolete, useless and forgotten (see section 2.5.2).

An essential component of PDT programme involves an ongoing and systematic evaluation process. Programme evaluation provides valuable information for the next planning and goal setting. Evaluation also addresses important questions regarding the value of significant investments such as learner support resources in a PDT programme (see section 2.5.2). Through the literature review, this study identified effective planning, implementation and evaluation as the three main stages or aspects of a successful PDT programme but confined itself to the implementation stage.

6.3.2 Conclusions relating to the research question: What is the role of well-organised learner support services in upgrading under-qualified teachers' qualifications through distance teaching?

Literature indicates that for any PDT programme to be successful, learner support services related to that programme have to be planned meticulously (see section 2.5.2). Therefore, well-organised learner support is an integral part of planning and delivery of quality DE courses, and should never be regarded as an added-on aspect. Learner support provides a framework to guide learners through their studies and also improve the quality of teaching and learning (see section 3.4.2).

Learner support services are essential components of the education system and assist in solving the main challenges facing DE, such as breaking the isolation of learners and reducing the high drop-out rate associated with this system of education (see section 3.4.3). With greater commitment to expanding these services to most DE learners and co-operating with other structures operating in areas where registered learners reside, institutions can demonstrate their crucial importance and can greatly improve usage and access to these services.

Another significant research finding concerning the role played by well-organised learner support services, such as registration support, study support services, contact sessions, technological support and feedback measures are described and explained in Findings 1-5 (see sections 5.4.1-5.4.5). The findings in these sections clearly demonstrate the importance of learner support structures in DE programmes for under-qualified teachers.

6.3.3 Conclusions relating to the research question: What do empirical data reveal on NPDE learners' awareness and perceptions of learner support?

Literature study revealed that DE learners need clear and accessible information, backed by action from their tutors about learner support services available to meet their needs (see section 3.4.3.2). In this way, DE learners will be able to make optimal use of these services at any time suitable to them. Findings 5.4.2 and 5.4.6 have clearly shown that some NPDE learners knew nothing or very little about the crucial learner support services that were available and intended to meet their needs, such as the *myUnisa* or video conferencing.

Furthermore, the findings of this study have demonstrated positive as well as negative perceptions of participants regarding different learner support structures available to them during their studies (see section 5.4.1-5.4.7). The following sections briefly discuss the positive and the negative perceptions of NPDE learners about learner support services that were available to them during their studies:

6.3.3.1 Positive perceptions

Participants, and particularly those from Pretoria, cited that the registration staff gave them accurate information and that the staff members were friendly. Learners were familiar with the use of the library and they employed its services maximally. All NPDE learners agreed that tutors came to class prepared, and facilitated and guided learning hence learners gained knowledge and understanding. Peer support was effective and beneficial as it widens participation and makes learning enjoyable. The SMS facility was highly commendable as it improved communication immensely between UNISA and NPDE learners.

6.3.3.2 Negative perceptions

Generally, participants echoed that information received at registration was not accurate, there were no intensive induction programmes, staff at registration was not friendly and most of the study materials arrived very late. In some venues, contact sessions were not always properly organised, learners had to travel long distances to contact classes and in most cases they struggled to secure sleeping accommodation.

Feedback responses from tutors were not remedial, insufficient, negative and not timely. Feedback responses were not mutual, that is, they only came from the tutors, as if they were directives. ICT usage was minimal in all NPDE activities and even during contact lessons. In some instances, technological resources such as telephones were not correctly used, resulting in poor communication.

6.3.4 Conclusions relating to the main research question: What are the main constituting elements of learner support in upgrading under-qualified teachers through DE?

After a comprehensive literature study about the implementation of learner support in the provision of distance teaching programmes for under-qualified teachers and after addressing the first three research sub-questions of this study, the researcher concluded that registration support, study support services, contact sessions, technological support and feedback measures are crucial learner support services in DE programmes (see sections 3.4 & 3.4.3). The following principles on the provision of critical learner support services through a DE mode can be formulated accordingly:

Principle 1: DE learners need well-planned registration support as they enter into study programmes and this support should be user-friendly, well-informed and service-orientated in order to address access needs.

Principle 2: The availability of well-resourced study support services such as the library, enhance enrolment, decrease attrition and provide for a well-rounded DE

programme, eases DE learners' adjustment to higher institutions, assists in their intellectual and personal growth and contributes to their academic success

Principle 3: In a DE mode, contact sessions are crucial as they provide an opportunity for learners to receive optimal individualised support from tutors and peers.

Principle 4: ICTs as form of learner support in DE programmes are essential in ensuring learner equity in access to high quality and independent educational information.

Principle 5: Clear and positive feedback comments encourage learners towards improvement in their learning and are crucial in reducing transactional distance between learner and tutor in any DE programme.

From the foregoing discussion, it is obvious that for any PDT programme to achieve its intended goals, the five learner support services as described above are crucial and fundamental, and therefore all activities should be planned around them.

6.3.5 Summary

From the foregoing discussions and conclusions (see section 6.3), from the literature study in chapter two and three and from the research findings in chapter five, it is evident that the research questions of this study, as stated in sections 1.5 and 5.4, have been addressed. The main aspects of an effective PDT in DE mode of delivery are addressed in sections 2.3, 2.4 and 2.5. The importance and the role played by well-organised learner support services in DE have been extensively covered throughout this study (see sections 3.4.2, 3.4.3, and 6.3).

The question of being aware or not aware about the main learner support services available to NPDE learners has been addressed (see sections 5.4.2 and 5.4.6). The positive or negative perceptions of NPDE learners about learner support available to them in their studies have been fully captured in the research findings (see section

5.4.1- 5.4.6). What are regarded as the crucial learner support structures in this study have been identified and their critical nature was justified and fully discussed (see section 3.4.3). The implementation of these critical learner support structures have been contextualised to NPDE programmes at UNISA (see section 3.5.2).

Finally, the recommendations on the implementation of learner support structures in DE for under-qualified teachers' programmes are presented in the following section, namely section 6.4.

6.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations of this investigation have significant implications for DE educational reform and provision on the implementation of learner support for under-qualified teachers. Firstly, the recommendations focus on the broad and national implementation of learner support in PDT programmes using DE as a mode of delivery. Secondly, recommendations are made on the implementation of what this study regards as the critical learner support services discussed in section 3.4.3.1-3.4.3.5, namely learner support at registration, study support services, contact sessions as learner support measures, technological support and feedback measures as means of learner support.

6.4.1 Recommendations: Implementation of learner support in PDT programmes using DE as a delivery mode

Presently all over the world, the distance mode of education has gained momentum and has become more popular as it creates the possibility of increased access to tertiary education at a more cost effective manner (see section 3.3). The competitive modern marketplace demands rapid change and innovation, for which DE programmes, backed by effective learner support services, can act as an alternative to a conventional learning system. Being mostly or entirely conducted off-site, the system of DE can reduce the demand on institutional infrastructure such as buildings. Therefore, this study strongly argues that the process of upgrading

teachers through DE is an important process and has to be improved so as to make it effective and successful.

The following recommendations are presented:

(1) If teachers' professional development programmes have to be cleansed of the stigma of "mere lip service", then education departments, in different countries, should engage DE institutions in order to ensure that PDT initiatives, such as up-grading under-qualified teachers' qualifications, serves under-qualified teachers irrespective of where they are. On-going planning, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in identifying strengths, weaknesses and problems of a PDT programme should be put in place early enough. These programmes should seek ways of addressing anything that might affect the implementation thereof in an adverse way. For any PDT to meet its intended goals, the following principles should always be observed:

(2) Principle 1: DE learners need a well-planned registration support as they enter into study programmes and this support should be user-friendly, well-informed and service-orientated in order to address access needs.

Principle 2: The availability of well-resourced study support services such as the library, enhance enrolment, decrease attrition and provide for a well-rounded DE programme, eases DE learners' adjustment to higher institutions, assists in their intellectual and personal growth and contributes to their academic success.

Principle 3: In a DE mode, contact sessions are crucial as they provide an opportunity for learners to receive optimal individualised support from tutors and peers.

Principle 4: ICTs as form of learner support in DE programmes are essential in ensuring learner equity in access to quality educational information.

Principle 5: Clear and positive feedback comments advise learners towards improvement in their learning and are crucial in reducing transactional distance between learner and tutor in any DE programme.

- (3) It is important that governments recognise the difficulties faced by DE institutions in providing access to learner support services generally, and especially in remote rural areas. Therefore, governments must assist DE institutions by allocating sufficient resources for learner support activities to ensure meaningful transformation and democratisation of learner support. DE institutions on the other hand, should also be fair in their allocation of resources and not short change learner support activities.

6.4.2 Recommendations: Learner support at registration

The literature study (see sections 3.2 and 3.4.3.1) emphasised that DE learners in higher education institutions, and particularly new learners, need maximum support at registration. With increased demand for access to higher education, institutions of higher learning are now increasingly challenged to improve support at registration if they are to develop quality learning services or programmes of high standards that are responsive to learners' needs. At registration, it is important that DE learners get an opportunity to receive support for any matter that is of concern to them and discuss problems in a supportive and cordial atmosphere. Furthermore, DE learners should receive well-resourced guidance and counselling support as well as correct information concerning their intended programme of study at the time of registration. Staff members that deal with registration issues should show positive support and study materials should be made available to the learners at the very beginning of their study programme.

In analysing the findings from the open-ended questionnaire and focus group interviews, UNISA NPDE learners agreed that at registration they received very little guidance and counselling and that generally staff members that attended to them were not friendly except at the Pretoria registration point. The findings also revealed that in most instances, learners received study materials very late.

The following recommendations are made:

- (4) It is recommended that each DE institution should establish or strengthen competent Departments of Guidance and Counselling to take responsibility of guiding and counselling learners with life and study matters. Each department in a particular DE institution should clearly formulate its orientation programme that deals with guidance and counselling for learners. For example, personnel responsible for this task should clearly indicate how they will implement guidance and counselling activities during an orientation period which is part and parcel of registration. These programmes should be rigorous and be prepared a year in advance. The programmes should be implemented annually, both for newly enrolled and returning learners, as the latter are also faced with challenges of the new level of their study. These departments should be allocated sufficient resources and time to execute their mandate. Occasional follow-up sessions by counsellors should be made throughout the year, for example during contact lessons.
- (5) As in comparable DE institutions, registration personnel, particularly those in the regional offices, should receive thorough and regular training in the rules and regulations pertaining to a particular programme of study such as the NPDE. Therefore, the unit or the department accountable for the registration process should compile a training manual with full registration information for each programme and all personnel in that particular programme should attend. The training should be made compulsory and to this end, trainees can be given portfolios to develop or complete. At the end of the training, trainees could be given certificates of attendance. It is argued that this endeavour could alleviate the problem of disseminating wrong information to learners during registration which mostly happens at UNISA regional centres. Quality assurance mechanisms should be put in place, whereby checks and balances are established, to see to it that learners registering personally receive all study materials, such as assignment pads and envelopes, right at the beginning of their studies, that is, at registration.

6.4.3 Recommendations: Study support services

Unlike their full-time counterparts, DE learners may not be familiar with support services that are available at the institution they are studying with. Therefore, DE learners have to be made aware about existing study support services (see section 3.4.3.2). Study support services, such as the library, promote a wide range of DE learners' learning activities so as to promote their academic achievements, address barriers to learning and reach desired outcomes.

The findings in this study revealed that NPDE learners knew nothing or very little about crucial study support services available to them such as the Financial Bureau, the BCCAD or video conferencing. They were not made aware of them and could not use them maximally to benefit them and meet their needs.

The following recommendations are presented:

- (6)** All learner support services available at a particular DE institution must be made known and available to all learners, particularly new ones who are enrolling for the first time. This information can be disseminated by a dedicated Department of Guidance and Counselling during intensive orientation sessions that have been referred to in section 6.4.1 above. In this way DE learners could be familiarised with the use of these facilities to avoid a situation whereby learners become discouraged in their studies, for example, due to lack of meeting financial obligations, while a support service such as a Financial Aid Bureau could have helped them. A separate booklet or manual should be made available to all registered learners, explaining the nature and usage of each and every study support service available at a particular institution, such as the library.

- (7)** In order to strengthen the above process, each course lecturer should include detailed information in tutorial letter 101 about the usage of any study support service relevant to his or her course, such as video conferencing or satellite broadcast, and encourage all learners to attend such sessions. In actual fact, such attendances could be made compulsory.

6.4.4 Recommendations: Contact sessions as learner support measures

DE learners may sometimes feel physically isolated from tutors, peers and the institution he or she is attached to, and therefore could rely on well-organised contact sessions to close this gap. During these sessions, DE learners can physically meet with tutors and peers so that the problems encountered by learners could be raised and discussed and finally be used as a learning experience. The strength of any contact session lies in its wise planning that includes factors such as distance to be travelled by learners, costs, accommodation, tutor preparations as well as technological resources to be used.

The findings from the study confirmed that in some centres contact sessions were not well-organised. DE learners had to travel long distances to contact centres, had to pay for accommodation, buy food, and all these impacted negatively on their finances. Therefore, some of the learners could not attend those sessions. Generally, NPDE tutors prepared very well during contact sessions, hence learners received a lot of assistance from their tutors as well as from peers.

The following recommendations apply:

- (8)** It is recommended that contact sessions be well-planned by each DE institution, with clear activities to be carried as well as outcomes to be realised for each session. Each department within a particular DE institution should develop an assessment form for each contact session, which each tutor and learner can complete, pointing out challenges experienced and also indicating areas of improvement. The assessment must be seriously considered by line managers in each department and implement positive steps derived from such assessment with a view of improving the implementation of contact sessions.

- (9)** When planning contact sessions or group discussions, each academic department should take into account factors such as costs or geographical location of all learners in a particular course and try to spread contact sessions to be within reasonable reach of each individual learner. This will encourage learners to attend.

- (10) Technological resources to be used during each contact session, such as power point slides should be prepared and rehearsed in advance by relevant tutors. This will avoid the situation which was experienced in some contact centres, where tutors struggled to use technological resources during contact sessions. The rehearsal part will assist tutors to master the use of such an ICT machine in advance and also think of improvising in case should technology fail during a particular contact session period.

6.4.5 Recommendations: Technological support

Technological support in any programme in DE should be understood as a means of embracing both design and implementation of an educational environment, with clear objectives and with carefully considered means for attaining them. The separation of programme design from technological resources is highly problematic in this view, whatever their costs may be. It means that ICTs as learner support measures must be included right from the planning stage of each DE programme as it is a very crucial component of any learner support system.

Nowadays, technological facilities such as the internet in DE can provide access to data, facilitate the understanding of complex problems and offer opportunities for dialogue and discussion with peers or tutors. Moreover, ICT services such as video conferencing or satellite broadcasts offer a way to move away from traditional learning, like pre-organised guided learning, towards experiential learning which is based on discovery, active learning and self organisation. The integration of ICT in education has been frequently based on these constructivist learning approaches.

When analysing the findings of this study, it was evident that ICTs such as the *MYUnisa* facilities or computers were not used or not adequately used to enrich learning in the NPDE programme at UNISA. The findings also revealed that some NPDE tutors seemed unfamiliar with or disinterested in using technological resources such video conferencing. Furthermore, it was found out that some tutors

did not have the skills to use technological resources such as the satellite broadcasting.

The following recommendations are should be implemented:

- (11) DE institutions must equip tutors with the skills of using ICTs like video conferencing or satellite broadcasting. Skills training in this regard should be organised and such training should be made compulsory to all tutors in that institution. DVDs, with challenging sections for example, could be prepared by DE tutors on their individual modules or courses and these computer discs must be included in the study package received at registration. The costs of these facilities can be included in the study fees. Learners could view and listen to these DVDs at any time during their studies and could take part in follow-up discussions during contact sessions or at any time through telephones or e-mails. During orientation sessions at registration, it must be categorically stated that having access to a computer, is regarded as a prerequisite for studying through DE. In this way, learners can even send assignments on-line and access some study materials on-line.

- (12) Aggressive campaigns and training sessions in the use of ICT platforms like the *myUnisa* facility must be established and such training must be compulsory to all tutors. During these training sessions, the importance and the strengths of an ICT facility like *myUnisa* as a crucial learner support service must be emphasised. Learners must also be encouraged by each department to register for using the ICT facility (e.g. *myUnisa*) and to use it to communicate and exchange ideas with peers and tutors.

6.4.6 Recommendations: Feedback measures as means of learner support

Feedback is very crucial in any DE environment as it connects and maintains a relationship between tutors and learners. Giving well-planned and well-prepared feedback comments is one key strategy for doing a good job in DE. Feedback responses have to be remedial, positive, mutual, timely and sufficient. Such feedback responses will create a positive environment, rich in opportunities for both

giving and receiving knowledge. Feedback responses from tutors provide structure and direction, and a means of prompting and getting full participation and feedback from the learners. Feedback responses are not used to “lecture” *per se*, but rather to encourage improvement, generate participation and further discussion in a more effective manner than in a mere discussion format.

The findings from this study confirmed that most NPDE learners received negative and insufficient comments from their tutors as well as responses that were not remedial and timely. Another finding is that feedback responses always were from tutors to learners and not the other way round.

The following recommendations apply:

- (13)** From time to time, line managers should moderate marked tasks such as assignments for quality assurance and follow up on the feedback responses given. Tutors can also moderate marked assignments of other tutors in the same departments and regular report backs can be given during departmental meetings. Feedback should be regarded as a crucial learner support strategy in any DE course and should be exercised with the utmost care and importance it deserves. Therefore, tutors should be encouraged to give positive and corrective remedial comments at all times, even if a learner did not perform well.
- (14)** Learners must be encouraged by course tutors to give feedback comments pertaining to mark allocation and on feedback comments given by a tutor on a marked task. At the end of the semester or year, learners should be given an opportunity to evaluate the entire course and give written feedback comments. This can be accomplished by sending learners an open-ended questionnaire to complete. The responses must be analysed effectively with the view to bring about necessary changes and improvements concerning feedback as a teaching and learning strategy.
- (15)** Part-time markers should be thoroughly trained by full-time tutors on the marking ethos, such as giving positive remarks, giving sufficient remarks or

giving remedial feedback remarks. Submission dates should be negotiated in advance between course tutors and part-time markers and must be adhered to. Learners should also be encouraged by course tutors to submit assignments on or before the stipulated closing date.

6.5 RECOMMENDED AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDY

This study emphasises the need for DE institutions to review the implementation of learner support in DE for PDT programmes for under-qualified teachers. Through literature review and the findings of this study it is evident that learner support is a crucial component in PDT programmes that are implemented through DE. It is trusted that this investigation will stimulate research in areas related to learner support in the provision of distance teaching programmes for under-qualified teachers. Possible areas for further research have been identified during the course of this study and are presented below.

- Due to the study's confinement of empirical research to NPDE programmes at UNISA, it is suggested that empirical investigations be extended to related development programmes through DE to assess whether comparable findings may be reached regarding the implementation of learner support.
- This study identified five critical learner support services, namely registration support, study support services, contact sessions, technological support and feedback measures and did not consider course materials. A study should be conducted on the incorporation of learner support in DE course materials for under-qualified teachers.
- The research study did not deal with e-learning as an emerging, modern approach for facilitating learning in DE, due to the NPDE learners' very restricted access to computers. Yet, it is recommended that research be done on the use of this approach in developing countries, so as to supplement information that has been highlighted in this study.

- The study confined itself to the implementation stage of learner support in DE programmes for under-qualified teachers. It is recommended that further research be conducted on the planning and evaluation stages of learner support in DE development programmes for under-qualified teachers.

6.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The main purpose of this research study was to argue for the pertinent contribution that learner support can make in upgrading under-qualified teachers through DE. The findings and recommendations in this regard can assist DE institutions to revise and improve their present models of learner support.

The most important challenge all educational systems across the world face is fostering skills, attitudes, practices and knowledge in learners so that they are prepared to participate in our global, knowledge-based civilisation. This challenge requires both that teachers understand what types of knowledge, skills, attitudes and practices are required in leading-edge situations, for example, decision-making under uncertainty, information filtering or adopting a variety of effective teaching skills and that teachers themselves are adept at generic higher-order cognitive, affective or social skills such as thinking, creativity and a collaborative teaching approach. Given this challenge, visionary PDT programmes that employ well-planned learner support services are a necessity. It means that such PDT programmes should include methods that improve the effectiveness of schools as they are, and should also focus on transformational strategies for developing deeper forms of content, new models of pedagogy and organisational partnerships for learning with parents, businesses and community institutions.

For any PDT to be effective and meaningful, governments should be involved in the provision and improvement of learner support services in their countries. PDT programmes through DE are a need for any country as they assist in meeting the general demand for education and personal development. Furthermore, requirements from the general populace and businesses can be met, especially because DE offers the possibility of flexibility to accommodate the many constraints

imposed by personal responsibilities and commitments on the part of the learner. For DE institutions to succeed, they need to implement their learner support with the utmost care it deserves and closely monitor its failures and successes.

In this study the essential value of the collaboration between DE and effective learner support services in the PDT programmes has been brought to light. With hindsight, it can be stated with confidence that the objectives of this study were met and all research questions answered; the participants gave their views on what they thought happened in the implementation of learner support in their NPDE programmes at UNISA. Furthermore, this study demonstrated that well-organised learner support systems are essential for DE learners to engage in the process of learning and that these services need to be developed in response to their needs. It is also imperative that a range of well-planned support systems be budgeted for and be put in place to enable DE learners to become competent in independent learning and to learn to interact in a virtual environment.

This study also argued that support received at registration, study support services, contact sessions, technological support services and feedback measures as discussed in section 3.4.3, are very important in any DE setting and therefore should be regarded as crucial at any time. Therefore, the challenge for those countries and institutions involved in DE programmes is to recognise, first of all, the critical value of these support services right from the planning stages of each course, and then to determine how they can best be implemented to enhance teaching and learning. The core of the argument here is that by planning these learner support services as integral part of a teaching and learning programme, rather than as an afterthought which can be implemented when times get difficult, DE institutions can demonstrate a clear recognition of the link between income generation and learner support.

Finally, it is hoped that this research study will be seen as an invitation to reconsider the implementation of learner support structures in different countries and in DE institutions. In addition, this study may contribute to an understanding of some of the factors that are essential for the successful implementation of learner support services in the provision of DE programmes for under-qualified teachers.

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LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

REQUEST FOR DATA COLLECTION: UNISA CENTRE MANAGERS

Dear.....

I, Segoe Bobo Aaron, work as a lecturer in the Department of Further Teacher Education at UNISA in Pretoria. I am pursuing my life goal to complete a DED degree and my study has been structured to contribute to the better implementation of learner support in distance education programmes for under-qualified teachers.

I therefore humbly request your permission to allow me to visit your regional centre on to collect data from NPDE students who will be attending contact lessons.

Your positive consideration concerning the above request will be held in high esteem and hope to hear from you soon.

Yours faithfully

Bobo Aaron Segoe

Tel No.: 012 429 4649 (Office)

Fax: 0866421617

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM:

I,....., hereby agree to take part in the research project on “Learner support in the provision of distance teaching programmes for under-qualified teachers”.

I understand that I will have to be available for the open-ended questionnaire phase/interview phase/both (please make a tick) and that data will be recorded in a written form.

I understand that I:

- Will not be asked personal questions and may at any time decide not to answer questions if I so wish
- At any time may ask for access to the dissertation or part thereof
- Shall stay anonymous in the study.

.....
(LEARNER)

.....
B.A. SEGOE (Researcher)

APPENDIX C

STUDENT SATISFACTORY SURVEY

NPDE PROGRAMME AT UNISA

No.....

STUDENT SATISFACTION SURVEY

INVITATION TO RESPONDENTS

With this survey the researcher would like to find out from you what you have experienced as positive aspects and negative aspects (frustrations) during your studies **as a distance learner** in NPDE. Please provide these by writing your impressions in the open space below and on the next page.

Your responses will be treated in the strictest confidence. The researcher does not need your name or student number on this response sheet. You are therefore requested to be as honest as possible in your essay. The researcher is not looking for “wrong” or “right” answers; just express your feelings and opinions about NPDE learning and teaching activities as you have experienced these throughout your studies through distance learning in the NPDE programme at UNISA.

Your contribution will assist UNISA in improving its student support services to learners. Thank you!

Your school location: City / Town / Rural / Far rural (Mark with X)

You are male / female (Mark with X) Your age Your years of teaching experience

APPENDIX D

Carina Barnard
Editing/Translation

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16 September 2012

Declaration

To whom it may concern

This is to declare that I proofread the dissertation

**LEARNER SUPPORT IN THE PROVISION OF DISTANCE TEACHING
PROGRAMMES FOR UNDER QUALIFIED TEACHERS**

By Bobo Segoe



.....
CJ Barnard