

Towards a sustainable model for ODL professional programmes – the Social Work Programme at Unisa as a case study

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Abstract

The Department of Social Work at Unisa has been piloting two strategic projects to enable their students to be exposed to work-integrated service learning in a variety of contexts. The innovative community engagement project has received international recognition and acclaim.

On 16 March 2011, the Bright Site Project was formally notified it had achieved second place in the Mac Jannet Prize for Global Citizenship in Madrid, Spain. The Talloires Network member universities around the world contribute to ongoing public service efforts. Of the 75 nominations, from 59 Universities in 26 countries, received by the Talloires Network for outstanding student civic community engagement initiatives, Unisa's Bright Site Project was recognised for its continued civic engagement.

The extent to which the project contributes to creating a sustainable ODL model within a professional training programme forms the focus of the submission. This research-in-progress study shares the scope and rationale of the project, its achievements and reflections on the barriers experienced. A comparative analysis of the two implementation sites, one in an urban setting and the other a rurally based extension, will be shared to highlight the challenges for sustainable and quality provisioning. The planned impacts of curriculum renewal in this professional domain, and the processes for the effective institutionalisation of the insights and

lessons from the project for Unisa as an ODL comprehensive university, are discussed.

The proposal

The South African context and the strategic relevance of social work training at Unisa

South Africa is facing unprecedented challenges that threaten the livelihoods and wellbeing of society. Contributing factors are high levels of poverty, unemployment, xenophobia, and a high incidence of HIV and AIDS, as well as other associated socioeconomic problems. These challenges require not only appropriate policies and interventions, but also the training of adequately skilled service professionals for the social services sector.

Through sheer dedication and hard work, the department has earned respect amongst peers and the social welfare/social work community for the quality of the social workers qualifying through our university. The department has grown to become the largest social work department in the world and the only department that offers the Social Work Programme via distance education. *We are presently training 70% of all social workers in South Africa.* Over the decades the student population has changed from predominantly white and Indian students to predominantly black students.

Social workers are increasingly viewed as a key strategic resource in addressing the needs and challenges of society. They have the appropriate training and skills to deliver effective services to this sector. Their diverse knowledge and skills make them a resource for the social development and various other sectors, both locally and internationally. The Department of Social Work plays a crucial role, and has a critical niche in providing opportunities for training and serving people who would otherwise not have access to education because of financial reasons, because they are employed, because they live in remote areas or they suffer from a disability. The unique people-centred philosophy of the department, the nature of training, and the various ways in which our lecturers and students contribute to the development and empowerment of communities and disadvantaged groups in South Africa, clearly

demonstrates some of the many ways in which the department contributes to the attainment of the following objectives of the university:

- *utilising resources and capacities of the university in community development initiatives and collaborative partnerships*
- *fostering a healthy, secure and stimulating environment for staff, students and communities*

Alignment to the vision and mission of Unisa

According to *2015 Revisited*, Unisa's strategic transformation plan, the aim is to establish itself as a leading provider of world-class higher education opportunities through open and distance learning. At the same time Unisa defines its vision as being an "African University in the service of humanity".

One of the mission objectives of Unisa is to utilise the resources and capacities of the university in community development initiatives and collaborative partnerships. In supporting this project, the university will contribute to the utilisation of its resources and capacities to render appropriate services to disadvantaged segments of the community.

Sound community development, as envisaged by this project, entails leveraging knowledge and skills to the benefit of communities and in doing so, improving our teaching and research opportunities on various levels. On another level, the project facilitates a nurturing learning environment for staff and students as an outcome. It is further stated in the mission that there are many opportunities within Unisa to develop a culture of philanthropic volunteerism among staff and students.

The Council for Higher Education on Service Learning

In June 2006 the Council of Higher Education (CHE) published *Service learning in the curriculum: A Resource for Higher education institutions* (www.che.ac.za/documents/). According to this, the White Paper on Higher Education 1997, The Higher Education Act of 1997 and the HEQC Founding Document of 2001 lay the foundation for making community service an integral part of higher education in South Africa. Community engagement is seen as a scholarly

activity and of critical importance both in shaping students as future citizens and producing knowledge that is most relevant and useful for the South African context.

The Department of Social Work perceives *community engagement as integral to tuition, service learning, and research*. The department actively attempts to include it in all processes and to contextualise it in regard to components inherent in the programme that is offered. The aim here is to facilitate, incorporate, implement and maintain processes that will address the unique and complex problems in the South African context, and more specifically in the domain of welfare.

The model that the CHE promotes is the service learning model, where both the students and the community are the beneficiaries and the goal of the intervention is as illustrated below:

Community← Beneficiary →Student

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Service← Goal →Learning

Service learning is seen as applied learning, which is directed at the needs of the community and is integrated into an academic programme and curriculum. It could be credit-bearing and assessed, and may or may not take place in a work environment. The quality criteria set for service learning are that it should:

- be relevant and meaningful;
- enhance academic learning; and
- be purposeful civic learning (social responsibility)

Other services can also be included, e.g. volunteerism, community outreach and internships.

Practical work in the Department of Social Work

The teaching mission of the department strives towards research-informed academic excellence and relevance that ensures congruence with the ethos of the profession of social work and falls within the parameters of the Act on Social Service Professions (Act 110 of 1978 as amended). The aim is to practically apply

the fundamental principle of Unisa's mission, namely to be "in service of humanity". Our training is student-centred, supportive and empowering in nature. The Department of Social Work furthermore strives to promote the ideals of democracy, social transformation and social justice.

The qualification is programme-based and requires a practicum or service learning component. The inherent worth and ODL practices that are fully integrated in this training component serve as strong motivation for effective financial maintenance and resourcing of the system. The consistent search for more cost-effective ways of training students in an ODL context has been ongoing. The Sunnyside project evolved as such an opportunity, since the community can be described as a microcosm reflecting many of the present-day realities faced in South Africa. The project scope was later replicated in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, as the latter offered a rural dimension as an important extension of the study.

The table below reveals that during the last years the student numbers in the Department of Social Work have increased dramatically.

Academic Year	1996	2001	2003	2005	2006	2007	2008
Student Numbers	321	2 553	2 766	8 276	9 541	14 668	18 273

The critical aspect of training the social work students in practical work is during the fourth level, when the students need to be placed and work at a welfare agency or NGO under the supervision of a qualified social worker (as prescribed by the Standards Generating Body for Social Work and the South African Council for Social Service Professions). Due to the increase in student numbers, the placement of students at welfare agencies became increasingly difficult and put greater pressure on our limited resources. In Pretoria alone, over 80 fourth-year students were registered in 2008.

Unisa's institutional objectives addressed in the project include:

- *the promotion of participation in corporate social responsibility and more specifically **community engagement***
- *facilitation of a delivery model that will enhance **student “graduateness”***
- *establishing a **culture of scholarship and enhancement of research activities** in line with institutional identity of the university (create research opportunities and research output)*
- *offering **effective student services** to enhance the total student experience*
- *facilitation of processes and practices that will promote student wellbeing, enhance sound **academic management, quality assurance, and throughput.***

A Master's study was conducted on the experiences of fourth-level student social workers, at an ODL university, relating to their social work practical work training. The value of applying their acquired knowledge and skills in a practice context as part of the requirements for completion of their Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree was confirmed. The curriculum benefits of using a participatory learning methodology enhanced student involvement, engagement and participation. Participants reported having more direct contact with and access to the lecturers.

Students perceived themselves to be more knowledgeable and skilled than their counterparts, ascribing this to the range of learning opportunities created, such as organisational duties, case, group and community work. Exposure to multiple cultures was another reported advantage. The research findings also bear testimony to the participants' personal and professional growth and development.

At a wider impact level during 2011, 21 organisations throughout Pretoria accommodated Bright Site students in their practical work, namely the Dimponyane Place of Safety, Child Welfare Eersterust and Mamelodi, ODI Self Help, Pretoria Christian Ministries, Tshwane Leadership Foundation, Beam Africa, New Beginnings, Moretele Sunrise Hospice, 2 Struben Street Shelter, Skills Development Centre, Catholic Women's League and Tswelopele Step by Step. In all, 10 community projects and 10 support groups were facilitated by the students.

In the Durban area, social work services were successfully delivered to individuals and communities in the Point and Inner City and rural Isnembe area. Eighteen students were linked to nine organisations in the Point/Inner City and 197 clients received counselling. Six students provided group sessions to community members and 17 community development projects were initiated in line with the needs of the community.

At the rural Isnembe site, three students provided counselling and group support to learners and members of the impoverished community. Seventy-five counselling sessions were conducted with school learners and 25 members of the community received counselling. Community engagement addressed early childhood development, single mothers, teenage pregnancies, HIV and Aids, substance abuse, unemployment and extreme poverty.

Staff from the Departments of Environmental Sciences, Education, Corporate Communications, Chance to Advance and Student Development contributed to the project by way of consultative meetings, information-sharing, site visits, training and research input.