

**THE ROLE OF OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTIONS IN THE
INTERNATIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA:**

THE CASE OF UNISA

By

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the dissertation/thesis, with the title: The role of open distance learning institutions in the internationalisation of higher education in Southern Africa: The case of Unisa which I hereby submit for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Geography at the University of South Africa, is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other institution.


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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the role that open distance learning institutions play in the internationalisation of higher education in Southern Africa. There has, over the past few decades, been a shift in higher education institutions and governments to focus more on international dimensions, specifically internationalisation. Internationalisation is an important component of higher education as it offers mutual benefits for all stakeholders, including the potential for increased international student enrollment, international citizenship for students, revenue generation, and brain gain. Distance education provides a unique opportunity to achieve many of these benefits, including increased international student enrollment and international citizenship for students, but at a larger scale than traditional institutions. As one of the largest providers of distance education in Africa, this study utilises the University of South Africa as a case study.

Incorporating evidence from in-depth interviews, this study shows that distance education institutions create a pathway for a greater number of students to access higher education, and due to their inherent flexibility and affordability, are able to cater to more diverse groups of students, unlike their traditional counterparts. It argues though that despite this, there are numerous challenges that foreign students encounter. These challenges highlight a disparity in how two groups of students (local and international) experience their studies. The study revealed that international students are faced with issues obtaining foreign currency needed to pay their school fees. They also experience difficulties in accessing their learning materials since they are, more often than not, reliant on a failing postal system and an information and communication network that is costly. Despite these difficulties, this study has shown that these students are resilient and find creative ways to overcome these challenges, highlighting the persevering nature of distance learners. As a result, distance education is best suited to meet internationalisation aspirations through increased access, flexibility, and knowledge sharing, through the provision of education to a group of students who would otherwise be excluded from tertiary studies.

OORSIG

Hierdie tesis ondersoek die rol wat ope afstand onderrig institusies speel in die internasionalisering van hoer onderwys in Suid Afrika. Oor die laaste dekades, was daar 'n verskuiwing in die hoer onderwys institusies en regering om meer te fokus op internasionale dimensies, spesifiek internasionalisering. Internasionalisering is 'n belangrike komponent van hoer onderrig omdat dit voordeel inhou vir al die belanghebbendes, insluitende die potensiele vermeerdering in buitelandse studente inskrywings en internasionale burgerskap vir studente. Afstand onderrig voorsien 'n unieke geleentheid om baie van hierdie voordele, insluitend verhoogde internasionale studente inskrywings en internasionale burgerskap vir studente, maar op 'n hoer skaal as tradisionele institusies. As een van die grootste voorsieners van afstand studeering in Afrika, word die Universiteit van Suid Afrika, is hierdie gevallestudiegebruik as voorbeeld. Ingeslote bewyse van studies en onderhoude, wys hierdie studie dat afstand studeering institusies skep 'n weg vir meer studente om hoer onderwys te bekom, en as gevolg van hul inherente buigbaarheid en bekostigbaarheid, kan hulle vir meer diverse groepe van studente verskaf, anders as hul tradisionele teenhangers. Hierdie studie bewys dat ongeag hiervan is daar menigvuldige uitdagings wat hierdie buitelandse studente konfronteer. Hierdie uitdagings lig 'n ongelykheid uit in hoe 'n mate hierdie twee groepe student (plaaslike en buitelandse student) hierdie studies ondervind. Hierdie studie het ontbloom dat buitelandse studente gekonfronteer word met verskeie kwessies onder andere om hul universiteitsgelde te betaal met buitelandse valuta. Hulle ondervind ook probleme om hul studie material te bekom as gevolg van onbetroubare en/of mislukte posdienste. Die inligtingsdienste en kommunikasie netwerke is onbetroubaar en baie duur. Nieteenstaande hierdie omstandighede bewys hierdie studie dat student aanpasbaar is en vind hulle kreatiewe maniere om hierdie uitdagings te oorkom, wat weereens die deursettings vermoë van hierdie student beaam. Die gevolgtrekking van die studie is dat afstand onderrig die beste manier verteenwoordig om internationalisering deur verhoogde toegang, buigzaamheid en kennis te deel en deur die voorsiening van onderrig aan 'n groep studente wat anderssinds uitgesluit sou gewees het van tersiere studies.

ISIFINYEZO

Lo mbhalo wocwaningo uhlola indima edlalwa yizikhungo zemfundo ezifundisa abafundi besemakhaya ekwenzeni imfundo ephakame yaseNingizimu Afrika ibandakanye onke amazwe omhlaba. Emashumini eminyaka edlule, kuye kwaba noshintsho ezikhungweni zemfundo ephakeme nakuhulumeni lokugxila kakhulu ekulingiseni lokho okwenziwa kwamanye amazwe, ikakhulukazi ukubandakanya onke amazwe omhlaba. Ukubandakanya onke amazwe omhlaba kuyisici esibalulekile semfundo ephakeme ngoba kuzuzisa bonke ababambiqhaza, futhi kwandise ukubhalisa kwabafundi bakwamanye amazwe, ukuba yizakhamuzi kwabafundi bakwamanye amazwe, ukungena kwenzuzo engokwezimali, kanye nokwanda kobuhlakani. Ukufunda usekhaya kunikeza ithuba eliyinqayizivele lokuthola eziningi zalezi zinzuzo, kuhlanganise ukwanda kwabafundi ababhalisayo bakwamanye amazwe kanye nokuba yizakhamuzi kwabafundi, kodwa ngezanga elikhulu ukudlula elezikhungo ezivamile. Njengomunye wabahlinzeki abakhulu bemfundo enabafundi abafundela emakhaya e-Afrika, lolu cwaningo lusebenzisa iNyuvesi YaseNingizimu Afrika njengesibonelo.

Ihlanganisa ubufakazi obuvela ezingxoxweni ezijulile, lolu cwaningo lubonisa ukuthi izikhungo ezinabafundi abafunda besemakhaya zivulela inani elikhulu labafundi ithuba lokuthola imfundo ephakeme, nangenxa yokuvumelana kwayo nezimo kanye nokungabizi kakhulu, iyakwazi ukwanelisa izidingo zamaqembu ahlukahlukene abafundi, ngokungafani nezinye izikhungo ezivamile. Nokho naphezu kwalokho, ucwaningo lubonisa ukuthi zikhona izinselele eziningana abafundi bakwamanye amazwe ababhekana nazo. Lezi zinselele ziveza umehluko okhona phakathi kwamaqembu amabili abafundi (abakuleli nabakwamanye amazwe) endleleni abafunda ngayo. Ucwaningo lubonisa ukuthi abafundi bakwamanye amazwe babhekana nezinselele zokuthola imali yakwamanye amazwe edingekayo ukuze bakhokhele izifundo zabo. Baphinde babhekane nenselele yokuthola izincwadi zabo zokufunda njengoba ngokuvamile bencike ekuthunyelweni kwezinto ngeposi okungathembekile kanye nenethiwekhi yemininingwane nokuxhumana ebizayo. Naphezu kwalobu bunzima, lolu cwaningo luye lwabonisa ukuthi laba bafundi bayakhuthazela futhi bathola izindlela zobuhlakani zokunqoba lezi zinselele, okugqamisa ukuphikelela kwabafundi abafundela

emakhaya. Ngenxa yalokho, ukufunda usekhaya kufaneleka kangcono ekuhlangabezaneni nemizamo yokubandakanya onke amazwe omhlaba ngokwandisa ukufinyeleleka kanye nokuvumelana nezimo, ukwabelana ngolwazi, nokuhlinzeka ngemfundo eqenjini labafundi ebelingeke likwazi ukuthola imfundo yasenyuvesi.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CHE	Council for Higher Education
DE	Distance education
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
DT	Digital technologies
GATS	General Agreement on Trade in Services
GDP	Gross domestic product
GER	General education requirement
HDI	Human development index
HEP	Higher education provision
IaD	Internationalisation at a distance
IaH	Internationalisation at home
ICEF	International Consultants for Education and Fairs
ICT	Information and communications technology
IDE	International distance education
IDEAS	International Distance Education and African Students
IEASA	International Education Association of South Africa
III	Inclusive internet index
KS	Knowledge sharing
KM	Knowledge management
LMS	Learning Management System
MOOCs	Massive open online courses

NCHE	National Commission on Higher Education
NRF	National Research Foundation
ODL	Open Distance Learning
ODEL	Open Distance e-Learning
SACQ	Student Adjustment to College Questionnaire
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SM	Social media
SMF	Social media fatigue
SMS	Short messaging services
TFL	Tobler's First Law
THE	Times Higher Education
UN	United Nations
Unisa	University of South Africa
VM	Virtual mobility
WBG	World Bank Group

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Distance education	Also known as distance learning or online learning, is the physical, geographical separation between students and their lecturers, and the institution at which they are enrolled, where technology is used to create lines of communication between students and teachers, and students and other students.
Globalisation	The increasing level of interdependence of various global aspects, such as the global economy, culture and populations that are influenced by the transnational trade of goods and services, technology, as well as the movement of investments, people, and information.
Internationalisation of HE	The integration of international and intercultural aspects into all aspects of higher education (i.e. the purpose, functions and delivery).
Internationalisation at home	As with internationalisation of higher education, IaH too focuses on the integration of international and intercultural aspects, but encompasses all students, not just the fortunate few who are able to travel abroad. It acknowledges that all students can benefit from exposure to an international learning experience, but removes the need for students to travel to experience it.

Learning Management System

A combination of software applications and web-based technology designed for use in an education environment to assist with the planning, implementation and assessment of learning in one central location.

Spatial diffusion

The way that an idea (in this case knowledge) is disseminated across space and time between individuals and groups. This sharing of information often comes from a central point of origin and may be shared with other locations regardless of whether or not they are connected.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND, PROBLEM FORMULATION AND AIMS

1.1. Introduction

Internationalisation of Higher Education (HE) has become a central topic in understating the geography of education. Understanding the mobilities of students, including how and why they choose to move in pursuit of their educational goals, points to the importance that both place and space play in an individual's effort in obtaining access to education. This study explores the role of space and place in a lesser studied area of mobilities in education, that of distance education (DE) and the movement of course material, administrative activities and knowledge while the student stays *in situ*. Access to education is considered to be the centre of human development, since it contributes to the progress of human beings as productive citizens (Bordoloi, 2018). It also provides the foundation for socio-economic, cultural and political progression necessary for the continued development of a country (Bordoloi, 2018). HE is of particular importance as it assists in economic development by creating a space in which skills, knowledge and information are able to be disseminated to people in various fields. An educated population is one in which citizens are able to protect themselves from discrimination and create opportunities for themselves, as well as empowering them as individuals (Bordoloi, 2018; UN Centre for Human Rights, 1996). Since education is necessary for continued development, it should therefore be accessible to everyone, regardless of their geographical and economic situation (Chawinga & Zozie, 2016). The geography of education is an important determinant, not just of where a student is (location), but it is

also an indication of whether a student is able to go to university (Wozniak, 2018). For some students, higher education is unobtainable because they are unable to physically attend classes, or because there are no institutions where they reside. Distance education (DE) bridges the geographical divide, and connects students with a tertiary institution, regardless of their geographic location.

For this reason, DE addresses Article 26 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights better than other types of study. It states: “Everyone has the right to education ... higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit” (UN General Assembly, 1948). Further, Article 13 (2) of the UN Centre for Human Rights (1996) states that education in all of its forms needs to show four key elements, including, availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability. Accessibility has three interconnected components: non-discrimination, physical accessibility and economic access (UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 2002). In this context, geographical location should not prevent a person from further study. Exclusion of a student from study based on their geographic location can be viewed as a form of discrimination (The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1999). One way of ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to achieve their basic human right to education is through DE.

For many centuries, DE has provided students with access to tertiary studies that they otherwise would have been excluded from (LaPointe, 2005). Despite its long history, much of what is understood about DE comes from what became known in the 20th century as modern distance education. Early distance education is linked to its European beginnings in the form of correspondence education that was common place in the 1800s

(Visser, Visser, Simonson & Amirault, 2005; Chawinga & Zozie, 2016). Although there are marked differences between early distance education and modern distance education, one key aspect remains unchanged – an egalitarian approach to education (Casey, 2008). Another similarity between the two is the instructional mode, where the teacher and students are in separate locations (Casey, 2008).

The greatest change that has occurred in DE is the way in which content is delivered to the student. Students no longer receive their study materials via the postal system, or via radio or television. Modern distance education has been transformed by advances in technology, but it has flourished not only because of innovation and advancement in technology, but because there has been an upsurge in the number of individuals who want to upgrade their skills and qualifications, and are able to do so through DE (Bordoloi, 2018; Chawinga & Zozie, 2016; Casey, 2008). DE provides opportunities to students who would otherwise be denied access to traditional institutions by a variety of factors, including poor economic conditions, parental illiteracy and work responsibilities (Bordoloi, 2018).

While DE refers to learning from a distance, it is limited in many ways (Gerber, 2013). Distance education does not provide a variety of channels of communication which serve to remove the barriers that exist between the ideal of learning and the individual's actual process of learning (Gerber, 2013). Unlike DE, the purpose of open distance learning (ODL) is to bridge the gap between the learning medium and the learner (Gerber, 2013). This is done by removing the restrictions within the learning process to include either on-site learning or off-site learning (Gerber, 2013). Students enrolled in ODL, are

able to study via tutorial classes, the traditional postal system or the internet, as well as being able to make use of all of these learning channels (Gerber, 2013).

It is evident that without distance education, many students in developing African countries, including South Africa, would not be able to reach their educational goals (Swanepoel, De Beer & Muller, 2009). Reports by the Southern Africa Regional Universities Association (SARUA) (2011) indicate a deficit in higher education in the Southern African region. This deficit occurs as a result of challenges which including a reduction of funding by governments to public universities and other institutions of higher education, an increase in students who would like to further their studies in higher education, as well as the inefficient manner in which resources are utilised by higher education institutions (SARUA, 2011).

This study will explore the role of DE in providing access to higher education in Southern Africa. Students from one of the largest providers of international distance education in Africa, the University of South Africa (Unisa), will be used as the study site. Unisa is the only university in South Africa that exclusively offers ODL (Mokoena, 2018). With a history of 150 years in tertiary education, Unisa is the largest ODL institution in Southern Africa and the longest standing dedicated DE university in the world (Unisa, 2022). Prior to 2019, Unisa was the largest provider of DE in Africa, but was replaced when the student enrolment at the National Open University of Nigeria exceeded 550,000 students (Sasu, 2022). Enrolling almost one-third of all South African students, and with a student cohort of more than 300,000 students, Unisa is considered a mega university (*Times Higher Education (THE)*, 2018). With a history dating back to 1873, Unisa officially became a distance university in 1946, providing access to education to millions of

students “regardless of race, colour or creed” (Unisa, 2022). The student cohort at Unisa consists of students from 130 countries globally (Unisa, 2017b). Since its opening, Unisa has not only increased its subject offerings, but it has also expanded its locations to include several regional centres around South Africa (THE, 2018).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The DE model of education has expanded along with the advancement of technology and the push online has been further accelerated by the lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemics. These advances have highlighted a need to explore further the nature of ODL and whether this type of learning provides students who reside and study in a different geographical location than the university, with the opportunity to engage with higher education in a manner that is useful and appropriate to them.

In order to determine the effectiveness of ODL, the study aims to: *Explore how Open Distance Learning Higher Education provides access across geographical space with a particular focus on mature students.*

In considering this aim, three objectives were identified in order to develop a comprehensive awareness of how ODL can remedy some of the challenges that some students face when trying to access higher education. These were:

1. Objective one: Determining the effectiveness of open distance learning programmes in creating access for students, despite their location;
2. Objective two: Analysing the flow of knowledge across geographical space in open distance learning programmes;

3. Objective three: Understanding the transition and adjustment of mature age students at Unisa.

1.3 Empirical Investigation

1.3.1 Ethical Considerations

This study formed part of a larger National Research Foundation (NRF) project “International Distance Education and Africa Students” which explored the role of DE in Africa. As part of the NRF/ESRC project, ethical clearance for this study was granted both under the broader project, and as a stand-alone study. The ethics for this study was issued by the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences Ethics Review Committee at Unisa. There are several points that need to be taken into consideration to ensure that the research is done in an ethical manner. During this research project, personal biases and opinions were ignored to ensure that they did not get in the way of the research and that both sides were given fair consideration.

Since this research involved surveys, they were conducted under the assumption that the findings would be kept anonymous. Students who agreed to participate in the study were informed that they could at any point withdraw themselves from the study without any negative implications. Furthermore, research subjects were chosen randomly and not from easy-to-access groups. Finally, the reported results have been used to accurately represent the observations and exact opinions of the research subjects. It was therefore important that the interview responses were not taken out of context, and that the discussions following the responses were put into the appropriate context.

1.3.2 Issues of Reliability, Validity and Trustworthiness of Data

Trustworthiness is measured by validity and reliability (Stahl & King, 2020; The Farnsworth Group, 2021). Trustworthiness is achieved when findings from the research are dependable, credible, confirmable and transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Stahl & King, 2020; The Farnsworth Group, 2021).

Dependability for this study is achieved since the methods used for data collection, analysis and interpretation are clearly laid out in the methodology of this thesis. The provision for sufficient contextual information (The Farnsworth Group, 2021) allows for this study to be replicated to generate predictable results. The broad range of demographics and varied geographic locations in the participants of this study created a less biased viewpoint from a less concentrated demographic.

Credibility in qualitative data is presented as a measure of truth and indicates whether the findings of the research are accurate and correct (The Farnsworth Group, 2021). Measuring the truth in this study occurred when the data gathered during the in-depth interviews were analysed by a variety of researchers, including the primary author, her supervisor, as well as researchers from the larger NRF study. Each interview was examined in detail to find overlapping themes, which, once identified, were verified by a separate researcher. It is these themes that guided the findings of this study. Credibility was also achieved through comparative analysis, whereby participants were drawn from two countries, and not just from one specific country. This allowed the researcher to draw themes across a wider geographical location.

Confirmability refers to a neutral perspective of the researcher to avoid potential biases and assumptions (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; The Farnsworth Group, 2021), and

as such, the research is able to “speak for itself” (The Farnsworth Group, 2021). Confirmability in this study is achieved through the careful documentation of each step of the research process (as outlined in Chapter 2), especially the data analysis processes. As such, the findings demonstrate an accurate reflection of the participants’ responses.

Finally, transferability determines if the results of the study are applicable in other contexts (The Farnsworth Group, 2021). However, since qualitative research is not intended to be generalised, the results of such a study should not be framed as universal truths (Williams & Kimmons, 2022). Instead, the other contexts refer not to broader contexts, but rather to very specific contexts, such as those with similar situations, populations or phenomena (Statistic Solutions, 2022). This study achieved transferability through the use of thick descriptions (Stahl & King, 2020; Statistic Solutions, 2022; Williams & Kimmons, 2022) about the context in which the study took place. By describing in detail the various aspects under which the study occurred, the researcher allows readers to determine which of the results might transfer to their particular contexts.

1.4 Chapter Divisions

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter focuses on providing a general overview of the topic. It includes background information pertaining to the topic, as well as a description of the research aims and objectives, the research methods and design, and the motivation for the research.

Chapter 2: Method

This chapter describes in detail the methodology employed to conduct the study. The chapter explains the data collected and the methods used to analyse the data, as well as describing all relevant results in relation to the research problem. Any unanticipated events that occurred during the data collection have also been reported on in this chapter. An explanation of how the actual analysis differed from the planned analysis is included, as well as a discussion on the handling of any missing data.

The steps taken to ensure that the assumptions for each procedure were not violated have been discussed. Tables and figures are included to provide exact values, with an explanation of each to ensure that the reader is aware of what information to look for in the tables and figures.

Chapter 3: Literature Review: The Internationalisation of Higher Education

The literature review is divided into two chapters. This first chapter focuses on creating a framework explaining internationalisation by exploring the rationales and motivations for internationalisation, as well as identifying the stakeholder motivations for the internationalisation of higher education. Introduced in this chapter is the theoretical framework, where the key concepts, together with existing theory/theories that are used for the study are defined. The theoretical framework demonstrated an understanding of theories and concepts that are relevant to the topic of the research paper, as well as showing a link to the field of geography. The chapter then reviews both the challenges and opportunities that arise as a result of the internationalisation process. The final

section of this chapter is a description of open distance learning, and the connection between ODL, internationalisation and student mobility.

Chapter 4: Literature Review: Higher Education in Africa

The second chapter of the literature review focuses specifically on higher education in Africa. It begins with a historical overview of HE in Africa, before focusing in on HE in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC). In this section, the focus is on providing a brief overview of the region, as well as the higher education aspects of internationalisation, before addressing how South Africa acts as an exporter of higher education in this region. The chapter then continues with a critical analysis of HE in South Africa, looking at the historical progression of HE in the country from the pre-democracy era through to the student uprisings and protests of 2015 and beyond. As the location for this study, the chapter includes a discussion on the University of South Africa. This section of the literature review provides a brief history of the institution from a global leader in distance education to a global giant in ODL. The chapter concludes by describing the factors that influence student success in ODL, as well as student success at Unisa.

Chapter 5: Findings: Access to Higher Education through Open Distance Learning

In this chapter the focus is on the effectiveness of ODL programmes at creating access to higher education despite a student's geographical location. The chapter uses the participants experiences and circumstances to identify the factors that influence access.

Four key elements were identified:

- a) cost;

- b) flexibility of the course;
- c) reputation of the institution and entry requirements; and
- d) enrolment.

Chapter 6: Findings: Analysis of the Flow of Knowledge Across Physical Space in ODL Programmes

The purpose of this chapter is to understand how knowledge moves in ODL. It looks at the process, systems and techniques employed by ODL institutions to connect with and share knowledge and information with their students. This chapter looked at both the factors that enhance the flow of knowledge, as well as the factors that inhibit this flow. The participants opinions, along with other existing research, allowed the researcher to determine the effectiveness of not only communication, but the sharing of ideas in ODL.

Chapter 7: Findings: The Transition and Adjustment of Mature Age, Undergraduate, International ODL Students at Unisa

As a unique group of students, the participants in this study were what researchers call non-traditional learners. While much is known about the transition and adjustment of first-year students that attend traditional universities, little is known about this unique group. This chapter begins with defining what it means to be a mature age student. Based on the characteristics that set them apart from other students, the researcher looked at how those factors impacted their studies. It also looked at the support structures the students were able to use to help them through their transition. Many students identified issues they had with the institution. This chapter highlighted these concerns and put forward the

suggestions made by students to help the institution better equip itself to deal with this cohort of students.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This chapter focuses on explaining the conclusions of the study. It summarises the findings of each chapter and the overall research topic. It provides both limitations and recommendations for future research, as well as feedback for the institution regarding the suggestions made by the participants of the study.

1.5 Conclusion

The continued growth in higher education has created a need for greater access. Distance education and open distance education create opportunities for students who would otherwise be unable to continue their studies. This study highlights the importance of space and place (geography) in furthering students' ability to study, regardless of their location. By ignoring the actual processes of learning, this study emphasises the way that geography is able to influence learning in an open distance electronic learning (ODeL) environment. As part of a larger NRF/ESRC project, this study contributes to a more profound understanding of space and place within the ODeL environment by exploring the way that students who study internationally at a distance are able to overcome the challenges associated with a separation across space.

This chapter introduced the topic of this study by providing a summary of the background, problem statement and the aims of the study, as well as outlining the chapters that will follow in this dissertation. The following chapter describes the methods

used in this study by detailing how the data for the study was collected. It then describes the methods used in the analysis of the data.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

2.1 Introduction

As growth in the higher education (HE) sector continues, so too does the need for an increase in the ability for a greater number of students to access the sector. Distance education (DE), specifically open distance education (ODL) is one avenue that creates this opportunity, especially since it creates a greater number of prospects for students who may have otherwise been excluded from HE (Xu & Xu, 2019).

While DE creates opportunities for study without the need to relocate, the remoteness does result in a physical barrier between the student and the institution. This barrier is lessened through the use of various technologies, such as online discussion groups, groups formed on various social media platforms and through email. These tools are only effective if the student chooses to utilise and engage with them. Consequently, there is a need to understand whether students are participating in the groups and whether they feel that they have been able to adjust to the culture of the institution.

As one of the largest institutions in Africa, Unisa has a global reputation for offering a variety of degrees and courses via DE. The institution utilises an array of technologies and platforms to connect students with their learning materials, the staff and each other. For this reason, the institution provided an opportunity to be a suitable case study, allowing the researcher explore and further understand these ideas, and to understand students' perspectives of the usefulness of these resources, and how they impact students.

This research study formed part of a larger project: International Distance Education and African Students (IDEAS). The aim of the IDEAS project is to understand both the access to, and quality of international distance education (IDE) in South Africa. One of the key objectives of the project is to assess the factors that influence IDE in Africa, as well as to explore whether IDE can lead to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of equitable access to education. In investigating the relevance of ODL programmes in creating internationalisation in higher education in Southern Africa, this research has contributed to the aims of the larger project.

This chapter aims at describing the methods employed by the researcher in order to understand and to explore the role of ODL in the internationalisation of higher education, specifically in Southern Africa, with a particular focus on countries within the SADC region.

Following on from this, the chapter will detail the research design by focusing on the research design, methods, as well as the sampling and data collection methods that were applied to this research. The qualitative components of the research design and methodology, including an explanation of both the participants and the samples used, will be discussed. The reliability of the study will be examined with regard to the strategies used to establish the trustworthiness of the data and the findings. The chapter will conclude with an analysis of how ethical considerations were applied to the research.

2.2 Qualitative Research Design

As previously stated, qualitative methods were used to collect and analyse data. This included open-ended, semi-structured interviews with a group of participants.

2.2.1 Setting and Procedure

The interviews were carried out online with distance students enrolled at Unisa as the voluntary research participants. This university was chosen since it has the highest enrolment figures on the African continent and because it is one of the largest providers of ODL in Africa (Amutabi & Oketch, 2003; Piyana, 2009; Unisa, 2023). Participants included students from all eight of the university's colleges without any limitation on which year of study. Table 2.1 gives an overview of the demographics for the 27 participants.

Table 2.1 Demographics for the participants of the study

Demographic	Number of participants	Percentage
Unisa College (College of...)		
Accounting Sciences	1	3.7
Agricultural & Environmental Sciences	0	0
Economic & Management Sciences	6	22.22
Education	2	7.41
Human Sciences	4	14.81
Law	11	40.75
Science, Engineering & Technology	1	3.7
Unknown (not specified)	2	7.41
Gender		
Male	10	37
Female	17	63
Race		

Black	15	55.56
White	5	18.52
Coloured	2	7.4
Indian/Asian	0	0
Unknown (not specified)	5	18.52
Citizenship		
Namibia	4	15
Zimbabwe	23	85

2.2.2 Participants

The population for this study were initially drawn from the students who had participated in a larger study conducted by the IDEAS project and who had completed the Student Adjustment to College Questionnaire (SACQ). The population for that particular study were first-year undergraduate students studying for a Bachelor of Science degree with a specific focus on Mathematics and Programming, which falls under the College of Science, Engineering and Technology. The students were contacted via their university email address. Roughly 2,700 emails were sent to students, and from that, 320 students chose to participate in phase one of the study. A checkbox at the bottom of the initial invitation to participate allowed the students to select whether they would like to be part of the second phase of the research involving in-depth individual interviews. The number of students who chose this portion was initially low, and so a decision was made to send an email to all the students, regardless of their field of study or their year of study. The only limitation was that they had to be international students from SADC countries.

Non-probability sampling was used in conjunction with a purposeful strategy. This was done since the key aspects of Phase two were to discover whether ODL programmes were effective, and whether there was an adequate flow of knowledge from the institution to the students located away from the main campus. Purposeful sampling is done on the assumption that the intention is to derive understanding and insights into a specific context, and as such, there needs to be a sample from which the most can be learned (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The value of purposeful sampling lies in the fact that the aim is not to create an average opinion (Chein, 1981), but to derive in-depth understanding of very specific cases (Patton, 2015). Cases which lead to the discovery of a large amount of detail about the issues that are key to the study are known as information-rich cases (Patton, 2015).

When undertaking purposeful sampling, it is necessary to determine the selection criteria that will be used to select the people who will be used in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In Phase two of the study, criterion-based selection was used since the first step in participant selection is the identification of attributes that are deemed crucial to the study and then the location of the students who are deemed appropriate for the study (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010).

In this instance, since Unisa has an array of students from a variety of countries, it was necessary to target students who were international students, who were located within the SADC region, who were studying at a distance. Initially, only students from two Unisa colleges, and who were in their first year of study were going to be used, but based on low response rates, the study opened the invitation to include students from all of the colleges, and from all years of study.

The email sent to the students (see Appendix 2) included information about the study and a link to sign up as a participant in the study. To start off with, 19,506 emails were sent out via the university email server. From that, 1295 students agreed to participate in the survey. Following the survey, 135 agreed to be interviewed, and of those, 27 students chose to participate, resulting in a response rate of 20%. Since the study was qualitative and followed a non-probability methodology, the low response rate was not of concern. Table 2.1 above, shows that of the participants, the majority were female (n = 17, 63%), enrolled in the College of Law (n = 11, 40.74%) and were black (n = 15, 55.56%).

2.2.3 Materials and Methods

As mentioned above, in-depth individual interviews with the participants were conducted. Each interview consisted of semi-structured interview questions, since this guided the interviewer through the interviewing process while at the same time allowing for conversational aspects to be initiated by the interviewer. The lack of a rigid and formal structure provides a certain level of flexibility and also allows the interviewer to ask more probing questions to elicit a more detailed response (Statistic Solutions, 2021). Another benefit of using a semi-structured interview process is that the ability to gain additional information (including thoughts, feelings and opinions) from the participant at the time of the interview, which removes the need to conduct several rounds of interviews (Statistic Solution, 2021), thus reducing both cost and time.

This phase of the study had no restrictions in terms of the current year of study of the student and focused more on how effective ODL is at creating access to HE and

analysing how knowledge is transmitted across physical space. The rationale for not restricting the sample to a specific year was the belief that any student who participated in the study would be able to give a holistic and detailed account of their experiences of studying through Unisa, by highlighting both the positive and the negative aspects – regardless of their year of study.

At the start of the interviews, each participant was informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could end the interview at any stage should they wish to do so. Verbal confirmation from each participant was necessary before the interview continued. The participants were then introduced to the interviewers, a postdoctoral researcher and a primary researcher from the IDEAS project. The interviews were recorded with permission from the participant. The recordings allowed the interview to progress smoothly without interruption, and provided greater accuracy than if the interviews had been conducted using notes. Once all the interviews had taken place, the interviews were transcribed.

This researcher did not participate in the data collection, and only began working with the data once it had been transcribed. The files the researcher received had been anonymised and only pseudonyms were provided. Included in the pseudonyms were other demographic information such as gender, race and citizenship. For example, the information provided to this researcher would read: “File name: ST40_INT_CF_NA”, where “CF” refers to race and gender and “NA” refers to their citizenship.

All other biographical information was gathered while coding the interviews. The sample size was determined through data saturation. This occurred during the interview

process, where similar themes began to emerge. These themes were later identified during coding.

Coding took place using *Microsoft Excel*. This software was used in favour of other coding software (such as *Atlas Ti*) based on testing done by the researcher. *Excel* was chosen as a personal preference of the researcher for its ease of use, and familiarity of the software. The program can handle large amounts of data, and is able to perform a variety of basic and advanced calculations (LinkedIn, 2023).

2.2.4 Data Analysis

As stated earlier, the in-depth semi-structured interviews were transcribed before coding took place. Phase two used inductive manual coding, since the coding began from scratch without a set codebook. This meant that all of the codes were derived from the interviews themselves. This form of coding is cyclical in nature and it is therefore necessary to review codes multiple times. Inductive coding was chosen in favour of deductive coding since the analysis of the data began without any preconceived ideas of what the codes should be (Kaluza, 2023). This type of coding allowed a narrative to emerge from the raw data. Furthermore, since inductive coding is an iterative process, it tends to be more thorough and unbiased (Kaluza, 2023). Below is a description explaining how the coding process was undertaken in this study:

Step 1: Read through an interview and highlighted important points;

Step 2: Reread the interviews and assigned a code to each highlighted point;

Step 3: Recorded the codes in an Excel spreadsheet;

Repeated steps 1– 3 until all the interviews were coded;

Step 4: Consolidated and reviewed all the codes;

Step 5: Created categories for the codes, grouping similar ideas together;

Step 6: Categories were then grouped into themes, where patterns were collected under one umbrella. Each theme was assigned a coloured flag that could be stuck on the interview;

Step 7: Reread each interview and placed coloured flags next to each code, whilst identifying parts of the interview that had been overlooked and assigning codes and categories to them;

Step 8: Placed the codes into a coding framework.

Prior to completing the coding, a sample of interviews and the accompanying codes were sent to the researcher’s supervisor to ensure that the coding was done satisfactorily. In total after the coding process was complete, nine themes were identified.

Table 2.2 Number of codes and categories that were added to each of the 9 themes

Theme Number	Number of categories	Number of codes
1	11	51
2	16	79
3	7	21
4	11	12
5	4	18
6	10	12
7	4	10
8	1	12
9	3	12

A more detailed look at the themes, categories and code can be found in Appendix 4. The themes that arose from the coding analysis were then compared with information that was gathered from secondary data. This allowed the researcher to identify areas in the research that were similar to and different from what other researchers have reported finding in relation to the effectiveness of ODL programmes in creating access to HE, and also how knowledge flows across physical spaces.

2.2.5 Ethical Considerations

The study required ethical approval which was applied for and granted by Unisa-CAES Health Research Committee – reference numbers NHREC – 170616-051; REC 2018/CAES/031 (see Appendix 1). Ethics approval was obtained prior to the collection of in-depth interviews, and was given until 30/06/2021. Consent forms were emailed to the participants prior to their interview and were also restated verbally by the interviewer prior to the interview beginning. Included in the initial email, and also explained verbally prior to the interview, was the purpose of the interview and what the data would be used for. The participants' identifying details were removed prior to the researcher receiving the transcripts, so it was not possible for the researcher, or any other person to be able to identify the students.

2.3 Conclusion

This chapter explained in detail the various methods used to collect and analyse the data that was generated for this study. Data was obtained through the use of qualitative methods, including in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 27 students. Each interview

yielded multiple hours of recorded information that was later transcribed, before coding of the transcripts took place. Coding generated several key themes that were important to the overall aims of the research.

The chapter that follows is a review of the literature, with a specific focus on the definitions used to describe the internationalisation of higher education, as well as the rationales and motivations which have led to a global increase in this phenomenon. The chapter will also provide a description of the various stakeholders, as well as an investigation into their roles in the internationalisation of HE. Finally, the chapter will assess the challenges and opportunities that arise as a result of this process.

CHAPTER 3

THE INTERNATIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

3.1 Introduction

Higher education (HE) has undergone tremendous growth over the past two decades, increasing student enrolments worldwide from 13 million students in 1960 to 89 million students in 1998. The greatest growth however has been in the 20-year period between 1998 and 2017, where student numbers increased to around 200 million (World Bank Group (WBG), 2017). Although the growth in the tertiary education sector is encouraging, it is restricted to those students whose families are wealthy and who can afford the high costs associated with tertiary education (WBG, 2017). Similarly, higher education is fraught with low retention rates, and so while the enrolment rates are increasing, drop-out rates and non-completion rates are high (WBG 2017).

This growth has occurred not just in traditional higher education institutes, but in distance education as well. As with many sectors, education is undergoing development to expand the ways that educational technology can be used to share knowledge and information (Kentnor, 2015). Internationalisation in higher education requires that students are adequately prepared to engage with a work environment that centres on global knowledge and technology, and which is more interconnected than ever (Hénard, Diamond & Roseveare, 2012). Distance education is an example of a progressive form of internationalisation, which due to its pervasive nature, allows a great number of students to develop the necessary skills to equip them for a globalised job environment and to interact in the global knowledge economy (Hénard, Diamond & Roseveare, 2012).

To begin with, this chapter examines spatial diffusion as a geographical theory. This is necessary since this study investigates the movement of knowledge without the movement of people. The chapter then moves on to define the internationalisation of higher education and examines the motivations and rationales that have led to an increase in this phenomenon. A discussion on the stakeholders and their roles in the internationalisation of higher education will be followed by an assessment of the opportunities and challenges that arise as a result of the internationalisation of higher education. Open distance learning programmes (ODL) will be detailed. Higher education in Africa will be explored through a historical overview of higher education in Africa, before focusing on the SADC region specifically. It will continue with a discussion of the current situation before moving to a review of the ODL programmes that are available in the region and examining how these programmes are driving higher education in the region. The chapter will then explore one of the key institutions in the region, Unisa, by looking at the institution's role in providing high quality distance education to the SADC region and beyond.

3.2 Spatial Diffusion and Higher Education

Diffusion is a key concept in geography, especially as part of Tobler's first law (TFL) of geography, which states that "everything interacts with everything, but two close things are more likely to interact than two distant things" (Tobler, 1970).

The concept of spatial diffusion is grounded in the idea that movement of "things" (physical goods, innovations, ideas, natural resources, etc.) across a geographic space takes place through a carrier of some sort, but that there are also barriers which can

influence the rate at which these “things” move (Gould, 1969). Thus, spatial diffusion is concerned with both the carriers and barriers which are central to the way that things are able to move through a geographical area. In the context of this study, knowledge is what is being moved and the carrier is open distance learning. ODL creates a borderless learning environment. There are however barriers that can impede the success of students who study through ODL. Examples of these barriers are a lack of technology, delays in receiving study materials and language of instruction, to name but a few.

Spatial diffusion can be expressed in a number of ways, including:

1. Contagious diffusion;
2. Expansion diffusion;
3. Relocation diffusion; and
4. Hierarchical diffusion

As with many concepts, there are overlaps between the various types of spatial diffusion. This study merges both relocation and hierarchical components since it focuses on the movement of knowledge between a university and its students, who are located in areas away from the main campus, and who are studying at a distance. Traditional examples of hierarchical relocation focused on “the movement of scholars in universities,” as well as the “transfer of students” (Gould, 1969, p. 15). While the idea remains unchanged, the way the transfer and movement take place has changed significantly, and so too have the barriers.

In the past, one major barrier preventing some students from accessing higher education was their inability to move to areas where HE institutions existed. Access to HE via DE opened up access and allowed students to become mobile without physically

moving, but rather through the movement of information across distance. Figure 3.1 shows that there are only six institutions of higher education that provide access to students via distance education in the SADC region (shown as a purple overlay on the map). This limited number of institutions means that students who are only able to study via this method have limited choices, and are therefore more likely to choose the institution based on the global reputation. For many students, especially those closest to South Africa, Unisa is the best choice. This perpetuates the idea of spatial diffusion that suggests that things located closer together interact more than things that are further apart.

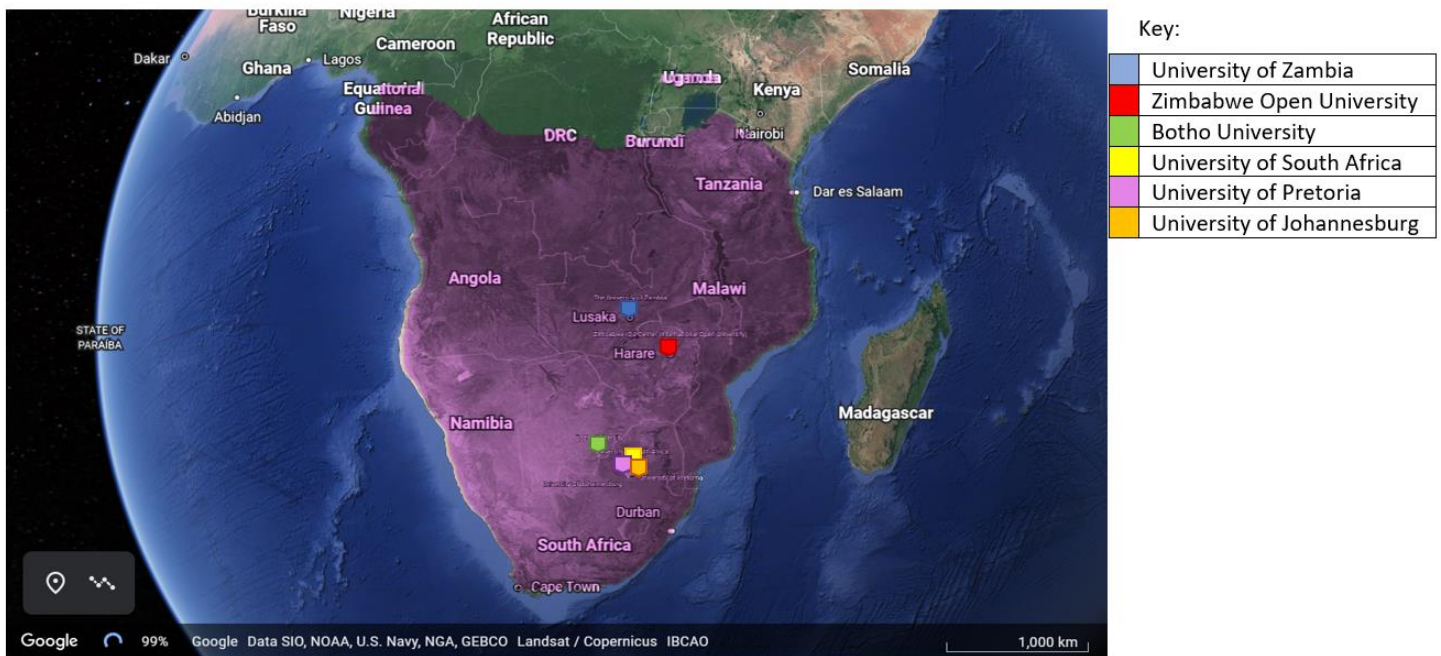


Figure 3.1: Map showing the number and location of distance education providers in the SADC region

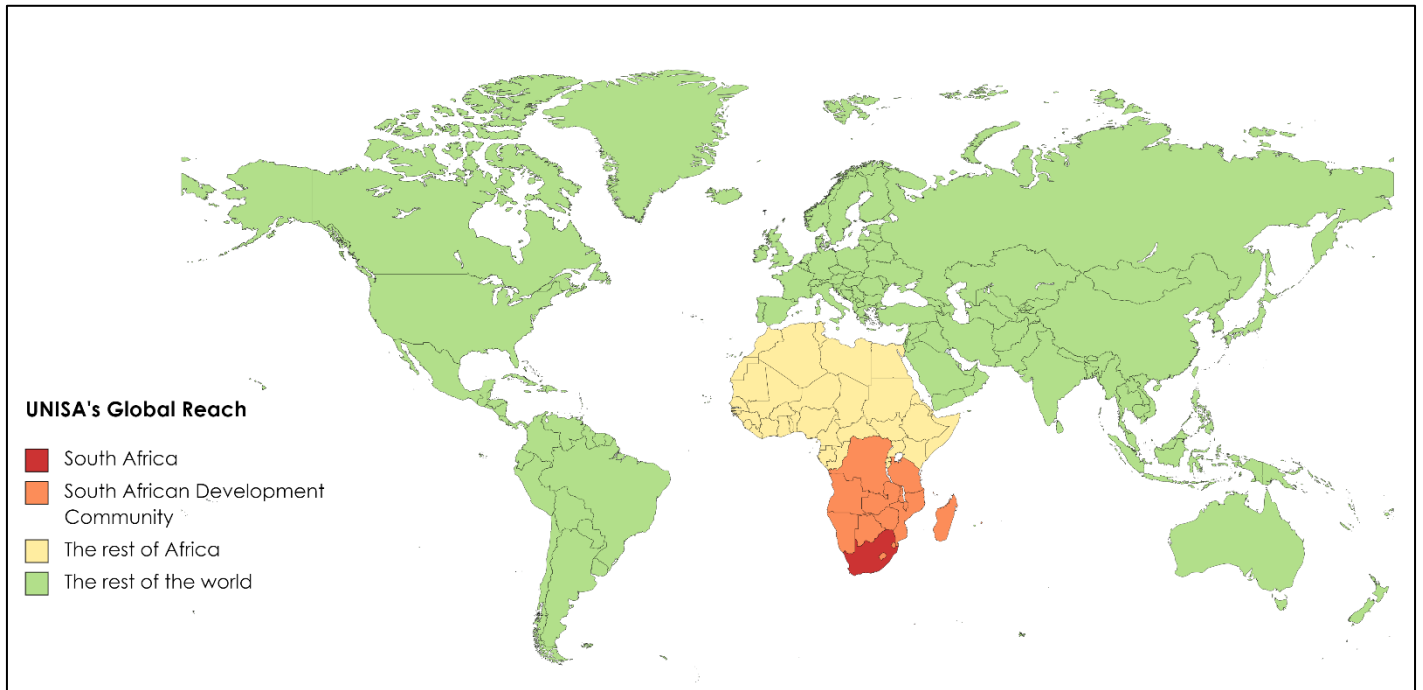


Figure 3.2: A heat map showing Unisa's global reach (based on data from the 2016 Unisa Annual Report)

While the theory of diffusion is still applicable in certain geographical contexts, the idea that “things” located closer together are likely to interact more is only relevant up to a point. Figure 3.2 shows (through the use of colour) the global reach of Unisa. The warmest colour (red) shows where the majority of Unisa students are based. The coolest colour (green) indicates where there are the fewest students. While the map is simplistic in nature, it does show the global nature of this international institution. What the map fails to depict is the connections that are made between students in different regions and countries. While the outward sharing of knowledge and information from Unisa to its students is clearly seen on the map, it cannot show the sharing of knowledge and

information between the students. It is this interconnectedness that makes distance learning unique and highlights the potential for internationalisation to be achieved.

3.3 Internationalisation of Higher Education

3.3.1. Understanding Internationalisation

Internationalisation is not a new concept, although it has evolved since its first mention in 1970s. Not only has the definition changed over the decades, but there has been a shift from seeing internationalisation as a fringe concept at an institutional level, to it becoming a key component of many institutions and at the forefront of nation-building (de Wit, 2011). The term internationalisation is often confused, or used interchangeably, with the concept of globalisation (Knight, 2008).

At the most basic level, globalisation is the increasingly integrated global economies that have been shaped by new information and communications technology, as well as the appearance of international knowledge networks (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009). Internationalisation is a response to globalisation (Stromquist, 2007; Mitchell & Nielsen, 2012; Lee & Stensaker, 2021). Internationalisation is impacting higher education and globalisation is changing internationalisation (Knight, 2008). Internationalisation can be understood as both a response to, and a counterpart of globalisation, creating an assortment of responses that can be utilised to address a diverse number of opportunities and obligations that arise as a result of globalisation (Rumbley, Altbach & Reisberg, 2012).

Internationalisation is not only impacted by globalisation, it is also influenced by the knowledge economy (Jiang, 2008; Aslam, Eugster, Ho, Jaumotte & Piazza, 2018).

The modern knowledge economy exists as a result of the exponential increase in knowledge, as well as the speed at which knowledge is transferred globally (Jiang, 2008). It is also shaped by the expansion of knowledge-mediated services and industries, as well as the perception of the relationship between knowledge and innovation (Jiang, 2008). There is however a clear distinction between knowledge and information; while information refers to the handling of data, knowledge is the complex way in which information is understood, as well as the way in which it is transmitted to others in a systematic form (Jiang, 2006). Knowledge is a key component in the empowerment and development of all societal sectors (Jiang, 2008).

This dependence on knowledge for development leads to the commodification of knowledge and results in a shift in traditional disciplinary and cultural boundaries (Henry, Lingard, Rizvi & Taylor, 2001). As a result, the need to achieve knowledge and skills has become the core concept in the quest to gain a competitive advantage (Jiang, 2006). Higher education has since gained an important foothold in the global marketplace, resulting in an escalation in the internationalisation of higher education (Jiang, 2008). Knowledge has become an industry with higher education as a key component, since it acts as both the carrier and agent of knowledge (Jiang, 2008).

Influenced by both globalisation and the knowledge economy, internationalisation has intensified in the higher education realm. Since the definition of internationalisation is constantly evolving, a working definition of internationalisation will be used in this study. Internationalisation of higher education is a process which incorporates an international and intercultural dimension into the teaching, research, and service operations of an

academic institution (Knight, 1994; Knight, 2012; Wu, Choi, Diderich, Shamim, Rahhal, Mitchell, Leask & de Wit, 2022).

3.3.2. Internationalisation of Higher Education

Universities have, since their initial conception, been global in nature, using a common language, serving students and professors from a diversity of countries, while at the same time, imparting knowledge that echoed the learning that was taking place in the Western world (Altbach, 2004). Since universities are inherently part of a global environment, it is natural to assume that they have and would continue to be affected by situations away from the campus and beyond national borders (Altbach, 2004).

Globalisation and internationalisation have a reciprocal relationship which extends into the realm of higher education. Internationalisation in higher education is a nation's response to globalisation, while ensuring national identity and individuality (Knight, 2004; Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009). There is emphasis placed on the importance of protecting the various cultural and ethnic groups within a country (Knight, 1997). Within the context of higher education, internationalisation integrates both intercultural and international aspects that have a direct influence on research and teaching processes (Santiago, Tremblay, Basri & Arnal, 2008). Internationalisation has now become a core focus for higher education institutions, since it raises concerns about both the social and curricular relevance of the institution, institutional quality and prestige, national competitiveness, as well as the potential for innovation (Rumbley *et al.*, 2012). Recently however, internationalisation has also been seen as a way for institutions to generate

revenue (Rumbley *et al.*, 2012). Economic incentives are not the only motivation for institutions who aim to integrate an international dimension into their establishment.

3.3.2.1. Rationales and motivations for internationalisation

There are a number of rationales in favour of internationalisation. The four most common rationales for internationalisation are political (Knight, 1997); economic (de Wit, 2002; Jiang, 2008; Rumbley *et al.*, 2012); academic (Qiang, 2003) and socio-cultural (Knight, 1997).

The first rationale, the political rationale, is unsurprisingly motivated more from a political perspective rather than at an institutional level (Knight, 1997). This rationale is related to issues focused on a country's position and role as a nation at a global level (Qiang, 2003; Jiang, 2008). Once a dominant rationale, the political rationale is not as important in modern internationalisation (Knight, 1997). With an increase in globalised economies, technologies and communication, a nation's culture and identity are under threat (Knight, 1997; Jibeen & Khan, 2015). So, while cultural, scientific, and educational exchanges between countries is necessary for diplomatic relations, there is an increased risk of the homogenisation of cultures (Egron-Polak, 2012), especially in smaller and developing nations (Knight, 1997). Internationalisation, with its focus on national identity, is considered as a method to overcome the possibility of homogenisation (Knight, 1997). Higher education is viewed as a type of diplomatic investment for both political and economic relations, but with this exchange, education can also become an exported product, rather than a cultural agreement (Knight, 1997). This change in role leads to the

second rationale for internationalisation, which is the economic role of internationalisation in higher education.

The second rationale, the economic rationale for the internationalisation of higher education is becoming increasingly important. Countries are continually seeking ways to gain a competitive edge in the international market place (Knight, 1997; Jiang, 2008). This competitive edge can be achieved through the internationalisation of higher education, where there is an increase in the number of highly skilled, knowledgeable workers entering the local workforce (Knight, 1997; Jiang, 2008). The economic benefits that result from foreign students are not only seen in a country's trade relationships with other countries (Msweli, 2012), but there are also direct economic benefits, such as institutional income (Qiang, 2003). Since economic motives and market orientation is becoming more prevalent in institutions of higher education, it is necessary to find a balance between income-generating motives and academic benefits (Knight, 1997). Key to the rationale in support of the economic role in higher education is the identification of competencies which are critical if new graduates are to function in an increasingly international work environment (Knight, 1997).

The third rationale, the academic rationale, focuses primarily on the goal of achieving international standards for teaching and research in higher education (Knight, 1997; Kreber, 2009). Academic rationales for the internationalisation of higher education are based on the earlier historical development of universities, involving the international mobility of students and scholars, as well as international aspects of research (Jiang, 2008). The rationale behind the internationalisation of higher education for academic purposes, is founded on the overarching assumption that value is added to the quality of

higher education systems through the enhancement of international aspects of teaching, research, and service (Knight, 1999; Qiang, 2003; Kreber, 2009). The most common institutional activities that promote internationalisation at an academic level include student/faculty mobility programmes, collaborative research projects, as well as international students, which serve as catalysts for institutional planning and review (Knight, 1997).

The standardisation and uniformity of higher education does however present a threat to national identity and culture, since uniformity can lead to homogenisation (Knight, 1997; Kreber, 2009). This standardisation could result in equality between local knowledge and (dominant) Western knowledge (Jiang, 2008). Neo-liberal ideology may however dictate uniformity and standardisation of Western principles in higher education as a way to promote higher education as a knowledge commodity within the global marketplace, leading to a loss of institutional and country culture and autonomy (Jiang, 2008).

The final rationale is the cultural and social rationale, which is based on limiting the effects of homogenisation on the culture and languages of a nation (Kreber, 2009). One of the key elements in favour of the internationalisation of a nation's higher education system is the appreciation of the cultural and ethnic diversity that exists within and between countries (Knight, 1997). In order to achieve this, there needs to be an improvement in intercultural understanding and communication (Jiang, 2008), especially in the preparation of graduates who would benefit from being equipped with both knowledge and skills in intercultural relations and communication (Knight, 1997). The focus of this rationale is on the individual, rather than that of the nation or the institution,

as emphasis is placed on developing students who are local, national, as well as international citizens (Knight, 1997).

Similarities exist between academic and cultural/social rationales in that the measures used for both include aspects such as mobility of staff and students, an improvement in the quality of education, and a deeper understanding and respect for other languages and cultures are the same (Qiang, 2003). There is however a marked difference between the economic and the three remaining rationales (political, cultural/social and academic), in that the former is founded on an ethos of competition, while the latter are based on an ethos of cooperation (Kerber, 2009). It is important to note that internationalisation is more than the adjustment of the curriculum to include international aspects, or a global focus (international studies, global studies, etc.), and that it goes beyond the mobility of students and staff (study abroad, academic mobility, etc.) (de Wit, 2011). This means that there is no single, absolute rationale since rationales overlap, merge, and differ between the various stakeholders within higher education: governments, education, and private sectors (Qiang, 2003). Stakeholder rationales for internationalisation are evolutionary, responding to changing needs and trends and therefore are complex and multifaceted (Knight, 1997).

3.3.2.2. Stakeholder rationales for the internationalisation of higher education

Although the four rationales, as described in the previous section, are important in understanding the internationalisation of higher education on a global scale, the following section outlines a new approach to analysing rationales (Knight, 2008). These new rationales focus specifically on the importance of internationalisation on higher education

systems and institutions in Africa (Knight, 2008). This is done by focusing on the various stakeholders, which allow for a distinction between national and institutional levels to be discussed. Table 3.1 explores existing rationales in relation to how these categories appear to merge, presenting as combined views, rather than stand-alone rationales (Knight, 2004).

Table 3.1: Rationales Driving Internationalisation in an African context (Source: Knight (2004))

Rationales	Existing – national and institutional combined	Of emerging importance – national and institutional separated
Social/cultural	National culture identity Intercultural understanding Citizenship development Social and community development	National Level Human resources development Strategic alliances Income generation/ commercial trade Nation-building/ institution-building Social/cultural development and mutual understanding Institutional Level International branding and profile Quality enhancement/ international standards Income generation Student and staff development Strategic alliances Knowledge production
Political	Foreign policy National security Technical assistance Peace and mutual understanding National identity Regional identity	
Economic	Economic growth and competitiveness Labour market Financial incentives	
Academic	Extension of academic horizon Institution-building Profile and status Enhancement of quality International academic standards International dimension to research and teaching	

At a national level, a key influencer of the internationalisation of higher education is human resources development. Known also as “brain power,” it is often seen as a way to counteract the effects of the “brain drain” phenomenon and the issue of migration (Knight, 2008). With continual changes in demography, the knowledge economy, trade in

services, as well as labour-force mobility, nations rely on international education strategies to develop and recruit highly qualified individuals (Knight, 2008). In order to compete in the global economy, as well in scientific and technological fields, there is a need to attract intellectuals, both students and scholars, from other countries (Knight, 2008). This is done through a variety of methods, including, but not limited to, changes in recruitment strategies, incentives and immigration policies. At a local level, international dimensions of research and teaching are being enhanced to better equip domestic students and academics, as a way to contribute to a country's effectiveness and global competitiveness (Knight, 2008).

Another key element of internationalisation at a national level is forming strategic alliances. This type of alliance can be both a driving rationale and an instrument of internationalisation (Knight, 2008). With an overall shift from cultural alliances to economic alliances, international student and academic mobility, along with collaborative research and educational initiatives, are considered ideal methods to develop geopolitical relationships, as well as economic associations (Knight, 2008). Geographically, new patterns have emerged showing that at a regional level, there is an increase in international education exchanges, which are used to achieve stronger economic and political integration between neighbouring countries (Knight, 2008).

The cross-border delivery of education has opened up opportunities for countries to generate income. The commercialisation of internationalisation can be seen in many aspects, including but not limited to, foreign and satellite campuses, online delivery, as well as increasing the recruitment of fee-paying students (Knight, 2008). One key piece of evidence which highlights the potential profitability of exporting education, is the fact

that education has recently (within the last two decades) been included as part of the 12 service sectors of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) (Knight, 2008). As a multibillion-dollar business, trade in higher education is expected to continue to increase significantly, and as a result, many countries are showing interest in the prospect of exporting education for economic gains (Knight, 2008).

A key element of a nation-building agenda is to increase the number of educated citizens, as well as the ability to generate new knowledge. This is limited since a large number of countries lack both the physical and human infrastructure, as well as the financial resources necessary for their citizens to participate in higher education (Knight, 2008). Historically, nation-building in developing countries took place through international academic projects, which formed part of development and technical assistance (Knight, 2008). Although mutually beneficial international development work remains a key component of the internationalisation of higher education, there has been a noticeable shift from an aid/development approach to international partnerships, and then moving towards an approach in which trade for commercial purposes is the focus (Knight, 2008). There is a distinction globally where some countries are focused on exporting education with the intention of generating income, whilst other countries import education programmes and institutions for the purpose of nation- and capacity-building (Msweli, 2012).

The final component of nation-level rationales is social/cultural development and mutual understanding. While social and cultural rationales, specifically those relating to the advancement of intercultural understanding and national cultural identity, remain important, many countries place a greater emphasis on the economic and political

rationales, as outlined above (Knight, 2008). It is difficult to predict whether a greater emphasis will be placed on the social/cultural and mutual understanding rationales, especially in light of issues and challenges that arise from culturally based clashes within and between countries (Knight, 2008).

There are countries where internationalisation is not of national importance, and for them the institutional rationales are of greater importance (Knight, 2004). Although a nation may be influenced by the international dimension of universities, it has been argued that the actual process of internationalisation occurs at an institutional level (Knight, 2008; Grasset, 2013). The process of internationalisation is implemented by institutions, and although the process is approached differently, and has various levels of success at every university, it is necessary for internationalisation to originate and be implemented at an institutional level for maximum effectiveness (Mestenhauser & Ellingboe, 2005). An institution's rationale for addressing and advancing internationalisation is at the heart of the process, defining policies and programs, and dictating the anticipated results (Knight, 2006). It is therefore imperative that institutional motives be the drivers behind the implementation of internationalisation (de Wit, 2002; Knight, 2004; 2006). There are multiple factors which impact and determine institutional-level rationales, ranging from mission, student population, faculty profile, geographic location, availability of resources and institutional autonomy, to name but a few (Knight, 2008).

The first institutional-level rationale of emerging importance is international profile and reputation. The achievement of international academic standards has traditionally been the most important goal for institutions. These standards have been difficult to define

in the past, and as such, difficult to achieve. While this objective remains significant at an institutional-level, it has been incorporated by the motivation to achieve a global reputation of being an international high-quality institution (Knight, 2008). In response to global trends (global student mobility, diminishing university funding and government-backed recruitment campaigns), and in an effort to attract both top academics, as well as international students, universities today are becoming increasingly competitive. It is this competitiveness that drives the need for universities to focus on a clearly articulate and well-developed brand identity (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007).

Traditionally, university reputation has been the main indicator for the uniqueness of a higher education institution, as both organisations and managers alike utilise an array of approaches, such as brand identity, meaning, image and reputation, to develop distinctive university identities and to enhance reputation in this highly competitive global environment (Hemsley-Brown, Melewar, Nguyen & Wilson, 2016). Aside from each university's own branding, there are other methods that allow potential students and academic staff to gauge the global reputation of an institution. One such tool for reputation building is the Times Higher Education (THE) World Education Rankings, which according to the company "has been providing trusted performance data on universities for students and their families, university academics, university leaders, governments and industry, since 2004" (THE, n.d.). As of 2019, THE World University Rankings provided a list of the top global universities (including over 1,250 institutions, across 86 countries), by judging research-intensive universities and focusing on their core missions, which according to the company, include teaching (the learning environment; research (volume, income and reputation); international outlook (staff, students and research); citations

(research influence); industry income (knowledge transfer) (THE, n.d.). In an attempt to brand themselves, many universities seek to gain accreditation. As a result, accreditation has become an industry in and of itself, whereby universities use their reputations to gain a competitive edge (Knight, 2008).

Following on from the need to develop a reputation as well as an international profile, is the need for quality enhancement, also known as meeting international standards. The interconnectedness and interdependence of the world has seen an increase in the international dimensions in both research and teaching in institutions of higher education, especially since higher education is required to serve the needs of many, including, individuals, communities, and countries (Knight, 2008). Internationalisation is able to provide institutions with “tools” which allow them to gauge and identify unique solutions for a variety of issues, such as challenges relating to management, academic teaching and learning, and research (Knight, 2008). While this is often seen as a way to strengthen the quality of higher education (Knight, 2008), maintaining standards in a globalised academic environment is difficult to achieve (Altbach, 2015), especially since global academic programmes and degrees are constantly changing and evolving. It becomes more problematic when academic programmes and degrees entering the academic marketplace are motivated by profit rather than by an educational undertaking (Altbach, 2015).

The third institutional-level rationale is student and staff development. When observed at an institutional level, internationalisation is seen as a mechanism to strengthen international and intercultural understanding for students and staff alike (Knight, 2008). Several factors have been identified as contributing to this trend, which

are outlined below. The first factor is conflict. There are an increasing number of conflicts (national, regional, international and cultural) which have led academics to assist students in their understanding of global issues, as well as to appreciate both international and intercultural diversity (Knight, 2008). The second issue which has led to student and staff development is the continued growth and emphasis on the knowledge society, which makes it necessary for students to continually upgrade and develop knowledge and skills (Knight, 2008). Knowledge societies aim to amplify human development through their ability to identify, produce, process, transform, share and utilise information (Bindé, 2004; Targowski, 2021). Not only is it necessary for staff and students to upskill, but it is also important for them to have the necessary skills and an understanding of cultural diversity that would allow them to work and live in environments that are multicultural (Knight, 2008). The final aspect of student and staff development as an institutional-level rationale for the internationalisation of higher education is the development of information and communication technologies (Knight, 2008). These technologies are effective tools that are used to support and coordinate the international activities of an institution by providing opportunities that allow for fast and cost-effective connections that transcend time and distance, as well as allowing for cross-cultural learning, creating and bolstering international relationships, through the appropriation of quality international standards and through the strengthening of relationships with institutions abroad (Gottlieb & Skovdal, 2010). Not only has the internet highlighted the need for a more complex understanding of the world, but it has provided an array of opportunities to do so (Knight, 2008).

The fourth institutional-level rationale for the internationalisation of higher education is income generation. Economic development is unsurprisingly a key motivation for internationalisation. Internationalisation, and the activities associated with it, provide a means to generate additional income for the institution (Knight, 2008). This process is by no means a straightforward one, as the income is often subjected to debates as to where the revenue is directed and whether or not it should be used as profit or as cost recovery (Knight, 2008). Since most public institutions are considered not-for-profit, the surplus funding generated by activities linked to internationalisation should be used as a subsidy for other activities or initiatives on campus (Knight, 2008). Although most would suggest that the income should be reinvested, especially to supplement underfunded aspects of internationalisation, it is inevitably up to each institution to determine where and how the money is allocated (Knight, 2008).

Strategic alliances are the next institution-level rationale used to understand the internationalisation of higher education. As with other rationales, strategic alliances can be seen as both a rationale for, as well as a means to achieve internationalisation (Knight, 2008). In its infancy, internationalisation resulted in institutions reacting to the number of opportunities which allowed for the creation of international institutional linkages (Knight, 2008). Since then, there has been an exponential increase in bilateral and multilateral education agreements. There is variety in the reasoning for these linkages, which include academic, mobility, benchmarking, joint-curriculum or programme development, seminars and conferences, as well as joint research initiatives (Knight, 2008). Agreements between institutions are often difficult to manage, and are often merely paper-based arrangements that are dormant. This however shifts as internationalisation

develops in an institution. At this time, more effort is placed on the development of strategic alliances with distinct purposes and well-defined outcomes (Knight, 2008). From this, networks develop. Despite the fact that networks have well-thought-out, clearly defined objectives, they are more difficult to manage than agreements. These difficulties arise as a result of differences in education systems and cultures (Knight, 2008). Strategic alliances, both at a national and institutional level, is about achieving various objectives, rather than simply creating alliances. These objectives could include academic, scientific, economic, technological, and cultural factors (Knight, 2008).

The final institutional-level rationale is research and knowledge production. Producing and distributing knowledge is a complex and costly process for institutes of higher education. Many current issues are of a global nature, and as such, there is an increasing need for nations to become interdependent, since these issues cannot be addressed at a national level. The international dimension of research and knowledge production is a primary rationale for the internationalisation of higher education, as outlined by both institutions and national governments (Knight, 2008).

Although the arguments put forward above show a variety of motivations for the internationalisation of higher education, it is important to note that the motivations vary widely between the various stakeholders. Accordingly, no two institutions, government departments or countries will have the same motivations for the internationalisation of higher education (Knight, 2008).

3.3.2.3. *Opportunities and challenges of internationalisation in higher education*

As with many situations, the internationalisation of higher education presents a number of opportunities and challenges. Many of these opportunities and challenges are created in the complex and rapidly changing environment created by internationalisation, and this makes it difficult for countries and institutions to maintain control (van de Wende, 2007). The opportunities and challenges of internationalisation are controversial – many new opportunities have been created, but internationalisation has also increased and recreated a number of unequal divisions within the political economy of global education (Zezeza, 2012). While the processes (of globalisation and modernisation) which have led to the internationalisation of higher education happen concurrently, the development generated is layered with inequality, divergence and contradictions (Gacel-Ávila, 2005). Potential opportunities do exist within the framework of internationalisation, but the global educational context is by nature uneven (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). Therefore, institutions with a greater number of resources will be better equipped to determine how and how much they want to internationalise themselves, resulting in a disparity in both the quality and quantity of the various activities (Rumbley, *et al.*, 2012). A competitive international environment has the possibility of resulting in both winners and losers, the implications of which can affect not only the educational opportunities of individual students, but the focus and activities of institutions of higher education, as well as potentially affecting the performance of national economies (Rumbley, *et al.*, 2012). Assumptions about internationalisation abound, as some presume that by increasing the international aspects of teaching, research and service, that value is automatically added to the quality of the higher education system (Knight, 1999), when in reality it is not that

simple; it needs to be asked which international dimension should be leading the way to internationalisation (Jiang, 2008).

Internationalisation does present the opportunity for local knowledge to be incorporated into higher education, thereby reducing the dominance that Western knowledge has in the higher education realm, and creating a level playing field (Jiang, 2008). In order for this ideal to be met, however, neoliberal ideology would need to be abandoned. A neoliberal ideology would promote uniformity, and since Western values are predominant, these values would be chosen in favour of local knowledge. In a neoliberal context, standardisation is necessary as higher education becomes a type of knowledge economy for sale in the global education market (Jiang, 2008). Neoliberalism leads to a loss of autonomy and of distinctive cultures (Jiang, 2008). Internationalisation is connected with international power and dominance, which is evident by those who voice their support of internationalisation, most of whom have Western ideals, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) (Jiang, 2008). It has been suggested that those who “praise internationalisation of higher education almost unconditionally, and push aside the anxieties of less powerful actors” should be marked with suspicion as they tend to be the most powerful and influential actors who stand to gain the most from the internationalisation of higher education (Teichler, 1999, p. 9).

Since the economic rationales for the internationalisation of higher education dominate many of the other rationales, the realm is characterised by the commodification and marketisation of higher education (Jiang, 2008). This has created an industry that is worth billions of dollars where higher education is sold as a new source of profit (Asmal,

n.d.). There are a multitude of issues that are created when higher education becomes a service and commodity. One such concern is the erosion of the collective knowledge base since knowledge will then move from a collective (Erwin, as cited in Asmal, n.d.) to singularity as institutions compete with one another for students. Higher education is about more than simply attaining a degree, it plays a role in realising “equity, development, justice and democracy” (Council on Higher Education (CHE), 1999), in fostering the values of democracy, creating critical citizens, as well as shaping new generations of thinkers and actors who will shape a nation. While internationalisation may be important for fostering global connectedness, a country should not have to sacrifice its national culture and identity, its needs and future because players (such as the WTO) advocate for freer trade and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATS) legalises it. Free trade in this regard represents the pursuit of economic gains in favour of knowledge (Jiang, 2008).

Most countries who are at risk of the negative implications of the internationalisation of higher education are those in the global south, where internationalisation can reinforce historical inequalities (Zezeza, 2012). Developed countries, like the United States, remain relatively unaffected by internationalisation, as there is no need to restructure the institutional and intellectual foundations upon which their higher education system is built (Zezeza, 2012). Unlike developed countries, developing countries face the possibility of having their development hampered by foreign models, as well as the threat of losing highly educated citizens through what is known as the “brain drain” (Zezeza, 2012, p. 12).

Both the international opportunities for academic mobility and the effects of international mobility are unequal. The brain drain phenomenon occurs when academic talents move from one location to other parts of the world permanently. This movement can equate to a net loss for some countries (such as those in the global south); it also creates more advantages for the receiving countries (mostly developed countries) (Rumbley, *et al.*, 2012). Skilled manpower is an important asset for any nation (Madgavkar, Schaninger, Smit, Woetzel, Samandari, Carlin, Seong & Chockalingam, 2022) in the development process but this asset is gradually disappearing from the African continent into other parts of the world and concerns about this phenomenon have been expressed at various levels. Although some amount of mobility is obviously necessary if African countries are to integrate into the global economy, the migration of huge numbers of students and skilled persons poses the threat of a skills deficit which can affect growth and development (Egron-Polak, 2012). While there is little doubt that highly skilled workers are scarce in many developing countries, it is also true that many academics, scientists, engineers, medical doctors and other highly trained professionals from developing countries work in the developed world. In 2020, the number of persons living in a country outside of their birthplace reached 281 million, representing a growth of international migrants of more than 100 million in the past two decades (United Nations (UN), 2021). This growth occurred mainly as a result of labour or family migration (UN, 2021). The actual data on the brain drain phenomenon in Africa is very scarce and the few available statistics are inconsistent.

Student mobility is seen as one of the key elements of the internationalisation of higher education and although is a complex phenomenon, it is increasing (Rumbley, *et*

al., 2012; Wang & Wang, 2022; Yang, Shen & Xu, 2022). Historically, more students and scholars have moved from less-developed countries (countries that exist mainly in the global south) to countries who are wealthier and who possess greater economic power (countries in the global north) (Lanati & Thiele, 2019). Although this trend is changing somewhat, the majority of students in the global south leave their home countries in order to get a degree that is perceived to be better, while fewer students (from developed countries) pursue their degrees at institutions located in the global south. Since students who are able to move internationally to gain part of, or the full degree, are mostly self-funded, the sphere of privilege remains for those who come from high socio-economic backgrounds (International Association of Universities (IAU), 2010). Internationalisation, as a key component of higher education, should mirror one of the key aspects of higher education – equitable access (Rumbley, *et al.*, 2012). This in turn could result in international mobility opportunities, not only for those students who come from privilege, but to a broader and more diverse group of students (Rumbley, *et al.*, 2012).

The internationalisation of higher education does not only provide and encourage opportunities for students and academic staff to become mobile, but programmes offered by institutions are also becoming mobile. Known as cross-border education (also referred to as transnational or borderless education), programme mobility takes on a variety of different forms, such as “sister institutions” of already existing institutions, branch or satellite campuses, as well as collaborative arrangements that exist between universities (Rumbley, *et al.*, 2012). Environments where demand for higher education exceeds the supply (as is the situation in developing countries) provide opportunities for foreign suppliers to step in and meet the needs (Rumbley, *et al.*, 2012). Unfortunately, many of

these foreign suppliers aim to make a profit, and as such their motivations are focused on monetary incentives, rather than on the delivery of high-quality education. The potential problems in cross-border programme mobility affect both the providers and the host countries. These potential problems are outlined in the table below, along with examples.

Table 3.2 Summary of potential problems with cross-border mobility

Entity	Problem (All problems adapted from Rumbley, et al., 2012, p. 11)	Example
Providers	Lack of understanding regarding the cultural and regulatory framework in host countries.	Bond University (Australia) was one of 10 business schools operating in South Africa whose MBA was discredited by the Council on Higher Education in 2004, as they failed to meet minimum standards (Fin24, 2004).
	Unrealistic expectations of the partnership dynamics. More specifically it creates issues when there is a lack of clarity on what can be achieved and by when.	Monash University opened a branch campus in South African in 2000 but struggled to turn a profit for many years after opening. One of the reasons this operating loss occurred was because the initial prediction for enrolments at the institution would be 300 students when in reality, only 25 students enrolled (Maslen, 2008). Three years after opening the student population at the campus remained low, with fewer than 500 students (Maslen, 2008). The prediction for student numbers and for money generated through fees was based on market research done in South Africa, with a focus on the perception of foreign education providers, course offerings, cost of studies, degree choices, as well as campus facilities and location (Maslen, 2008). In

		<p>2013, Laureate International Universities became the majority shareholder of the institution (IIE MSA, 2019). With this change in shareholder size came a rebranding of the institution from Monash South Africa to MSA. In 2017 both Monash University and Laureate agreed to explore the possibility of concluding the joint venture and sought to find a local operator to further develop the campus (Monash University, 2019). MSA was sold to the locally operated education group AdvTech on 11 September 2018 (Monash University, 2019), where it was incorporated into The Independent Institute of Education (The IIE), ADVTECH's higher education subsidiary (IIE MSA, 2019). In 2019, the institution underwent yet another renaming and rebranding reflecting the new owners and is now operating under the name IIE MSA (IIE MSA, 2019).</p>
	<p>Short-term financial gains are often motivators for institutions to launch branch campuses, but they may lead to major financial losses.</p>	<p>After receiving more than \$22.4 million in grants and loans from the Singapore government, the University of New South Wales decided to close its branch campus due to a lack of students (Alexander, 2007). The campus only operated for one semester before the institution decided to close. Not only did the university have to repay the loans, but their reputation was also slightly tarnished as a result of their failure abroad (Alexander, 2007).</p>
	<p>When not carefully planned, other losses may occur. These include loss of academic freedom, loss of equality, rights and opportunities for students and staff.</p>	<p>With an increase in academia globally, many new markets have opened up and some American universities moved in quickly to fill the gap. Universities with programmes in China for example note that although there is some level of academic freedom, internet censorship remains an obstacle,</p>

		<p>which has led to some institutions practicing self-censorship to avoid offending the host country (Ubell, 2018). The desire to maintain partnerships has led some university administrators to forgo academic freedom (Ubell, 2018).</p>
Host Countries	<p>Less wealthy countries, especially those who lack a regulatory framework, are unable to safeguard their citizens from educational institutions offering low quality programmes, or who are offering programmes without any sort of accreditation.</p>	<p>The South African Department of Higher Education and Training has become ruthless in their pursuit of colleges and institutions which are offering higher education programmes without registration by the Department. This clamp down continues as a result of a flood in the number of institutions, many of which operate as “fly-by-nights”, taking money from potential students (in the form of registration fees, study fees and fees for certain resources) before disappearing (News24, 2011).</p> <p>While the South African government has been able to clamp down on these types of fraudulent institutions, many developing countries are not in a position to do so, and as a result, their education market becomes saturated with sub-par institutions, many of which have no formal registration or accreditation.</p>
	<p>National and cultural contexts are often ignored and as such the imported curricula and teaching methods are unsuitable.</p>	<p>Cultural differences vary by location, and can at times be overlooked by the institutions that are providing higher education across borders. In student-centred education, like that of ODL, socio-cultural differences can take place in class interactions (Luo & Shao, 2022). One such example is students from mainland China and Hong Kong who study in Macao, who may experience confusion by Cantonese local slangs used by other students (Cheung, 2013). Although the two regions (Hong</p>

		<p>Kong and Macao) are sovereign territories that form part of the People’s Republic of China, they are not governed as part of mainland China and therefore have a high level of autonomy, including differences in language, cultural gaps, as well as differences in teaching (Trent & DeCoursey, 2011; Benson, 2012; Cheung, 2013; Zhang, 2019).</p>
	<p>Quality of offerings is often lost as massification of higher education takes place. An ever-increasing student population is required by developing countries in order to compete in an already developed marketplace and to become modernised. Institutions take advantage of this by setting up campuses in these regions.</p>	<p>It is becoming easier for institutions, even those with a good reputation, to provide inadequate education to students enrolled in their campuses abroad, since the regulatory agencies in the country of exportation often overlook the activities and practices taking place abroad (Zezeza, 2012). The rise in “academic fraud” (Hallak & Poisson, 2007) is aided by internationalisation and advances in and greater accessibility of the internet (Zezeza, 2012).</p>
	<p>Local priorities are overlooked by the providers as a way to keep operating costs low and profits high.</p>	<p>Foreign providers are reluctant to offer courses that require a large outflow of money required to develop the necessary infrastructure (Rumbley, et al, 2012). Setting up laboratories is costly, as is investing in other high-tech equipment, therefore, many institutions avoid offering courses where such things are required, regardless of whether there is a need for those programmes in the host country or not. This avoidance of certain courses can put a limitation on a country’s planned trajectory for development.</p>

Ultimately, in order to limit the potential problems that could arise from cross-border programme mobility, the reasons for choosing to establish a branch in the host country should balance local needs and provider objectives, and ensure that the partnership is

sustainable (Rumbley, et al., 2012). All types of mobility, whether student mobility or programme mobility, remain largely unequal (Sabzalieva, Mutize & Yerovi, 2022). While student mobility sees many students moving from the global south to the global north, programme mobility results in the export of institutions, programmes and curricula from the well-developed global north to the less-developed global south (Zezeza, 2012).

Despite overwhelming evidence outlining all the potential challenges of the cross-border mobility of students and academic programmes, there are some opportunities as well. An example of such a benefit is the economic growth that can be gained by a country having students who study abroad. Student mobility is believed to automatically benefit the host country economically, both in the short and long term (Reinold, 2018). Short term, the economy is boosted by the presence of international students who contribute to the generation of revenue, as students living abroad would be active participants in the local market, since they are required to make necessary purchases for their basic day-to-day living (Reinold, 2018). At the same time however, the cost to study away from home is often higher, since international students pay the institution more in the way of fees. The host country's economy is also able to benefit from international students in the long term if those international students choose to remain in the country (Reinhold, 2018). If the students remain after graduation, their presence bolsters the local pool of well-educated workers, thereby enhancing the domestic knowledge economy (Reinold, 2018). While it can be argued that local economies are beneficiaries of the wealth brought through the international exchange of students, it is important to remember that when referring to student mobility and programme mobility, in most cases it is the economically well-off countries that continue to benefit, whilst the economies in the global south

continue to suffer. Students are exported to countries in the global north and programmes are imported to countries in the global south. Another example of an opportunity created through the mobility of students, especially talented students, is that it could bolster a university's reputation, as well as enhance their programme offerings, since there would be an increase in global competition (Reinold, 2018).

In a bid to remain relevant in a world where competition for students is now on a global scale, many institutions rely on international university rankings, such as Times Higher Education (THE) and the Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU). These ranking systems created a new standard against which competing institutions could compare and reposition themselves so that their international reputation is enhanced (Zezeza, 2012). This quest for global positioning has resulted in changes in institutional behaviour, as well as their missions and priorities (Zezeza, 2012). Another side effect of trying to bolster international standing through global rankings is the loss of disciplines such as social science and humanities in favour of disciplines that are considered to be more advantageous, such as natural sciences and marketable professions, such as business and engineering (Zezeza, 2012). At the same time any government subsidies are diverted to the institutions who are more likely to achieve world-class status (Zezeza, 2012).

One main criticism of internationalisation is that although there are many advantages (academic, economic/social and political), it remains out of reach for many (Ergin & Morche, 2018). Mobility is a key, but by no means the only component of the internationalisation of higher education, but when considered from a physical point of view, only a very small percentage (2%) (UNESCO, as cited in Ergin & Morche, 2018) of the total global student population is able to internationalise (study abroad) (Ergin &

Morche, 2018). The number of internationally mobile students has steadily declined over the last few decades (Rumbley, et al., 2012). Despite the fact that physical mobility in higher education is largely inaccessible, internationalisation remains a priority for the 21st century. While physical mobility remains important to the concept of internationalisation, it has resulted in the exclusion of many students. Internationalisation at Home (IaH) (Beelen & Jones, 2015) and Internationalisation of the Curriculum (IoC) (Leask, 2015) have created ways to ensure that internationalisation becomes more inclusive, thus allowing for a greater number of students to experience the benefits of mobility, without being physically mobile (Ergin & Morche, 2018).

3.3.2.4. Internationalisation at home, of the curriculum, and at a distance

The concept of internationalisation can be separated into two interdependent concepts – Internationalisation at Home (IaH), and Internationalisation Abroad (IA) (Knight, 2006). Although it is often regarded as a narrow focus in the overall idea of internationalisation, internationalisation at home is a complex term, encompassing a range of elements (curriculum, research and collaboration, and extracurricular activities), as well as the associated expectations (Agnew & Khan, 2014; Beelen & Jones, 2015; Sierra-Heudo, Bruton & Fernández, 2022). Defined as student participation in an internationally related activity, driven by the intention to bring internationalisation to a greater number of students, internationalisation at home, creates mobile students through the use of technology (Crowther, Joris, Otten, Nilsson, Teekens, & Wächter, 2015).

Unlike IA, IaH focuses more on activities that promote the development of international understanding and intercultural skills in students, (Jones & de Wit, 2011; Beelen & Jones, 2015), and by doing so, prepare students to participate in a global world

(Jones & de Wit, 2011). International and intercultural skills can therefore be acquired by students, without them leaving their home country (Wächter, 2003). This does mean that IA does not allow students to develop international understandings, nor does it mean that the curriculum is ignored in IaH (Beelen & Jones, 2015).

A core value of higher education is to create graduates that have the necessary skills and knowledge to live, work and become productive citizens in a globalised world (Hudzik, 2011). IaH is the actualisation of this fundamental goal (Robson, 2017). Achieving the goal requires a merger between international and local perspectives into teaching, research and extracurricular activities (Robson, 2017). Achieving internationalisation can only be achieved if the process includes IaH, but a key element of this is the internationalisation of the curriculum (IoC) (Robson, 217).

The term internationalisation of the curriculum was defined by Leask (2015) as redesigning the curriculum (and as such learning outcomes, assessments, teaching methods and support services relating to a specific programme) to incorporate international, intercultural, and global elements (Leask 2015). This definition therefore suggests that through the use of IoC, internationalisation criteria are able to move beyond simply the language of instruction and the presence of international students that came to be synonymous with the understanding of what it means for a university to be internationalised. This new concept (IoC) focuses on both mobile and non-mobile students equally, by assimilating intercultural competence into the core of the curriculum, and also into the discipline (Gregersen-Hermans, 2017).

Global interdependency, local and global interconnectivity, and the changing nature of knowledge are all motivators for the internationalisation of the curriculum

(Agnew & Van Balkom, 2009; Leask, 2009; Clifford 2010; Agnew, 2012). Not only does IoC promote innovative and creative thinking by providing students with skills, knowledge and experiences needed to engage with and respond to issues that are of global importance (Agnew & Khan, 2014), IoC highlights the importance of both the content of the curriculum, the teaching and learning methods, as well as the support structures relating to the particular study programme (Leask, 2009). Since IoC incorporates all aspects of traditional and non-traditional teaching and learning (Leask, 2009), it is often considered as the most challenging aspect of internationalisation (Agnew & Khan, 2014).

There are however suggestions for ways to achieve internationalisation of the curriculum, such as using comparative international literature, guest lecturers, local cultural groups or international companies to present a topic, as well as hosting guest lecturers from international partner universities (Beelen & Jones, 2015). Case studies, especially international case studies and practice are other examples of how to incorporate internationalisation into the curriculum (Beelen & Jones, 2015). Technology-based tools, such as digital learning and online collaboration, can also provide many internationalisation opportunities for all students (Beelen & Jones, 2015). There is an element of altruism in trying to achieve IaH through IoC (Campbell, 2010). In transforming learning, there is an increase in accountability in the HE sector since universities need to generate evidence that their programme offerings are able to produce employable global graduates (Campbell, 2010).

Distance education provides an opportunity for internationalisation to occur in a local setting (Ergin & Morche, 2018). Not only is distance education a useful tool in the pursuit of internationalisation, but it also provides students with independence with

regards to time and physical space (Ergin & Morche, 2018). The barriers associated with physical student mobility are removed when students are able to engage with international institutions via digital mobility which is associated with distance education, thereby bridging the gap between the global north and the global south (Ergin & Morche, 2018).

The phenomena of IaH was first described as a metaphor to explain a newly created area in higher education which incorporated both internationalisation at home and internationalisation away perspectives, where international learners, studying through online platforms remained in their local contexts, but had almost no contact with the education culture of their country (Ramanau, 2016).

The most widely accepted definition of IaH sees it integrating international and intercultural aspects into both the formal and informal curriculum intentionally so that all students within the domestic learning environment benefit from the process (Beelen & Jones, 2015). Studies which focused on the benefits of traditional internationalisation (where students study abroad) indicated that these students became equipped with a variety of transversal skills (skills such as curiosity, problem solving, empathy and communication) which many consider to be vital employability skills (Beelen interviewed by Huerta-Jimenez & Sanchez, 2018). Students who remained at home, unable to travel abroad, are therefore missing out on the opportunities to learn these skills. The intention behind IaH is to enable all students to gain these skills, and in a sense, to level the playing field for the majority of students who are unable to study abroad (Beelen interviewed by Huerta-Jimenez & Sanchez, 2018).

Beelen (in Huerta-Jimenez & Sanchez, 2018) identified several key characteristics of IaH that separate it from the other types of internationalisations:

1. IaH should be viewed as a tool to achieve internationalisation, rather than an aim of internationalisation;
2. IaH should differ in approach and outcomes across disciplines and programmes;
3. in order to successfully achieve IaH, local and cultural practices need to be included. In areas with great diversity, this is relatively easy to achieve, but cultural groups and international companies can also aid in the internationalisation of the curriculum;
4. IaH needs to be part of a compulsory curriculum in order to ensure that it is accessed by all students;
5. IaH needs to focus on the outcomes rather than the inputs needed in order to achieve it;
6. Key to the success of IaH is knowing that incoming students and the use of English as a language of instruction are not necessary in order to achieve IaH;
7. Since IaH focuses on creating experiences for all students, regardless of their ability to study abroad, IaH views any type of physical mobility as an added bonus; and
8. IaH needs to be controlled by academics, since they are the ones who construct the curriculum and are therefore responsible for

ensuring that internationalisation is incorporated into the teaching and learning components of a specific programme.

Table 3.3 Various ways that IaH can be implemented (adapted from the interview of Beelen by Huerta-Jimenez, & Sanchez, 2018)

Types of implementations of Internationalisation at Home		
Type	Description	Advantages & disadvantages
Add on	IaH is added to the curriculum without clear links to the rest of the curriculum.	This is the easiest way to include IaH into a curriculum, but it is not ideal since the added components remain detached from the rest of the curriculum.
Infusion	Occurs when activities are added to the curriculum as a way to incorporate IaH, but the aim and purpose of the activities was not clearly identified prior to implementation.	This usually occurs when academic staff are excited about IaH and want to immediately incorporate it into their curriculum, but without a clearly defined aim, the activity is of little value. Without an aim, the purpose of the activity remains unclear and therefore the benefit of activity in achieving IaH is also unclear.
Transformation	Takes place when international and intercultural elements are built into an existing curriculum. As such, the curriculum becomes internationalised through the intentional (and thoughtful) addition of international activities and elements.	This method is the best method, but it is also the most challenging, since both the curriculum and the learning outcomes need to become internationalised.

Technology is changing the higher education realm. For this reason, IA and IaH need to be reconsidered in a way that incorporates the technological advancements that create

greater global connections worldwide (Hénard, Diamond & Roseveare, 2012). These advancements create global opportunities for students who are now able to access international tertiary programmes remotely, without being restricted by geographical boundaries and borders (OECD, 2017). One such evolution, spurred by technological innovations, is that of distance education, which has, and continues to provide innovative ways for students to study through its constant adaptation to and evolution through technology (OECD, 2017). Distance education has resulted in the development of a third category of international education (Mittelmeier, Rienties, Rogaten, Gunter & Raghuram, 2019). This third category, representing a blend of IA and IaH, sees students remaining at home, whilst still participating in programmes that originate in other countries is known as internationalisation at a distance (IaD) (Mittelmeier et al., 2019). Redefined in 2019, IaD is now considered to be all forms of education that take place across international boundaries through the use of technology, where students, staff and institutional provisions are separated by geographical distance (Mittelmeier et al., 2019).

In summary, globalisation is an ongoing process which has inevitably led to the internationalisation of higher education (International Association of Universities (IAU), n.d.). Internationalisation is seen as an intentional strategy aimed at improving both the quality and the relevance of higher education (IAU, n.d.). Internationalisation as a concept has been continually evolving and as such has a variety of definitions. The most widely accepted definition sees internationalisation as an “intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for

all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society” (de Wit, Hunter, Howard & Egron-Polak, 2015, p. 29).

Key to this refined definition is the need to make internationalisation an intentional process rather than a passive experience (IAU, n.d.). For this reason, internationalisation should not be viewed as a goal, but rather as a method used to enhance the quality and excellence of higher education and research (IAU, n.d.). Furthermore, internationalisation needs to shift focus from being centred on economic rationales and returns, to where internationalisation serves societal needs (IAU, n.d.). While globalisation affects all institutions, individual institutions will experience pressures differently since they exist in different contexts and have a variety of needs (IAU, n.d.). Therefore, it is argued, a “one-size-fits-all” approach to internationalisation should be abandoned in favour of an individual, more tailored approach that is constructed by each institution (IAU, n.d.).

Beginning as an off-shoot of globalisation, internationalisation has changed to become a key goal in higher education (Knight & de Wit, 2018). It forms part of all aspects of mobility, including student and staff mobility programme and provider mobility, as well as internationalisation at home (Zawacki-Richter, Conrad, Bozkurt, Aydin, Bedenlier, Jung, Stöter, Veletsianos, Blaschke, Bond, Broens, Bruhn, Dolch, Kalz, Kerres, Kondakci, Marin, Mayrberger, Müskens, Naidu, Qayyum, Roberts, Sangrà, Loglo, Slagter van Tryon, Xiao, 2020). Both internationalisation and open education are important components of higher education, and while they were once studied as an individual component, researchers are beginning to recognise that there is a connection between the two (Zawacki-Richter, Conrad, Bozkurt, et al., 2020). Open distance learning is able to facilitate internationalisation, allowing institutions the ability to become globally

engaged (Kinser, 2014). Traditionally, internationalisation focused on the outward mobility of students and staff. This however excluded the vast majority of students who would otherwise remain immobile, unable to contribute to the goals of internationalisation. Therefore, focus has shifted from a minority of mobile students, to a greater majority of students who could contribute to internationalisation by remaining at home, and studying via open distance learning. The concept of open distance learning and its contributions to internationalisation are described in detail in the section that follows.

3.4 Open Distance Learning

3.4.1 Understanding Open Distance Learning

DE is an instructional mode where the teacher and student are separated by distance, location and time (Casey, 2008; Aucoin & Chao, 2016; Raouna, 2022; Masalimova, Khvatova, Chikileva, Zvyagintseva, Stepanova & Melnik, 2022). The basic concept of DE is simply an arrangement between the university and the student to deliver education regardless of the geographical separation that exists between tutors, lecturers and students (Chawinga & Zozie, 2016). This arrangement is beneficial to the student since it provides quality education to students who are seldom able to access the campus (Lentell, 2012).

Open distance learning (ODL) is a concept that was constructed on the basis of distance education, but included an aspect of “openness”, which sees a greater number of students being able to access higher education since the educational institution has chosen to remove barriers that previously excluded students from tertiary education (Gourley & Lane, 2009). Within the framework of ODL, a person’s background, or

previous advantage or disadvantage becomes entirely irrelevant and therefore allows for a greater number of students to enter into higher education (Gourley & Lane, 2009). ODL seeks to establish equity in the education system via different modes of education, including, but not limited to correspondence and online learning (Bordoloi, 2018).

Not only does ODL provide access to an increasing number of students, it also provides learning opportunities for students in remote locations, who, because of their geographical location, may have been excluded from traditional, campus-based study (Chawinga & Zozie, 2016). Increasing access to higher education through ODL also reduces strain on universities. There has been a sharp increase in the number of students applying for tertiary education, and universities have not always been able to accommodate the increase (Chawinga & Zozie, 2016). Open and distance learning is able to increase the limited number of student places available at campus-based institutions; which tend to have a fewer number of student places, and who also have strict entry requirements; making higher education accessible to a greater number of students worldwide (The Commonwealth of Learning, 2002).

There are several advantages that have led to the growth of ODL programmes in recent years. The most important of these is that ODL programmes allow people to hold positions of employment while studying, as well as increasing accessibility. Since ODL programmes are borderless, the courses can be offered over long distances, catering for students who are widely spread geographically (Perraton, 2000). ODL is a flexible form of learning, that enables learners to take ownership of their learning at a fraction of the cost of traditional institutions (Bordoloi, 2018).

Despite numerous advantages, ODL is not without a number of challenges and disadvantages. One of the most pressing challenges, especially in developing countries is poor information technology infrastructure (Atkins, Brown & Hammond, 2007; Wilson, 2008). Information and communication technologies (ICT) are crucial to the success of modern ODL, and the availability and reliability remain unequal between different countries (Wilson, 2008). Internet access and availability are problematic, with the distribution tending to be centred in large cities, leaving rural areas without much coverage or accessibility (Atkins, Brown & Hammond, 2007). In sub-Saharan Africa, despite the rapid growth in mobile technology, internet access remains limited (Attanasio & Giorgi, n.d.). With only one in every ten households connected to the internet, internet penetration in Africa is significantly lower than the global average: 18% as opposed to the global average of 30% (Attanasio & Giorgi, n.d.).

Although some technological barriers still exist, many students enrolled in ODL are able to connect to, and engage with their peers. These students use communication applications such as WhatsApp and Facebook to connect with their peers. They also make use of services provided within their communities, such as internet cafes to remain connected to their institutions.

3.4.2 ODL and Internationalisation

Internationalisation in higher education is seen through cross-border exchanges which include but are not limited to the physical movement of students, staff and researchers (Ali, 2011). Key to the concept of internationalisation is open distance learning (Ali, 2011; Bruhn-Zass, 2023). ODL has experienced tremendous growth within the last decade, and

it is seen as a vital component of higher education provision (Ali, 2011). The use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has aided this growth, allowing more students to access higher education through ODL (Ali, 2011). ICTs also enrich the learning experiences of ODL students.

The fundamental value of ODL is that it should create open, accessible, flexible and equitable opportunities for education (Ali, 2011). This has meant that new groups of students were created. ODL created opportunities for people to gain entrance to university study without them having to leave their day jobs (Ali, 2011). In general, these students study part-time whilst still holding full-time positions of employment and while needing to balance other personal and professional commitments (Ali, 2011). This flexibility in learning makes ODL attractive to older students with families, who hold positions of employment.

Growth in higher education in sub-Saharan Africa is expected to double in the next 25 years to an estimated 400 million students (University of Oxford, 2015). Such growth cannot be accommodated in traditional institutions made of bricks and mortar (Daniel, 1996). ODL presents the best option for institutions to take advantage of financial opportunities, as well as educational and cultural opportunities presented by this growth (Aucoin & Chao, 2016). Despite the many opportunities, a number of challenges will arise. In catering to such a diverse group there is an expectation that all the needs of the students, academics and research staff are met (Aucoin & Chao, 2016). These include educational, personal, as well as professional needs.

There are also a number of educational challenges that can arise from extending learning opportunities to a diverse group of students, where lecturers are expected to

teach students with increased cultural diversity (Aucoin & Chao, 2016). Research has shown that while ODL can be effectively done via the use of technology, cultural differences remain and have the potential to negatively impact learning (Uzuner, 2009; Liu, Liu, Lee & Magjuka, 2010). Interculturalisation and internationalisation of teaching has been suggested as a way to overcome this challenge. Through this process, both students and educators gain insight and skills necessary to achieve intercultural awareness (Teekens, 2003; Leask, 2013; Aucoin & Chao 2016).

Intercultural competence is defined as having the ability to use the necessary skills and cross-cultural sensitivity to develop, maintain and manage relationships with others from a variety of different cultural backgrounds (Deardorff, 2009; Gudykunst, 2004). Intercultural understanding and communication are a key feature in the social/cultural rationale for the internationalisation of higher education (Knight, 1994), and as such, the development of students and staffs' intercultural competence is the primary motivator for the internationalisation of higher education (Pinto, 2018).

Stier (2006) suggests that intercultural competence can be broken down further into two key areas, content-competencies and processual competencies (p. 6). Content-competencies tend to be one-dimensional, focusing on what Stier called the "knowing that-aspects" of both the "other" and the "home" culture (Stier, 2006, p. 6). These understandings often do not extend beyond knowledge about the history, languages, non-verbal behaviours, world-views, values, customs and taboos (to name but a few) of the cultures, which in many instances, is based on stereotypes (Stier, 2006).

Processual competencies differ from content-competencies in that they focus on the nuances and the dynamic character of both intercultural competence and its

interactional context (Stier, 2006). The focus becomes narrower and there is a careful consideration of cultural peculiarities, situational conditions, as well as all the players included in the context (Stier, 2006). Processual competency moves intercultural competence from being about “knowing-that” to “knowing-how” by incorporating intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies (Stier, 2006).

Intrapersonal competency is both an emotional and a cognitive process using interactive skills that allow the individual to view a situation from a multitude of perspectives, as well as to use their understanding in relation to emotional aspects (Stier, 2006). Interpersonal competencies use a variety of interactive skills to detect and interpret non-verbal cues, as well as signals and responses to better understand the situation and the individuals within the situation, and to react in an appropriate manner (Stier, 2006).

Shaped by an increased use in technology, open and distance learning is now accessible to a greater number of students, allowing it to become cross-cultural since programme offerings cross both national and cultural boundaries in order to reach students (Aucoin & Chao, 2016). Although some level of mobility is required, in many instances, physical movement does not happen often, since interactions take place through the use of technology (Aucoin & Chao, 2016). This means that, internationalisation and interculturalisation happen without the need for physical mobility (Aucoin & Chao, 2016). When ODL is viewed as a system, internationalisation can be thought of as a process (Msweli, 2012).

3.4.3 ODL and Educational Mobility

Student mobility in higher education is not a new concept. For decades students have travelled to other institutions where they stayed on-campus and completed units for academic credit (Ruiz-Corbella & Álvarez-González, 2014). Educational mobility adds value in all aspects of a society, and not just for the people involved (Collins & Ho, 2014). Students are however the main beneficiaries, since educational mobility has the potential to enhance cultural capital through the development of knowledge and cultural competencies (Yang & Cheng, 2018). While the number of benefits of educational mobility are fairly obvious, there are however very real limitations. A study of students “studying abroad” through open distance learning found that while educational mobility allowed students to study through a variety of international institutions, those students who were underprivileged both academically and socio-economically had the potential to be “educationally mediocre” (Yang & Chen, 2018).

As internationalisation and globalisation have grown over the years, so too has student mobility in higher education (Yang & Chen, 2018). Mobility has however changed over the years. More recently, mobility has extended to include open distance learning. Information and communication technologies have influenced higher education by creating new pathways for student mobility through greater access to academic resources (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Ruiz-Corbella & Álvarez-González, 2014). This shift means that more students are able to study abroad, but are not physically moving to the host campuses.

Student enrolments in tertiary education outside of their home country has risen from 1.3 million in 1990 (OECD, 2013) to an estimated 5 million in 2014 (ICEF Monitor,

2015). Advances in technology mean that international student mobility will continue to grow. This projected growth is set at 8 million international students within the higher education sector in 2025 (Altbach & Bassett, 2004).

Internationalisation can be expanded through the use of digital technologies (DT) (OECD, 2017). DTs can create virtual classrooms, which allow students to interact with students and faculty who are based in other countries (OECD, 2017). There is a vast array of digital learning assets (such as MOOCs, i.e., Massive Open Online Courses) which can be used to internationalise and enhance the curriculum and teaching programmes (OECD, 2017).

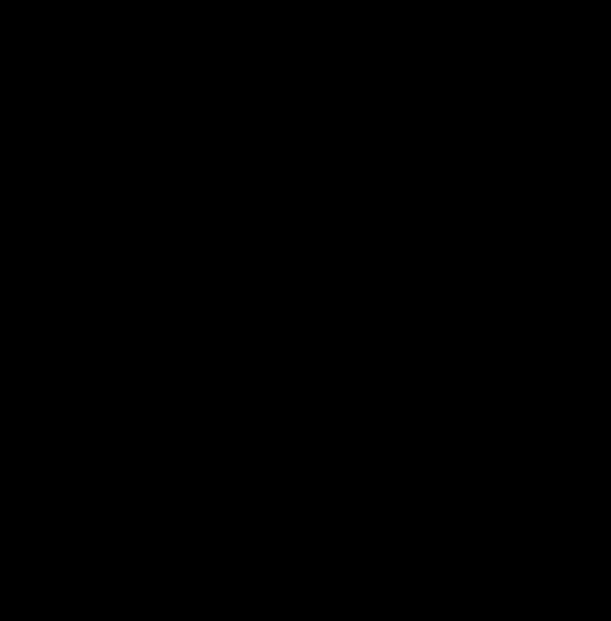
Any form of learning that incorporates virtual elements, which accesses a learning environment through an ICT, and allows for cross-border collaboration between students, teachers and researchers from different backgrounds and cultures is known as virtual mobility (VM) (Bijnens, Boussemaere, Rajagopal, Op de Beeck, & Van Petegem, 2006; Ruiz-Corbella & Álvarez-González, 2014). DTs are a key component in the delivery of distance education as they remove (or reduce) obstacles (such as distance, time, access to resources) that would ordinarily keep people and potential learning opportunities separate (Traxler, 2018).

Technology, and increasingly, new technology has the ability to shape learning in new ways, allowing students to experience new forms of learning, while also reducing the gaps in student mobility, and continuing to internationalise higher education (O'Dowd, 2013). Student mobility is a constantly evolving concept. Internationalisation has shifted from needing physical mobility, to the integration of cultural components into the curriculum, and then onto connecting students and academics in different locations

through the use of technology. The use of synchronous and asynchronous platforms allows students to collaborate on shared projects across all disciplines and allows teachers to create and share online courses for students across the globe, as well as providing virtual internships where students are able to work for international companies (Creelman, 2019).

Table 3.4 Advantages and disadvantages of studying via open distance learning as it relates to student mobility (Adapted from Mahlangu, 2018).

Advantages	Disadvantages
Students studying via ODL are able to apply new learned skills and knowledge directly to their current practices/jobs.	Not all students who study at a distance are equipped with the technological skills needed to make use of information and communication technologies employed by distance education institutions.
Distance education mitigates certain restrictions that are placed on students who study through traditional methods. One such restriction is mobility. Many students are unable to travel abroad for their studies, limited by cost, familial responsibilities and other challenges. DE allows students from various locations to study through the institution, thereby increasing the cultural experiences of the students. This is achieved through the use of asynchronous (online forums) and synchronous (textual and audio/video chatting, email, and phone conversations) platforms.	Situational barriers can hinder students' access to higher education. Situational barriers can occur when a student is unable to cover the cost of their studies and they are forced to drop out. Another situational barrier is insufficient time to complete tasks – holding permanent posts of employment often means that the student may struggle to find time for their studies, and is therefore more likely to drop out or discontinue their studies. Family responsibilities can also result in increased drop-outs for students studying at a distance as they are unable to actively participate in their studies.
ODL offers opportunities for students who would have been otherwise excluded; students who have families or students with full-time employment, who are therefore unable to attend class full time.	Social and administrative barriers also limit student participation in higher education. Students can face challenges if they are unable to communicate effectively with their lecturers, or if they are unable to track their progress in their courses.

<p>ODL offers flexibility in terms of their studies; they decide when and where they want to engage with their study materials.</p>	<p>Not all institutions offer total flexibility and there may be some courses where students are required to log onto a live lecture at a specific time (WGU, 2021). Flexibility can also prove to be a challenge for students who are not self-motivated (WGU, 2021).</p>
<p>Students situated in remote locations are still able to study even though they are far removed from the traditional classroom and therefore their lecturers. In fact, these students actually gain new skills such as self-study, time management, planning and organisation, as well as problem-solving skills.</p>	
<p>There tends to be greater cultural diversity as students can interact with other students from different locations across the globe.</p>	
<p>The online learning component of distance education has the ability to develop opportunities for community engagement among online students.</p>	

3.4.4 Flexibility in Open Distance Learning

Flexibility is one of the advantages of studying via ODL, especially as it relates to student mobility (Mahlangu, 2018). The flexibility provided through ODL not only allows students to study where they are geographically, but it allows them to maintain the various roles and responsibilities they had prior to studying, such as family and work commitments. With the advent and increasing usage of mobile technology, more and more barriers are being breached. Both temporal and physical boundaries between work, home and study are being removed (McCloskey, 2016), and DE students are expected to fulfil all their various roles as if none of the other roles existed. This flexibility can create conflicts as family, work and study are in competition with one another (Romero, 2011).

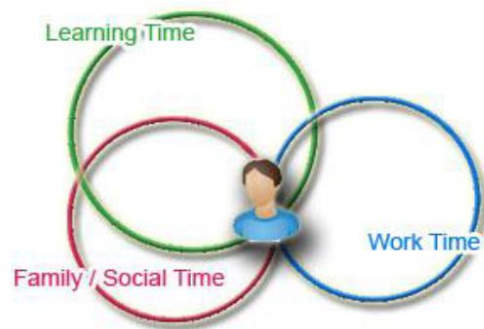


Figure 3.3: Distance education work-life-learning balance (Romero, 2011, p. 45)

Figure 3.3 shows the overlapping nature of temporal spheres a student engaged in DE would experience. It highlights the struggle the student faces when trying to balance their family and work time with their studies, which due to its flexible nature, allows for overlaps to occur in a variety of ways (Romero, 2011). Distance education allows learning to take place at the same time as work or family commitments (Romero, 2011; 45). While DE can be “spaceless” it is not “timeless” (Romero, 2011, p. 44).

Education adds the third dimension which is neither home nor work, but which straddles the boundaries between the two (Berry & Hughes, 2019). The learning can take place either at home, in the evening or over weekends, or at work, using resources that promote learning. Unlike other students, it is not easy for DE students to follow a regular study schedule, because, unlike traditional campus-based institutions, there are no

classes scheduled at specific times. It is therefore the responsibility of the DE student to carve out time to fulfil their learning obligations.

These blurred lines and overlapping of contexts can be addressed if a student is able to create well-defined boundaries that allow them to successfully balance their work activities and family time with their learning requirements. Not only is self-efficacy a useful gauge of success (Farrell & Brunton, 2020), but studies have shown that organisational and time-management skills are necessary skills for DE students (Brown, Hughes, Keppell, Hard & Smith, 2015; Buck, 2016). A work–life–study balance can be achieved with the use of temporal regulation competency, also known simply as time management (Romero, 2011).

In summary, open distance learning creates unique opportunities for students by bringing the classroom to the student, while at the same time opening up opportunities for students to engage with other learners from different cultural backgrounds. There appear to be a greater variety of advantages for students who study at a distance, many of which have been discussed at length in this chapter. Technology has created an entirely new space in distance education, connecting the globe through a variety of learning platforms, which allows for truly internationalised learning to take place.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter began with a presentation of spatial diffusion as the theoretical framework for this study since the theory explains the movement of “things”; in this case, knowledge; across a geographic region. It also accounts for the various carriers and barriers which have influence over this movement. This is key to this study as it addressed

two of the three aims of this study, namely, the effectiveness of ODL programmes in creating access to higher education despite geographic location, and, analysing the flow of knowledge across physical borders.

The chapter continued with a comparison of the terms globalisation and internationalisation, and identified that while the two terms are often used interchangeably, internationalisation is actually a response to globalisation. This comparison led to the definition of the term internationalisation that would be used throughout this study. The definition is based on Knights' (1994), where internationalisation in HE is seen as a process, incorporating both intercultural and international dimensions in to all the aspects of an academic institution.

Four key rationales (political, economic, socio-cultural and academic) of internationalisation were identified and discussed. However, the rationales of key importance to HE are socio-cultural and academic, since they share similarities in the way that they are measured.

At a national level, education has become a commodity, where some countries export education for financial gain, whilst others import education for the benefit of society, since education leads to nation-building. At an institutional level however, internationalisation varies from place to place, and so to do the rationales for it. For some institutions, international reputation and global profile are important, but for others, international standards, relating to the overall quality of the programmes on offer are of greater significance. Other institutions see value in the development of student and staff as being key to the institution's internationalisation. This rationale sees staff and students

benefit from the international and intercultural diversity that comes from internationalisation.

Much like national-level rationales for internationalisation, so too do institution-level rationales focus on the economic benefits of internationalisation.

Internationalisation in HE creates both opportunities and challenges. The most common challenge is that of inequality, which can be exacerbated by the already uneven nature of education. Internationalisation would have an increase in the interconnectedness between individuals and institutions, but without redistributing power and resources at the same time, the existing patterns of inequality that create uneven patterns in the global higher education environment may (Stein, 2021). As such, institutions with a greater number of resources will be better equipped to create opportunities for internationalisation. Not only are institutions negatively impacted by this, but so too are students. Countries and institutions in the global south are at greater risk of being affected by these negative implications, since internationalisation can intensify historic inequalities created as a result of colonisation, which can lead to a brain drain. Although internationalisation encourages cross-border mobility, it often results in students moving from the global south to the global north, which again, would result in a brain drain.

One key opportunity does however exist. This opportunity creates the potential for local knowledge to be preserved and incorporated into HE. This however requires the abandonment of neoliberal ideologies, which promote uniformity and generally favour Western values over local knowledge.

There are however ways that potential pitfalls created by internationalisation can be avoided. This is through internationalisation at home (IaH). IaH incorporates all aspects of higher education, such as the curriculum, research and collaboration, as well as extra-curricular activities. Unlike traditional internationalisation, IaH creates student mobility through the use of technology, rather than via the physical mobility of students and staff. IaH is believed to be more useful to students since it promotes and encourages international understanding and intercultural skills, which are necessary for graduates whose working environments are increasingly global in nature. These skills can be gained without the need for students to leave their home country, or study abroad, making it an ideal form of internationalisation. The most effective way to achieve IaH is through open distance learning (ODL).

ODL allows students to pursue their higher education goals without leaving their home, and creates opportunities for students who would otherwise be excluded from studying based on their unique set of circumstances, such as being employed full-time, familial responsibilities, or being a mature student.

The chapter that follows is a continuation of the literature review, becoming more inward facing as it concentrates on higher education in Africa, but specifically in the South African Development Community and Unisa.

CHAPTER 4

HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA:

SOUTH AFRICA AS AN EXPORTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION TO SOUTHERN

AFRICA

4.1. Introduction

Chapter 3 brought to attention internationalisation and provided literature related to this context. Since this study focuses on the role of open distance learning (ODL) institutions in internationalisation, the chapter also looked at the concept of ODL.

This chapter, however, focuses on the second objective of the research, which is to understand the role of these institutions in creating internationalisation within the higher education context in Southern Africa. Since this relates to the research aim, it is necessary to provide a brief overview on how higher education in Africa has been shaped and altered by colonial influences, since it influences both the students and way they learn.

The context of this study focuses on students within the Southern African Development Community (SADC). This chapter therefore reviews higher education within this region by looking first at the background to the formation and goals of SADC and then shifts to focus specifically on the trends in HE in the region.

Although there are a number of HE institutions within the region, South Africa remains the primary exporter of HE in the SADC region. This chapter explores the factors that attract students to South Africa before ODL in the region is investigated.

The chapter continues by critically analysing HE in South Africa. A historical overview demonstrates how HE in South Africa has evolved as the country shifted to a

democratic society in 1994. It then continues with a look at how HE has changed since then.

The final section of this chapter evaluates the University of South Africa (Unisa), the study area for this research. As part of this, the chapter looks at the factors that make Unisa a centre for ODL, as well as the elements that influence student success in both ODL and at the institution.

4.2. Brief History and Overview of Higher Education in Africa

Although African higher education is not new, most, if not all universities located in Africa were created to follow a Western model of academic organisation (Teferra & Altbach, 2004). This Western model is a direct result of colonialism in Africa. This influence created a number of challenges for students, including limited access, language barriers, limited freedom and a limited curriculum (Teferra & Altbach, 2004). Although many of these limitations have since been removed, the legacy of colonialism remains.

Despite the changes that have occurred in African since colonialism ended, the continent remains with academic institutions that have been shaped and organised by models of the various colonial powers in Europe (Teferra & Altbach, 2004; Teferra, 2008). Consequently, higher education in Africa, as is the case in many developing regions globally, is a relic of colonial policies (Altbach & Selvaratnam, 2011; Lulat, 2003; Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2013).

There are three major ways that European colonialism shaped modern higher education in Africa: through language, limited freedom and a limited curriculum. These factors are examined in more detail in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Colonial influences on higher education

Colonial influence	Explanation
1. Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language of the coloniser became the language of instruction. • Existing languages were replaced by the colonial language (Teferra & Altbach, 2004; 24). • Over 2,000 languages are spoken in Africa, yet the primary methods of instruction at universities remain that of the colonisers.
2. Limited freedom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic freedom and the autonomy of HE institutions became limited (Teferra & Altbach, 2004). • European education during the colonial periods shifted the traditional roles (Teferra, 2008; Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2013). • Education moved from being society-centric to being an extension of colonial ideologies (Teferra, 2008; 45; Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2013).
3. Limited curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The colonial curriculum was created to execute colonial agendas (Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2013). • Colonial education created African elites necessary for colonial administration (Ashby, 1961; Swaniker, 2017).

Although independence is a national reality for most of Africa, the legacy of colonialism remains a key factor in African higher education (Teferra & Altbach, 2004). Modern higher education systems in Africa are still considered to be a product of European colonial frameworks (Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2013). Independence brought with it a sense of hope, promised freedoms, prosperity and empowerment (Swaniker, 2017). Political independence, however, did not guarantee educational independence, especially at the tertiary level (Lewis, 1961).

Despite most African countries achieving independence by the 1960s, newly created African governments inherited institutions that did not reflect local and African interests (Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2013). With both nation-building and the preservation of African identity being expected from institutions of higher education, universities shouldered multiple responsibilities as agents of development (Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2013; Swaniker, 2017).

4.3 Higher Education in the Southern African Development Community

4.3.1 1 Background to the Southern African Development Community

Established as the successor to the Southern African Development Coordination Conference of 1980, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) was established in 1992 with the purpose of achieving development and economic growth, alleviating poverty, enhancing the standard and quality of life of the peoples of Southern Africa, as well as to support the socially disadvantaged through regional integration (SADC, 2022). With a shared vision to create a regional community which ensures economic well-being, improvement of the standards of living and quality of life, freedom and social justice, and peace and security for the people of Southern Africa, the overall purpose of SADC is to foster equitable and sustainable economic growth and socio-economic development, alleviate poverty, enhance the quality of life of the people of the region, and to support its socially disadvantageous areas through deeper regional integration (SADC Secretariat, 2009).

These objectives, established on democratic principles, were intended to increase regional integration, as well as equitable and sustainable development (SADC, 2022). SADC is comprised of 15 member states, namely Angola, Botswana, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, the Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. There is a vast disparity in the levels of socio-economic development between member

states, including gaps in gross domestic product (GDP), per capita GDP, literacy levels and population size (SADC Secretariat, 2009).

The Human Development Index (HDI), which provides a measure of life expectancy, literacy, education and standards of living for countries worldwide range from 0.384 to 0.843 for countries in the SADC region, which indicates that countries in the region are some of the lowest scorers on the HDI in the world (SADC Secretariat, 2009). Socio-economic indicators within the SADC region show significant developmental challenges, and for many member states, investments in education are a critical element of the solution to the challenges, whether they be raising GDP levels by creating more skilled workforces within member states or helping to reduce the spread of HIV through education (SADC Review (2007/08), SADC Country Profiles).

A quarter of Africa's total population, more than 270 million people, resides in the SADC region, which covers a total area of 1,219,090 km² (SADC Secretariat, 2009; Kotecha, 2012). Half of this total population is between the ages of 15 and 29 years of age, with a significant number of young people below the age of 15 (SADC Secretariat, 2009; Kotecha, 2012). Since the population has a large number of youths, there are a greater number of challenges that are encountered in the meeting of education and training needs, as well as expanding services to respond to the needs of the growing numbers of children (SADC Secretariat, 2009). This growing youth population will ideally require access to tertiary education at some point (Kotecha, 2012). World Bank figures (2017) have shown a sharp rise in the demand for higher education in the region, with the number of students pursuing higher education tripling in 15 years from 2.7 million students in 1991 to 9.3 million students in 2006.

4.3.2 Higher Education in the SADC Region

Despite the increasing demand for higher education in the SADC region, levels of higher education provision and enrolment rates are among the lowest in the world (Kotecha, 2012). One of the areas identified early on was that of education and skills development, since cooperation within the region in these areas would lead to the development of knowledge, attitudes, appropriate and relevant skills and human capacities that are necessary to promote investment, efficiency and competitiveness (SADC Secretariat, 2009). There are however multiple challenges within this sector which need to be addressed. The challenges within the education and training sector include, but are not limited to: restricted access to higher education levels; inequitable access, especially by disadvantaged groups such as women, disabled people and people from rural areas; poor quality of education at all levels; high inefficiency due to absenteeism and dropouts; inadequately trained and qualified teachers; irrelevant curricula and the mismatch between the supply and demand of education; shortage of relevant and appropriate teaching and learning materials (SADC Secretariat, 2009).

The SADC stated goals for education are to increase the availability of educated persons who will be able to make meaningful contributions to scientific innovation as well as economic development (Mhango, 2015). Furthermore, the African Union (AU), as noted in its Plan of Action for the Second Decade of Education for Africa (2006–2015), identifies the education sector as an absolute necessity which is critical to the development of the human resources necessary for achieving socio-economic development (Mhango, 2015).

The delivery of higher education in the SADC countries has several characteristics, many of which are likely to have implications on the strategies that are necessary if the countries intend to meet the increasing demand for entry into higher education, as well as improving the quality of provision (Kotecha, 2012). One of the key features of higher education provision (HEP) in SADC countries is that the systems of higher education in the region are elitist, which is directly linked to the lack of provision of higher education (Kotecha, 2012).

Although there has been a rapid increase in the number of students attending tertiary institutions over the last few years, the higher education systems remain small, which results in competition for places (Kotecha, 2012). Demand has far exceeded capacity in this instance leading to issues of overcrowding and concerns regarding the quality of the provision (Kotecha, 2012). Registrations in higher education centre around the humanities and social sciences, followed then by business, management and other commercial fields, with registrations in science, engineering and technology remaining low (Kotecha, 2012). As drivers of development, science and technology should be a key focus area, and since revolutions in technology and science support economic advances, this should result in improvements in health systems, education and infrastructure (Chetty, 2012; Kotecha, 2012).

Another key feature of HEP in the SADC regions is the impact of limited funding on academic teacher development and the retention of staff. It has been suggested that the number of teaching staff at universities needs to almost double in order to meet the demand that is expected with the influx of new students (Kotecha, 2012). Furthermore, universities also have to contend with the issue of the academic brain drain, which sees

an increase in the number of qualified individuals who leave the region in search of better opportunities abroad, often in more developed regions of the world (Odhiambo, 2011; Kotecha, 2012). Aside from staffing issues, there are further constraints on the system, which include lack of infrastructure, and the need to grow and improve information and communications technology (ICT), as well as other facilities that already exist (Kotecha, 2012). This demand for increased expenditure will, however, impact funding for future research (Kotecha, 2012).

In order to improve the quantity and quality of HE in Southern Africa, universities need to first contend with the demand for higher levels of enrolment, as well as the expenditure that is necessary to achieve improved quality and output (Kotecha, 2012). One suggested strategy for the expansion of HE is to expand distance education provisions through the use of online, digital and credible offerings from reputable institutions (Kotecha, 2012). Linked with this is the need to create networks between well-established universities in the region (Kotecha, 2012). By adopting a multi-country approach, a foundation can be built that allows for the exchange of skills and knowledge that are unique to each institution.

As a regional initiative, the SADC Protocol on Higher Education and Training was signed in 1997. The Protocol aimed to provide a policy framework for regional cooperation in addressing education needs (Kwaramba, 2012; Hahn, 2005). The framework resulted in the promotion of internationalisation of higher education in the region as member countries agreed that 5% of all available study places should be reserved to admit students of SADC member countries (Kwaramba, 2012). In 2002, South Africa saw an increase in SADC member students enrolling in universities and technikons. These

enrolments however totalled more than 5% (Kwaramba, 2012). Since then, some higher education institutions in South Africa have continued to exceed the 5% quota in their annual intake (Hahn, 2005).

South Africa has since become a major exporter of higher education in the Southern African region (Kwaramba, 2012), as it is regarded as a regional leader in tertiary education (Majee & Ress, 2018). In order for trade to occur, a transaction needs to take place. In this instance the trade is in education. Education is a service, and so the service can either be provided by the consumer moving to the exporting country, by the provider moving to the importing country or by the service being provided electronically, online (Kwaramba, 2012).

4.3.3 South Africa as an Exporter of HE in the SADC Region

There are numerous factors that have led to South Africa dominating the higher education sector in Southern Africa. The first factor is geographic location – South Africa is close to many other member countries in the SADC region and the cost of living is reasonable (International Education Association of South Africa (IEASA), 2013; International Consultants for Education and Fairs (ICEF), 2017). Similarly, living conditions in South Africa are good and there are few visa requirements, making studying in the country easier than studying in other countries where the visa requirements may be more stringent (ICEF, 2017). Language is another important pull factor. English is the primary language of instruction, which is useful since English is one of the official SADC languages (SADC, 2012; Majee & Ress, 2018). The third pull factor for students choosing to study in South Africa is the cost of tertiary education, as it tends to be less expensive than in other countries (such as the UK and the US) (ICEF, 2017). Coupled with this is

the availability of government subsidies, which allow students in the SADC region to pay the same fees as local students. This subsidy is part of the SADC Protocol of 1997 which requires SADC students to be regarded as domestic students, and therefore allow these students to pay the same fees for both accommodation and for course fees (ICEF, 2017; Majee & Ress, 2018). In addition to affordable education, many of the universities within higher education in South Africa are reputed to be of a high quality, and many of the qualifications offered by South African institutions are well recognised by other African countries (Kwaramba, 2012; Lee & Sehoole, 2015; ICEF, 2017). Limited higher education opportunities and scarcity of employment in their home countries result in further pull factors for regional students wanting to study in South Africa (Majee & Ress, 2018). These factors, coupled with flexible admission requirements, makes South Africa a desirable location for university study (IEASA, 2013; ICEF, 2017).

South Africa's relative political stability is considered as another attractor, although recent student protests have impacted this perception. Many students in other African countries face situations of political unrest and uncertainty, which results in the outbound mobility of students, especially to South Africa for tertiary study (Sehoole, 2011; Kotecha, 2012; IEASA, 2013; ICEF, 2017).

Arguably one of the biggest pull factors for regional students to study in South Africa is the use of mobile learning in higher education in the country (ICEF, 2017). Cellphones appear to be used most frequently, acting as channels for the distribution and accessing of course materials (ICEF, 2017). Basic cellphone usage in South Africa is high, at around 90%, but only a small fraction of the population has tablets or smartphones (ICEF, 2017).

Short messaging services (SMSs) has been shown to be useful as an educational tool, offering a means of assistance for students who are able to access higher education, but who may lack the financial and logistical support that is required in order for them to progress through and to ultimately complete their studies successfully (ICEF, 2017).

Internet usage is high in South Africa (ranked third in Africa), while the use of smartphones and tablets is the highest on the continent, with roughly 37% of the population accessing and using both smartphones and tablets, which is 17% higher than the average use across Africa, which is less than 20% (ICEF, 2017). The continued use and growth in the availability of technology within the country and especially in higher education is considered to be another pull factor for neighbouring students who want to study in South Africa (ICEF, 2017).

Despite the numerous pull factors, there are however also a number of issues which may make studying in SA unappealing. Foreign students have indicated that their treatment by locals can be at times inhospitable. This is especially true and has been highlighted in the xenophobic attacks, mainly targeted at black international students (Sichone, 2006); that reached a critical high in 2008, and which continue to take place year on year (Bremmer, 2019). This xenophobia is based on the perception among locals that both jobs and university places will become scarcer as the number of foreign students increases (Lee & Sehoole, 2015; ICEF, 2017). Xenophobia may not always be obvious. Passive xenophobia exists because domestic students perceive international students as a threat to both their academic success and to their group identity (Harrison & Peacock, 2010). Academic staff also exhibit traits that lead to passive xenophobia, when, for example, their own biases result in missed opportunities to take advantage of a genuinely

inclusive classroom (Harrison & Peacock, 2010). International students tend to form study groups with students from similar backgrounds since cultural differences can lead to academic underperformance (Volet & Ang, 2012).

Linked to this discrimination is the inability of foreign students to access affordable housing (Lee & Sehoole, 2015; ICEF, 2017). The perception surrounding international students is that they have greater financial resources and they are therefore required to pay for off-campus housing for a year upfront (ICEF; 2017).

Despite local fears surrounding foreign students, it is important to note that there are multiple benefits to having international students. One such benefit is the income generated by institutions from international students (Lee & Sehoole, 2015). Beyond universities, the presence of foreign students also leads to broad economic benefits through the financial revenue that all foreign students generate through their expenditure on accommodation rental, food purchases, use of public transport and entertainment, to name but a few (Lee & Sehoole, 2015). One final contribution is that foreign students contribute to the development of diversity within institutional cultures at South Africa's universities, which is necessary for the country's ongoing transformation process (Lee & Sehoole, 2015).

4.3.4 Open Distance Learning in the SADC Region

The most recent data from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (2013) shows that of the 73,856 international students studying at South African institutions, 46% were enrolled through distance education. Of the 33,646 international distance education enrolments, 78% of students were from countries within the SADC

region, with the highest number of students coming from Zimbabwe. Transition rates from primary to secondary level education are low within the SADC region, however, the transition rates from secondary to tertiary level are even lower (SADC, 2012). Inefficiencies and wastage within the education systems in the SADC region are indicated by the differences in general education requirements (GERs) between the three levels of education (SADC, 2012). Without a significant improvement and innovation in the modes of educational delivery, socio-economic development within this region will be difficult to achieve (Mhango, 2015).

In response to the ever-widening participation in higher education, distance education is a solution that allows many countries in Africa to offer higher education to an ever-growing population of students (Moeketsi, 2015). Although distance education is necessary in order to widen access, it must also provide academically credible and quality education content at a low cost (Olcott, 2013). This need was met by an exponential increase in the number of open distance learning (ODL) institutions over the past 20 years (Moeketsi, 2015).

Delivery modes, such as ODL, can provide ways to address the challenges currently experienced in countries in the SADC region, such as access, relevance, quality, and equity (Mhango, 2015). ODL can address a variety of educational challenges, for example, low student participation rates can be reduced since ODL does not depend on classroom space (Mhango, 2015). Distance education can also reach a wider number of students since it can expand the limited number of places that students can access their educational materials (Shabani & Okebukola, 2001). Those who were previously geographically isolated are also able to access tertiary study through ODL (Saint, 2000).

ODL also provides access and improves education for women (Shabani & Okebukola, 2001), who have historically had limited access to tertiary study, and who have domestic responsibilities, which could prevent them from studying in the traditional sense (Saint, 2000). Furthermore, ODL can overcome the challenge associated with the high costs of tertiary education, making access to education more affordable. Lower costs means that more students can access higher education.

ODL provides all students with access to outside experts who may otherwise have been unavailable (Shabani & Okebukola, 2001). Geographically, there has been inconsistency in the supply and demand of trained teaching personnel, with there being a greater concentration of teachers with greater expertise in areas that not all students can access (Shabani & Okebukola, 2001). With ODL more students are able to engage with experts in their relevant fields. Finally, the current improvements in information and communications technologies (ICT) provides an opportunity for well-organised and efficient ODL systems (Mhango, 2015).

Current figures illustrate the increase in enrolments in ODL in the SADC region. For example, enrolments in ODL have increased substantially in Tanzania, Namibia and Zimbabwe, however, by 2010, South Africa had the highest number of enrolments (38.8%) at tertiary level through ODL (SADC, 2012). In 2016, 91,7% of Unisa students were South African, with a further 6,9% coming from other SADC countries (Unisa, 2016). These two cohorts represent the vast majority of students who are engaged in ODL through Unisa, which is the largest open distance learning institution in Africa and the longest standing dedicated distance education university in the world (Unisa, n.d.).

Although ODL has become an important form of teaching and learning around the world, earning the reputation of being an innovative education phenomenon for both developed and developing countries (Bagwandeen, Bojuwoye, Lebeta, Letsie & Matobako, 1999), ODL should in no way be thought of as the only solution to the current problems faced by those in pursuit of access to higher education (The Commonwealth of Learning, 2002).

In recognition of the importance of education and skills development, in regional economic integration, SADC consequently established policy frameworks and strategies to promote regionally integrated and harmonised education and training systems (Siaciwena, 2010). These policies and strategies have led to considerable progress in education and training provision in the region (Siaciwena, 2010). Despite this progress, the region still faces a number of educational challenges. In order to address some of these challenges, the SADC member states adopted ODL (Siaciwena, 2010). Although growth occurred within sub-sectors throughout the region, ODL faces many challenges, which led to the development and implementation of a Capacity Building in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Project (Siaciwena, 2010).

Although 11 out of 26 public higher education institutions in South Africa offered a distance mode of learning, almost 90% of the students enrolled through the distance mode of learning in 2018 were from Unisa (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2018).

4.4 Critical Analysis of Higher Education in South Africa

4.4.1 Background to Higher Education in South Africa

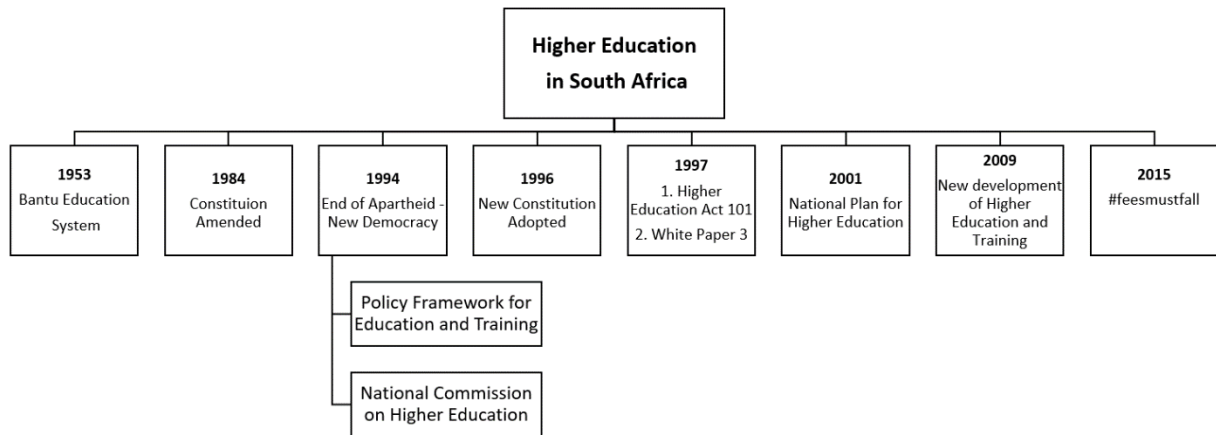


Figure 4.1: Timeline showing the important milestones for development of higher education in South Africa

Higher education in South Africa is constantly evolving, being motivated by both political and social agendas. The timeline above (Figure 4.1) gives a simplified overview of the key changes that have occurred in the South African higher education system over the past several decades. It is important to note that these milestones represent key changes in the system, but the timeline does not provide an exhaustive enquiry into the entire history of higher education in South Africa. The timeline does not include events prior to 1953, since this study is focused mainly on the period post-apartheid, and therefore the events that have led to this period in time.

4.4.1.1. Pre-Democracy: 1953–1994

In 1953, before the introduction of the Bantu Education Act, almost all (90%) of black South African schools were mission schools that had some aid from the state (South African History Online (SAHO), 2019). The newly revised Act required all of the state-aided mission schools to remove the control of African education from the churches and provincial authorities by requiring the schools to register with the state. The control was housed in the Bantu Education Department, which aimed to separate education based on race, as well as ensuring that the education that black students received was far inferior to the education white students received (SAHO, 2019). The state also provided less funding for black schools since the state spending for these schools was derived directly from tax paid by Africans, resulting in a larger portion of money going to the education of white children (SAHO, 2019). Black children and teachers protested against Bantu Education from 1954 to 1955, which resulted in the African Education Movement, which provided alternative education. This allowed for the formation of cultural clubs (which operated as informal schools), but these were soon closed and by 1960 none remained (SAHO, 2019).

Higher education in South Africa was also forced to undergo radical transformation when the Extension of University Education Act 45 of 1959, resulted in the restriction of black students from attending white universities (SAHO, 2019). The Act created segregation based on race, and new institutions; known as tribal colleges; were created for black university students (SAHO, 2019). These universities, also known as “bush” universities included Fort Hare, Vista, Venda and Western Cape. As a result, black students were excluded and prevented access to white universities (SAHO, 2019). These

newly formed institutions (36 higher education institutions) created a higher education sector that was based solely on race, but which also resulted in dissonance in culture and language (Mekoa, 2018).

In 1984, the Constitution was amended, dividing the national parliament into three separate chambers, to represent each of the racial groups, except for Africans (Bunting, 2006). The so-called 'tricameral' parliament established the House of Assembly (for representatives of white voters), the House of Representatives (for representatives of coloured voters) and the House of Delegates (for representatives of Indian voters) (Bunting, 2006). Despite representing more than 70% of the total population, the 1984 Constitution made no provisions for Africans (Bunting, 2006). Each legislative body was responsible for its 'own' affairs, meaning those matters that related specifically to the racial group that the legislative body represented. Defined as matters, such as education (at all levels, including higher education), the category of "own" affairs referred to the separate governing of the various racial groups (Indian, black, white and coloured) in order to maintain the groups' identity, as well as to uphold and further the groups' way of life, culture, traditions and customs (Welsh, 1984). The 14 "own" affairs listed in the Constitution assured that the separation of groups according to race remained highly divisive and ensured that apartheid remained largely unaltered (Welsh, 1984).

4.4.1.2. Era of Democracy: 1994–2001

A decade later, in 1994, South Africa became a democratic country, a country burdened by many racially divided sectors, including the higher education system (Mekoa, 2018). New education policies and frameworks were drafted and carried out in an effort to rebuild the higher education system to be inclusive and equitable (Mekoa, 2018). Key to this transformation was *A Policy Framework for Education and Training*. The document highlighted three features that resulted from apartheid (African National Congress (ANC), 1994, p. 2):

1. Education and training was divided by race and ethnicity, and the education system was steeped in racial ideology and doctrines of apartheid;
2. Access to education at all levels was lacking, or was unequal between the white and black populations. There were also large groups of people who had little to no access to education and training. These groups included adults, out-of-school youth and children of pre-school age;
3. Lack of democratic control within the educational and training systems, where stakeholders (students, teachers, parents) were excluded from decision-making processes.

The ANC realised that these issues, left unresolved, had the potential to disrupt social and economic development (ANC, 1994). A productive and competitive economy relies on a skilled, trained and educated workforce, and by excluding a large population from receiving training (on the basis of race and ethnicity), South Africa was limiting its economic potential. The policy acknowledged this fundamental flaw and highlighted the need to create an education and training system which ensured that human resources

within South African society were developed to the full (ANC, 1994). The key aspect in achieving this was to ensure that education and training were considered a basic human right, which was then enshrined in the Bill of Rights.

In the months following the 1994 elections, the South African government established the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE), whose main aim was to advise a way forward for education which would reflect the values and needs of a democratic society (Mekoa, 2018). In September of 1996, the NCHE issued its first report, *A Framework for Transformation*, which acknowledged the fundamental flaws which resulted from racially motivated policies, but focused on the future of higher education, listing several principles that would be used to guide the transformation process. These principles included (NCHE, 1996, p. 4):

- The distribution of resources and opportunities based on equity;
- Redressing past inequalities;
- Democratic, representative and participatory governance of the higher education system and of institutions;
- Balance in the development of human and material resources;
- Services and products of higher education should aim to maintain “the highest attainable levels of quality”;
- Defining clear principles necessary for academic freedom and institutional autonomy;
- Accountability for the use of public money through increased effectiveness and output.

Furthermore, the framework had three central features that would frame and advise the subsequent proposals drafted by the commission (Cloete & Muller, 1998). These central features included the massification, increased participation within the higher education system, greater responsiveness of the higher education system, and increased co-operation and partnerships in both the governance structures and operations of higher education systems (Cloete & Muller, 1998; NCHE, 1996).

In the following year, 1997, the government issued a policy paper, *White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education*. The key feature of the policy paper was emphasis placed on higher education as a pivotal point in the development of a modern society across all sectors of society, i.e. social, cultural and economic (Mekoa, 2018). The report described the existing system as fragmented and inefficient, noting that there was limited coordination, insufficient common goals, as well as very little systems in place for planning (South African Department of Education, 1997).

The policy paper acknowledged that in the South African context, there were many challenges to upend. These challenges included redressing past inequalities, which would be needed in order to transform higher education systems to benefit a newly created social order, as well as to address new realities and opportunities, while meeting the most important national needs (South African Department of Education, 1997). Strategic principles were outlined in the paper which aimed to remove all aspects associated with the racist education of the apartheid era (Mekoa, 2018). To begin with, the policy paper required that the higher education system become unified in order to meet the needs of all students, regardless of their race (South African Department of Education, 1997).

Following this framework, the Higher Education Act (Act 101 of 1997) was passed with the aim to improve the standard of education beyond the secondary level (Majola, 2017). The Act governs higher education in South Africa, as well as oversees the relevant legislation for the formation and continued operation of the Council of Higher Education (CHE), as well as overseeing the financing and operation of public higher education institutions, including both universities and technikons (Act 101 of 1997). Moreover, the Act allows the CHE to oversee and appoint (where necessary) an independent auditor, and to evaluate and assist with the registration of private higher education institutions (South African Government, 1997). Key to the Act (Act 101 of 1997), especially with regards to public institutions of higher education, was the ability of the Minister of Education, based on consultation with the CHE, and other interested and affected parties; to create, close and merge public higher institutions (South African Government, 1997).

Several years later, in February of 2001, both the White Paper 3, of 1997, and principles outlined in the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, would lead to the adoption of the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE). The National Higher Education Strategy, outlined in the White Paper of 1997, established the structure and strategies for reforming the higher education system (Mekoa, 2018). Targets regarding the size and shape of the higher education system were also included in the NPHE. Growth and participation rates, institutional and programmes mixes, and equity and efficiency goals, were also covered in the plan (Mekoa, 2018). Provided in the plan was a framework and outline of the processes and components necessary for the restructuring of the higher education systems institutional landscape, as well as the development of a rolling plan that was to be executed over a three-year period (Mekoa, 2018).

A key feature of the NPHE was to merge universities as a way of addressing areas of concern such as access to higher education and equity within higher education, and also as a way to rectify the injustices experienced by people of colour in their pursuit of higher education (Mekoa, 2018). These mergers were initially proposed in 2001, but many were only implemented in, or after 2003, at a significant cost to both the government and the South African taxpayers (Karodia, Shaikh & Soni, 2015). The restructuring of the higher education sector led to a reduction of public universities, from 36 institutions, to 23 through the merger process (Seepe, 2010). The result was the creation of some large universities, aimed at transforming the higher education sector and removing the racial divides created through apartheid (Seepe, 2010).

There were several limitations to this process, the biggest being the lack of funds set aside for the process, as well as the way in which the mergers took place (Pityana in Dibetle, 2008). The biggest negative consequence of the merger strategy was the exclusion of many of the “traditional apartheid universities” from the process (Karodia, Shaikh & Soni, 2015). The universities of Witwatersrand, Pretoria, Stellenbosch, Rhodes and Cape Town remained untouched by the process and were able to uphold the apartheid status quo, while mainstream and traditionally marginalised black colleges were forced to undergo major changes (Karodia, Shaikh & Soni, 2015). An example of such a merger happened between the universities of the former-Bantustan homelands, such as the Eastern Cape Technikon, the Border Technikon and the University of Transkei, which merged to form the Walter Sisulu University (Dibetle, 2008).

In some instances, by merging institutions, national skills shortages were created (Karodia, Shaikh & Soni, 2015); technikons merged with universities and lost some of

their academic offerings (degrees replaced diplomas). Another pitfall of the merger process was that physical access to some universities became difficult, and many students were unable to study at facilities that were closest to them, and they were forced to travel further (Karodia, Shaikh & Soni, 2015). Not only did the increase in distance create challenges by way of access, it also increased the cost of education, as students now needed to pay more for transportation to and from these newly formed institutions. The entire merger process was developed as a way to redress the injustices of the previous higher education system by focusing on the principles of equity, human rights, democracy and sustainable development (Karodia, Shaikh & Soni, 2015; Mekoa, 2018). However, major oversights resulted in increased disparity across the higher education sector (Karodia, Shaikh & Soni, 2015).

4.4.1.3. A decade after democracy: 2004–2014

A new Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) was created following South Africa's third democratic election in 2009. This department focused specifically on higher education training, resulting in a differentiation between basic and higher education systems, with specific mandates, where each level of education would be overseen by different departments (Mekoa, 2018). Prior to this, education and training were housed separately in the Department of Education and the Department of Labour, where skills development was previously held (Department of Higher Education and Training, n.d.). The previous separation often led to a lack of coordination between the two departments. Once established, the newly formed DHET became responsible for one of the twelve

objectives of the South African government, namely to “develop the human resources of the workforce in an inclusive way” (Field, Musset & Álvarez-Galván, 2014, p. 8).

The South African higher education sector is undergoing constant adjustments, in what can be thought of as a series of trials and errors. Higher education is under constant scrutiny since it is viewed as being integral to the process of social transformation (Reddy, 2004). The government requires much from universities, expecting that they actively advance both economic and socio-political transformation, however, a number of factors have resulted in conflicting agendas; the pressure to become globalised does not always align with the need to redress the issues that resulted from the transition from apartheid to a democratic regime, as well as with the macro-economic state policies (Reddy, 2004). These opposing ideas are noted in the expectations of universities within South Africa. Firstly, universities are expected to be economic drivers, acting as businesses that produce graduates necessary to bolster South Africa’s contribution to the global economy (Reddy, 2004). Secondly, in order to encourage the continued growth of democracy within the country by producing citizens who can actively engage with and be critical of democratic processes, as well as serving the public (Reddy, 2004). While these two ideologies are not necessarily contradictory, in the South African context, where there are profound racial, gender and class divisions, these two objectives can lead to further divisibility (Reddy, 2004).

4.4.1.4. Student Protests: 2015 and Beyond

In spite of lofty goals for the overall transformation of the South African higher education system, numerous shortcomings and failures resulted in nationwide student protests in

2015 (Tjønneland, 2017). These protests were the culmination of many decades of quiet tension, where people had been forced to accept extreme inequalities, widespread poverty and a large population of unemployed youths (Tjønneland, 2017). While social protests and community-wide action are not new to the South African political scene (Tjønneland, 2017), the student protests of 2015 became the first national wave of protests, and were the largest student movement since the inception of democracy in South Africa in 1994 (Habib, 2016). These protests focused primarily on two areas:

1. The rising cost of university tuition, resulting in the #feesmustfall movement, and
2. The removal of relics (both physical and abstract concepts and ideologies) that acted as reminders of colonialism in South Africa, known as the #Rhodesmustfall movement.

These protests led to the temporary closure of campuses, suspension of all teaching activities; including the writing of exams; as well as in the destruction of teaching facilities, resulting in millions of Rands of damage (Macha, 2017). Furthermore, these protests impacted the inbound mobility of international students to South Africa, as well as jeopardised researchers, as they were unable to complete their work on campus (Macha, 2017).

Alienation and lack of access were the catalysts for the two student movements mentioned above, and are believed to represent the second stage of radical changes that are necessary to transform the post-apartheid higher education system (Habib, 2016).

#Rhodesmustfall represented an opportunity for students (and some academic staff) to publicly highlight institutional racism that exists in many of South Africa's

universities, as well as to promote the notion that education, not only in South Africa, but globally, should be decolonised (Chaudhuri, 2017). This was to be achieved by removing Western ideologies, symbols and traditions that dominated African higher education (Molefe, 2016). The movement called specifically for the removal of worldviews saturated in “white, male, Western, capitalist, heterosexual, European worldviews” (Shay, 2016), and the introduction of South African and global perspectives within the curriculum, teaching and learning, as well as within research (Shay, 2016; Wamai, 2016).

The movement, brought into focus the pre-existing idea that decolonisation in South Africa was necessary (le Grange, 2016). In the context of higher education, decolonisation requires the deconstruction of archaic, colonial knowledge, ideologies, and methods of teaching, with the intention to rebuild them with the inclusion of components that are important to the people who were colonised; such as their history, culture, language, and identity (du Preez; 2018).

For many black students, unless the decolonisation of higher education is achieved, they will continue to be ignored and overlooked. Their history, lived experiences, and even their own aspirations are side-lined in favour of colonial knowledge systems, which degraded, exploited and enslaved the former colonial subjects (Heleta, 2016).

While there has been much debate around the decolonisation of higher education in the years following the start of #Rhodesmustfall movement, there has been very little change (Shay, 2016). This is due to the nature of the issue. It has been noted that while it is easy to remove physical objects associated with a racist past, and that it is also possible to negotiate the cost of higher education (#feesmustfall), thereby securing

financial changes that benefit the masses, the greatest challenge is in trying to transform entire curricula, an endeavour which requires greater effort (Shay, 2016). That is not to say that some of the key ideas behind the transformation of the curriculum is not possible, it just requires focus on the individual components which form part of the larger debate. Examples of this are discussed by Shay (2016), who highlights six challenges that would need to be overcome in order to achieve the overall goal of decolonising higher education within the South African context. These challenges do not cover all of the aspects relating to the topic, but are recurrent themes in overall debate. These six challenges (as identified by Shay, 2016) are:

1. Relevant undergraduate curriculum;
2. Global relevance;
3. Input of students;
4. Dominating worldviews
5. Academic misuse of power; and
6. Reproduction of inequalities.

Transformation of the curriculum can mean a number of things. It is however narrow minded to assume that the term curriculum is limited to simply the tangible materials needed for education to take place: the books, planning materials and assessments. Curriculum for many is an extension of what is taught; or not taught; how teaching is done, as well as the teaching methods employed by educators (Heleta, 2016; du Preez, 2018; 20). The curriculum can therefore be used in a political manner, where people in positions of power are able to select both the content of the curriculum, as well as the manner in which that content is taught (Jansen, 2017). This is especially true when looking at

education within South Africa. Historically, the colonial powers controlled all aspects of education, even beyond the transition of South Africa to a democratic society. The need for decolonisation of education should therefore be non-negotiable (Heleta, 2016).

When viewed in the context of higher education, it appears as though decolonisation can be used by institutions to rectify historical inequalities and injustices, challenging the colonial foundations (Western knowledge, pedagogy, research) upon which South African academics are founded (du Preez, 2018). Decolonisation should therefore restructure the curriculum in such a way that South Africa and Africa become the focus of teaching, learning and research (Heleta, 2016). Although some academics fear that decolonisation will result in academic regression, or that South African institutions will become isolated from the world, decolonisation presents many opportunities (Heleta, 2016). These opportunities will allow for the inclusion of African perspectives, knowledge and thinking into teaching and research. More than that, decolonisation can also bring to the fore ideas and perspectives from other countries located in the global south, who share similar colonial legacies (Heleta, 2016).

While it appears as though internationalisation can be used to redress many of the issues relating to a colonial past, it is also important to note that globalisation and internationalisation agendas in higher education have been flagged as a way to further develop “Euro-American logics under the guise of the ‘global’” (Majee & Ress, 2018, p. 4). Decoloniality provides a method of understanding the complexity of the challenges that public higher education systems face as they transition through post- and neo-colonialism (Majee & Ress, 2018). Decoloniality sees coloniality as the problem in the modern era, and as such, the analysis of Euro-American-centric modernity cannot exist

without the examination of the history of (in the South African context) colonialism, apartheid, neo-colonialism and underdevelopment (Majee & Ress, 2018).

The framework for decolonisation highlights the disharmony that is created by trying to balance internationalisation (as a Western ideology) with the need for racial justice needed in the post-apartheid, post-colonial era (Majee & Ress, 2018; 4). What is ignored in this process is the need to acknowledge the importance of historic regional relations between South Africa and neighbouring SADC countries, since these countries were key players in the fight against the apartheid regime (Saunders & Nagar, 2013). The destabilisation process used during apartheid as a way for the South African government to prevent anti-apartheid groups from overthrowing the ruling party and thereby ending apartheid (Dzimba, 1998) resulted in the deaths of millions in the SADC region, as well as damage to infrastructure which reduced further opportunities for development (Chikane, 1988). Added to this, SADC countries trained and educated South African students who were unable to study at home. Many of those who were trained in the SADC region are regarded as being the pillars of the South African economy (Majee & Ress, 2018). Internationalisation in South Africa is unlike the internationalisation that is seen in Europe and further abroad. While European internationalisation is seen as a way to create a regional identity and to create European citizenship post World War II (de Wit, 2002), internationalisation (and therefore international student mobility) in South Africa exists as a way to support the development of other countries in the region, but also as a form of geopolitical redress, acknowledging the role that SADC countries played in the social and economic advancements in South Africa (Majee & Ress, 2018).

The internationalisation framework is broad, and encompasses a variety of aspects; many of which have been discussed in earlier sections of this chapter. There is however one understudied aspect of internationalisation which is pertinent to the South African context, that is, to understand both the movement of international students to regional centres of higher education (i.e. students from the SADC region studying in South Africa), as well as to explore how it relates to national efforts to reform higher education systems, as they attempt to democratise access to higher education for students who were historically marginalised, within the post-colonial context that is unique to South Africa (Majee & Ress, 2018).

Colonial occupation (more specifically apartheid) resulted in a higher education system which, with regards to student access, is largely unequal. Despite this, South Africa is a regional hub for many students from neighbouring countries. Regional leadership roles (Flemes & Wojczewski, 2010) and efforts by the South African government to improve access to higher education for historically excluded populations (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007) mean that South Africa is seen as an attractive study destination for an ever-increasing number of regional students (Kotecha 2012; Milani, Da Conceição, & M'Bunde, 2016). Although not unique to the South African context, public universities in the country are compelled to balance the need to compete globally (e.g. to keep up with university ranking systems) with the domestic requirements for institutional transformation (Majee & Ress, 2018).

Some academics have argued that the motivations to internationalise the curriculum stem from a desire to promote national political and economic competitiveness, while preserving linguistic and cultural heritage in an attempt to create

methods of critical thinking necessary for a multicultural environment (Yershova, De Jaegbere & Mestenhauser, 2000). While the need to encourage new forms of thinking and learning is key to this argument (Brewer & Leask, 2012), intercultural competencies are also important in order for personal professional and citizen development (Knight, 2004). Since such a small portion of students are actually able to study abroad, without the internationalisation of the curriculum, many students would not be able to gain these skills (Brewer & Leask, 2012), leaving them unprepared for an unequivocally interconnected world, which is highly interdependent and multicultural (Harai, 1992). Internationalisation (if integrated into the curriculum), creates content which is not tied to one specific cultural base, instead, it draws from an ever-widening pool of knowledge, and in doing so, create students who are encouraged to explore how the knowledge they consume is produced, distributed and utilised globally, which is important if students are to understand the global nature of various types of exchange (scientific, economic, political and cultural) (Webb, 2005).

So, while it appears that internationalisation is a positive process, there are some that argue that internationalisation is simply the continued dominance of Western perspectives within higher education (Brewer & Leask, 2012). These Western models of higher education define “what is knowledge and who is qualified to understand and apply that knowledge” (Goodman, 1984, p. 13). It is also able to determine who becomes an expert and in what field, as well as determining who can claim privilege, prestige and elite status (Brewer & Leask, 2012). One author (Mok, 2007) advised against the replication of Western policies and practices in higher education in Asia out of fear that they (Asian states) “fall into traps of recolonization [sic]” (p. 438).

African scholars share similar concerns (Brewer & Leask, 2012). Colonisation in Africa and the policies implemented by the colonisers (apartheid for example) resulted in many Africans being disconnected from their “earlier African identities” (Brewer & Leask, 2012). In response to globalisation and internationalisation, therefore, African universities should look inward as a way of meeting the needs of Africa while at the same time contributing to the production of world knowledge (Mthembu, 2004; Rouhani & Kishun, 2004).

These concerns bring to the fore two types of tensions: local and global tensions; tensions between the less developed south and the more developed north (Brewer & Leask, 2012). These tensions cannot be overlooked or ignored if the internationalisation of the curriculum is to take place. One key aspect of the north-south debate is the uneven flow of students from the south to the north, which promotes a “brain-drain,” especially if the students remain in the country of their studies as migrants (Brewer & Leask, 2012). One way to tackle this problem is to promote ODL and internationalisation at home, since students can remain in their home country while completing their studies at a university that may be in a different country.

4.5 The University of South Africa – Unisa

4.5.1 History of Unisa

As with most African countries in history, modern day South Africa was under colonial rule for many centuries. Although the Cape Colony had been established early on in South Africa’s history, the British gave the colony self-government in 1872, as a way to get the colony to fund itself and its own defence (Luscombe, n.d.). One of the first acts of the new

government, under the first Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, John Charles Molteno, was to establish the first university in South Africa under Act 16 of 1873, thus creating the University of the Cape of Good Hope (UCGH) (Zimmermann & Visser, 1997; Boucher, 1973). The university received the royal assent on 26 June and in due course was approved by the British parliament (Boucher, 1973).

The initial focus of the UCGH was to serve primarily as an “examining body”, used to guarantee quality through the setting of examinations and awarding degrees to those students who passed the required examination (Unisa, 2018; Carruthers, n.d.; Boucher, 1973; Zimmermann & Visser, 1997). Prior to the establishment of the UCGH, there was no higher education in Southern Africa, and even basic schooling was lacking, since it was not a priority of the colonies (Carruthers, n.d.). As a result, only children of the wealthy were able to receive an education, since their parents were able to send them abroad for formal education (Carruthers, n.d.). During the formative years, the university faced numerous challenges, including fraught relationships with teaching colleges (Carruthers, n.d.).

Since the university was established as an examination centre, both private and external students could write their examinations there, but since the teaching colleges provided the teaching and created the greatest number of candidates, they also generated the most money through fees (Carruthers, n.d.). With only two recognised colleges to serve the whole colony, new colleges began to enter the foray and became rivals for subsidies (Carruthers, n.d.). The turn of the century saw a fluctuation in the number of colleges. At the same time, the political situation between the British colonies and the Boer republics became unstable after the discovery of mineral wealth in the

Witwatersrand region (Carruthers, n.d.). This discovery, along with conflicting political ideologies of imperialism and republicanism led to the Second Anglo-Boer War, fought between 1899 and 1902 (South African History Online, 2017).

The conclusion of the war in 1902 did little to solve the deteriorating situation of higher education in South Africa. In fact, the establishment of four British colonies in South Africa worsened the situation (Carruthers, n.d.). As negotiations to unite the four colonies into a single state began, power relations within the civil service of the four colonies determined the future of higher education in Southern Africa (Carruthers, n.d.). To this extent, the question of language and forms of education became a matter for serious debate, as the different histories and political institutions created ideological dissent (Carruthers, n.d.). This in turn led to the pursuit of personal, political and unpatriotic agendas over any beneficial policy (Carruthers, n.d.).

The UCGH remained the only university in South Africa until the end of World War I (Cooper & Subotzky, 2001). Criticism began to appear however, and the UCGH was criticised as being “a factory of certificate,” and as a foreign import from England (Boucher, 1973; Herman, 2015). In 1910, South Africa gained independence from Britain and the Union of South Africa was formed. This led to a rapid growth in university teaching in the period following independence (Cooper & Subotzky, 2001). Legislation in 1916 (South African Government, 1916a, 1916b, 1916c) made provision for the establishment of the autonomous Universities of Stellenbosch (US) (Act 13 of 1916), Cape Town (UCT) (Act 14 of 1916) and South Africa (Unisa) (Act 12 of 1916). Unisa was an examining university to which six institutions were affiliated (Herman, 2015). Following its name change in 1916, Unisa then moved location from Cape Town to Pretoria.

South African universities at the time catered mainly for the white population, limiting access for black students (Herman, 2015). In 1946, Unisa became the first public university in the world to teach exclusively through the use of distance education (Unisa, 2018). While there was some transformation at some universities in later years, Unisa (in 1951) became a fully-fledged correspondence university that was available to all races (Herman, 2015).

4.5.2 Modern Day Unisa

Spanning a history of 150 years, Unisa has always set out to create access to higher education for as many people as possible (Unisa, 2017b). Throughout its history, Unisa has resisted exclusionary principles that were commonplace in many other universities, by providing all people with access to higher education “regardless of race, colour or creed” (Unisa, 2017b, p. 2). The institution remains steadfast in its aim to provide education that is both inclusive and relevant in the constantly changing arena of higher education (Unisa, 2017b).

The social mandate for Unisa is straight forward: to focus on “quality, development, and transformation through education – teaching, research and community engagement – nationally, continentally and globally” (Unisa, 2017b, p.2). With continued transformation happening in South Africa post 1994, the higher education landscape itself underwent transformation to become fully inclusive in 2001. From this process, Unisa underwent its own transformation, merging the old Unisa, Technikon Southern Africa and the Vista University for Distance Education Campus, to emerge as South Africa’s single dedicated comprehensive distance education institution in 2004 (Unisa, 2017b, p. 2). Its

history also makes Unisa the oldest dedicated distance education university in the world (*THE*, 2019).

Unisa has earned its role as the African university through its rootedness in South Africa and the African continent (Unisa, 2017b, p. 2). The university's large student intake makes Unisa the largest open distance learning (ODL) institution in South Africa and Africa, as well as making it one of the top 30 mega-institutions in the world (Unisa, 2017b; *THE*, 2019).

With close to 400,000 students enrolled at Unisa, the university is responsible for the education and training of a third of all higher education students in South Africa, as well as international students from over 130 different countries (*THE*, 2019). The student profile reflects the demographics of South Africa, highlighting the important role Unisa plays in higher education, as well as its strategic position nationally, continentally and globally (Unisa, 2017b). The university is key in the transformation, growth and development of South Africa and the African continent (Unisa, 2017b).

The need to remain relevant has spurred the university to be innovative and effective through institutional governance and management structures that are continually adapted and adjusted to meet emerging regulatory requirements and socio-economic dynamics (Unisa, 2017b).

4.5.3 Unisa as a Centre for ODL

Open distance education in South Africa accounts for more than 34% of the total enrolments in higher education, and more than one fifth of all HE students in the country are participating in distance education through online courses and programmes (Qayyum

& Zawacki-Ritcher, 2019). When considering distance education in South Africa, one institution stands at the fore – the University of South Africa (Prinsloo, 2019). Considered to be one of the global mega universities, Unisa has close to 400,000 students (Baijnath & Butcher, 2015). With a history spanning almost 150 years, Unisa as a provider of distance education has and continues to evolve. This evolution has happened in three distinct phases (van der Merwe, 2007):

- First phase – an examining body (called the University of the Cape of Good Hope in 1873);
- Second phase – a correspondence institution in 1946 with the establishment of a Division for External Studies (Boucher, 1973);
- Third phase – the institution merges with two other distance education providers (Technikon Southern Africa and the distance education component of Vista University) in 2004.

For over seven decades, Unisa has followed an open distance learning model of teaching. By its own description, Unisa (2008) defines ODL as a learning model that works to overcome barriers, such as time, geographical location, economic and social circumstances, as well as the educational and communication distance, that exist between the institution and the students, academic staff and students, educational material and the students, and to create connections between the students themselves.

This model represents an approach to teaching that combines learner-centeredness with lifelong learning, while offering a flexible learning facilitation provisioning, and the removal of barriers to access by recognising prior learning, as well as provisioning relevant learner support, and the continued construction of learning

programmes (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2013; Unisa, 2016). Many, if not all ODL institutions exist to provide educational opportunities to non-traditional students who tend to be mature and working, and who are often excluded from accessing higher education at institutions that are full-time, contact and campus based (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2013; Ngubane-Mokiwa & Letseka, 2015).

Not only does the student profile of Unisa fit into the description of an ODL student, it also reflects the current demographics of South Africa. African students make up the majority of the student population, with 71% of students at Unisa being African, 16% Caucasian, 7% Indian and the remaining 6% are coloured (Unisa, n.d.). The student ratio of females to males is 63:37 (Unisa, n.d.). Part-time students outnumber full-time students with a ratio of 90:10 (Unisa, n.d.). Mature students account for the majority of the student population, with 60% of all students being between the ages of 25 and 39 (Unisa, n.d.).

The South African Department of Higher Education identified Unisa as an ODL institution that should help to broaden access and participation in higher education in the country (Baloyi, 2017). Unisa is committed to this agenda and as such has a “responsible open admission policy” (Unisa, 2008, p. 2). This policy allows for the university to provide fair and equitable access to higher education opportunities which stem from its social responsibility to redress inequalities that are a result of the country’s tumultuous past (Unisa, 2019). The application and selection processes used by Unisa aim to address historical inequalities, whilst maintaining high standards (Unisa, 2019). Key to these processes is a focus on improving student support, together with the necessary infrastructure to ensure student success (Unisa, 2019).

ODL institutions are faced with a number of challenges, including high dropout rates and lack of learner support. One way that Unisa has attempted to overcome these challenges is through the use of technology and multimedia interaction. Unisa uses an assortment of technologies to connect its students and provide them with opportunities to learn. Despite advancements in teaching and support methods, a number of challenges remain.

4.5.4. Factors Influencing Student Success in ODL

ODL institutions were created (at least in part) to overcome the deficits that existed in traditional institutions, especially with regards to the democratisation of higher education (Maritim & Getuno, 2018), by providing education to a greater number of people, despite any inherent differences (Latif, Sungsi, & Bahroom, 2006). Throughput rates, which are direct measures of the quantitative performance of an institution, are one of the biggest challenges faced by ODL institutions (Parker, 1995; Perraton, 2007; Simpson, 2013), where low throughput rates create a so-called “distance education deficit” (Simpson, 2013). Student success rate in ODL is influenced by an assortment of both endogenous and exogenous factors (Maritim & Getuno, 2018), where student-focused endogenous refers to elements such as age and gender, and student-focused exogenous factors include factors such as the quality of the teaching (Guney, 2009). It is important to note that while ODL institutions have greatly increased access to higher education, the number of students who actually complete their studies is far lower, especially when compared to the completion rates of students who study at traditional universities (Daniel, 2016;

Tresman, 2002; Perraton, 2007; Simpson, 2013). So, while student access has grown, there is an underperformance in student success (Maritim & Getuno, 2018).

The number of challenges and needs that would lead to student success in South Africa are daunting, because despite substantial government funding incentives, multiple policy initiatives, and efforts by the institutions, retention and success rates at tertiary institutions are especially poor (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011). Student success in ODL is particularly challenging since it requires a well-structured support system that is based on the availability and effectiveness of student support systems that are able to deal with students' academic, cognitive, emotional and social needs (Nsamba & Makoe, 2017). These services are a necessary component in creating a pathway that can lead to academic success in ODL, and as such, the level of student success can, and does, depend on the number of support services that are made available to students who study at a distance (Mannan, 2008).

Unique to ODL is the physical separation that exists between academic staff and students (Baloyi, 2014) whose main source of interaction is most likely to occur through the use of technology, which has the ability to impact learning since students are more likely to experience isolation and disorientation, which can in turn impact motivation, engagement and attrition (Moore, 1993). The distance component of ODL while allowing students to access higher education despite their geographical location (Baloyi, 2014) does mean that the learners and lecturers are separated from each other which can magnify the feeling of isolation as students feel the separation not only from their lecturers, but from the institution and fellow students (Rumble, 2000).

Technology has allowed ODL to undergo various transformations over time, and has also been used to enhance student success (Maritim & Getuno, 2018). Far removed from the paper-based learning, that historically relied solely on postal systems (Hendrix, 1998; Ortner, 1999; Heydenrych & Prinsloo, 2010), technology has created a supportive learning environment that can be accessed at any point in time, and from any location (UNESCO, 2002; Maritim & Getuno, 2018). In addition, some of the challenges, such as loneliness and isolation, that are synonymous with ODL learning are being removed through the use of e-learning platforms and mobile technologies (Maritim & Getuno, 2018). Tutor–learner and learner–learner interactions are created and enhanced through the use of technologies which can overcome issues relating to isolation, and in turn positively impact student success rates (Maritim & Getuno, 2018).

For some, the use of technology in ODL is regarded as the perfect solution to the issues that arose from the traditional forms of distance education (Maritim & Getuno, 2018). However, not all access to technology is equal. There are multiple barriers which limit the use of technology and e-learning in developing countries, and as such, limit learner success (Abdon, Ninomiya, & Raab, 2007; Wright, Dhanarajan, & Reju, 2009; Maritim & Getuno, 2018). The challenges that prevent the development of technology include: power and internet connectivity, telecommunication penetration, cost of hardware and internet access, and the human capital necessary for the development of online courses (Maritim & Getuno, 2018). Despite this, it is important to remember that there is no direct correlation between the use of, and access to technology and student success (Maritim & Getuno, 2018). Evidence indicates that the use of technology in ODL in developed regions fails to result in an improvement in success rates of students

(Maritim & Getuno, 2018), and as such, online learning should not be viewed as a cure-all for student success rates in ODL (Simpson, 2013; Baloyi, 2014). Other studies show that students who participate in e-learning courses are more likely to drop out compared to their on-campus counterparts (Levy, 2007). With a throughput rate of roughly 15%, the majority of students at open universities do not complete their studies (Shaikh & Asif, 2022).

When student success in ODL is higher, it often has little to do with external factors, and more to do with the learner themselves. These factors include: the age of the learner; the learners experience and receptiveness to the use of computers; and the learner's position in their employment (Maritim & Getuno, 2018). Harris and Gibson (2006) contend that adult learners tend to outperform younger learners when studying through ODL; learners are more likely to succeed when using modes of e-learning if they have prior experience with computers and the internet, and are receptive to their use during their studies and that students who hold senior management positions tend to succeed in ODL since they do not want to be perceived by their employees as either failures or dropouts. These factors are important to this study since they relate directly to the type of participants involved in this study, and as such are useful in providing background and insight into the results that this study generates.

4.5.5 Student Success at Unisa

As the only dedicated distance education institution in South Africa which provides ODeL opportunities to the region, Unisa is focused on constant innovations and the continued exploration of new technologies to enhance both the business and teaching models of

the university (Unisa, 2020). Despite a continued focus on the development and use of technology in teaching, the university relies on courier services to deliver study materials. The use of these services ensures that study materials reach students in a timely manner (Unisa, 2020). Since a large portion of the university's students are from rural areas, Unisa has to continually find ways to meet students where they are, and the institution does this by providing study materials in both hard copy and in electronic formats (Unisa, 2020). As a way of ensuring student success when using digital tools and technologies, Unisa has created a programme of action which assists students with access to devices and the internet (Unisa, 2020).

Unisa (2008) views ODL as a multifaceted concept. In this construct, all forms of barriers relating to time and to distance (geographical, economic, social, educational and communication) between the institution and the students are removed (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2012). Barriers between the students and the academics, the students and courseware, and the students and their peers are also removed in this context (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2012). The key focus of ODL is to remove many artificial barriers and to promote greater access to learning. This is done through the provision of flexible opportunities, student-centeredness, student support, as well as creating learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2012).

Although providing access to higher education through ODL is important, especially to those who would otherwise be excluded from studying, it is not useful unless students enrolled in these programmes are able to succeed.

Student success at Unisa is measured primarily by studying throughput rates (Unisa, 2020). For this reason, Unisa focuses its teaching and learning models on a

student-centred approach which provides greater flexibility for students, as they are able to choose what, when, where and how they learn while having the necessary support systems that allow them to succeed (Unisa, 2020). E-learning support services have been developed by the institution to ensure student success and improve throughput rates (Unisa, 2020).

Historically, Unisa struggled with low throughput rates, and despite continued growth in enrolment rates, the corresponding throughput rates at the institution were lacking (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2012). Poor success rates at Unisa are considered to be the institution's greatest weakness (Perraton, 2000). By its own admission, the university acknowledges that the institution has had persistently poor success and throughput rates and attributes it to the distance mode of delivery, as well as to the changing student profile (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2012). A recent integrated report (2018) indicated that there was an overall improvement in throughput rates, where the set targets were exceeded (Unisa, 2018). An incentive strategy was developed in 2017 by Unisa's Council Bursary which meant that undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students who have completed their qualifications within the minimum prescribed period of time would be refunded 30% of their study fees (Unisa, 2017a). Described as a "win-win" situation, the incentive would motivate diligent students to complete their studies within the required time, which in turn would contribute to improving the university's throughput rate (Unisa, 2017a). Despite meeting the throughput rate targets set for the institution, there is still concern on the part of the Council since the overall throughput rate for the institution remains low (Unisa, 2018).

At its core, the institution is focused on providing learning through a student-centred approach, which provides students with the necessary flexibility and choice with regards to what, when, where, and how they learn (Unisa, 2018). The institution seeks to provide extensive student support, incorporating e-learning support services, as a way to improve overall student success, and therefore improve throughput rates (Unisa, 2018). It is important to remember when looking at student success at Unisa, that low pass rates and throughput rates in undergraduate studies have always been problematic in distance education (Mafenya, 2014).

With the largest student population in the country, graduation numbers at the institution are the largest, making Unisa a leading higher education pool contributor (Mphaphuli, 2019). Each year thousands of students graduate and add to the labour market their skills and competencies (Mphaphuli, 2019). The total number of students graduating from Unisa during the 2019 academic year was a staggering 63,777 (Mphaphuli, 2019). Of this, 367 students completed their doctoral degrees, 1,097 completed their master's degrees, 5,523 completed their honours degrees, while 9,939 students completed and obtained postgraduate diplomas and certificates; the total number of postgraduate qualifications for 2019 was an impressive 16,926 (Mphaphuli, 2019).

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter explores the context and nature of higher education in Southern Africa. It began with a succinct description of the historical influences, specifically the colonial conditions (language, ideology and colonial agendas) that shaped higher

education in Africa, and in South Africa specifically. Shifting from a general to a more specific focus, the chapter continued by exploring higher education within the Southern African Development Community. This was necessary since the study involves students from the SADC region.

Demand for higher education in the SADC region although increasing, remains lower than in other regions (Kotecha, 2012). The chapter highlighted some of the characteristics that are key to the delivery of higher education in the region, as well as the goals and trends in HE.

With over 23 higher education institutions and as an African economic hub, South Africa is the largest exporter of higher education in the SADC region (Sayed, Mackenzie, Shall & Ward, 2008). The factors that drew students to study within the South African higher education domain were examined and described. Similarly, the factors that dissuaded students from studying there were also highlighted.

As a key component of this study, open distance learning within the SADC region was explored. Millions of youths across these Southern African countries want to further their studies and want to access quality learning opportunities, resources and qualifications (Isaacs & Mohee, 2020). ODL has emerged as the way to meet these needs.

A critical analysis of higher education in South Africa through the use of a timeline highlighted key moments in the evolution and shift of higher education as the country transitioned to democracy in 1994 and included a look at the most recent challenges, including the #feesmustfall movement.

Since the University of South Africa is the research area for this study, it was necessary to conclude the chapter by exploring the institution as a centre for ODL, as well as identifying the factors that influence student success at both Unisa and in ODL.

The following section, Chapter 5, focuses on answering the first research aim of this study by determining whether ODL programmes, specifically the ones offered by Unisa, increase access to higher education in the SADC region.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS: ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMMES

5.1 Introduction

Based on the premise that education is possible without the need to be in the same geographical space, distance education changed the way that students and teachers interacted (Kentnor, 2015). Advancements in ICT have created a space where distance education is more common than ever before, and as a result DE plays an important role in providing access to education for a greater number of students (Kentnor, 2015). One of the key principles of DE in the beginning (circa 1700s) was about opening access to knowledge, so that it no longer belonged to a privileged few (Kentnor, 2015).

The previous chapters explored the concept of internationalisation, as well as the way that open distance learning, and the institutions that offered them were able to meet criteria specific to internationalisation, without the need for students to be physically mobile. ODL was then explored in the African context, with specific focus on South Africa, and Unisa as exporters of higher education, especially in the SADC region, and to students who are engaged in distance education.

Most ODL institutions use a variety of terms to market themselves to prospective students, the most commonly used terms are open, accessible, flexible, supportive and affordable (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2012). As a leader in ODL, Unisa aims to overcome temporal, geographical, economic, social, educational and communication distance

between the students and the institution, the academics, the courseware and their peers, by removing barriers allowing students to access learning (Unisa, 2008). This is done through the provision of flexible learning, student-centeredness, student support and the construction of learning programmes focused on student success (Unisa, 2008).

Many of the terms used to market ODL institutions (flexibility, cost, access, timeframes and convenience) are key themes that were identified in this research, and will be unpacked in the chapter that follow.

Using the themes uncovered during the coding of the interviews, this chapter utilises excerpts from the student's own narratives to address the first objective of this study, which is to determine whether ODL programmes, specifically those offered by Unisa, create access to higher education.

5.2 Creating Access to HE Despite Location: Are ODL Programmes Effective?

There is an array of evidence that suggests that ODL programmes are effective at creating access to HE (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2012; Jimoh, 2013), more so in developing countries (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2012), where access to traditional forms of HE may be limited to the elite, or exclude mature students, with families and careers, as they are unable to attend classes as offered by traditional, in-person institutions. In doing so, ODL provides a unique opportunity to address a wide range of inequalities, such as race, gender and social inequalities.

5.2.1 Factors Influencing Access

The three key terms that are often used to describe ODL as a multidimensional concept (Unisa, 2008) are used by Unisa to describe how the institution aims to remove barriers, such as geographical distance, time constraints and funding (Unisa, 2022), and thereby increase access to learning, as well as creating a more flexible learning environment (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2012).

Several aspects relating to the category of access emanated from the interviews conducted for this study. They are: (i) cost, (ii) flexibility, (iii) reputation and entry requirements, and (iv) enrolment. In general, the participants regarded the cost of the degrees as affordable and they found the programmes to be flexible in many ways. The following section provides evidence of each of the aspects listed above, through the use of verbatim quotes taken from the student interviews.

5.2.1.1 Cost

Distance education is economically affordable and therefore provides a viable opportunity for students to pursue higher education (Mahlangu, 2018). Cost is a significant factor that leads many students to choose to study via ODL programmes. Not only are most courses offered through ODL cheaper than in-person options, they are also more cost effective in less obvious ways (Simon, 2021; Krakoff, 2021; Terry, 2020).

Unisa's affordability of their programmes creates access for a greater number of students, but especially for those who would otherwise be unable to participate in HE (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2012). This is in keeping with the institutions mandate to broaden access to previously disadvantaged students (Unisa, 2022).

Of the 27 students interviewed, 12 mentioned at some point in their interview, the aspect of affordability. This idea referred both to the affordability of the programmes offered by Unisa specifically, but also, to distance education in general. Five of the students had done some sort of comparison between Unisa and another distance education institutes abroad. In many of these cases, the students had looked into studying through ODL in the United Kingdom. These students found that Unisa was cheaper than the other option, and therefore made the fees more affordable.

One such student, Participant ST36, explained that they had considered other institutions, but ultimately chose Unisa because of the cost and affordability:

“I also admire the University of London. It offers all [sic] mostly similar courses but the expenses [sic] is just prohibitive. Then when I compared to South Africa it’s slightly cheaper.”

Similarly, when Participant ST38 was asked whether they had looked into studying at other institutions, the student stated that he had, but that ultimately, the cost was the determining factor:

“Yeah, it [Unisa] is really affordable, you know, compared to other countries, because if you look at England, Australia, they are quite expensive.”

Again, when asked the same question about whether they had investigated other possible institutions, Participant ST45 said she had:

“I considered other options but my major challenge was that the other options were very expensive and with the challenges we are facing with forex I had no choice; it’s not like I didn’t have a choice but after weighing my options I actually realised that Unisa was the better option.”

When Participant ST73 was asked about their decision to study at Unisa, the student noted that at that point in time, Unisa was the only option because it was the most affordable:

“I could not do distance education with ... universities from England ... they’re a bit pricey for me – so Unisa was my option ... they’re very reasonable.”

Participant ST35 chose to study through Unisa for a variety of reasons, one being the ability to pay in South African Rands. They initially wanted to study in the UK via DE but they were unable to make the payments as it was in British Pounds. Unisa made sense to them because:

“For the Unisa course because I could pay local currency and the company board will pay Unisa in Rands. That is the only advantage that I chose Unisa over ACCA.”

Four of the participants had compared the cost of studying at Unisa to other institutions that are traditional universities and not necessarily ODIs.

Participant ST53 compared the cost of studying at Unisa to the cost of studying at a university based in her home country of Namibia. She discovered that:

“I still find Unisa very affordable, Namibian universities are quite expensive ... Our own universities are quite very [sic] expensive. South African modules are quite affordable. The only thing is we are charged for being foreign students, so that’s the only problem we have. But then otherwise overall Unisa is still affordable to us compared to our own universities in Namibia.”

In comparison, Participant ST70 found that Unisa was affordable when compared to other South African universities, but that it was more expensive than studying at one of the institutions in their home country of Zimbabwe.

Two reasons were given when Participant ST46 was asked why they chose to study at Unisa: flexibility first, then cost. The student stated that the fees were *“quite reasonable”* in comparison to *“other universities which offer the same programme for distance education.”*

Participant ST54, who also based their perception of affordability based on some sort of comparison, felt that cost played a role in the popularity of Unisa, stating that:

“Unisa is popular in Southern Africa ... I also feel like it’s affordable when you compare it to other institutions.”

One student, Participant ST49, believes that studying via DE is more affordable than in-person learning, stating that he chose:

“To attend university with the [sic] distance education, because the cost is substantially less than if you were to attend physically.”

The student went on to explain the difference, using his friends as examples, saying that:

“It’s very affordable because ... my friends were paying a lot more to physically stay in South Africa, the travelling costs, the living costs and so on.”

The remaining two students both felt that studying at Unisa was affordable and cost effective, but they did not compare these costs to other institutions. This perception of affordability was often based solely on the cost of the fees, and their ability to make the necessary payments. Participant 56, who relies on his parents to pay for his fees, stated that studying at Unisa was *“affordable because they [his parents] have never missed a letter [referring to payment].”*

The final student, Participant ST48, simply stated that the fees at Unisa were *“reasonable”* and that they were able to pay for their fees themselves, using their salary.

There is a widespread belief that most students who choose to study at international institutions are often privileged (Raghuram, Breines & Gunter, 2020). This belief is rooted in the idea that privilege begets privilege, in this case through an educational advantage, suggesting that those who attended independent/private schools are more likely to be accepted into a university in other countries (Findlay, King, Smith, Geddes & Skeldon, 2011). In the case of this study, this does not appear to be true. People in positions of privilege would rarely need to consider the affordability of a programme. What this study has shown though, is that affordability is a key factor for

many students choosing to study at Unisa via DE. Not only do these students need to consider the cost of their chosen programme, but they encounter a unique set of challenges that domestic students at the same institution would not encounter. These obstacles include a foreign levy, ability to access foreign currency to pay fees, and sourcing funding for their fees.

The most discussed topic regarding the payment of fees and the issues surrounding it was the sourcing of funds to pay the fees. There are several ways that students pay for their fees: through a personal loan (either from a financial institution or their employer), saving money in anticipation of needing to pay for fees (Raghuram et al., 2020), professional development programmes at their place of employment, parents, as well as making sacrifices to stay on budget.

One such example of a student using a loan to pay their fees is that of Participant ST45. Participant ST45 is a single parent, whose daughter is also attending university. Study finances are a major burden on them. The student explained that:

“The thing with Unisa what [sic] I noticed... Okay, what I did for myself was as the months progressed before we actually register for a particular semester I put aside even hundreds of dollars, hundred dollars per month so that eventually when I’m supposed to pay it’s not as painful as trying to get a lump sum all at once, whereas here I’m expected to pay the full amount, right now she’s supposed to go back to school in August and I’m supposed to pump out 1,100 which is quite a lot for me which can be quite strenuous for me.”

The student stated that these fees would need to be paid all at once. The interviewer asked whether the student was able to afford the fees and if she needed assistance. The student stated that:

“I’ve so far been trying to cover everything based on my job and at one time I got a loan from my employer to help with my daughter’s fees and then that freed me to be able to pay for my fees ... I would have to pay back, say if I get it in January, I would have to start paying it back in February so at the end of the day I realised that I wasn’t really solving a problem ... so at the end of the day, I realised that the Unisa option of just putting aside a small amount as you go along is the better option rather than trying to raise a lump sum all at once.”

When asked whether the loan from her employer would accrue interest, the student said it would but that the rate was much lower than the interest rates from the bank, making this option better than if she went the formal route of applying with a registered banking institute.

Another student (Participant ST52) who made use of a loan to pay for their fees stated that:

“The fees are a bit high but I will have to get a loan for me to pay my fees of [sic] which I’m managing but with the salaries that we are getting it’s a bit difficult ... the institutions that offer loans, they know that we are studying; they give us a window period so that you manage to pay another loan or they offer you a loan so that you cover a previous loan and continue with a new one, so at least we are managing.”

Saving money was one of the most common and necessary ways that students planned to pay for their fees. Although several students claimed to use this strategy, it is not always possible for students to save money in advance (Raghuram et al., 2020).

Participant ST49 explained that they paid between \$800 and \$900 (US dollars) per semester, which they have been able to afford because they were able to save money while they were working. This is something that they acknowledged feeling thankful for.

As a more mature student (58 years old), Participant ST64 stated that they rely on their savings to pay for their fees. They hoped that when they completed their qualification that it would open up new opportunities for work to *“add up to my pension.”*

One final student, Participant ST68 explained that they are able to pay for their fees because they saved money for each payment. The student explained the process as:

“I did have to save for the degree I’ve just done now ... it was about \$630 for the one module and that’s more than I get paid per month, so it does require some saving, but it is manageable because it’s [Unisa payment] only twice a year... [and] I tend to save throughout the year.”

One benefit of studying while working is the possibility that the employer may pay for the student’s fees through some form of professional development programme. Many companies have such programmes to enhance and support continuous improvement, as well as further career development. Not all employers actually contribute financially to these goals, but the following three students were in a fortunate position to receive assistance in the form of payment of their fees.

One such student, Participant ST73, described how she received some assistance from the company at which she worked in the form of professional development, but the amount only allowed her to enrol in a few modules per year:

“My workplace were [sic] giving us US\$500 per year ... it was enough to cover just two modules a year ... we’ve got a [sic] professional development ... so everyone who’s studying ... get \$500.”

Participant ST40 works in a unique sector and she is able to pay her fees as a result of funds that are available for professional development. She explains that:

“Fortunately my company that I work for, they have a self-study assistance scheme, so at the end of your modules when you’ve passed ... or let me say for all the modules that you’ve passed they give you 87.5% of your tuition fees back ... that helps me, it’s just in the beginning because I have to pay for everything and at the end of my course they usually give it back to me or at the end of a semester ... when I have finished with these modules then I can register for the next using the money that I have gotten back.”

Participant ST46 uses a combination of saving money and a salary advancement to pay for their fees. He is in an advantageous position since his employer will fully reimburse his study fees on completion of his degree. He explained this process as:

“the company approves the programme so the motivation is after completing my studies, after graduating they will refund my course costs.”

All of them ... In terms of paying ... you pay twice a year for the first semester and the second semester, so what I used to do was when I'm preparing for the second semester starting in January, I will start saving three months before the beginning of this semester, so that's how I manage to raising with the funds, the required funds. It's also the flexibility of uni so that you can take a certain amount to get your modules then finish off during the course of the semester ... you don't have to pay everything at one go... if there are any challenges in paying for fees I can apply for an advanced salary then I pay off my school fees."

The responses of the remaining students who described how they acquired the money to pay for their fees, were quite varied. One of the students, Participant ST70, said that although she was working, her parents paid for her fees. Participant ST60 stated that they were only able to pay their fees by working multiple jobs, while Participant ST41 explained that they had to make many personal sacrifices in order to pay their fees.

"Most of the fees money, honestly came from my parents because when I am working I can sustain myself maybe [sic] and buying [sic] my books, but when it comes to my fees, no." (Participant ST70).

Participant ST60 explained that although she had a full-time job as a police officer, she is forced to work multiple part-time jobs in order to pay for her fees:

"Right now, I'm officiating a tournament, so that I can pay my fees. I am [sic] already owing Unisa ... I do extra things and it's stressing [sic], but

I've got no choice, it's best I have got another extra thing to do to pay for my studies."

Participant ST41 recognised that they were struggling to pay their fees, stating that at times they had to make personal sacrifices to afford the tuition:

"Right now, I am really struggling paying my fees... it's expensive. You just have to sacrifice. If I tell you I haven't bought [sic] even clothes for myself for the past three years, I [sic] just all wearing old clothes, for that time to sacrifice so that I finish the degree. So, you just have to fit your priorities right."

Not only do students have to contend with the issue of finding the money they need to pay for their fees (as outlined above), but in some countries, this issue is further complicated by issues outside of their control. Unique mainly to the Zimbabwean cohort of students was the issue of obtaining foreign currency needed to pay for their fees. The local economy in Zimbabwe is often described as being "in-crisis" (Tyson, 2017; Marima, 2019; Muronzi, 2020). This is largely as a result of an inflated and unstable currency, and the inability of the banks in Zimbabwe to buy foreign currency in the open (African Development Bank, 2021). As a result, many students reported the need to buy foreign currency on the black market in order to pay for their fees.

The use of the black market to obtain currency generally emerges when the government controls access to foreign exchange. These controls often begin when the local currency is overvalued leading to a shortage of foreign currency, which results in the

creation of foreign exchange black markets (Makochekanwa, 2007). This is the situation that many Zimbabwean students found themselves in.

Since Unisa is based in South Africa, the fees of all international students are expected to be paid in South African Rands. This can become challenging when international exchange rates are taken into consideration.

The overall issue of foreign currency is two-fold. Firstly, students paying for their studies from another country will have to convert their local currency to South African Rands. This process will inevitably incur a processing fee, and the amount converted will be pegged at the current exchange rate. Very few SADC countries' currencies are on a 1:1 ratio to the South African Rand. For example, at its highest for 2018 (on Sunday, February 25, 2018), the exchange rate between SA Rands (ZAR) and Zimbabwe Dollars (ZWD) was 31.3398:1. This date was chosen because it coincides with the time at which the interviews were conducted, and therefore gives a more accurate view of what the students were encountering, when paying their fees.

Secondly, students in countries where access to foreign currency is scarce are forced to seek the currency on black markets. These black markets come with their own set of drawbacks, including, but not limited to an inflation of rates, which often results in the students paying more.

Participant ST63 explained the challenge he encountered when trying to pay for his fees in this way:

“price is becoming a challenge because Zimbabwe is a country, as you might be aware, we are facing challenges in raising foreign currency and for that degree we pay using Rand which is a foreign currency to us as

Zimbabweans. So, we have been buying foreign currency and the rates of foreign currency have been spiking of late and the challenge is, as you can see a few ... last semester I was supposed to register for six modules but I ended up registering for four modules because of finance challenges.”

Other students encountered similar challenges when trying to pay their fees. One such student is Participant ST48 who explained that studying via ODL in Zimbabwe was especially challenging since there were multiple challenges not only with accessing the funds, but then needing to convert those funds into a different currency. They explained that:

“It was the payment. It was very difficult. Yeah, to convert Zimbabwean Dollars to US or South African [currency] ... So paying fees is a little bit challenging ... I used my Zimbabwean pay, so I need to find foreign currency then conflate it to pay our local bank, they need foreign currency.”

When asked by the interviewer if they found the fees affordable, the student went on to say that the fees are reasonable, and that he is able to pay them from his salary, however another participant has a different experience. Participant ST59 explains that making the payments is:

“... becoming a bit expensive considering the current economic situation in Zimbabwe ... you can only get the Rand or the US Dollar on the black

market ... Obtaining the Rand is the only problem because you don't have foreign currency in Zimbabwe.” (Participant ST59)

When asked if the student was able to make payments through the bank, the student went on to explain that:

“I cannot pay in the bank because these days our bank cannot do a single transfer. I have to travel [to] and pay my fees in South Africa.” (Participant ST59)

Another student (Participant ST63) noted that:

“The fees have been stable, but it is the exchange rate that has been affecting us ... I could certainly say my salary is sufficient to cover the four modules, but it's only that maybe it becomes difficult because we have to access the forex from the black market where the rates are extremely high ... Once you get the Rands on the black market you have to travel to South Africa, go into a South African bank then deposit it into the Unisa account – that poses another challenge as well.”

Students who are studying through Unisa as international students are faced with yet another added cost – the foreign levy. Cited by the institution as an “additional fee”, all students who reside outside of South Africa are required to pay an additional amount per module (Unisa, 2020). The cost per module varies depending on whether the module is a year module or a semester module, with the latter being slightly less than the former.

Several students specified that the foreign levy was problematic in regards to the overall cost of their studies.

When Participant ST64 was asked about the cost of their fees, the student explained that:

“The expense is a big issue. Because we, as Zimbabweans, pay a foreign levy which is roughly the equivalent of the tuition fees. So, we are paying double what the South Africans are paying”.

The student added that a compounding factor is that the banks in Zimbabwe do not have foreign currency readily available, which results in students turning to the black market to search for the currency that they need to pay their fees which, according to the student *“becomes pretty expensive.”*

Another student (Participant ST35) described the foreign levy as costing almost double the fees, and although he has a job, it is sometimes difficult for him to pay for both his fees and the foreign levy. He explained that:

“Unisa sometimes it does cost [sic] me. You know, at times when you get a job that isn’t paying well, the fees for international students was [sic] pretty high. I think it was double compared to South African students ... but I know we pay more than South African students.”

Like him, many other students highlighted the foreign levy as being a challenge when paying for their fees. Participant ST54, explained that while he was able to pay his fees (despite the high cost of the levy), there were many other students in situations where they would not be able to pay their fees as they had other, more pressing responsibilities:

“There’s a certain portion of the fees charged to foreign students, it’s expensive to fork out that ... for someone working in my position it’s not too bad but for many colleagues I feel like it’s tough. Some of them won’t be making [referring to cost and ability to pay the fees] ... they’ll be having younger siblings to take care of ... it’s tough.”

Similarly, participant ST60 explained that the fees, specifically the foreign levy, was challenging at times. Especially since the foreign levy has increased twice since they started studying at Unisa and that:

“finding the money ... was a big challenge, because the foreign levy is much more expensive than the module fee.”

Unlike most of the students interviewed for this study, Participant ST74 believes that studying at Unisa is expensive, especially for foreign students who have to pay the foreign levy. The student stated that:

“It’s quite expensive. You find that the modules that others are paying for R1,400 I’m probably paying R2,800, that’s double the normal rate which the South Africans are being charged because they are saying it’s foreign levy. But at the end of the day, because you’ve got no choice to just say, “Ah, everyone is saying Unisa is expensive.” Very expensive, so you find most people want to study with Unisa but they can’t afford it so they end up doing the local universities. For us we do not have a choice because with local universities the programme is not there, we are forced to come

to Unisa. But had the programme been here locally I wouldn't be doing it with Unisa because it's expensive."

So, while cost not only determines whether a student is able to study at an institution, it also determines the number of modules a student can take in a given year, thereby deciding on the total length of the student's programme. When an additional cost, like foreign levies are factored in, it can further reduce the number of modules a student can take and extend their programme for several semesters. Participant ST77 explained this process, stating that there were a number of factors that determined the number of modules they were able to take each year. Cost was the first factor that they mentioned, but they specified that the cost referred specifically to the foreign levy. In their case, the student's cost increased from R5,000 to R8,000. This increase in foreign levy impacts the students beyond just how many modules they are able to take each year. In the case of this student, they had to revisit their budget and *"do away with some things,"* such as *"accounts for clothes ... and also food ... I have really been cautious on prices, on whatever I buy."*

Like Participant ST77, quoted above, Participant ST60, shared a similar sentiment of needing to prioritise how they spend their money explaining that:

"At some point, I ended up registering three subjects/modules, instead of the required five... because I couldn't afford it, so that's [sic] made me lag behind."

These comments suggest then that if foreign levies continue to increase, more students will be excluded as they are unable to afford the cost of studying. This then lowers access to higher education and reduces the internationalisation of HE at Unisa.

Some students however, have thought of ways to circumvent the foreign levy. Students travel to South Africa to register at local centres, while others try to obtain South African citizenship as a way to avoid the levy. The latter is explained by Participant ST53, who compared her situation (in Namibia) to that of another student who was studying in Nigeria and said that:

“I’m being charged 5,000 extra for student levy, for a SADC country. I have a friend in Nigeria who [is] also studying LLB through South Africa, Unisa, and then they pay almost twice as much as I pay because they’re not part of SADC. So as a result, some of them actually drop out because it’s quite expensive for them being [sic] not SADC students ... Some students actually go to the extent of trying to get a South African citizenship just for them to study, because they can’t afford the studies ... For instance, my friend in Nigeria is trying to get a citizenship of South Africa just so he can complete his LLB, because he said the student levy that had been charged is quite high. I’m not sure but they said because they’re not part of SADC, his fees are quite high compared to ours who are part of SADC. But then the universities in Namibia are doing the same for foreign students, so I guess that’s how it goes.”

Participant ST77 explained that some students choose to register in South African and then write their exams at a South African examination centre as a way to avoid the foreign

levy. Many of these students claim that doing it this way is cheaper than having to pay the levy.

“some students they even go there to write exams there because they can’t afford the foreign levy so they just go there for the exams ... you just arrange your study, yeah, and you have to travel there and they say the cost is better because they go by Musina, that is near the border there, so they just load, somebody pays for the lodging and food and then they write exams and then come back home.”

If the intention behind internationalisation is to diversify the student population with the inclusion of foreign students, the implementation of the payment of additional fees for international students counteracts this, because a portion of these students are unable to afford the fees.

Cost is not just about the affordability of the fees. In many instances ODL is touted as being more cost-effective than traditional in-person learning as there is a reduction in auxiliary costs, such as transportation and travel, child-care and a reduction in the cost of learning materials such as textbooks (Hughes, 2015; Terry, 2020; Krakoff, 2021; Simon, 2021).

When reviewing the interviews, it became apparent that this is not the case for many of the students. Several students reported that they needed to travel to South Africa for a variety of reasons. This therefore removes the premise that ODL reduces the overall costs, since the students would not need to travel. The reasons for travel were varied, and include such factors as needing to travel to:

1. Pay fees;
2. Meet with lecturers;
3. Sort out enrolment issues;
4. Obtain study materials;
5. Write exams; and
6. Complete course requirements

Participant ST45 mentioned two of these issues in her interview, stating that she travelled to South Africa from Zimbabwe to complete her enrolment and to write exams.

“I actually went to Pretoria Sunnyside Campus ... that’s how I managed to register.”

“I only go to South Africa for exams because it’s the nearest examination centre.”

Participant ST59 explained that they needed to travel for a number of reasons, including to pay fees, to complete their enrolment process and to complete certain course requirements. This continued need to travel left the student feeling angry and frustrated, stating that:

“I have to travel and pay my fees in South Africa ... I just cross the border, [and pay at] any bank.”

Since the closest South African bank is roughly 500 kilometres away, it takes seven hours to make the journey. Added to this is the need to make the journey twice a year to make

payments every semester. The student also travelled to the campus in South Africa to complete their enrolment, saying that:

“I had to go there and enquire myself [sic] ... it took me about 18 to 14 hours because it’s far, it’s about 1,200km ... so it took me five days in total.”

The same student described how the course requirements had changed, requiring the students to travel to South Africa to complete their practicals. Not only did the student feel as though communication between the university and the students was lacking, in her case, completing that particular course requirement was nearly impossible since the cost was too high:

“Now they are saying that we must travel to South Africa for our practicals. But they never communicated to us.” When asked how they intended to resolve the issue, the student lamented “I don’t even know because I don’t know anybody, I don’t have a home there, I don’t know how I’m going to do it ... it’s a very difficult thing for me now ... and looking at my country’s economy it’s even worse ... To get that money and to get money to go and stay in a hotel, I cannot afford it.” (Participant ST59)

Travel, and therefore the cost of travel, is also unavoidable when the students are required to write their exams in person. This is done through the use of examination centres. More than 10 countries in the SADC region have less than three exam centres, and surprisingly, four countries have no examination centres at all. This means that

students who are studying in those countries will be required to travel to other countries in order to write their examinations.

According to Participant ST52:

“we write our exams here in Zimbabwe ... I only know that we’ve got two centres that I know in Zimbabwe for Unisa. We’ve got the one in Harare and the one in Bulawayo. You choose when [sic] you apply for a degree with Unisa, you choose the centre that you want to write your exams with; for myself, I chose Harare ... I have to travel about 200 kms to go and write my exams!”

There is a perception that since learning takes place online, and that the resources needed to engage with the courses are available online, that students do not have to pay extra for textbooks and that therefore the fees are reduced (Simon, 2021). This is not true in the cases of students studying through Unisa. Many of the students who were interviewed for this study indicated that accessing study materials was not only challenging, but in many instances, it was also costly.

For some students, the prescribed textbooks were not available to purchase in their own countries, which resulted in students finding unique and expensive ways to get hold of the texts. This means that some aspects related to cost overlap, for example, the lack of prescribed textbooks in a student's home country results in the need to travel. In many instances, the students travel to South Africa in order to obtain the necessary learning materials.

Participant ST70 shared their experience, stating that:

“Usually I will go [to South Africa] when the semester begins so that I can buy textbooks ... neither do most of the books[hops] ship to Zimbabwe, so I will specifically choose to go and get the books that I want.”

One student, Participant ST38, explained in detail how they go about obtaining the necessary resources:

“Maybe for us in Zimbabwe, we say, ‘Well, we can’t get a textbook in the bookshops in Zimbabwe,’ so it is a challenge here to send somebody to South Africa to buy the texts. There are not [sic] shops that sell, you know, the prescribed textbooks. You can’t get those ... that’s the biggest challenge that there is here.”

When asked how they were able to get the textbooks, the student said that:

“You have to give somebody Rands and then when they cross over, they buy those books and then give them [sic].”

Another student spoke of their experience with what they call “agents, or runners” who act on their behalf to purchase textbooks in South Africa and bring them across the border to Zimbabwe.

“The only challenge was on [sic] getting the prescribed books, because you know Unisa is very specific in terms of the study materials, you know, you are supposed to use in terms of prescribed books. Most of them are South African authors so, yeah, because you know accessing the bookstores – and the bookstores are in South Africa – it had been a

challenge but you know with years going on and with many people doing Unisa in Zimbabwe, you've found people who are now acting as agents and getting new books, obviously at an extra cost, yes, it's an extra cost and it is in books so that is still a challenge in terms of getting books, unless you're getting an eBook, where you just, you know, pay online and get an eBook. But getting like [sic] hard copies of prescribed books is still a bit of a challenge ... We do have agents here who now act as runners so you just tell them the books that you want and they get them for you.” (Participant ST72)

When asked about the additional cost when using “agents, or runners,” the student stated that they pay up to 15% of the original price. The student explained that this was only one of the extra costs that they needed to pay for.

For some students, the cost goes beyond simply the need to purchase prescribed textbooks. In order to engage with their study materials, most, if not all students need to have access to the internet. Although there is a regional infrastructure policy in place in the SADC region, establishing affordable, always-on internet availability remains low (Mothobi, Chair & Rademan, 2017). The cost for 1GB of prepaid mobile data is especially high in Zimbabwe and Eswatini, with the Seychelles having the highest cost in the region (Mothobi, Chair & Rademan, 2017).

When asked about their ability to access their learning materials, one student stated that:

“Yes. But on my [sic] expense. I am really paying, when I talk to the guys in South Africa they say, ‘We have regional centres, we have stuff, we

can go to regional centres and access materials easily, university's computers,' but here in Zimbabwe we are using our own money to access that MyUnisa platform ... roughly there's an extra \$30 per month for full-time internet connection ... Yes, it's expensive". (Participant ST41)

Yet another student mentioned the challenges faced when trying to access their course materials via the internet, saying that:

"Because the airtime, the data airtime is very expensive in Zimbabwe most of the time I end up going to an internet café whereby they charge me a dollar for an hour or sometimes I might choose my phone, I put data bundles on my phone and then I do it at home but the internet connectivity here is a bit challenging sometimes so most of the time I end up having to go to an internet café." (Participant ST45)

Students have indicated that they rely on the hard copies (i.e. printed versions of their course materials) due to the difficulty they have getting online to access the soft copies.

"They (the university) put up materials on the school website, they put the materials there, but like I'm saying at times we have got network challenges in our region." (Participant ST60)

The same student went on to explain that due to the lack of study materials (both hard and soft copies), they felt that they were at a disadvantage when it came to exam preparation, which in turn resulted in them failing one of their modules. They elaborated further:

“The modules had not reached me, I was using the soft copies, the laptop is now stalling and it’s exam time. So we can’t really rely on the soft copies, we need those hard copies”.

As stated previously, one area where auxiliary costs can be reduced through ODL is through saving on the cost of childcare (Simon, 2021). It is often assumed that since the student is not required to attend in-person classes, that they do not have to seek childcare for their children (Simon, 2021). Based on the interviews conducted, this assumption appears to be true for most of the students who have children, or are in some way responsible for children, such as through guardianship.

One of the ways that formal childcare (such as childcare that would take place through a creche) is avoided is through the use of family members and spouses. One such example is a student (Participant ST51) who states that:

“My kids are weekly boarders. They come home on Friday, back to school on Sunday ... So he [referring to her husband] takes care of the kids on Saturdays ... I go to the library [to study] on Saturday... Then by 3:30 pm I will be home with the kids ... he has been very supportive of me.”

Although the course fees for ODL courses are generally less than in-person learning courses, the overall amount can at times be too expensive, especially for students in developing countries (Dadigamuwa & Senanayake, 2012).

While many of the students felt that the fees were affordable, some of the students indicated that they had to go through other means to be able to afford the fees. Some of

the ways that students were able to raise the money needed for the fees was through student loans, working multiple jobs, parental assistance (i.e., parents paid the fees), accessing funds from savings or retirement accounts, and through employer support in the form of professional development funds.

The use of student loans and financing of fees by parents is not a concept that is unique to distance education; in fact, many students who pursue higher education through traditional methods (i.e., in-person, on-campus learning) utilise loans that are offered by financial institutions, or for many others, their parents are able to pay the fees.

Cost is not just about affordability of the fees, and ideas surrounding the cost effectiveness of ODL seem out of touch with reality. It has been shown that students enrolled in ODL programmes still need to travel, and in many cases have to travel extensive distances. There are a variety of reasons for travelling, as explained by the participants, ranging from needing assistance with enrolment to economic factors that prevent students from paying their fees in their home country, which necessitated travelling to South Africa to pay their fees. Auxiliary costs include the need to purchase prescribed textbooks despite having access to online resources, which often results in the need to pay “agents” to purchase the books in South Africa, and bring them across the border to Zimbabwe, as an additional cost. A lack of regional infrastructure means that many students are forced to pay costs to receive internet access, which at times is unreliable and spotty.

5.2.1.2 Flexibility

Flexibility is a key element of ODL, which has many facets and results in easier access to education for students and more convenience when choosing what, when, how and where to study (Gaskell, 2015; Daniel, 2016; Alice, Guopeng, Valley, Cyprien, Eduard & Andrew, 2016; Khan, 2007). As such, flexibility is a trademark of learning that happens “anytime, anyplace,” and relates to aspects of time and place (Veletsianos & Houlden, 2019). Increased levels of flexibility give the students the independence and control not to only schedule their studies, but their lives as well (Daniel, 2016). Flexibility is often one of the major factors that draw people to study via ODL. The concept of flexibility is interwoven into the ideology of access, since students are able to access higher education without the need to make extreme changes to their existing lives, including the ability to continue working, and to place family responsibility first (Veletsianos & Houlden, 2019).

Flexibility was one of the largest categories that was noted during the coding of the qualitative data. In total, 20 out of the 27 (74%) students interviewed made some reference or mention of flexibility as a motivating reason for choosing to a) study via ODL, and/or b) study at Unisa. The concept of flexibility was broken down into eight distinct groups:

1. Can work and study
2. Can support family
3. Can remain in home country
4. Can determine own schedule
5. Can complete degree in own time

6. Can gain work experience while studying
7. Can study and travel at the same time
8. Can maintain independence

The concept of flexibility and all of the underlying concepts related to it will be unpacked in the section that follows.

Of the eight groups mentioned above, group 1 (can work and study) had the highest number of responses, with 41% of students referring to this idea as a key factor of flexibility. The group with the second highest number of responses was group 5 (can complete degree in own time), followed by group 4 (can determine own schedule), where 26% and 21% of the participants made reference to this being an important factor when making their decision to study via ODL and ultimately to study through Unisa specifically. The flexibility to support their family while they studied (group 2) was noted by several students, and contained elements of financial and physical support. The remainder of the groups (3, 6, 7 and 8) all had a low number (less than 10%) of participant responses, but were worth mentioning nonetheless.

The reporting of these results involved some of the groups being combined. This was done as there were several groups that overlapped each other, and it made sense to report them under one larger grouping. These groups were, group 1 and 6, group 4 and 5. The remainder of the groups were reported as stand-alone groups.

The ability to work and study is of paramount importance to most students. After all, this is the model on which the university was created – mature students who study part-time while they hold steady positions of employment (Hammond, 2020). As indicated in the previous section, many of the students interviewed for this study indicated that they

were able to finance their studies as either a direct or indirect result of their employment. For this reason, many of these students would not be able to study without being able to work.

When asked about their current work situation, Participant ST35 noted that they decided to study in South Africa because:

“It was a flexible course ... I needed to have a course where I could go to work at the same time and study at the same time. That was the reason I studied at Unisa.”

Another Participant ST36 noted something similar, stating that:

“it [Unisa] offers me the opportunity to do my things [referring to their job] whilst I’m studying at [sic] the comfort of my home.”

Similarly, Participant ST41 stated that:

“Unisa is one of the best universities in Africa ... and it offers that [sic] online education, open distance learning, so it’s good for me because I can work as well as go to school.”

When asked why they would not choose to study in Zimbabwe, the same student explained that Zimbabwe does not have many options for ODL, so they would be required to attend a traditional, in-person, university, however they were looking for an institution that:

“enables me to be working as well as going to school, because I have a family to support. So, I can’t be studying full time ... I need a university that gives me that [sic] opportunity to work as well as study.”

The ability to work while studying means that not only are the students able to earn an income, but in some instances, their employer may actually assist them in financing their studies, as was explained by Participant ST46:

“I chose to study with Unisa because of the flexibility that it gives me. I’m a fully employed someone, so Unisa gives me that flexibility. I can study after work and during the weekends. That was number one. Number two I also considered the cost.”

Later in the same interview, the student described how his employer was able to assist him with his fees, saying that:

“if there are any challenges in paying for fees, I can apply for an advanced salary then I pay off my school fees.”

Participant ST45 explained that they had chosen to study via Unisa because the options available to her at the local universities in Zimbabwe would require her to take time off to attend lectures, whereas the learning offered to her through Unisa meant that *“it’s more convenient because I don’t have to take time off from work.”*

She also considered her age as crucial to her decision in choosing DE since she assumed that most people her age (older than 40) would hold some position of employment making it difficult for them to attend classes in the traditional manner. As a

mother, she outlined the difference in tertiary study between herself and her daughter, noting that:

“for somebody who is my age and who can’t really leave work, distance education is the better option, whereas for maybe my daughter, who is not at work and right now her number one priority is school [meaning university]. Full-time university education is the better option for the younger person, rather than the older person.”

The flexibility to work while studying is not unique to mature students alone, as is highlighted in the quotes from the previous participant. Participant ST49 who is a younger student (aged between 19–25) reported having two main reasons for studying at Unisa: flexibility in determining her own schedule and the ability to work while studying. She stated that:

“after doing [sic] Unisa for a year or so, I realised that it was very pleasant to be able to have my own schedule. I didn’t have to attend any lectures at a certain time or be at certain places, I could run my own day the [way I] wanted to, so I could study in the evenings, I could study at lunchtime, I could do whatever I wanted to do. So it grew on me gradually that at least with the distance learning I can run my own show really ... first one it [sic] was because of that and then the second one it [sic] was because I was working ... I also realised the inherent potential in being able to study while having an income and also gaining work experience...”

because I started to learn a lot more about the work environment, managing yourself, and just really applying skills that you can learn.”

For other students, cost and flexibility go hand-in-hand. One student, Participant ST52, noted that if she were to complete a degree at a local distance university, there would not be as much flexibility as she currently experiences at Unisa, noting that:

“here we’ve got what we call ‘block release’ sessions ... I will have to go to the college for three months of which I am not paid for the months that I’m off, which is more costly to me ... rather than just studying online whilst I’m getting paid.”

Participant ST73, explained how she started working as a teaching assistant straight after she left high school, and although she did pursue a degree, she realised that she was not suited to it and dropped out. Since she already had some experience with teaching, she was able to pursue a formal teaching job at a school close to where she lived. It was this job that made her realise she had a passion for teaching and decided to begin her studies in education. She came to the conclusion that distance education through Unisa would afford her the opportunity to continue teaching, while studying at the same time.

“I started working as a teaching assistant straight from high school and I did a bit of accounting with a different institution but I found it boring before I even finished so I left that. Then I started working at a school, at our international school, and I just, I then discovered that I really enjoyed teaching, more than anything, so that’s when I decided to start doing my

degree ... I chose distance education because it would allow me to stay at work.” (Participant ST73)

The same student also shared that she needed to work and study as her father was unemployed, and she was therefore required to pay for her tuition with her salary. The situations stated above, show the need that some students have to work in order to be able to pay for their fees, and not just to earn a living. While some students expressed the need to work as a way of supporting themselves, their studies, or their families, some students simply stated that Unisa offered them the flexibility to study while working. The emphasis on needing to work therefore led them to choose an institution that afforded them the opportunity to maintain their employment, while studying at the same time. According to (Participant ST62): *“I am full-time employed [sic], so I want something where I would be working at the same time.”*

With the ability to work and study, comes the added benefit of gaining valuable work experience. This experience allows the student to apply what they have learned directly to what they experience in their professional environment (Corlett & Martindale, 2017) This is in contrast to a student who would gain their degree in the traditional manner of in-person learning. These in-person learners would not have the flexibility to work to the same extent, and therefore would not be able to gain skills that would only come from working in that industry. Aside from the knowledge gained through the course material, and for some students, through work experience, students studying via ODL become equipped with a variety of transferable skills, such as time management, research, use of technology and communication (South Dakota State University (SDSU), 2021).

A few of the participants mentioned that they felt that ODL allowed them the flexibility not to only work while studying, but to gain relevant work experience at the same time.

When the question was asked whether the student felt that there was a connection between their current job and their studies, Participant ST68 emphatically agreed, stating that:

“The studies were definitely a part of it because they are utilising me in the marketing department, which is what I am studying”.

Later in the interview, the student explained that:

“I chose distance education because I was [sic] loving my job and I thought it would be great to get experience while I worked, because I know these days to get a job without experience is very hard, so I thought it was the best way to get that experience while I studied.”

During another interview, Participant ST54 described the process of “converting” the Unisa Law degree, which is South African based, to be able to practice as a lawyer in Zimbabwe. In explaining the process, the student highlighted that:

“this is the stuff that I am already doing [referring to what they are studying and what they are doing at work]. I’m doing most of the legal stuff that’s done by the lawyers at the first level; I’m doing it [sic] right now, by virtue of being an HR practitioner. In fact, I actually help lawyers in some cases, I tend to assist them.”

When asked by the interviewer whether the student felt as though they were applying what they learned to their current position, the student agreed, saying:

“indeed. It’s given [me] an opportunity to put into practice because [sic] of the stuff I’ve learnt about.”

The final participant to mention gaining work experience while studying began by expressing the financial benefits of being able to work and study simultaneously, before noting that distance learning allowed her to gain valuable working experience:

“the work experience I really appreciated too, because I started to learn a lot more about the work environment, managing yourself, and just really applying skills that you learn.” (Participant ST49)

Another aspect of flexibility that was repeatedly mentioned is time. This characteristic has two elements to it:

- 1) Flexibility to determine own study schedule, and
- 2) Flexibility to complete their degree in their own time.

The first characteristic is a relatively short-term time frame that tends to be more malleable and have greater flexibility than the second characteristic, since this can vary day to day or even hour by hour. The second characteristic is more rigid, where a student decides beforehand, at the beginning of their studies, how long they intend to study, before they complete their studies. While the second characteristic is flexible, it tends to only change as a result of significant events, such as a loss of employment, failure of a module, or

suspension. While these two elements differ in scale, they will be reported together as a measure of time and the flexibility of time.

Participant ST40 highlighted the duality of time when they were asked about how the student viewed the flexibility of Unisa. The student described Unisa as:

“very flexible. I control what I want to do, how much I want to take on in which [sic] amount of time I have to ... I think you have a certain limit to complete all the modules but you can decide – want to do three modules with Unisa, or five, or six. So I can control that.”

Multiple students noted how they viewed their time as a student via DE versus how they imagined their time being used if they were to attend in-person classes. In some instances, the ability to create their own schedule spoke to a level of independence that they believed they would not have in a traditional setting. For a few of the students, this realisation only came after a year or so of DE.

For Participant ST49 the adjustment to being a DE student was gradual:

“After doing Unisa for a year or so, I realised that it was very pleasant to be able to have my own schedule. I didn’t have to attend lectures at a certain time or be at certain places. I could run my own day the [way I] wanted to, so I could study in the evenings, I could study at lunchtime, I could do whatever I wanted to do. So it grew on me gradually that at least with the distance learning I can run my own show really.”

One student, Participant ST56, thought that having to go to campus daily would be a distraction, since it would prevent them from doing things unrelated to their studies:

“Unisa has other benefits of different learning where you can actually do other things without being distracted, without going to school, going to the university every day.”

This sentiment was shared by Participant ST62 who stated that:

“You are not full-time at school, but you are able to login and do your own thing. I think that’s a positive.”

Not only did students value the independence to choose when (i.e. what time and for how long) they studied short-term, but also having the ability to make a decision about the total amount of time it took them to complete their degree was as important. Participant ST56 explained that:

“I won’t deal with the pressure from university for three years to be there all the time ... where you can just do your assignments, get help when you need help [referring to Unisa].”

This ability to have flexibility with time allows many students to prioritise aspects of their lives that are important to them, while still being able to study. In the case of DE, students do not have to choose one over the other. Participant ST60 explained this sentiment well stating that:

“What inspired me is the thing that I can take my own time to read and what have you. I really wanted to attend campus too, but I didn’t have the time to do all that. I couldn’t leave my kid and go for [sic] school, on campus, I couldn’t. So I was searching for a school that can give me Law, like Unisa, they send me my modules, I read, so it’s difficult, I have to read those odd hours. I am now used [sic] ... it is even better because during the day I will do something else, I’ll go to work, I’ll attend to my kid, attend to my family and everything, and read during the night.”

As a leader in DE, Unisa also allows greater flexibility than other DE institutions, where there is still an element of on-campus learning that takes place over a number of days. These periods of on-campus learning are known by the students as “block release,” and are often the reason why the students decided to study via Unisa.

Participant ST77 explained that:

“I wanted something that was flexible with my time and the other local resources are not really friendly for me because there was only one university here [referring to a DE institution] that could offer what I wanted but I had to do what they call block release.”

Participant ST46, who is also based in Zimbabwe, shared a similar sentiment to Participant ST77. They shared that the number one reason they chose to study at Unisa was flexibility, and explained in detail the reasons why:

“I chose to study with Unisa because of the flexibility that it gives me. I’m a fully employed someone so Unisa gives me that flexibility. I can study

after work and during the weekends ... compared to maybe other universities which offer the same programme for distance education. For example, here in Zimbabwe, they offer a programme but you have to attend lectures ... I don't have time for that, and also, the timeframe in Zimbabwe, you have to study for six years. But with Unisa I give myself five years ... it's one year faster than doing it here in Zimbabwe."

Flexibility also applied to the student's ability to support their families. Associated with this is family responsibility; a separate theme that emerged from the interviews, as one of the challenges of studying at Unisa. Several students acknowledged that one of their key roles was that of a caregiver. This role encompassed many areas, including, parental responsibilities, and other familial responsibilities, such as caring for parents, siblings and/or other family members. This support came in a multitude of forms, such as financial, emotional and physical support (as in providing a living space). While fewer students mentioned the flexibility to support family (23%), many more students indicated that they had some form of extended family that they felt responsible for looking after (37%).

One student who clearly expressed the interconnectedness of needing to address family responsibilities and the flexibility to do so through DE was Participant ST77, who explained that:

"It [referring to Unisa] met all the requirements that I wanted and I wanted something that was flexible with my time and the other local universities are not really friendly for me because there was only one university here that could offer what I wanted but I had to do what they call block release ... But I'm a wife and I'm a mother, I have little children. That means I

couldn't afford to be away from them for about a week or month. I wanted something that I can do while I'm home and while I'm able to take care of my family. So, Unisa was, yeah, was the only university that I felt could fulfil what I wanted to achieve".

Similarly, Participant ST40 expressed how her changing roles would create more responsibilities but that she felt that she could balance them all due to the flexibility of her studies, stating that:

"[The] only responsibility that I have at the moment is my mother, however I am getting married now in September so then ... now you don't just have yourself ... I don't have only myself to look out for, now I will have a husband who I must feed every night and all that responsibility, but he's really supportive so ... I can maintain a healthy balance between work, married life, family and my studies."

Participant ST73 is also a married woman, who, when asked why she chose to study at Unisa, explained that:

"I choose distance education because it would allow me to stay at work ... coming from a family where my father wasn't working, I really needed to do work for me to be able to go to school."

She went on to explain that:

“I’m now married so I’ve got a child and we still support ... my parents, and we do support ... my in-laws, but yeah, so I’ve got responsibilities as well”.

Unlike the participants discussed previously, Participant ST60 is a single mother who has an eight-year-old son. She works multiple jobs in order to afford her fees. The flexibility of DE means that she is able to focus on her multiple roles (employee and mother) and still study at the same time.

“I cannot say that it is very difficult because for myself I have drawn the line, when I am at work, I just do my work. After work I have to make time for the kid, I have to. When he goes to sleep then I’ll start [to] study”.

The student also strongly feels that DE is best suited for women, explaining that:

“distance education is the best for women ... if we are to engage in distance learning I can still study while I’m still with my family, for as long as I can balance my family and my work, and my studies, it’s good for me.”

Participant ST45 had different responsibilities since she was an older woman with a young adult at home. She described her ability to support her family in a unique way. For her, in choosing to study via ODL, she was able to send her daughter to university full time, since the cost of DE is lower than that of in-person institutions. For her, the flexibility of DE came in the lower fees, while still maintaining her ability to provide tertiary education opportunities for both her and her daughter.

As one of the only males to comment on the ability to support family while studying, Participant ST63, explained his reasons for studying through Unisa as follows:

“I didn’t want to go through the complications of leaving my job, leaving my family behind in Zimbabwe to go and study in South Africa. I thought Unisa would better provide me with an opportunity of 1) living with my family, and not leaving my job but at the same time go [sic] to school”.

The flexibility to study without the students needing to move away from their home country is another area that was identified in the research. Participant ST63 highlighted that studying at any other institution would be highly disruptive to both his personal and professional life (see quote above), and that studying through Unisa meant that he would be able to remain in his home country, with his family, and his job, while being able to study.

Unlike the previously mentioned participant, Participant ST56, said that she had considered studying in South Africa (she is from Zimbabwe), but that they decided to complete one year via distance education and then reassess her decision, but ultimately, she came to the realisation that, *“I can do this [referring to studying] here in my own country.”*

The final two elements of flexibility that were identified in the research came from only one student; these elements were:

1. The flexibility to study and travel, and
2. The flexibility to maintain independence.

Most students who participated in this research project were asked various questions about travel, most of which was done with some reference to migration. In this instance, when asked about her travel, Participant ST50 explained that one of the key reasons she chose to study via DE was, *“So I could have the flexibility to travel around.”*

The student also explained that prior to studying at Unisa, she had been working, and so when she decided to pursue a degree, one of the key factors in making the decision between ODL and traditional learning was that of independence. The student explained that if she studied at an in-person institution, she would not be able to work as much, and would therefore have a loss of income. She explained that:

“I had actually been working for I think it was two years before I actually started with Unisa and I gained my independence and I wasn’t prepared to let that go, so in order to get a degree as well as keep [sic] that independence I decided to enrol at Unisa.” (Participant ST50)

Key to creating access to higher education via distance education is the premise that distance education offers more flexibility than traditional in-person institutions of higher education. Based on the responses from the participants in this study, this appears to be accurate. Students enrolled in DE are able to access and engage with their learning materials at times that are most convenient to them. They are able to set the pace for their studies and, as a result, are in more control of their studies than their traditional campus-based peers. The idea of flexibility extends beyond just the student though, as DE students are able to continue supporting their families. This is possible as students are able to continue working, which not only provides them with income, but with valuable

work experience as well. In many instances, it is the ability to continue working while studying that allows the students to pay for their fees.

5.2.1.3 Reputation and entry requirements

Research into higher education institutions has highlighted the importance of reputation as a motivating factor for prospective students (Eagan, Lozano, Hurtado & Case, 2013). In this instance, access refers both to gaining access to HE via the institution, and also gaining access to an institution whose reputation is of greater value than other institutions. Many students (74%) interviewed for this study indicated that they chose to study via Unisa due to the institution's reputation, thereby choosing both access to HE and also to an institution they perceived to have a better reputation than other institutions. For many students, while local institutions offered similar degrees, and were easier to access (geographically), it was the overall reputation of Unisa that ultimately drove their decision to study there. For these students, simply obtaining a degree was not enough. These students wanted a degree that offered them the potential to go further in life, once they had completed their studies. For them, reputation and global recognition meant that they had more options, and greater access to jobs once they had completed their degrees.

Reputation was coded into seven distinct categories:

1. Quality of the course;
2. Internationally recognised;
3. Recommended by others;
4. Global leader in DE;
5. Global ranking;

6. Well known locally;
7. Student previously studied at Unisa.

While some of these categories were discussed individually, many of them were reported alongside others, which together fall under the general umbrella theme of reputation.

In some instances, students indicated that they chose to study through Unisa because they were granted access to study at the institution due to the entry requirements. These categories, along with entry requirements will be elaborated on in the section that follows.

Of the 27 students who were interviewed for this study, 20 discussed the reputation of the institution as an important factor when choosing where to study. Of those, 35% of students noted that international reputation was the most important factor in their overall decision of where to study.

Like many other students, Participant ST48 believed that a degree from Unisa would be a “safer” option because it is “internationally recognised”, stating that: *“I chose Unisa as ... it’s offering internationally recognised degrees.”*

The student also explained that the degree they were enrolled in had very few students as it was a highly specialised area, and that having an internationally recognised degree would give them the flexibility to *“work anywhere in the world”*.

In this instance, not only did Unisa create an opportunity for the student to access HE, but it gave him access to a degree that not many other institutions offered.

For Participant ST49, reputation was important both locally and internationally. He explained that his reason for studying via Unisa, and not through a local institution offering DE, was two-fold: a) because Unisa was *“well-known, the recognition it has worldwide is*

pretty stellar, it's very well recognised”, and b) “it's more well known to Zimbabweans because ... a lot of people do it [study at Unisa], so it's well established in the country.”

The student acknowledged that there is some form of bias towards Unisa among students from Zimbabwe, since a large number of students in Zimbabwe study through Unisa.

Another of the categories, global ranking, is related to international recognition in many ways. One such example of university ranking is the US News & World Report, which evaluates institutions from the USA and across more than 90 other countries around the world. Institutions under consideration for this report are ranked based on 13 indicators measuring academic research performance, as well as the institutions' global and regional reputations (Morse & Wellington, 2022). The information published in these reports allow students to view these rankings and explore the HE options that exist in their own country, as well as in other countries (Morse & Wellington, 2022).

According to the report, Unisa was placed 11th in SA and 28th in Africa in 2018 (Farrell, 2018). The university has steadily improved its ranking in the 2022 US News & World Report, placing it 9th in the country and 851st globally, which is an increase from 921st in the previous year (van der Merwe, 2021). While this global ranking is not the only one that people refer to, it is the one most reported on Unisa's webpages.

Many of the students interviewed for this study mentioned the “university's ranking”, but it was not always obvious where they obtained the information.

One of the students who reported using global rankings as part of his decision to study through Unisa is Participant ST41. The student chose Unisa based on two key

factors: a) flexibility to work and study, and b) because the university had a good rating. He explained that:

“Unisa is one of the best universities in Africa ... and also it offer[s] that online education, open distance learning, so it’s good for me because I can work as well as go to school.”

Participant ST60 made her decision based on the same two factors, stating that she chose to study at Unisa because of its reputation, and because she wanted *“a well-recognised university ... worldwide”*.

While she acknowledged that there were *“good universities here”* (referring to her home country of Zimbabwe), she also explained that she *“opted for a better one”* when she chose to study at Unisa.

Unlike the other two participants, Participant ST62 used information that he had found online to compare institutions to determine which best suited his needs and aspirations. After careful consideration, the student felt that the local options lacked the international exposure that they felt Unisa had. He stated that:

“I wanted an international qualification which would be suitable wherever I go. I do not want to limit myself to my country, but with the qualification from Unisa I don’t ... it was best suited if ever I was going to look for employment elsewhere outside my home country ... you’ll be able to market yourself to the rest of the world”.

Some students use information from multiple sources to make their decision to study at Unisa. Participant ST38 is one such student. During the interview, the student stated that she chose to study at Unisa because:

“I think that Unisa is one of the best universities, offering the best. So, from Unisa you know, you can get a good job ... My sister, who is in South Africa, she is getting a degree from South Africa and doing social work, but she got a job immediately. And even [when] you search on the internet, it [referring to Unisa] is also ranked as one of the best [universities] in Africa”.

Like Participant ST38, many other students also chose to study at Unisa based on the opinions of others who were, or who had studied at Unisa.

One such student, Participant ST63, first found out about Unisa through a friend who had studied through the institution. This friend then recommended that he study at Unisa. After looking into the institution, the student chose to study through Unisa as it is based in South Africa:

“In this part of the world [referring to Zimbabwe] South Africa is our USA; it is our UK ... So, I thought if I do a degree from a South African university, they will be able to be ... of higher grade, or a higher value as compared to a degree from a Zimbabwean university ... in Zimbabwe, South African degrees, they [sic] have more value than our local degrees.”

Participant ST45 was influenced to study at Unisa because his brother had studied at Unisa and the student was able to see the benefits of working and studying simultaneously.

It appears that despite researching other institutions, some students chose to study through Unisa as a result of information they gathered from other students. One such student was Participant ST51, who stated that she had considered studying through other DE institutions, but it was what other students had said that ultimately made her choose Unisa. She had heard from both family and from other students that Unisa is “*very efficient*”. The student also had the perception that unlike degrees from Zimbabwean institutions, Unisa degrees are recognised worldwide.

Although Participant ST50 did not have any family who studied via Unisa, she did know some people who were studying through the institution. They were able to share their views with her and that information, coupled with the fact that mature students who worked were able to study, motivated her to study through Unisa. She also believed that a degree from a South African institution would be more valuable than a degree from Zimbabwe. For this reason, she chose Unisa over local DE institutions.

Findings from this research have highlighted a common perception that qualifications gained from South African tertiary institutions, including those from Unisa, were of superior quality and therefore had greater global recognition. This is one of the key factors that led many students to study through Unisa.

Many of the students interviewed for this study were asked why they chose to study at Unisa. Participant ST36 explained that:

“In Zimbabwe they have few colleges so they don’t offer the same style of studies as the distance learning levels, and apart from that the University of South Africa has been in existence for quite [some time] ... and I have seen some people who have gone through those universities have been quite successful. I’m an interested politician ... and I found that programme was quite appropriate for that [sic] type of work that I’m doing.”

The same student (Participant ST36) also expressed that they believed that a degree from a South African institution would be viewed as more advantageous and so they presumed that:

“that one [referring to Unisa] is of international standing. That is a marvellous university, they have experience in ... if you compare with our own university [who are] ... Quite new in the field on [sic] distance learning, and apart from that they do not provide in [sic] such courses. It has become difficult for such a thing, the reason why I am so keen to study in South Africa university.”

Like many students, Participant ST68 decided to study via Unisa as it enabled them to work and study simultaneously. Another key factor in making this decision was that:

“Unisa ... was one of the few open distance universities that I knew and I’d always heard good reports, so I just ran with it.”

The student also explained that when speaking with other students who obtained their degrees from local Zimbabwean universities, the general consensus was that those students struggled to find employment outside of the country. As a result, the student believed Zimbabwean students who had a South African degree *“had a much easier time getting the same kind of job.”*

The same student, Participant ST68, also knew many people who had studied through Unisa, who had *“nothing but good comments”*, which influenced the student to only consider Unisa as a distance learning provider.

Another student, Participant ST40, answered the same question by explaining that the key reason for their decision was the institution's reputation as a leader in DE. They went into more detail saying that: *“To my knowledge it's [referring to Unisa] the best distance learning institution.”*

They went on to explain that they were unsure about the status and reputation of DE learning facilities available at the universities in their home country of Namibia compared to Unisa. The student also explained that they chose to study at a South African institution because they believed that a qualification from South Africa, in general, is *“more advanced in terms of tertiary qualifications than Namibia”*.

The student went on to explain that they first heard about Unisa via word of mouth, as some of her colleagues had studied through Unisa. As a result of that information, she decided to do her own online search and googled “best online universities” and “distance open learning universities” which led her to Unisa’s webpage. This suggests that she believed, based on the Google results, that Unisa is ranked highly as a DE provider.

One other student, Participant ST52, also used information they found online to influence their decision to study at Unisa. This student believed that Unisa is a “*reputable university*”. This opinion was formed by the student after they read an advert describing the courses on offer. As a result of this advert, the student downloaded an online brochure to find out more about the institution and then opted to study via the institution.

It appears through the interviews that one of the motivating factors in their decision to study at Unisa was the popularity of the institution in their home country. Participant ST54 explained that:

“Unisa is popular in Southern Africa ... I know a lot of people who have studied through Unisa that are successful right now and ... I know quite a number of lawyers who have done their law degree with Unisa and they seem to be doing fine.”

While many students considered other institutions, the quality of the courses offered was another key factor in their decision to study at Unisa. Participant ST46 acknowledged that had his decision about where to study been based solely on the length of time it would take for him to complete the course, he would have chosen to study at a university in his home country of Zimbabwe. This is because the law programme offered at that university has only 19 modules, while Unisa has 40 required modules. However, the student acknowledged that he felt that the modules offered by Unisa were “*well balanced and they cover a lot of areas*”.

The student also explained that he believed that Unisa was ranked better than the local institutions stating that:

“I think Unisa is ... for Southern Africa in particular, I think Unisa offers the best”.

Later in the interview, when asked to elaborate on their potential career prospects the student stated that they would have better options because they were studying at Unisa, because *“South Africa is an upper edge”*, which suggests that they believed that a degree from a South African institution would be more likely to result in employment opportunities than a degree from a Zimbabwean institution.

Entry into the institution is another important factor for some students. One such student, Participant ST35, stated that he chose not to study at a university in his home country, as he did not have the required points to gain access to those institutions:

“In Zimbabwe it was different ... it was difficult to get the degree you wanted ... they required [sic] you to have a high amount of points ... so most of us, we have to opt for other courses and other service providers. And then as time went on, the numbers opening [sic] up more at universities when you can go for accountancy degrees, but then the quality was not [good] ... so I wanted something that’s good quality and Unisa offered me that”. Furthermore, the student felt strongly about Unisa’s global ranking, stating that: “It’s world-wide renown and I can use it anywhere in the world”.

5.2.1.4 Enrolment

As the largest university by enrolment in Africa, Unisa enrolls thousands of students annually. Despite gaining access through acceptance into a degree programme, many students encounter challenges that could prevent them from pursuing their studies further. These so-called “road-blocks” can, and do act as barriers, which restrict access to higher education. During the course of the interviews, six areas were identified as issues which can, or have resulted in a restriction of access for students. These areas all centre around the enrolment process and are as follows:

1. The enrolment process in general;
2. Lack of communication from the university during, or after the enrolment process;
3. Confusion about the enrolment process;
4. Documents sent during the enrolment process get lost;
5. Difficulty sending documents needed to complete the enrolment process;
and
6. Time lost as a result of difficulties and delays during the enrolment process.

These areas will be discussed in the section that follows.

At the heart of these issues is communication. Since students are located away from the main campus, in other countries, the issues surrounding communication tend to be amplified. One student, Participant ST68, described how after she had submitted her application, she did not receive any feedback or acknowledgement that her application had been received by the institution. For this reason, the student chose to register at a local centre. The staff at the centre were able to tell her that her application had been

processed and submitted, but that she was late submitting her supporting documentation. She states that she never sent the documents as she had been unaware that she had needed to send them as she had not heard from the university. She claims that without the local centre she would not have been successful in her application, especially since contact with the university via phone or email proved unsuccessful.

This case is unique in that the student had access to a local centre that was set up to assist students with any issues that they may have encountered during their studies, with a main focus on enrolment issues. These centres no longer exist, and as such, the support they offered the local students has disappeared. Students are now more isolated than ever, and struggle to resolve issues on their own. Not only have local centres closed, but several years ago, Unisa changed how it communicates with students, removing the call centres and replacing them with an email-based enquiry service. These channels have created a number of issues for students who find themselves having to navigate through the enrolment processes alone.

Participant ST35 was one such student who found that communication with the university was challenging, especially for international students who are only able to communicate via specific channels (email only since the call centres closed). The student describes the challenge as:

“It’s a mixed bag, from the experience working in administration ... you having fingers crossed all the time. In terms of registration, in terms of renewals or don’t know if someone’s going to reply your email. It’s not a dedicated, they don’t ever dedicate an additional section that would help international students.”

The student went on to explain that:

“When I had a difficulty like let’s say I want to register, and they take long, like you request via email, there is no direct email, it goes through a general email; they don’t reply email sometimes, so if you get they’re not replying emails on time then”.

For several students, their initial enrolment was problem free. Participant ST50 stated that initially the enrolment process was *“fairly simple”*. She explained that when she first registered:

“there was an Unisa facilitator in my home town so that made it a lot easier ... they would just help you through the process and registration and everything and all the paperwork, so it was helpful, but ... last year, I think they did away with it. So unfortunately, there’s no longer a Unisa facilitator in my home town.”

As a result, the student’s subsequent enrolments have become more challenging. In her final semester of study, the student had determined that she had three remaining modules to complete, but was ultimately told that she needed to complete a fourth module in order to graduate. She stated that this confusion and inability to work with someone face-to-face was stressful, and resulted in her having to reverse her registration. Although she was able to work with someone from Pretoria (it is unclear whether this was in-person, via telephone or via email) she still found the overall process challenging.

As with the previous student, Participant ST51 initially had no complaints or issues with the enrolment process. This however changed during their 2018 registration. The

student explained that as a result of curriculum changes, some modules had been removed from the course. As a result of the changes in modules, the student stated that:

“Some students were exempted from doing other modules and the like.

When you decide to register, you would get some error message and like that, it was later sorted out by the [sic], and managed to register”.

The student went on to explain that it was the university that was able to resolve the issue, and not the student themselves.

After encountering difficulties during the application and enrolment process, Participant ST52 resorted to asking a friend to help them through the process. The student acknowledges that without that assistance, they would have to *“spend a whole month trying to register”*.

While a delay of a month may not appear to be much, for some students, that delay may result in them missing important deadlines which can in turn exclude them from studies for that year. This was partly the case for one student in the study, Participant ST64, who encountered many challenges with regards to their registration and enrolment. These issues became so frustrating for the student, that with no clear way to solve them, the student chose to abandon their pursuit of studying via Unisa. The student decided two years later to check whether the issue had been resolved, and discovered that she was able to register. The student cites problems communicating with the institution as the primary factor in her lack of success when she initially applied to study in 2015, saying that:

“communication with Unisa is a problem. You get emails, you send emails, nobody responds to you, you get these automatic responses, but after automatic responses, nobody else contacts you.”

This lack of communication led to a two-year delay in the student’s studies. For many students, this may have been the end of their endeavour to study further.

Another student, Participant ST73, who named communication as a major difficulty in her application process explained that she began her studies through Unisa in 2011, but owing to financial difficulties had to take a break. She was able to resume her studies in 2014, but faced several issues with re-enrolling owing to what she calls a *“communication breakdown”* between herself and the university. According to the student, unbeknown to her, she was required to send a copy of her identity document to the university. She claims that she had not been told to do so by anyone at the university. Part of the communication breakdown according to the student occurred as she was moved,

“from one office to another, one office to another ... emails would come back and forth to me and you know it was a challenge then to get through like with phone calls ... you can never get through the phone lines to Unisa.”

The student explained that while she lost one full year due to miscommunication, she knows of several other students who have also lost time as a result of a lack of communication. She explained that:

“I know a couple of people ... from my workplace who’ve lost a year or a semester ... if communication can be ... put in place ... I think everything else would be fine.”

It appears that the problems students encounter during enrolment arise from miscommunication, as well as issues with the sending and receiving of necessary documentation that is needed by the university to complete the enrolment process.

Participant ST41 stated that they encountered challenges when trying to register to study at Unisa. The main issue that the student encountered was the need to send a variety of documents. The student explained that:

“I had some problems ... I must send very confusing documents and stuff, and I didn’t know how to, and they were requiring ... you ... to send those documents even on a monthly basis, even after I have sent them the documents, they were saying, ‘We don’t have the documents here.’ So, I had to keep on doing the same thing over and over again!”

Another student who encountered similar challenges was Participant ST74, who explained that they experienced multiple challenges trying to send documents from Zimbabwe to South Africa. The first issue described by the student is the cost. The student explained that they had to send the same document on multiple occasions as the university claimed that they had not received them. The student stated that it cost them R300 each time they had to send a document as the documents needed to be sent via a courier. The other challenge the student described is the certification of the documents. Each copy of the document needs to be certified by the South African embassy in Harare.

In one of the emails she received from the university; she was asked to send the originals of the documents they required. The student was hesitant to do so because she was worried that they may lose those documents, in which case she would not have any “backups”. The student began their enrolment process in 2016, and was only able to begin her studies in 2018. According to the student she has spent more than R2,000 trying to obtain matric exemption which would allow her to study via Unisa. This according to her is as a result of lost forms and documentation that she has sent and for which she had received confirmation of delivery.

While it appears that many students encountered challenges with their enrolment at the beginning of their studies, Participant ST53 explained that they had never had issues with enrolment until her final semester. She stated that as a senior student, she never had issues until the qualification was reviewed and new modules were added. As a result, she struggled with registration. This was further compounded by the lack of assistance from the institution. Like all Unisa students, help was only available to her online via email. This however is problematic for international students who, unlike local students, are unable to seek help in person by going to the campus. The student explained that:

“University of South Africa is trying to be online to render assistance online. They [the university] are never available on the telephones when you call and the emails are always not answered on time. We used to have a centre in Namibia. Then ... it closed down, and before it closed down for instance, I did my registration directly through South Africa.”

The student also explained that they were fortunate since they had contacts in South Africa who could assist them in registering, as they put it, “*directly through South Africa*”. The student explained that she had many issues with her current registration (in 2018) as the modules had changed significantly and she was in need of assistance to help her with registration.

Without direct contact with the university, it became even more challenging, and as a result, many students resorted to contacting other students from South Africa to assist them with their registration. The student did however acknowledge that while many students would like to study through South Africa (Unisa), however because of the issues surrounding communication with the institution, and registration and enrolment specifically, they give up and choose to study at other DE institutions. Those students who cannot afford to study elsewhere (because of costs, for example) are therefore disadvantaged and cannot, as the student states “*further their studies*”.

Although the entry requirements at Unisa allow a larger number of students access to tertiary education, issues during the enrolment process impede it. This creates a push-pull situation where students have been given access to study, but are not given the tools, resources and necessary support to convert this invitation into an actual placement. So, while many students find unique ways to overcome these challenges, others simply do not have the time or resources needed, and are unable to progress further.

5.3 Conclusion

This chapter looked at the effectiveness of Unisa at creating access to HE for students, despite geographical and temporal distances. This was done by analysing the codes and

themes that were identified in the qualitative portion of this study, as they relate to accessibility. Based on the coding, it is evident that Unisa does increase access to HE in multiple ways. The most common ways identified in the research are through such factors as cost, flexibility, as well as through reputation and entry requirements.

Unisa's reputation in Southern Africa is such that it draws a large number of African students from countries across the region. These students not only gain access to higher education when they study through Unisa, but based on their perception of the institution, they also gain access to a world-class, internationally recognised institution, which they are able to access despite being geographically distanced from the main campus. This access not only creates a sense of hope for the future, but equips students with skills and knowledge that they believed will benefit them greatly in the future.

Flexibility appeared to be of utmost importance to the students, who stated that without it they would not be able to study. At its core, DE is the most flexible form of education (Naidu, 2017). Flexibility means that students are able to work, take care of families, and study simultaneously (Mohamed & Victor, 2012). For those students, ODL not only means increased access, but increased flexibility within HE.

Although there are several factors that were shown to increase accessibility, it was shown that in some instances they could also hinder access. For example, while the cost of studying at Unisa is relatively affordable, many international students are required to pay international levies, which in some instances cost nearly as much as the standard fees. Another factor affecting cost is foreign currency and the ability to access foreign currency. Many international students are forced to look for foreign currency on the black market, as their country's financial system is in turmoil.

The entry requirements at Unisa also enable a greater number of student enrolments, thus increasing access, but with challenges during the enrolment process, it appears that many students are either delayed or simply discontinue the process. These problems range from a lack of assistance, to confusion around the process, as well as challenges in communication around what is needed for the student to begin their studies. These issues are further compounded by a lack of person-to-person communication, as students were only able to contact the university via email.

While ODL provides educational opportunities to a larger population, wider participation through massive student enrolments does not automatically translate into success rates (Khumalo, 2018). The following chapter analyses how knowledge is shared between the institution, the students and the teaching staff. It looks at the tools and services used to distribute and disseminate knowledge, while identify the factors that enhance and impede the flow of knowledge using the information shared by the participants of this study.

CHAPTER 6

FINDINGS: ANALYSIS OF THE FLOW OF KNOWLEDGE ACROSS PHYSICAL SPACE IN ODL PROGRAMMES

6.1 Introduction

Levin (cited in Kolowich, 2014) suggests that the exclusivity of the most prestigious universities of the 21st century will be replaced, and that instead of being elitist, these institutions will teach everybody. Furthermore, Levin states that when these previously elite institutions are judged in the future, they will be based on the reach of their teaching, and not solely on their research outputs.

Knowledge is an important and strategic resource in many organisations the world over (Ubon & Kimble, 2002). This is especially true for institutions of higher education, whose key function is to deliver and receive knowledge in both traditional and online classrooms (Kentnor, 2015). From the outset, in its early infancy, the purpose of distance education was to make knowledge accessible to more students.

The previous chapter focused on whether ODL programmes provided access to higher education by looking at factors such as cost, flexibility, reputation and entry requirements, as well as enrolment. It established that students believed that Unisa was more cost effective than other universities and offered the flexibility they needed in order to participate in HE. Following on from that, this chapter addresses the way that knowledge is shared, despite the larger geographical distances that exist between students and the institution. This chapter begins by describing knowledge management as a way of understanding how knowledge moves and is shared, especially in the context

of open distance learning. The chapter then looks at learning management strategies and identifies the LMS employed by Unisa to connect, communicate and essentially bridge the gap between students, staff and the coursework. The chapter continues by highlighting both the factors that enhance and impede the flow of knowledge by analysing the qualitative portion of the study, drawing on the student's perspectives of these aspects.

6.2 Knowledge as a Resource: Knowledge Management and Sharing, and the Use of Learning Management Systems

In an attempt to actively participate in the global educational market, universities search for ways to internationalise their courses, often choosing DE as a way of offering their programmes to more students, regardless of their location (Ubon & Kimble, 2002). However, unlike traditional institutions, DE faces the unique challenge of distributing knowledge across both time and space, while contending with differences not only in language, but in social and cultural constructs (Ubon & Kimble, 2002).

Distance education makes use of a variety of methods to remove both the temporal and geographical distances that exist between students and the university, the teaching staff, and other students. In the past, these methods included, but were not limited to, correspondence, audio, video, computer and internet technologies (Roffe, 2004). While DE is not new, it has, in its current form, made use of online education, with the internet as the primary delivery mechanism (Kentnor, 2015). This synthesis of traditional distance

education with information and communications technologies led to the formation of open distance education (Ubon & Kimble, 2002).

Knowledge flow (KF) and knowledge management (KM) are ways to understand how information is processed and disseminated via ODL. Knowledge flows refer to the manner in which knowledge moves across people, organisations, places and time, while simultaneously showing changes, shifts and applications (Chauvel, 2016). Knowledge is therefore seen, metaphorically, as a living entity, as it is constantly changing, being transferred through human interaction (Nonaka, 1994).

Knowledge management, defined in its simplest terms, is “the process of capturing, distributing, and effectively using knowledge” (Davenport, 1994, p. 119). A more recent definition acknowledges that KM involves the people, process, culture and enabling technologies that are necessary to capture, manage, share and find information (Wahl, 2018). These four elements – capture, manage, share and find – are explained in detail, along with examples in Table 5.1 below.

Table 5.1 Four critical components of knowledge management in HE (based on Wahl, 2018)

Term	Explanation	Example
Capture	The movement of knowledge from tacit to explicit.	Lecturers’ ability to share their learned experiences with their students. Can also be the uploading of documents by the lecturer to the student’s portal.
Manage	The sustainability and maturation of content – ensuring that the content becomes better over time.	The updating and formatting of student resources to ensure that they are up-to-date and relevant to the current context.

Share	The ability within an organisation and the individuals within an organisation to collaborate and share knowledge and information via a multitude of means, such as one-to-one sharing, one-to-all sharing and synchronous to asynchronous.	The use of various platforms, such as discussion forums, emails, social media platforms to share information with other members of the institution.
Find	The ease with which knowledge and information can be found. It goes beyond the concept of “search” to include the ability to navigate through content to discover additional content. It also refers to the ability to connect with and receive feedback from experts.	The ability of the students to access and engage with their learning materials in order to complete assessments and participate in group discussions. Can also be the feedback that students receive from their peers, tutors and lecturers about their performance.

Tacit knowledge is knowledge that is difficult to explain, understand and share with others (OmniSci, Inc., 2021). In most cases, tacit knowledge is gained through personal experience, which means that it becomes difficult to share with others (Indeed, 2021a). An example of tacit knowledge is innovative thinking or leadership. Explicit knowledge on the other hand, is easier to transfer between people, since it is information that can be documented, stored and shared with others (Indeed, 2021b). In HE, explicit knowledge is often found in textbooks or is disseminated by the lecturer to the students in various forms, such as required readings, however, the tacit knowledge that makes up the bulk of an institutions intellectual capital is possessed by the academics within the institution (Dhamdhere, 2015).

In ODL, it is necessary for knowledge to transform from an individual to a collective dimension, and also from tacit to explicit forms (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). However, it has been suggested that the transformation of tacit knowledge to explicit can only occur

when opportunities for people to engage in face-to-face, or group settings exist, since these events create an environment that is conducive to discussions, and it is these discussions that allow knowledge to convert from a tacit to an explicit form (Ubon & Kimble, 2002). With less opportunity to engage in face-to-face discussions, as well as potential social, cultural and language barriers, it has been argued that students engaged in DE are at a disadvantage when it comes to knowledge sharing (Ubon & Kimble, 2002).

Knowledge sharing (KS) is an integral part of knowledge management. This is especially true for distance education. In this context, KS happens mainly through the use of IT tools and technologies, which, when used effectively, can enhance the process (Koenig, 2002). There are five major characteristics related to KS as described by Vorakulpipat and Rezgui (2008, p. 23).

1. The use of IT can aid in the sharing of explicit knowledge, as well as tacit knowledge, although this occurs to a lesser degree;
2. The simplest form of KS in an organisation is through human interaction;
3. The culture of an organisation can be used to design KM strategies that are a best fit;
4. People can be motivated to share knowledge through the use of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, such as rewards and recognition;
5. The key factor to enable KS is trust.

In order to be effective, KS requires a suitable space when explicit knowledge can be shared (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). This space could be either a virtual or a physical space. While it is easier to share explicit knowledge (Vorakulpipat & Rezgui, 2008), the use of IT can enable the sharing of tacit knowledge (Roberts, 2000).

It is easy to create an overdependence on IT to share knowledge, even though knowledge is more easily shared through human interactions and social settings (Vorakulpipat & Rezgui, 2008). Cultural barriers within organisations can make KS difficult to achieve (Hubert & Lopez, 2013) therefore there should not be a one-size-fits-all approach to KS. In some instances, it could prove to be more effective to design and implement KM to fit the culture of the organisation, rather than attempting to change the culture itself (McDermott & O'Dell, 2001).

Motivation is a useful tool to encourage people to share knowledge (Vorakulpipat & Rezgui, 2008). Two types of motivation exist: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation comes from within, while extrinsic motivation arises from outside (Santos-Longhurst, 2019). For example, an intrinsically motivated student might join a discussion forum to debate a research problem with other students, while an extrinsically motivated student participates in a discussion forum because their participation will result in them receiving credit for the course. Participant ST40 explained that she interacts on the discussion forums because she is required to do so. She stated that:

“I’m currently busy with one module now and it’s strictly online so that means partaking in discussions where they would post a question on the discussion blog and you have to answer from there. So there we are a group of students that are in the same group and we have to do our assignments online in the discussion forums.”

For her, these interactions on the discussion forums occurred only because she was required to do so for the course she was enrolled in. When asked whether she had formed

any sort of relationships with her peers as a result of these discussion forums Participant ST40 stated: *“No, currently it’s still really academic.”*

Since international ODL institutions (like Unisa) generally have large student populations that are multicultural and diverse, they are likely to encounter issues relating to teaching. Three primary challenges of teaching in ODL environments were identified by Du, Ochola and Friedrich (2013). The greatest challenge according to the authors was the variations in the levels of students’ views on basic knowledge. This is influenced by an array of factors, such as education system structures and cultural orientations among nations, as well as the standard level of education (Du et al., 2013). The second issue happens as a result of differences in the way an institution delivers their study materials (Du et al., 2013). This challenge manifests when there is disparity in the interaction between lecturers and students. ODL environments limit simultaneous interactions, and without eye contact, and other non-verbal cues, the lecturers may find it challenging to get real-time feedback from their students. As a consequence, the lecturers may find it difficult to adapt their study materials and teaching styles to suit the specific situation that they are faced with (Du et al., 2013). The final challenge that was identified was the self-centred nature of ODL, where the students are required to have a high level of individual study motivation, as well as the ability to complete activities alone (Du et al., 2013). Each student is an independent learner, who has their own way of thinking, learning and understanding. Studying is a complex process that is influenced by a variety of factors which all play a part in the efficiency of learning (Du et al., 2013). In ODL, emphasis is placed on integration, rather than on individualisation (Du et al., 2013). This can be seen in the way that ODL delivers their “knowledge media” (things like printed, visual and audio

materials) in the same manner to all the students, regardless of the individual thinking preferences of the students (Du et al., 2013).

Learning management systems (LMS) are key to KM and KS, and are especially important in DE. LMS is integrated software that is housed online, or on an institution's servers, that is used to create, deliver, track and report education programmes and the outcomes of the programmes (Bureau of Indian Education, n.d; Valamis, 2019). Although they can be used as a support for traditional instruction, they are most effective when used in DE (Bureau of Indian Education, n.d.). LMS can be compared to the backbone of an institution, providing a space for workflow to take place (Mansfield, 2017). On the teaching side, LMS allows lecturers to assign work, share content, post updates as well as student grades (Mansfield, 2017). For students, LMS provides a space to submit work, view course content, and to collaborate and participate in forums that have social-like features (Mansfield, 2017). Since these portals have an interactive communication capability, they can be used to engage students, academic and administrative staff (Ng, Lei, Iseli-Chan, Li, Siu, Chu, & Hu, 2020).

At Unisa, e-learning happens through the use of the LMS known as myUnisa. This LMS creates a space where both academic and administrative information can be accessed by the students and their lecturers, regardless of geographical location or time (Abdullah & Mtsweni, 2014). Since the platform provides a multitude of uses, the successful use of the platform is based on lecturer involvement and student participation (Abdullah & Mtsweni, 2014).

The key aim of the LMS is to improve communication between the students and the teaching staff, while also providing improved services to students that enable them to

experience an uninterrupted learning experience (Mbatha & Naidoo, 2010). Key to their view of the myUnisa LMS, is that it creates a bridge between the transactional distance to increase engagement between all the stakeholders (Mbatha & Naidoo, 2010). The LMS has a wide range of functionality, including *course administration*, *my students*, and *course site tools* (Letseka, Letseka & Pitsoe, 2018).

The *course administration* and *my students* sections are aimed mainly at the staff who are able to perform a variety of functions in both sections that are centred on, or aimed at students. Such functionality includes: access to student information (such as admissions, assignments, academic records, etc.), as well as a platform where staff can manage their courses (such as assigning and managing assignments, sharing course readings, etc.) (Letseka, Letseka & Pitsoe, 2018).

One key feature of the *course site tools* are discussion portals where staff can share updates and announcements, including the sharing of additional resources. The *discussion forum portal* creates a digital space for lecturers to share important announcements and updates with the students, as well as a space for students to engage and interact with staff and with each other (Letseka, Letseka & Pitsoe, 2018). The portal creates a space where participants (both staff and students) can collaborate, interact, and share ideas and experiences with one another (Letseka, Letseka & Pitsoe, 2018). Since the portal is shared across students and staff (as part of one course), it also allows the teaching staff the ability to moderate the content and to intervene where necessary (Letseka, Letseka & Pitsoe, 2018).

Another key element used by Unisa to achieve a holistic approach to ODeL is the use of Web 2.0. Web 2.0 is an array of various web-based utilities and technology tools

that aim to create social, collaborative and user-driven content and applications (Mbatha, 2013). Four broad modes of Web 2.0 exist according to Rudman and Steenkamp (2009). These are listed and described in the table below.

Table 5.2 The four Table types of Web 2.0 technologies (Source: Rudman and Steenkamp (2009, p. 13))

Technology Type	Explanation	Examples
1. Publication	Technology applications that allow for content contribution by various users in real time, as well as the editing of that content.	Weblogs (blogs), wikis, user-generated media
2. Syndication	Sharing, consolidation and sourcing of information from various sources	Really simple syndication (RSS), newsfeeds, social tagging or bookmarking, folksonomies
3. Collaboration	User-created communities for the collaboration on projects, as well as the tools needed to collaborate on projects	Social networking, peer-to-peer networking, Web application program interfaces (APIs)
4. Recombination	Flash-based players, podcasts, etc. that are simple to create and can be used for a variety of purposes	Podcasts, mash-ups

Web 2.0 technologies are at the centre of most students' everyday life, so it follows that educators and institutions should find ways to utilise them in the learning process too. In an education setting, these applications provide educational opportunities to create and facilitate inquiry practice, collaboration, effective communication and individual expression, as well as increase literacy (Mbatha, 2013). Social networking has completely changed the way people communicate with one another, and is also changing the way that teaching and learning are conducted (Mbatha, 2013). More common in distance education institutions, Web 2.0 technologies provide opportunities for learners to create

community-based environments that are not only collaborative, but personal as well (Mbatha, 2013).

6.3 Factors that Enhance the Flow of Knowledge in Distance Education

For the majority of Unisa students, the use of Web 2.0 applications, as well as the LMS, myUnisa, is commonplace. During the coding of the transcripts, two factors were identified in relation to the flow of information, especially the sharing of knowledge between students, and between students and teaching staff. These two platforms were through social media, and through what this study refers to as “university groups”. These groups were then placed under the theme of “student success”, which will be used here to understand how these factors create pathways for students to connect with other stakeholders, and thus increase knowledge sharing.

6.3.1 Social Media

There are a number of social media (SM) platforms that are used by university students across the globe. The main platforms for students at Unisa include, but are not limited to: Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, Telegram and WhatsApp. A recent study focused on students’ experiences with using social media to support their education at Unisa (Madge, Breines, Dalu, Gunter, Mittelmeier, Prinsloo & Raghuram, 2018). The results of that study showed that the majority of participants (94%) used SM to support their education experience (Madge et al., 2018). The finding also indicated that the main

platforms used by the participants included WhatsApp (60%), Facebook (43%) and YouTube (26%) (Madge et al., 2018).

Similar to the quantitative findings of the study previously mentioned, during the coding of the data for this study, three SM platforms, Telegram, WhatsApp and Facebook, were identified and discussed by the participants. This section of discussion will focus on the ways that students utilise these platforms not to only communicate with one another, but also to use them as tools for knowledge creation and knowledge sharing. More than 50% of students interviewed for this study stated that the use of SM was an important part of their studies.

Reasons for using SM as a tool to support their studies were varied. The figure below (Figure 6.1) is a summary of the key reasons why students used the platforms. The diagram is based on student responses and illustrates the reasons for use from the most to least commonly reported. The diagram provides insight into the ways students not only interacted with SM, but also what they found most beneficial. The inverted pyramid has the most commonly reported reasons listed at the top, and the least reported at the bottom.

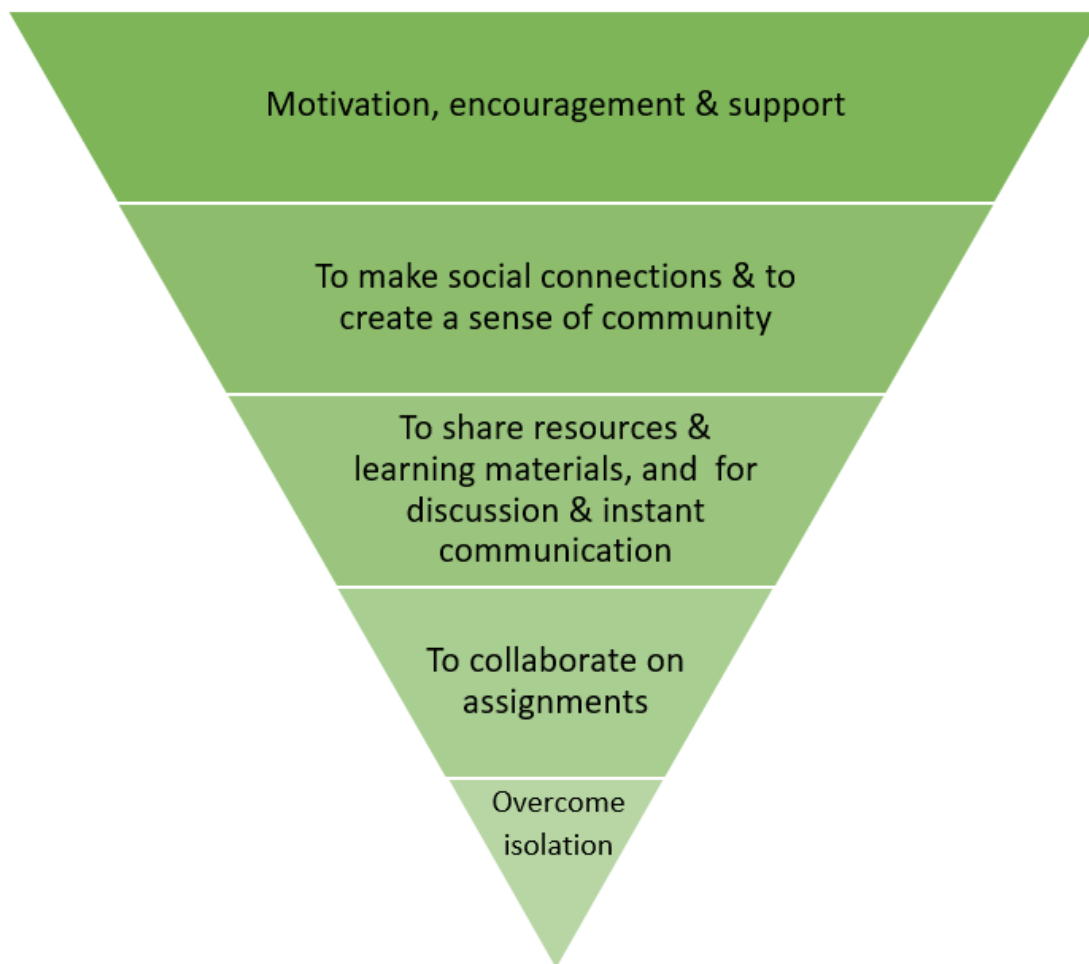


Figure 6.1 Key reasons students at Unisa used SM as part of their studies

One student, Participant ST34, mentioned many reasons for choosing to engage with other students via SM. As an older, more mature student, Participant ST34, admitted that initially she did not want to make contact with other students, citing having a busy schedule as part of the reason for this decision. However, as the student progressed further into her studies, she came to realise the benefits of communicating with other students. The student explains that she chose to communicate with other students via WhatsApp because it allowed her to:

“touch base with students and to share the workload as well, because if you’ve got a whole bunch of people working on the things it’s a lot easier.”

She explained that her age made her hesitant to use social media initially and that she preferred using email since she believed that following threads on social media would be difficult. Email provided her with a way of referring back to information at a later date. The student went on to explain that when she started her studies at Unisa, she was under the impression that like other universities, Unisa would use massive open online courses (MOOCs) and various other methods to broadcast virtual classes online, with students being able to log into the sessions despite their location. The student stated that while other students may have been able to do so (if those services were provided), she herself was unable to do so, and as a result:

“I relied a lot on the social media group to tell me what went on in the lectures and to give me updates and information about what was coming up for the exams and things that you had never planned for and things like that.”

The student stated that social media was fundamentally important for her during the remainder of her studies, as she realised *“there’s a lot there that I was missing out on when I tried to go it alone”*.

Many students found that the groups they had formed on the various platforms helped them in some way. Participant ST53 explained that the value she found, specifically in the WhatsApp group that she was part of, was because working with other students on

assignments helped her to feel part of a bigger community and allowed the students not only to share their ideas, but also to discuss them with others. She explained that:

“when it comes to assignments, you do your assignment and then we agree to discuss the assignment at a particular time ... then we start OK, question 1, you will say no, it’s true and then you give your page number for instance, and that’s how we debate and debate until we come to a conclusion.”

While the students are able to collaborate and share answers and ideas, the student did state that:

“At the end of the day, you’re actually forced to have your own conclusion and the debates are on-going. But that’s a voluntary thing, it’s not a mass, it’s not everybody that participates in the group at the end of the day.”

However, the groups tended to be like-minded in their approach to work, and rather than placing all the emphasis on one student to come up with the answers, it was more symbiotic, where students could share and engage with their peers.

Participant ST34 acknowledged that while social media has been helpful to her and her studies, she believed that if the lecturers were part of online social media:

“it would make the lecturers more approachable and I think I think it would make the whole experience a lot better.”

But the student acknowledged that in doing so, it would require more commitment on the part of the lecturer.

When asked to explain the dynamics of the group, the same student, Participant ST34, stated that the vast majority of the participants in the WhatsApp group she was part of were from South Africa, and that during the semester, there was a steady number of students, but that as the exams drew near, the student number increased, as more and more students joined the group searching for answers and trying to catch up on assignments. She described the students who participate regularly as the “core”, and explained that these individuals had been working consistently throughout the semester and were well acquainted with each other. The group numbers tended to increase around the exam and registration periods, when students are looking for quick answers from other students. However, the student said that:

“it’s the sense of comradeship that you get from other people going through the same thing when you’re going through it ... people understand [what you’re going through] and they sort of bond with you like that.”

When asked about how people present themselves in the group, Participant ST34 explained that:

“There’s not much personal discussion ... It’s more a kind of, let’s focus and get this done rather than having to think about things and worry what people think of me”.

The student believed that Facebook has dropped in significance as a tool to connect with other students because:

“WhatsApp is more anonymous and you don’t end up sharing your family photos.”

The student explained that she felt that it is best to keep things superficial, thereby avoiding the need to get into people's private lives. When asked to summarise what social media meant to her as an international student studying at Unisa, the student stated that it meant: *"Help, immediate help or fairly immediate help if we're in a different time zone."*

Although many DE students realise that they may work in isolation, the use of SM allows them to interact with other students who are in similar positions to them. The student explained that the WhatsApp group they were part of, was used for discussions and as a platform to encourage one another. Interestingly, for this particular student, the use of WhatsApp has also allowed them to make connections beyond social media. This student met a fellow student on the WhatsApp group and later they decided to meet up in person. Although the WhatsApp group allowed the student to meet students from her home country, she explained that the group she is part of is made up from students in many other countries, and while this means that the students come from a multitude of backgrounds, the overall feeling of the group is one of helpfulness.

Findings from their study on WhatsApp use in IDE students indicated that students who engaged with WhatsApp did so for the sense of community and belonging that being part of the groups created (Madge, et al., 2019). In some instances, friendships within these groups formed. The findings from this study indicate similar trends.

WhatsApp groups create a sense of community for many students. It is a place where students can open up about their experiences and feel validated by others who are in a similar position. This idea of not being alone makes most students feel less isolated. Participant ST68 explained that:

“it’s always nice to know that you are not the only one in your boat, that you do have other people that ride along with. It is always very motivational.”

For some students WhatsApp allowed them to feel unified with the other students.

Participant ST68 explains it as:

“it wasn’t a case of, ‘I am from here,’ or, ‘I’m from there,’ and, ‘I’m from the next place,’ no one really knew where each person was unless you look at the area code. But it was a case of we’re all strategic management students and we’re here to help each other, because we’re all enough of repeating it [sic] and I think that gave us a common purpose to help each other ... So, everyone is very united in the sense that we need to understand this content and we need to get this exam done ... people have been supportive of each other no matter the area [they] come from, no matter the race, no matter the gender. It was actually a very nice group to be in.”

Cost is another motivating factor for many students. Participant ST56 explained that she makes use of WhatsApp as it is a cheaper platform to use. She also felt that communication via WhatsApp provides instant access to other students since there is no delay in waiting to receive a reply from someone, as would happen with emails.

Madge et al. (2018) noted similar findings in their study. Their study showed that since WhatsApp is easier to access, more cost effective, and is direct and instant in nature, communication on the platform was the preferred method for many students at Unisa.

There are other students who use a variety of SM platforms as part of their studies. One such student is Participant ST54. He stated that he used all forms of social media, including WhatsApp, Facebook and Telegram. He explained that he felt that although there were a variety of groups across the platforms, they were helpful in their own unique way. The student explained that students share a variety of things on each platform, and that while there may be a difference of opinions between students, the platforms had proved to be useful to him and his studies.

Like other participants, Participant ST53, made use of both WhatsApp and Facebook groups to communicate with her peers. According to the student, one of the key aspects of SM groups was to assist one another beyond issues pertaining to the curriculum. She explained that while both groups have students who were willing to assist her (and other students) with administrative issues (i.e., students are willing to travel to the campus on behalf of the foreign students), she felt that the students in the WhatsApp group were more likely to help her than the students on the Facebook group, saying that:

“We joined the WhatsApp group so the other students, the students who stay closer to the campuses, most of them are in South Africa, when they go for their own queries at the university, for instance, you know you’re fortunate enough for them to help you. Just give them the student number and then they communicate to you via WhatsApp. And the others were on Facebook. There’s also support on Facebook. Well sometimes we don’t get the support we get because I guess we are foreigners and sometimes we do. So, I guess it all depends on your relationship with those people. For instance, I formed a couple of relationships with some

ladies that I've studied with, so whenever I'm stuck and I need something from the university, because they have access to the university they actually try help out at the same time."

The student stated that another benefit of joining the *Facebook* group is that while the students are able to communicate and interact with each other, they also share resources with one another. Not only has Participant ST53 used WhatsApp to make connections with students who are able to assist her when the university is unable to, she also uses the platform to access study guides, tutorial letters, and assignments. She stated that this is especially beneficial when a student's registration is pending, as the student is unable to access their study materials, and runs the risk of falling behind.

"So, you know you're registered, registration will be processed in due course, you don't know when, but in the meantime, you can access study materials from the WhatsApp group and start with your assignments."

Beyond the benefit of having immediate access to learning materials, sharing of resources using SM platforms online also reduces the costs that some students might otherwise incur. Participant ST53 explained that:

"And then that's the same group where you for instance have all study materials ... for instance if I need to order exam packs from South Africa, I'm to pay for that. And these exam packs can also be found on the Facebook group, in the WhatsApp group, so we share study materials as well. It's just not for us to interact but we share quite a lot of things."

The same student, Participant ST53, made note of the fact that these groups remained relevant since they all had administrators who ensure that the group is used solely for academic purposes and remove students who post things that do not relate to the module.

Like many of his peers, Participant ST63 said that while he was part of the online discussion boards available on the myUnisa portal, he and a group of other students created a separate Facebook group. The Facebook group is much smaller in size and has students from a variety of African countries, including Angola, Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa. The students use the group as a virtual tutorial group:

“We give each other tasks during the week that go and research [sic] on this particular issue, then we engage on the group over the weekend over an hour or two, we share ideas, we share answers, do our corrections there and we teach each other.”

The student feels that this smaller Facebook group is more useful than the discussion forums on the myUnisa portal since:

“there will be thousands and thousands of people there and what happens, the discussions will lose focus. So you want to create a smaller group with certain people who have got a passion, who share certain passion with you and then those smaller groups are the ones that are more effective.”

Unisa Telegram groups have been touted as a “great place to get first-hand information about the University of South Africa” (Elikplim, 2022). Isolation and physical distance have the potential to negatively impact a student’s learning and academic progress, but some

have suggested that joining student study groups created on the Telegram platform can overcome these challenges by bringing students together and providing them with a space to discuss problems, and create connections between the study materials and other sections of work (Elikplim, 2022).

There are three general university groups on Telegram that are available to all Unisa students. The table below outlines these groups in detail.

Table 6.1 Telegram groups available at Unisa (based on Elikplim, 2022)

Telegram Group	Information about the group
Unisa announcement group	This group is an announcement Telegram channel for all Unisa students. The announcements include information regarding: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Exams, 2. Graduation, 3. Applications, and 4. Assignments submission closing dates. As of 2021, the group has over 46,000 members.
Unisa textbooks and tutors	In this group, students can: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Advertise their textbooks for sale, 2. Search for academic tutor services, 3. Offer services to their fellow students, and 4. Ask questions about Unisa study materials, as well as other things concerning their study at Unisa.
Unisa student lounge	This is the most popular Unisa Telegram group. The group offers a space where students can engage in regular discussions on modules, exam tips, myUnisa admin, etc. As of 2021, the group has more than 53,000 members.

Unisa encourages students to join Telegram, and while there might be a large number of participants in the groups, many students interviewed for this study indicated that they personally had no interest in joining the Telegram groups. Their lack of interest stems

from the way that Telegram operates in much the same way as WhatsApp, and students felt as though it is repetitive. Since most students are familiar with the WhatsApp platform, and have already formed groups, Telegram is largely ignored. Participant ST53 explains that:

“I’m already in the WhatsApp group, the same information that is shared on the Telegram, exactly the same information will be shared on the WhatsApp group. Why not stick to one group to avoid confusion? Even though I think they encourage us to ... really sign up for Telegram because there you can go back and retrieve all documents that were posted on Telegram, compared to the WhatsApp group. Because what we usually do is once I pass the module or once I’m done with a module then you exit the group. Then you search for the next group and you join and that’s how it goes.”

The so-called “social media era” has seen a dramatic uptick in the number of social media platforms being adopted into higher education, but more specifically into distance education (Anderson, 2019). While there are significant educational benefits, there can also be draw-backs. Before enrolling in DE many students are already familiar with a number of social media apps that they use in their personal and social lives on a daily basis. Adding new applications, or even integrating their existing apps for education purposes may be overwhelming to some students. Any benefits to using social media in ODL occur only if their use is embedded into the learning management systems (Kawachi, 2019).

6.3.2 University Applications

Unisa makes use of a LMS known as myUnisa. It was created as a way to promote teaching and learning, as well as to serve as a virtual learning environment that allows the institution to plan, manage and assess the courses it offers (Netanda, 2020). The system allows the students to submit assignments and exam portfolios, and receive feedback from anywhere in the world. The institution and teaching staff are able to connect to students through the platform and post announcements regarding general information, as well as course-specific information (Netanda, 2020; 100).

This portfolio of online tools is available to all registered students (Baloyi, 2014). Since the LMS is asynchronous in nature, students are able to access and interact with the associated links from any location and at any time, as long as the students have internet access (Baloyi, 2014). Not only are students able to interact with the interface, they are also able to interact with teaching staff via the LMS. This interactivity makes the LMS useful for creating connections between the lecturers and students, especially when they would otherwise be studying in isolation, far removed from the campus and their lecturers.

The information gathered from this study showed that 37% of students interviewed made mention of three university-related applications that they engaged with that were available to them via the myUnisa LMS. These applications were:

1. Discussion forums;
2. Online tutors; and
3. Online lectures.

These applications will be discussed in relation to the students' views, as expressed in the interviews.

While Telegram appears to be the least used SM application offered by Unisa (based on student interviews), the most common application used is the discussion forums one. Many institutions that offer courses through distance learning use discussion forums as a way of providing additional support to students (Olivier, 2016). Online discussion forums create a space for students to share ideas with their peers, as well provide a platform where students can continue discussions around topics that they are learning on their own (Olivier, 2016; Balaji & Chakrabarti, 2010; Kearsley, 2000).

Of the 27 students interviewed for this study, 26% made reference to discussion forums and how they impacted their studies. Some of these excerpts are presented below.

When asked about student support, Participant ST40 stated that they made use of the discussion forums made available to students via the myUnisa portal, explaining that:

“on the Unisa site we have discussion forums and a blog thingy [sic] that you can do. If you encounter problems we usually get grouped into, like normal set classes, so we have the option of communicating with each other if you run into problems.”

The student did admit that he did not make regular use of the application, as he preferred to study on his own, but did engage with other students when he needed assistance, stating that:

“if push comes to shove and I really do need assistance somewhere, then I would go read through [the discussion forums] and see what people are saying, or then I might post my own questions. But the TA’s [teaching assistants] are also very helpful, they are also very engaging, they usually put up a lot of information.” (Participant ST40)

The student also described how the myLife Unisa emails were useful in communicating information, as the TAs send information about assignments directly to the students, without the students needing to search for it themselves.

Participant ST45 explained that they used the discussion forum to complete group assignments and to communicate better with other students. She explained that the discussion forums were generally based on assignments that the TAs had posted. These discussion forums required students to respond to the assignment, which the student found useful since it allowed students to hear the views of their classmates. The student also felt that the forums alleviated the feeling of isolation stating that:

“Okay, I’m here, I’m all alone but at the end of the day, what I was thinking or the view I had of a particular assignment might change because I’ve heard what the next student is thinking and they might bring in an angle that I hadn’t even considered ... so it’s not like I’m confined to my own ideas, I get other people’s ideas, I get the teaching assistants ideas ... so at the end of the day, it allows me to be in a classroom.”

Unlike many of the other students, Participant ST36 stated that they did not currently use any form of social media to connect with other students, but that they would like to connect

with other students. The student explained that they struggle to find online study groups. Their primary form of connection is through the use of tutors on myUnisa LMS.

When asked about whether they communicated with other students, Participant ST38 stated that she did, through groups organised by the university for group projects. Aside from those groups, the students also made use of chats on the internet which she stated were mainly used when the students wrote exams.

Participant ST56 believes that Unisa provides students with support through their online platform, myUnisa. She found the platform useful because:

“people can be ... [in] different countries, so they can go online on myUnisa, then they can see the process, lecturers, and you are able to share, and you are able to know something, an announcement on the online platform. So, it’s been very useful.”

Participant ST62 stated that he relied on the discussion forums on the myUnisa website to engage with the modules and the e-tutors who are responsible for uploading and managing the content on the forums. He explained that:

“You have got your e-tutor there in the discussion forums. You can post some questions. You can get your responses so which is fine, but I would think we are at a disadvantage as compared to someone who is there in South Africa, who has got maybe face-to-face interaction with the tutor. They can have a proper discussion ... Which is quite different when you are writing to someone and when you are talking to someone face-to-face.”

Despite this, the student admitted that he used the platform for almost all of his modules and that he engaged regularly with the discussion posts, almost *“four to five times a week”*. Not only did he log on to check the discussion boards for new information, but he also shared information and asked tutors for assistance. He felt that the platform and the e-tutors assigned to manage the boards are great for the students since the e-tutors acknowledged the students and the questions they asked, and in his experience, always provided feedback. The student believed that the platform is helpful since it reduces the feeling of isolation by creating a reality in which a student feels comfortable and knows that they are not alone. He commented, *“that’s the closest you can get to Unisa.”*

Participant ST63 had studied at another distance education provider, and felt that there is a vast difference in the way that the two institutions approach the delivery of reading materials and other learning resources. The student felt that Unisa is superior as they provide many ways of delivering materials (via CD, printed documents, as well as online). Secondly, Unisa makes use of the myUnisa platform which connects students with their lecturers and e-tutors, as well as other students. They described the discussion forums as enriching because:

“there is nothing more exciting than having an interaction with a student who is in Angola, who [sic] the background is different from yours, whose language ... they speak Portuguese out there in Angola, it is different from you, whose culture is different from you and when you sit down and do discussions on that platform you begin to share, not only academic information, but you also being to share information about your personal life, information about politics in our respective countries, information

about the religion in our respective countries. So much so that the discussion seems to be discussions that are centred towards academic achievement but they become also [sic] discussions that also enrich us as human beings and also enrich us as citizens of Africa or the South Africa region where we have got our own differences and we find differences. Amongst those differences also have areas of commonality that we make, especially politics ... that I must say that it was a very, very fruitful experience ... But I must also mention that on that platform we also use it to share career experiences. Career experiences and share ideas on how to solve particular work problems.”

The major difference between traditional campus-based learning and distance education is the relationship between the lecturer and the student. Despite the distance between student and lecturer, some students do not feel isolated. They state that the level of communication between themselves and the teaching staff is enough to overcome that sense of isolation that they may have experienced had they not been able to connect so easily and through a number of different methods (such as discussion forums, email, etc).

Only one student mentioned online lectures, so it would appear that this is not a primary method of teaching employed by all the teaching staff at Unisa. Participant ST77 stated that only one of her modules had an online lecture, but despite this, she felt that the teaching staff was helpful when responding to online queries.

6.4 Factors that Inhibit the Flow of Knowledge in Distance Education

It has been argued that the function of colleges and universities is to create and share knowledge (Serban & Luan, 2002). For this reason, success in HE is based on an institution's ability to create, manage and use knowledge effectively (Gibb & Hannon, 2005). Knowledge sharing occurs when there is an exchange of knowledge between individuals and groups (Yu, Lu & Liu, 2010). In a tertiary environment, since KS is at the core of an institution's existence, the way knowledge is shared is more complex, including sharing with students, between students, between students and faculty members, between students and the institutions, as well as in collaboration with other external enterprises (Dhamdhere, 2015).

While technology and the applications associated with it are able to overcome some barriers to KS, they do not guarantee KS success, and some barriers therefore remain. While certain, more obvious factors are easily identified (factors such as cost, and lack of internet access), there are also a range of other factors that students interviewed for this study identified as barriers to, or interrupters of, the flow of knowledge and information between students and the various other role players at Unisa. These barriers will be discussed in the section that follows.

6.4.1 Geographical and Social Isolation

Technology has the ability to connect people who may be hundreds of kilometres apart, and although distance education is able to connect remote learners and allow them to engage with the course material, teaching staff, and other students, isolation can still be an unavoidable pitfall associated with distance education. Learning at a distance has the

potential to create a unique sense of isolation that is seldom experienced by students in a traditional face-to-face setting. In many instances, students feel isolated when there is little to no interaction with other students or teaching staff (Lineberger, 2016; Baloyi, 2014c). While there can be multiple opportunities for engagement, some students continue to feel a sense of isolation.

While findings from this study indicate that only 22% of the students interviewed mentioned isolation as an issue in distance learning, a study conducted by Muilenburg and Berge (2005) on student barriers to online learning found that the single most important barrier to student success in online learning was a lack of social interaction.

For one participant in this study, age was a factor that led to the feeling of isolation. As a more mature student, Participant ST34, initially avoided making contact with other students, preferring to work on their own. She stated that because of her age, she preferred email as a mode of communication, as it was easier to navigate and refer back to. She also felt that her age was a barrier to talking with other students, since she perceived them as being much younger than her. This is however only a perception, but it was relevant enough to prevent her from reaching out to other students when she needed assistance.

Unisa considers a student to be “mature” if they are older than 23, therefore, a large portion of the Unisa student population can be considered “mature”. While the opinions expressed by Participant ST34 with regards to her willingness to engage with other students are hers alone, it does suggest that there may be other students, who are similarly aged, who feel the same as her, and are reluctant to engage with other students based on their own perceptions of age.

Aside from age as an isolating factor, some studies have shown that isolation can also occur when students lack a feeling of belonging to an institution (Venter, 2003). More than one student felt the sense that they were just a number at Unisa – that their identity had been reduced to the student number they were assigned when they first enrolled at the institution. As one student, Participant ST49, suggested, using only a student number can be advantageous as the anonymity means that there are no additional qualifiers (such as age, race, gender) that can be used to classify students. However, the student stated that they did not like the feeling of being reduced to a number, and that traditional universities were better in that regard since students could get to know their lecturers in person. As a student at Unisa, the student explained that they had never had any contact with any of their lecturers. The same student has done multiple qualifications through Unisa and stated that he never had any contact with his lecturers, not even via email. When asked whether he feels like this lack of contact led to any missed opportunities, the student stated:

“In a way, yes, cause [sic] academically you’re restricted in two ways. You’re restricted to what the reading material is but also, you’re restricted to your own interest, so if I was reading psychology and I looked up a certain psychologist, like Carl Yung, for example, I might focus on something in his career, whereas the lecturer might have found something much more interesting if we had spoken in person, to say, ‘Did you know about this?’ So, I feel there’s certain things you miss out on, different dimensions, perhaps? You end up just reading what the book says and which way your interests take you, rather than being guided

particularly by a lecturer's comments or their own interest, perhaps, or their own experience?"

Participant ST50 shared a similar sentiment regarding the lack of communication and connection with their lecturers, stating that they felt disconnected:

"I just find it quite difficult; I mean, I know Unisa provides, you know, email addresses and telephone numbers to lecturers and they have discussion forums online and which is great. It really is. But I can't be sitting on my phone or my laptop all day just to talk about one little thing, you know, so from that side of it I do get a bit frustrated."

With more than 300,000 students, it can be easy for students studying at Unisa to feel as though they have been reduced to a number, rather than to be seen as an individual. With discussion forum sizes exceeding hundreds of students, it can also be overwhelming for an individual to feel confident enough to share their opinions in the forums. While encouraging student participation in online discussions may increase their interaction with their peers, which in turn may help to ease their feelings of isolation (Croft, Dalton & Grant, 2010), making participation in discussion forums compulsory, may result in a lack of participation instead (Gulati, 2008).

What this indicates is that isolation, whether caused by lack of social interaction, or because of the sheer number of students in a programme, is a key barrier in the sharing and flow of knowledge within distance education. Online learners can experience a sense of isolation if there is a lack of connection between themselves and both the institution

(as a whole) and elements of the institution (such as the course, its instructors, and social context) (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003).

6.4.2 Lack of Support from Teaching Staff

Another factor that may inhibit the flow of knowledge is the lack of trust in DE. Since trust is the key component of collaboration (Tseng, Yeh & Tang, 2019), it becomes difficult to achieve in ODL since there can be limitations to both communication and to social interaction (Ubon & Kimble, 2002). Trust is an important part of KS, and is even more valuable when establishing connections in DE (Ubon & Kimble, 2002). When students have difficulty engaging with teaching staff and other students, trust inevitably falters (Dzakiria & Christopher, 2010). For some students, overcoming isolation is not merely a request to receive more information from the institution, but it is also an appeal for contact with another human being, and not just interaction with an interface or 2D object, such as learning materials (Walker, 2002).

Owing to the nature of distance education, interaction provides an array of necessary connections (Kumtepe, Atasoy, Kaya, Uğur, Dinçer, Erdoğan & Aydın, 2019), including an increase in learner motivation, deep learning and the encouragement of critical thinking skills (Mason, 1994).

Interactions that occur between students and their teaching staff should allow students to build on and reinforce what they have learned on their own (Thurmond & Wambach, 2004).

For some students, reaching out to teaching staff to ask for support can be daunting. When asking for help, a student is required to formulate a question prior to

asking for help; something some students may find difficult (TD, 2015). Without support from teaching staff, a student may also be at risk of perpetuating misunderstood concepts as they are unaware that they are missing key ideas in their knowledge (TD, 2015).

Participant ST53 gave a detailed explanation as to the impact that lack of support has on students:

“Last year I emailed the lecturer for clarity cause [sic] we were debating an assignment in the group and we went on and on and on and we couldn’t really understand some of the things, so some of us actually emailed the lecturer. I, for instance, emailed the lecturer, and she came back to me after two days so I was really impressed, and I could go back to the group and say, ‘Look this is my response from the lecturer.’ And we carried on discussing. But then there are times you also try to get clarity from the teaching assistants or the lecturers and they never actually come back to you, so you are forced to really depend on your fellow students ... For instance, I needed clarity in one of the modules this semester and I’ve submitted my query and I was supposed to give my mobile number, so the teaching assistant can assist me. But they never came back to me. And then in one of the groups we heard that no, it’s best you don’t ask teaching assistants for assistance or complain about the results for instance, because your marks will drop. I don’t know how true that is. So, most of us decided OK, you know, we were not gonna contact the teaching assistant because, especially [since] we have the online modules, we do continuous assessment. You do online

discussion and some people come out with 100 marks, some people come out with 70 and then those who come out with 40 and you don't know what the problem is. If you can't reach your teaching assistant to actually ask what the problem is ... because I can really see that this year my results, my assignments have been marked [but] all I get was a comment of 'Good effort. You should have elaborated more.' I need to know where I lack [sic], because it's an online module and I'm busy with the portfolio exams and you're supposed to bring all these things in [sic] into my exams. I don't know where I lack [sic]. Some of my marks are good, some are not, but then I can't ... access someone and say: 'Help me here' because they never come back to us. So we have to rely on each other in the group."

In a context where students are working independently from the institution and engaged in asynchronous learning, they should not be scared to reach out to the teaching staff out of fear of retribution. Student discrimination is one of the many drawbacks of using social media type platforms (Mendez, Le & De La Cruz, 2014), where students can face biases from teaching staff (Cisco, 2020).

This fear of being judged and potentially having their grades affected because of contacting or asking questions of their lecturer, was the experience of one of the participants of this study. Participant ST34 explained how she experienced discrimination in one of her courses:

"I think a lot of the time people wouldn't say anything for fear of affecting their marks. We had a few particular issues that came up this term where

we weren't getting ... You know, some of the questions in the assignments were wrong and when we got them back, of course, we were marked as incorrect but we wanted to raise that with the lecturer. And then eventually it all boiled over until somebody went up and I think ... went to Unisa physically and got a response but you could tell from the conversation that was going on that people were really afraid that if they raised the matter or if they took a stand that it would affect their marks. So I think there's a place for being involved with your lecturer."

When students teach each other, a chance exists that a gap in their knowledge may be perpetuated and adopted by other students who are struggling to understand the coursework. Lecturers and tutors have an important role in helping students understand the content of the course and ensuring that the students have a safe space to ask questions that relate directly to their understanding of the coursework.

While not many of the participants described instances where they felt there was a lack of support from teaching staff, one student, Participant ST50, explained that:

"I do feel disconnected... I just [sic] find it quite difficult [to connect with teaching staff]... if I'm trying to communicate with lecturers, say to do with an assignment query or something like that, I don't always get a response in a short amount of time ... which is also quite frustrating."

Since DE lacks several key aspects of teaching (such as physical, face-to-face interaction), the courses offered need to be well structured, providing an array of opportunities for students to be more interactive, not just with the course content, but with

the teaching staff as well (Kumtepe et al., 2019). Additionally, to replace their physical presence in a classroom environment, lecturers should create an online presence (Thurmond & Wambach, 2004) by interacting with the students through written feedback to assignments, email communication, as well as by participating in online discussion forums (Kumtepe et al., 2019). However, the overuse and dependence on online discussion forums by teaching staff instead of engaging in personal feedback can lead to students feeling isolated and disengaged which in turn can have negative consequences for the learning process (Kear, Chetwynd, & Jefferis, 2014).

Participant ST50, quoted above, highlighted the need for such interaction with her lecturers saying that she would feel more connected if there was more dialogue, or intensive communication between herself and her lecturers.

While interaction in DE is undoubtedly different to that of traditional on-campus settings, some authors believe that there are opportunities for DE to create a greater level of interaction between the lecturer and their students through the use of timely and personal feedback (Hirumi & Bermudez, 1996).

6.4.3 Lack of Communication between Students and the Institution

In July of 2011, Unisa management made the decision to close Unisa Contact Centre, which all students (local or international) were able contact, forcing international students to make contact with the university via email (Natsis, 2011). This decision left many students feeling dissatisfied, as the university failed to address its core communication challenge, which was responding to its students' (and prospective students') need for information quickly and easily (Natsis, 2011). As a result, students felt that the only

channel for communication with the institution was becoming overrun with queries, and as such, responses to queries were taking days, weeks, and in extreme cases, months to reach students (Natsis, 2011). In some instances, students resorted to contacting their lecturers in desperation with institutional queries. This was problematic since lecturers are often unable to assist with institutional queries, and it added unnecessary administrative burdens on the teaching staff (Natsis, 2011).

Many students interviewed for this study felt these impacts. Participant ST34 commented:

“Unisa itself is notorious for being really difficult to contact ... if you can get hold of somebody to answer a phone call or answer an email then you’re doing better than a lot of students.”

As a result, the student had noticed that complaints about the university spill over into social media forums. This spill-over has the potential to disrupt the learning aspect that these social media forums are designed for. Posts that focus on complaints have the potential to bury important questions and discussions that students are trying to engage with.

Like many other students, Participant ST35 encountered challenges when trying to communicate with the university. The lack of direct contact with any of the support staff forced the student to come up with unique ways to force communication. The student explained the process as follows:

“I have found a trick around Unisa. I call one of the regional offices, like you know in George... I don’t know where George is, but I know if I call

the office in George, they will answer my call and can answer my queries.”

The student then explained that if they were still not able to get the answers they needed, then:

“I’d get the details of the Dean. The Dean himself is ringing, directing email and they help out in ten minutes or so, they’re very, very, very efficient, especially if it’s coming from the Dean. But if it’s coming directly from a student, it’s just a student number and there’s no sense of urgency.”

It is somewhat alarming that students are forced to come up with unique strategies in order to communicate with the institution. This example of a student needing to go through other channels of communication highlights a serious flaw in the way that students are expected to communicate with the university.

Like Participant ST35, other students who struggled to communicate with the university found ways to overcome the challenge. One such student, Participant ST53, asked students whom she has become acquainted with on WhatsApp to assist her by going to the campus on her behalf. She explained that:

“Most of them [the South African students from the WhatsApp group] actually go to the university, yeah, on our behalf. Because the problem is when we try to call the university, the telephones are never picked up, even though when you try to call you will see that the phone is engaged, there’s somebody on the line, but the moment you call it’s never picked

up. It either rings or it picks up and it's slammed or it's just not answered at all. And I know they're trying to do everything online but sometimes it's a delayed process for us because when you send them emails, they don't really come back to you. And the same with the teaching assistants now. You call sometimes a query to a teaching assistant, you need clarity on something, and then your email is only replied to after two weeks or so and it's ... at the end of the day I guess you have to rely on the other students in the group to assist you."

As with the previous student, Participant ST41 felt that there is a lack of support from the university when it relates to communication with students. The student explained that:

"Even the policies of the university, I don't think they are supportive enough ... if I have a problem, again I will try to call the university. I have to use my own money and I'm answered by an answering machine. It takes five minutes before even I am [sic] attended to ... they don't really reply the email."

Participant ST45 had similar experiences where they were unable to communicate with the university.

"the challenge that I've experienced is when I want to communicate with Unisa, when I call them and I have an enquiry they have an automated response and the many times that I have ... this is the only challenge that I faced with Unisa, they are not easily accessible, that's the only challenge that I face with Unisa and sometimes when you send an email

you get an automated response and it takes a very long time before you can actually get the response that will help you solve your problem, that's the only challenge that I've experienced with Unisa."

An inability to communicate and engage with the institution has the potential to leave many students feeling isolated and frustrated. Support services are important in many types of institutions, but especially so in educational institutions (Kumtepe, Toprak, Ozturk, Buyukkose, Kılınç & Menderis, 2018). For students enrolled in distance education however, support services are considered most essential since students and lecturers are physically separated (Kumtepe et al., 2018). Communication with the institution and access to the support services offered by the institution are crucial if the education system is to remain effective and sustainable (Kumtepe et al., 2018).

6.4.4 Issues with Social Media

Studies, such as the one conducted by Henke and Rusum (2000), found that the sense of separation experienced by students enrolled in DE created not only a sense of disconnection and inaccessibility, but ultimately a sense of isolation. The authors of the study suggested that in order to overcome these feelings, students should engage in interaction through the use of online activities, such as tutorials, but also through social media (Henke & Rusum, 2000). The use of social media in DE is not without its challenges however.

Although Participant ST34 found that social media, specifically WhatsApp, was useful in creating connections with other students, it can be distracting, especially when there is an influx of messages that are seemingly irrelevant to the student. For example:

“It does annoy me at the moment, because the results are about to come out so all of the group keep just popping in and going, ‘Hi, have you got your results?’ and my phone is just constantly buzzing. I put my phone on silent and I stop the feedback [notifications] stuff and then I end up missing important things, so it’s a bit of a trade-off. I can also leave the group if I want to.”

This sentiment highlights the conflicting nature of using technologies in DE (Berge, 2013). Because these technologies are capable of delivering mass communications directly to the students, they begin to feel overwhelmed by the sheer number of messages they are receiving within a day through these open chat forums.

Student-led social media, such as independent WhatsApp groups often contain a noisy mixture of learning-related content and truly social content. Participant ST51 explains:

“You know with this social media, yeah, it keeps one busy, so it requires one to be very disciplined when using it ... You need to be very careful ... one thing I noticed with other ... that I noticed very clearly, that most of [sic] students end up wasting so much valuable time on social media ... not even considering that they need to study.”

Participant ST51 also acknowledged that they use social media platforms to primarily engage with other students as a way of avoiding isolation.

“I use it [social media] for study. I just use it for study purposes like interacting with other students. We are studying in isolation when you are

doing your studies. For me it [isolation] doesn't work ... I need to interact with others."

Noticing patterns where people are constantly bombarded with endless streams from social media platforms led researchers to coin the phrase "social media fatigue" (SMF) (Liu & He, 2021; Zhang, Shen, Xin, Sun, Wang, Zhang & Ren, 2021). The term is directly related to the use of social media, but it is not inherently a new concept (Kwon, English, & Bright, 2020). The term "technostress" was created in 1984 to describe the stress that occurred as a result of a person's inability to manage information and communication technology in a way that was considered to be healthy (Ayyagari, Grover, & Purvis, 2011). Both technostress and SMF highlight the concerns and negative consequences that arise as a result of communicating using information technology (Kwon, English & Bright, 2020).

While the term is ordinarily used in reference to social media outside of the academic environment, in recent years, it has been applied to ODL. The outcome of one such study suggested that there was a negative correlation between SMF and academic performance (Malik, Dhir, Kaur & Johri, 2021).

Social media fatigue presents a challenge for many Unisa students who are subscribed to many of the social media platforms recommended as part of the institutions' LMS.

Participant ST34 (as quoted previously) expressed feeling overwhelmed by the number of notifications they were receiving and as such, chose to withdraw from the platform by silencing their device, but recognised that there were significant drawbacks, such as missing important announcements. When asked whether maintaining

connections with other students via social media platforms was beneficial to their studies, Participant ST34 stated that:

“...as a student, it’s been very helpful and supportive and interesting”.

Aside from being overwhelmed by the sheer number of students participating in the various social media platforms, some students, such as Participant ST53, stated that there is evidence of xenophobic discrimination on certain social media platforms, such as WhatsApp. The student suspects that non-South African students are ignored in some groups. She explains that in WhatsApp groups, it is easy to identify where students are from based on the country code that appears at the beginning of each phone number. She states that:

“the first thing they look at is your number. Doesn’t start with a +27, it doesn’t ... then nobody actually gets to you. That’s why the few people that actually are willing to assist me, those are the people that I actually get to communicate with on a daily basis or when I’m stuck.”

Participant ST53 further explained that although there are many students on the same platform, interaction between students is not a given.

“you can’t force people to interact with you. You have a choice who to interact with and if you want to private message somebody that you think will assist you, then you do that, because at times for instance, you post something in the groups and nobody cares to respond. And then you just wonder, ‘maybe because of my number’, cause they look at your number

... most of the students come back and [say], 'which country are you from?', because the number doesn't look like their number."

These examples highlight cultural barriers that can occur when the technologies used in DE advance. They are meant to decrease a student's sense of isolation and the physical distance that exists between them, the institution and their peers (Berge, 2013). However, these advances are offset by an increase in the number of students from different locations and cultures, which can lead to communication barriers (Berge, 2013).

Language can also be a source of contention when participants in social media groups have different nationalities and speak different languages. Participant ST54 highlighted this issue, explaining that:

"I feel like some students in South Africa are very particular when it comes to their language. When you put [sic] something, let's say you chat and make a mistake, you shout a Shona word, they all think that probably you are a bit aggressive, you are swearing or something!"

In other studies, similar findings were noted. Participants in distance education where the student body was comprised of many students from many different countries, cultural backgrounds and who spoke different languages were often concerned about miscommunication, or potentially unintentionally offending someone through their online communications (Valaitis, Sword, Jones & Hodges, 2005; Berge, 2013).

Participant ST62 said that they only use platforms coordinated by the university. When asked why, the student explained that you cannot persuade others to add you to

their group. This uncertainty can lead to feelings of isolation if a student requests to join a group and is not added.

The sheer size and number of students participating in WhatsApp groups can be daunting and overwhelming. Consequently, some students choose not to participate in these groups. One such student is Participant ST64, who stated that:

“WhatsApp groups, they [have] become so big. They just become so horrendously big; you can’t operate within that group.”

The issue with the size of the groups is not limited to WhatsApp. The student explains that the discussion forums on the myUnisa page are just as big, and participating in the group chats is difficult.

“some of the groups are too big as well because you have a group which might have 40 or 50 students, and a lecturer or a tutor would say ‘read other papers, contributions and comment on one or two or three’, but for you now to be able to identify which ones are worth your attention, you’ll have to go through all 40 or 50. So the groups are just too big.”

The use of discussion forums, while largely beneficial, can have several drawbacks if not done in the correct manner. Large groups, despite being comprised of many students may have an isolating effect on students who are unsure of how to engage in the discussion, or who may feel that they lack the right answers to specific topic-related questions.

6.4.5 Accessing Study Materials

Often seen as a benefit of ODL, students studying via DE are viewed as having access to an array of resources and materials, which may often be located in a number of distant locales around the world, through the use of the internet (University of Illinois Springfield (UIS), 2022). These additional study materials can be compiled to include scholarly articles and materials that are relevant to the course (UIS, 2022) and which provide the student with opportunities to further their understanding of a topic.

Although students have access to these study materials and course resources, students can encounter issues when they try to access their study materials. The inability to access study materials represents a disruption in the flow of knowledge. The distribution of study materials at Unisa is two-fold. The first method (and the longest standing) is through the postal system. For decades, Unisa made use of the South African Postal Office (SAPO) to distribute learning materials to its students. In 2014 for example, a postal strike affected more than 113,600 students who were enrolled at Unisa (Jurgens & Laganparsad, 2014). During this period, hard copies of study materials, exam timetables and admission letters were sent to students via the postal system, but were ultimately undelivered (Jurgens & Laganparsad, 2014). As a direct result of this, Unisa resorted to the implementation of its contingency plans, which included the uploading of study materials online, as well as the use of private courier companies, all of which had major budgetary implications for the institution (Jurgens & Laganparsad, 2014).

The delays in postal deliveries to students in remote and rural areas, especially in other countries, has been an ongoing challenge in terms the delivery of study material. A study conducted by the University of Namibia, Centre for External Studies (UNAMCES)

on their students who were studying at a distance, indicated that more than 60% of students who were part of the study experienced significant delays in the delivery of their study materials, and in some instances, mail was returned back to the sender (the institution) too soon (Mowes, 2005). Since the study was conducted at another DE institution, and the results were the same, it shows that the problems lay not with the institution, but with the chosen delivery provider that the institutions used, i.e., SAPO.

More recently however, as Unisa has begun its transformation from an DE provider to an ODeL institution, most of the student material has been made available online through the university's online platform, myUnisa. In the case of online resources, ICT technology in a student's home country can be the limiting factor, since the internet is unreliable, and the student encounters many issues when trying to get online.

Consequently, students are often motivated to choose SM over other forms of communication due to the widely varied accessibility to internet infrastructure at a country level. Access to the internet is significantly impacted by a variety of factors, including both regulatory and political environments, and also internet connectivity (Messenger, 2020). For this reason, many students access the internet through smartphones, however, those located further from main cities can experience variability with regards to the quality of connection, the cost of data and handsets, as well as connectivity (Messenger, 2020).

This variability is clearly shown when looking at various factors. The Inclusive Internet Index (III) is a tool that measures the accessibility, affordability and relevance of the internet in over 120 countries (The Economist Newspaper, 2021). The index also seeks to understand whether the use of the internet enables positive social and economic outcomes at both individual and group levels (The Economist Newspaper, 2021). The III

uses four categories of inclusion in order to assess the performance of the countries. These categories are: Accessibility, Affordability, Relevance and Readiness. Included in each category are indicators of internet inclusion, such as quantitative measures (examples include network coverage and pricing), and qualitative measures (examples include the presence of e-inclusion policies and the availability of local-language content) (The Economist Newspaper, 2021).

According to the III, both Namibia and South Africa, are ranked highly, based on their regulatory environment and internet governance, however, in Namibia, internet penetration is lacking, at only 35% coverage. Another example is Lesotho which exhibits both high coverage and good quality connectivity, but, despite this, the internet usage in the region is only at 36% (Messenger, 2020).

The uptake and usage of the internet in other SADC countries, such as Mozambique, Lesotho and Eswatini, are limited due to low levels of digital skills (Messenger, 2020). The situation in Mozambique is further exacerbated by a combination of poor digital skills and high costs, which result in an internet penetration rate of 10% (Messenger, 2020).

The internet is not the only challenge that students face when trying to access their study materials. For many students, recommended textbooks are unavailable in their home countries and therefore the students are unable to access them. Some students have taken to paying someone else to travel to South Africa and purchase their textbooks for them. This is not the most desirable way to access learning materials, as it adds additional costs for students, a cost which some students may not be able to afford, and this puts them therefore at a further disadvantage.

One such student, Participant ST41, was able to access his study materials easily, but at an additional cost to him. The student made the comparison between himself and a South African student who is required to access the same materials as him, stating that he could access the materials, but at his own expense:

“I am really paying, when I talk to the guys in South Africa they say, ‘We have regional centres, we have stuff, we can go to regional centre and access materials easily, university’s computers,’ but here in Zimbabwe, we are using our own money to access that myUnisa platform.”

The ability to access learning resources at an additional cost highlight just one of the inequalities distance education students at Unisa face. The example above highlights a form of digital divide, where one student (located in South Africa) is perceived to have greater access to the learning resources than another student (located in Zimbabwe) who is unable to access the online resources unless they bear the additional costs needed to gain access to the internet. This perception is based on information shared by local students, who have told international students that they have access to regional centers which according to Unisa, offer a variety of services and access to facilities for students (Unisa, 2021). There are six regions identified by Unisa, and each region is serviced by multiple regional centers located across South Africa. There is only one regional center located outside of South Africa, in Ethiopia (Unisa, 2021). These regional centers offer a wide variety of services, for example, allowing students to get advice and guidance, library assistance, and access to computers (Unisa, 2021). These facilities and services are unavailable to many international students.

For Participant ST59, both communication from the institution and access to study materials was challenging. The student experienced a delay in receiving their study materials, so they felt entirely unprepared for the exam, and consequently they chose not to write it:

“they [referring to Unisa] send me the module [study materials and course guides] after ... I didn’t even know what to expect in [the] examinations, so I just had to drop the examination that I had originally started doing after paying my school fees.”

Like other students, Participant ST60, noted that they did not receive their study materials on time:

“We can get the modules and the stuff when the assignments are two weeks away, so you have to race against time, you have to work extra hard, so that you meet the deadlines, the due dates.”

This delay in the delivery of study materials can last months, and while the student did acknowledge that many of the study materials can be found online, a lack of reliable internet infrastructure can make those channels obsolete:

“Yeah, they put all the materials on the school website, they put the materials there, but like I’m saying at times we have got network challenges in our region.”

The student felt that the lack of study material resulted in her failing a module. She explained that while most students have access to soft copies online, her situation meant

that those copies were not available or access to them was not reliable, and that she would have preferred hard copies of her study materials.

When asked about the aspects he considered as negative, Participant ST62 stated that it was access to textbooks. The student explained that accessing textbooks that are current, in his home country, is challenging. This means that he had to access whatever materials he could find. In some instances, the resources are photocopied textbooks, which, while in addition to being a violation of copyright laws, may also be outdated:

“that’s when you get photocopied books, which sometimes may not be the current edition ... you might be on the sixth edition, which is the current one, but you might get, maybe, a fourth edition that is photocopied so that’s a disadvantage. You don’t have much material with Unisa in the bookshops locally.”

Participant ST73 had similar issues accessing the prescribed textbooks.

“The only challenge was getting the prescribed books, because you know Unisa is very specific in terms of the study materials, you know, you are supposed to use in terms of prescribed books. Most of them are South African authors so, yeah, because you know accessing the bookstores – and the bookstores are in South Africa – it had been a challenge but you know with years going on and with many people doing Unisa in Zimbabwe, you’ve found people who are now acting as agents and getting new books, obviously at an extra cost, yes, it’s an extra cost and it is in books so that is still a challenge in terms of getting books, unless

you're getting an eBook, where you just, you know, pay online and get an eBook. But getting hard copies of prescribed books is still a bit of a challenge."

Since accessing additional learning resources is challenging for many students, and results in disadvantages when preparing for assignments and exams, Participant ST74 suggested that all additional resources, including prescribed textbooks, be placed online:

"others [referring mainly to South African students] are content because they've got access to the library [referring to the physical, campus-based library], they've got access to extra material which we don't have ... and I would think if they could put it on extra material on eLearning, not on our emails so that we can have access to it. Or on myLife ... it would be okay".

The numerous issues relating to the delivery of study and supplementary study materials, as well as access to online copies of the aforementioned material, represent a disruption in the flow of knowledge. This disruption creates an unequal learning environment that centres on a student's ability to access the necessary learning materials to succeed in their studies.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter focused on the factors which enhance the flow of knowledge, as well as the factors that inhibit the flow of knowledge within DE at Unisa. Excerpts from the qualitative portion of this study were used to analyse these factors, as they relate to the opinions of

the students who were interviewed for this study. This data highlighted the strategies and technologies used by the institution to disseminate information to its students. It also looked at factors, identified by the participants that either enhanced or inhibited the flow of knowledge from the institution to them as students.

The factors that the participants felt enhanced the flow of knowledge were the various social media platforms that the university makes use of to connect with students globally. More than 50% of the participants stated that they use and engage with these platforms as key parts of their studies. The three main platforms used by students were WhatsApp, Facebook and Telegram.

Since knowledge is the key commodity in higher education, it follows that knowledge management and knowledge sharing are of importance when understanding the way in which knowledge flows, especially in the context of ODL. Knowledge flow focuses on the way that knowledge moves. It focuses on the movement of knowledge between people, within organisations and across both time and place. Knowledge management, however, involves the processing of knowledge. Not only does KM look at the way that knowledge is captured, distributed and used, but it also considers the people, processes, cultures and technology needed to process information.

Knowledge sharing occurs when there is an exchange of ideas and information within an organisation, and between both individuals and groups. Because KS is an important component of DE, there needs to be a seamless flow of knowledge between the university, its teaching staff and its students. It is an activity that is reliant on both interaction and communication between individuals (Liao, 2006).

Technology is an essential tool in KS, as it removes barriers that would otherwise limit communication, especially between people who are temporally and geographically dispersed. Educators, through the use of web-based applications and tools, are able to influence knowledge sharing to increase social interaction among students (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Students too are able to take control of their studies by creating and participating in online groups with other students. These smaller groups allow students to establish relationships with their peers and create an online atmosphere that is conducive to sharing and collaborating with one another.

The chapter that follows examines the transition and adjustment of mature age, undergraduate, international ODL students who are studying at Unisa. This particular cohort of students face unique challenges pertaining to their success as students. The factors that make this group different from the average university student will be described followed by a discussion surrounding the particular challenges they face. The chapter will also discuss how these students perceive themselves to be lacking in comparison to the local students enrolled at the same institution, and how they feel it affects their studies.

CHAPTER 7

FINDINGS: THE TRANSITION AND ADJUSTMENT OF MATURE AGE, UNDERGRADUATE, INTERNATIONAL ODL STUDENTS AT UNISA

7.1 Introduction

While much is known about the integration and adjustment of first-year students in traditional face-to-face institutions, less is known about the integration and adjustment of students engaged in online and distance education. Even less is known about the integration and adjustment of mature age students engaged in online and distance education. With a year-on-year increase in the number of mature age students enrolling in higher education, student retention for this group of students is a perpetual challenge (Bohl, Haak & Shrestha, 2017). Poor retention of mature age students is exacerbated when students struggle to adequately adapt and transition to their role as a student.

Using a variety of existing definitions, as well as characteristics of this particular population, this chapter will begin by describing the participants as mature age individuals based on characteristics that are representative of them. This will be done by looking at the socio-economic factors that make these students unique, as well as identifying other distinctive characteristics of the population. Using these attributes, a portrait of what it means to be an international, mature age student studying via DE at Unisa, will be developed.

The use of a qualitative approach in this study allows the researcher not to only gain insight into the participants own experiences, but to understand the shared challenges that they, as mature age students, encounter. This approach allowed the

researcher to understand the motivating factors that led mature age students to study and to continue with their studies at Unisa via ODL, as well as to understand the challenges that these students encounter before and during their studies. In understanding these factors, the motivating factors will be discussed. The motivating factors refer to both the reasons why these students have chosen to study, not only via DE at Unisa, but also at the stage of their life at which they find themselves.

In order to further understand the students and to potentially assist future students with their journey, this chapter will highlight the suggestions that the current mature age students have made regarding their own experiences so that the institution is better able to understand and support this cohort of students in the future.

7.2 Defining Mature Age

All students encounter a number of difficulties as they transition into their first year of university (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018). The transition is challenging, involving an adjustment of previously held beliefs and worldviews as they are exposed to the culture of their chosen institution (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018; Huon & Sankey, 2000). Although mature age students encounter many of the same issues as younger students, they are also tasked with overcoming other factors that are unique to them (Munuhe, Kathuri & Njagi, 2019).

The term *mature age student* has a multitude of definitions, and it can at times be difficult to find a definition that adequately and accurately describes the student population that is being referred to. Mature age students not only face the same integration and adjustment issues as their younger counterparts, but they are faced with an array of

unique factors that can make integrating and adjusting to university all the more challenging (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018; Mallman & Lee, 2016). These factors include, but are not limited to, employment while studying, familial dependents, and isolation (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018; Fragoso, Gonçalves, Ribeiro, Monteiro, Quintas, Bago, Fonseca & Santos, 2016).

In the context of this study, the term *mature age* comes with a unique set of challenges. Not only are the majority of participants in this study not traditional school-leavers, but they are engaged in their studies via distance education, whilst also being international students, who are located in a country that is not the same as the institution. These factors, along with others, make this particular group of mature age students, and their integration and adjustment to studying difficult to define and understand.

It is difficult to define the term *mature age student* since there are a multitude of variations of the use of the term between institutions, researchers and even between countries (Fragoso, Gonçalves, Ribeiro, Monteiro, Quintas, Bago, Fonseca & Santos, 2016). Some variations exist simply because many universities choose different criteria and ages to classify which students represent the category and the term *mature aged*. For many institutions, the term *mature age* refers to prospective students who wish to study at the institution but who lack the necessary academic requirements to gain access, and, as a result, these students seek entry based on age, rather than on academic merit alone (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018; Richardson, 1994).

In these instances, the student is seeking exemption, which can be granted based on age. In South Africa, the Matriculation Board awards these certificates of exception when certain criteria are met. One such criteria is “mature age”, which is offered to

students who are older than 22 years and lasts for the duration of their studies (Cloete, 2021).

For other institutions, such as those in Australia, *mature age* refers to any student who has had a break after their secondary studies (regardless of the length of time) before beginning their tertiary studies (Collins, 2022; Good Universities Guide, 2022; Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018). Whilst for other institutions (like those in Ireland and South Africa), it is anyone that is over the age of 23 (Collins, 2022; Citizens Information, 2022). One researcher, Kerr (2011), defined mature students as those students who are returning to education after a period of time after completing their secondary studies. This implies that anyone who took a gap prior to commencing their tertiary studies, whether that gap was one year, five years or even twenty years, is considered to be mature age. Those definitions of *mature age* that focus solely on age of commencement and tend to overlook other important factors that make students who are mature age unique and set them apart from traditional school-leaving students. The benchmark of age should not be the only factor in defining what it is to be a mature age student (Bok, 2021). Instead, the definition should include the complex and varied aspects (including class background, ethnicity and disability as examples) which make these students unique (Karmelita, 2020; Mallman & Lee, 2016) and their adjustment to their studies different to those that commenced their studies as school-leavers (Mackinnon-Slaney, 1994).

Such complexities are that the students are enrolled at the institution on a part-time basis, as a way to fulfil multiple other obligations and responsibilities that exist outside the scope of their studies (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018). These obligations and responsibilities include, but are not limited to familial (Mackinnon-Slaney, 1994; Burton,

Lloyd & Griffiths, 2011; Fragoso et al., 2016), financial (Fragoso et al., 2016), and employment related.

While many definitions of mature age reflect on the actual age of the student, age is not a necessary benchmark (Bok, 2021). For the purpose of this study, mature age refers not to the actual age of the student, but rather to a set of socio-economic circumstances that shape the students, and set them apart from traditional students. In this study, *mature age students* are those who are not school-leavers, but those who have taken time off after completing their secondary studies, before pursuing their tertiary education. There are a number of reasons why a student may have taken time off after finishing high-school, such as, to start working or to travel.

For many students, the choice to study via distance education is based on the level of flexibility that it allows, as discussed previously in chapter 4. The flexibility afforded by DE provides students with the opportunity to coordinate their various needs, such as the continuation of full-time work, as well as to fulfil family obligations (Berry & Hughes, 2019). For many students, the need to continue full-time work comes as a result of their position as the primary financial providers for their families. Since these students are engaged in full-time work, many of them are enrolled at university on a part-time basis. As such, these students are expected to balance their careers and their studies in a way that also allows them to successfully complete their studies. This work–life balance, and the challenges that are associated with it will be expanded upon in the sections that follow.

Finally, for the purpose of this study, mature age students are also those who have various familial responsibilities. These responsibilities include being a primary caregiver to members of their family, such as children, parents, siblings, spouses and other family

members. Attempting to strike a balance between work and family responsibilities with academic study is key to a student's personal, as well as to their academic adjustment (Drury, Francis & Chapman, 2008). Academic and personal adjustment can benefit from a home and/or work environment that is supportive of the student and their personal situation (Bird & Morgan, 2003).

7.2.1 Socio-demographic Characteristics of Distance Learners Studying at Unisa

A separate analysis conducted by the University of South Africa created a profile of the international students studying at Unisa between 2018 and 2020 (Fynn, 2021). The analysis not only showed where the students came from geographically, but looked at the specific demographics of the students. This information, along with information gathered by this study (see Table 6.1) will be used to create a more holistic view of what it means to be an international student at Unisa.

The profile created by the Unisa analysis showed that the majority of international students reside in African countries, with the majority of the students coming from SADC countries, such as Zimbabwe, Eswatini and Namibia (Fynn, 2021). The results from this research showed a similar profile, with the majority of participants residing in Zimbabwe (85%) and from Namibia (15%). Since all of the participants in the study reside within SADC countries, only information pertaining to these countries will be utilised from the Unisa student profile.

The gender profile of students in the Unisa profile indicates that the majority of students living within the SADC region are female, although no specific data was given indicating the percentage of females to males (Fynn, 2021). This was replicated by the

findings of this study, where 63% of participants were female (see Table 6.1). This is also reflective of the overall gender profile of Unisa during the 2018 academic year, where 66% of the total student cohort were female (Unisa, 2018). Based on the international profile of Unisa students, the age profile for SADC students in 2020, the largest age category was 35–39.

Unlike gender, age was not a specific question asked of students in this study (and in many cases was unreported to allow for greater anonymity of participants). For this reason, it was difficult to create an age profile for the participants of this study. Some participants did however report their age due the open-ended nature of the questions they were asked as part of their in-depth interviews. Based on the 7 (27%) students who stated their age, findings suggest that the students' ages ranged from 25–62. This is an incomplete set of data since there were too few who did not report their age therefore, we can assume that there may be students who are younger than 25 or older than 62.

Table 7.1 Demographics of participants

Characteristic		Percentage
Gender	Females	63
	Males	37
Geographic location	Zimbabwe	85
	Namibia	15

A profile created based on the information presented in Figure 7.1, Figure 7.2 and Table 7.2 below shows that the mature age students studying via DE at Unisa, interviewed for

this study, are most likely to be married (52%) with child/ren (63%) and be employed (89%), with the majority of students being employed full time (78%). Some students (30%) have previously engaged in higher education and therefore have some insight as to what is needed to be a university student.

Table 7.2 Socio-demographics of Participants

Baseline Characteristic		n	%
	Married	12	48
	Single	1	4
	With partner	2	8
	Divorced	1	4
	Single parent	4	16
	Unknown	5	20
	Children	17	63
	Caregiver to other family	4	15
	Employed full time	21	78
	Employed part time	3	11
	Unemployed	2	7
	Retired	1	4
	Previous study	8	30

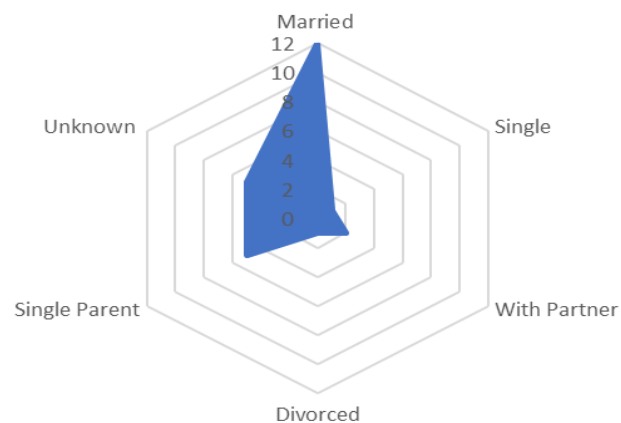


Figure 7.1 Radar chart showing marital status of participants

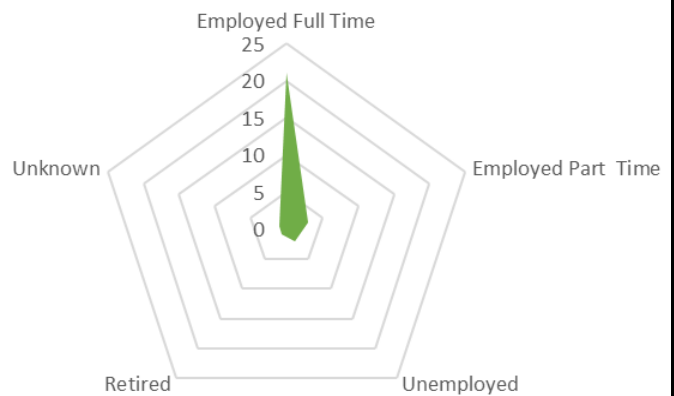


Figure 7.2 Radar chart showing employment status of participants

While there appears to be an overall “type” of mature student, it is important to recognise that there is no homogeneity amongst all mature students. These students are unique in that they fill a wide range of roles and responsibilities, often covering a multitude of duties all at once (Burton et al., 2011; Osborne, Marks & Turner, 2004)

A study conducted in 2011 (Swain & Hammond) identified the most noteworthy personal barriers to learning for mature age students were young children, high-pressure jobs and unsupportive partners. It appears that there are some similarities in these barriers and in the overall profile of participants in this study.

These characteristics highlight the various constraints that mature students need to overcome in order to participate in higher education, affecting a student’s ability to transition into HE (Fragoso et al., 2016). In this regard, it is often believed that younger students are better able to transition since they are able to prioritise their studies, unlike mature students who have a variety of personal responsibilities to meet before they are able to focus on their studies (Bowl, 2001). These expectations and constraints are often thought of as barriers to learning and can impede the transition and adjustment of students to higher education.

7.3 Adjustment and Transition of Mature Age Students to HE

Successful adjustment and transition to university study begins early on in a student's journey through higher education. These experiences have significant impacts on their self-confidence and as such, impact whether a student believes they can successfully continue with, and complete, their courses (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018). It is a widely held belief that it is the responsibility of the institution to ensure that the students experience a transition into their studies that is straight-forward and for the most part

unproblematic (Kantanis, 2001; Fragoso et al., 2016; Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018). This is especially true for universities that have an extraordinarily diverse student population, like Unisa, where students range from school-leavers to retirees, and where students have a varied array of circumstances that impact their transition and adjustment, not just at the beginning of their studies, but throughout it as well. While transition and adjustment to university studies affect all students, this chapter focuses only on the issues as they relate to mature age students, as the key demographic of this study.

With greater responsibilities, such as partners, children and work commitments, it is apparent that mature students enrolled in DE are at a slight disadvantage, as they not only have to adjust to studying, but have to do so while trying to maintain their current responsibilities and roles outside of the university environment (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; Mallman & Lee, 2016; Fragoso et al., 2016; Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018). Whilst there are authors who identify the process of adjustment to higher education, especially for mature students, as barriers (Burton et al., 2011; Fragoso et al., 2016), this author does not agree with that interpretation. This is because these factors did not impede these participants' ability to gain access to higher education, nor have they prevented the student from studying, however they do create circumstances that the students needed to adjust to. The three areas of adjustment that this population encountered most frequently are adjustment to:

1. their new role as a university student (which will be looked at as “familial responsibilities”);

2. their relationships as outliers of the institutions' "normal population" (which will be explored under the moniker of "struggles of international students");
and
3. academic requirements and habits (which will be discussed as "work–life–study balance").

These are certainly not the only collegiate adjustments that mature students encounter, but these three areas were most commonly reported by the participants of this study. The sections that follow will focus on these categories as described by the participants themselves, and how these challenges impacted their studies. Each category will highlight both the challenges the participants experienced, as well as the strategies that the participants used to overcome them.

7.3.1 Personal and Family Commitments

Edwards (1993) supposed that institutions saw an "ideal learner" as an individual who is young, well-resourced and without family responsibilities and that these ideal students would be able to build their lives around the "greedy institute" that is higher education. In this context *greedy* refers to the way in which HE requires a student to be completely devoted to the institutional setup (Edwards, 1993, p. 63), where a student does not have any competing activities, where all energy and focus can be placed on achieving academic success. As a result, any activity, role or responsibility that attracts attention and time away from HE is deemed "baggage" (Edwards, 1993). Family is one such example, and rather than viewing family as an important component of a student's identity, it is labelled as a distraction (Mallman & Lee, 2016).

A mature student is often depicted as a responsible individual, an older learner who is able to make the necessary changes and sacrifices to ensure that they succeed in their education (Williams, 1997). While mature students may have more life experience than their younger counterparts, they are often just as insecure about their role as a student (Mallman & Lee, 2016).

Commencing tertiary education creates new challenges for students which require them to readjust their existing roles: that of parent, spouse, caregiver and employee (Kantanis, 2002; Barker & Fabian, 2009; Waterhouse, Samra & Lucassen, 2022). This need for adjustment is particularly relevant to students who are engaged in full-time employment, who have families and are therefore studying part-time (Waterhouse, Samra & Lucassen, 2022). When mature students choose to enrol in HE, it is a decision that is made with careful consideration and requires the factoring in of all of the complexities that come with being a mature student (Fragoso et al., 2016).

The individual's various roles can be further compounded by the dynamic structure of families in an African context. According to Mwaura (2015, p. 15), "The family in Africa is a complex institution." At a basic level, the African family resembles a nuclear family, consisting of a husband, wife and children (Mwaura, 2015; Swigart, 2001; Makiwane & Kaunda, 2018; Seidl-de-Moura, 2012). More commonly though, the African family includes extended family members: aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins and siblings (Swigart, 2001; 4; Mwaura, 2015; 15; Makiwane & Kaunda, 2018; Seidl-de-Moura, 2012); and it is the extended family that creates a network that is founded on both economic and emotional support (Swigart, 2001). In this context, as is common in most African contexts, the use of the word family is interchangeable with household; when a participant refers to

family, they often may be referring to an extended family, rather than a nuclear one. This network of extended family members can be both a form of support for students, as well as an additional burden that a student must carry.

Participant ST41 explains the African family dynamic well, saying:

“I grew up in the rural areas, and my parents were separated ... so I grew up with my grandparents, my paternal grandparents.”

This impacted his studies and he had to delay going to university, explaining that:

“After finishing my A-levels, I had to stay home for more than five years because I didn’t have anyone to pay for my fees, but soon I got a job at the police and I said to myself ‘why not develop myself further’ so that if I have children, I have some way [inaudible section]”

Not only was Participant ST41 thinking about his future when he decided to study, later on in the interview he revealed that many of his decisions are made with his family in mind, saying that:

“When I make a decisions [sic], it’s not just about me now, but I will have to consider my family.”

It was this thinking that led him to study via DE, since it allowed him to remain close to his family. This was expressed when he was asked whether he would travel abroad to pursue his studies, he stated: *“Just to study, it would be a little difficult for me because I have a family to support.”*

Participant ST77 explained that she had many responsibilities that exist beyond simply being a student. She described herself as:

“A full-time worker, a wife, and a mother, and so far, my experience has been okay, it’s been challenging, but I’ve been trying my best.”

Unlike some participants who are in the same position, with multiple roles, Participant ST77 is fortunate in that she has assistance from her sister, which has allowed her to focus more time on her studies. Unfortunately, not all of the participants interviewed for this study had the same level of support or support structures in place. Despite having help, Participant ST77 still finds herself balancing her studies, work and familial responsibilities, stating that it is:

“kind of hard, but I think that time management is very important ... so I have to, after work, I have to get home today, whatever needs to be prepared and then I study after that. And sometimes during the weekends if I’m not working, then I’ll be studying ... I have my sister to help me during the day with the little ones.”

While Participant ST77 admits that it can be challenging trying to fulfil all of her various roles, she does it to create a better life for her family, especially given that she is the breadwinner for her family as her husband is unemployed. She explains that her drive comes from her desire to:

“Improve my life and I will be able to also send my children to high school and university, I’m hoping for that.”

Another example of how an extended family structure influences and can impact a student is described by Participant ST38. As an older individual (she states she is 41 as of 2018), her nuclear family consists of herself, her husband and their three older children, while her extended family, whom she and her husband support financially include her cousin, her mother and mother-in-law.

“I look after my mum and my mother-in-law ... I have got three children. Two girls and a boy. The first one is a girl – she is getting her degree in xxx University in Australia. But the boy is sitting, he passed his A Levels, the A Level exams, okay.”

She went on to explain that she is trying to use the skills she gained through her studies to uplift younger women and to assist in their future growth and development. She explained that:

“I would say a cousin of mine, like who are [sic] paying fees, now that is also ambitious ... she is from a poor [inaudible] so we are paying her fees.”

Based on her responses in the interview, it is apparent that the couple (husband and wife) are financially responsible for the support and education of two of their three children, as well as for her cousin’s university fees, whilst also needing to pay for her own studies. This level of financial responsibility can place additional burdens, not only on the family, but on the student as well.

Family can be a source of support for students enrolled in DE (as shown in the case of Participant ST77), but family can also create challenges that make it difficult for

students to succeed in their pursuit of HE. One such example is Participant ST73, who explained:

“I am now married, so I’ve got a child and we still support home [family] here and there, so my parents, and we do support as well for my in-laws ... so I’ve got [additional] responsibilities as well.”

She went on to explain how becoming a mother impacted her studies, saying that:

“When I got my baby things changed. I even failed some of my modules because balancing, you know, having a baby, because I gave birth to my baby last year May, so you know, sometimes I had to feed, wake up, feed, and be studying at the same time, you know, and adjusting to that wasn’t easy. Because I gave birth during exam time ... I had to defer two of my modules because I gave birth on the day that I had exams.”

Home environments that are shown to be supportive of the student and their studies are key in creating a favourable adjustment to university (Dawborn-Gundlach & Margetts, 2018; 18; Kantanis, 2002). While there are certainly students who feel an increased sense of stress and overburden created as a result of having families while studying, there are also those who feel a strong sense of support, especially with regard to their studies and the success of their studies. The family structure also helps many DE students overcome the sense of isolation that many students encounter. Although their family members may not be students themselves, they can offer support to students by providing the students with a support structure. There appears to be a sort of ebb and flow, where students feel

the burden of family responsibilities and then feel the encouragement that comes from a family's desire to see their loved one succeed.

Since almost all of the students who participated in this study were mature age students, it makes sense that they were either married, newlyweds or getting married at some point in the near future. Several participants in this study were newlyweds and might therefore have been unaccustomed to sharing their space with another person.

Participant ST40, a female student who was to be married at the end of the year that the interviews took place, admitted that this shift in family dynamics meant that she would have additional responsibilities, but that she felt her soon-to-be husband would support her through her studies. She stated that:

"I don't have only myself to look out for now, now I have my husband who I must feed every night."

She went on to say that:

"He's really supportive...if I stick to my guns and do what I'm supposed to do, I can maintain a healthy balance between work, married life and my studies, then I should be OK".

One student, Participant ST49, was asked whether this shift in dynamic from being single to married impacted their studies in any way. He explained that there was no impact since:

"She's [his wife] very much of an academic background herself, so she's been very understanding and supportive in knowing how much work I have to do both at work and at university, so she's been very supportive

and she's helped me a lot, where she can along the way, just getting things done and just being very good moral support as well."

As with Participant ST49, there were other students who experienced support from family members as a result of mutual understanding since they were or had been students at some point and had the ability to empathise with the student and offer them the support needed to succeed in their studies. One such example is Participant ST62 who explained that his wife is supportive of his studies because:

"She is currently also doing a programme with Unisa as well ... very supportive. She knows how it is."

Participant ST51 felt supported by her husband, and that that support allowed her to be successful in her studies. She explained that she studies before and after work, as well as on the weekend. Although she does have children to look after, her husband creates an environment that allows her to engage with her studies. She states that since her children attend boarding school:

"he [her husband] only takes care of the kids on Saturdays... I go to the library on Saturday ... from 8:00 am to 3:00 pm I go to the library. Then by 3:30 pm I will be home with the kids ... he [her husband] has been very supportive of me."

Aside from assuming responsibilities for their children while she engages with her studies, Participant ST51's husband pays for her fees, and explains that his payment of her fees in advance motivated her to succeed.

When asked whether studying at home was problematic, Participant ST46 stated that:

“Yeah, at home it’s a little bit difficult. I’m a family man, I have a wife and three kids but they usually give me the time, give me the space, they respect that so it is not an issue”.

Support from family does not necessarily have to involve big gestures, it can be as simple as providing a quiet space for students to work.

In order to adjust and transition into their roles as students, all students need to be able to adequately balance their work with their personal and student lives. This ability to balance these three spheres will be addressed in the section that follows.

7.3.2 Work–Life–Study Balance

With 78% of participants in this study working full time, and an additional 11% holding some form of gainful employment, it is unsurprising that several students identified work–life–study balance as a challenge.

Participant ST35 explained the balance between work and study as *“very difficult, cause [sic] you come home and you’re very tired”*.

This participant went into detail about their experiences as a working student, noting that their commute to work and home was a challenge, saying that:

“[You have been] working and commut[ing] ... for two years, so you’d wake up at 4:30 [am] and get on the bus, get to work at 7:00 [am], work through your daily work finishing at 4:00 [pm], get on the bus, travel 85

kilometres, try to do studies, sleep, and try to cook, wake up in the evening, try to study. It's a challenge."

For some participants, such as Participant ST40, their work schedule has some flexibility, allowing them to continue to work full-time and study part-time. They explained that:

"I'm in a fortunate position because my work cycle is seven days on, seven days off, so, during my off cycles I get quite a lot done. When I do work, it's a bit tougher because I work 12-hour shifts and then there is still the two hours driving to and from my work."

When asked whether their work impacts their studies negatively by limiting the amount of work they are able to get done, Participant ST40 pointed out that that was not necessarily true:

"no, not necessarily but sometimes I have to, when I get home at seven o'clock at night I have to put in an hour or two to complete an assignment that might be due in that week where [sic] I work. And fortunately, I am an 'under pressure' type of person so I leave things to the last minute to get it done."

Other students, such as Participant ST45, mentioned that they chose DE because it allowed them to continue working, saying, *"it's more convenient because I don't have to take time off work"*. However, they acknowledged that they found a work–life balance difficult to achieve at times. They noted that:

“Sometimes I find it very challenging because I do shift work but I try to study when I have free time, say when I’m doing the morning shift, I can actually sacrifice my afternoon or evening and then I catch up with my school work, so it’s usually during my free time.”

Like most of the participants who work full time, Participant ST49 expressed difficulty maintaining a healthy work–life balance. He reported that his role as a student and as a high school teacher is:

“not easy, I have to work very late most nights and then my weekends are generally pretty busy between marking books, setting tests, doing administrative work and then doing assignments, portfolios and studying for exams, so it’s not easy, you sacrifice a lot.”

Participant ST53 explained the challenges they experienced trying to balance their studies and their full-time job, saying that:

“well, study-wise it’s not easy. You need to put in sleepless nights. I try to go to bed [at] 2 o’clock in the morning and I’m up [at] five o’clock. There are days you don’t sleep when you study and write. For instance, when you write a paper in the morning, 8 o’clock, you can sit up the entire night. Cause unfortunately, at work, you are only given a day before you write exams called ‘study leave’. The day you write exams is called exams leave, so you can’t have a day before to write exams. So, if you have annual leave days, then you are forced to take your own annual leave days to study, cause ... even when you have a full-time job, you need to

make time for your studies. It's not easy, but like I said, it requires a lot of dedication and I always look up to, for instance, my boss [who] is doing his MBA, I look up to him. He's married, he has kids, he's got a very demanding job."

While she admires her boss's ability to succeed given the various roles that he is shouldered with, Participant ST53 notes that her circumstances are different to those of her boss. She explains that:

"I have two small boys and I live with a nanny, so I try to juggle everything and I work ... when I go home, give attention to the little ones and lock yourself in the room. I can't really study in the library because I prefer to study in a noisy place, like I can study with a movie, that's how I concentrate, and I guess that's why I chose to do my exams at the office ... but now Unisa is a different story. It actually requires a lot of dedication."

For many students, finding a work–life balance is as straight-forward as finding the time to complete various activities, such as working on an assignment or studying for an exam. These students make their studies a priority and plan their lives around the notion that studying is an important part of their lives and so it needs to be treated as such. One student, Participant ST74, explained:

"You find the time. Either you wake up early in the morning, you study, or you leave work late, quite late ... it's not easy, but we have to do it".

She also explained that as a serious student, certain sacrifices need to be made, and in her case, it is her social life; she feels that when studying and working, you don't get a social life.

For this participant, her focus is more about making certain aspects priorities, as well as forming a realisation that this (studying and working at the same time), does not last forever, but that it is important at that particular point in time.

Some students do not have the same clarity of thought as Participant ST74, and for them, being a student is accompanied with feelings of guilt and anxiety as they struggle to find a balance between work, family and their academic endeavours (Fragoso et al., 2013).

Support for students can sometimes come from unlikely sources. A number of participants in this study experienced support for their studies from their employers. In some instances, this support comes with certain conditions, especially if it involves the funding of a student's fees, but it is also support that enables a student to take time off to adequately prepare for their examinations or to complete an assignment. Support can also be the use of services at work, such as access to the internet, which allows a student to access their study materials without needing to pay for a private connection, which we have come to learn can be very costly. Finally, being employed offers a sense of job security. In certain instances, students rely on the salaries they earn from their place of work to pay for their studies, as well as to support their families. Without employment, some students may not be able to study, so it is vital that the students are able to balance the expectations of work with their studies.

Participant ST42 explained that she was able to achieve a work–study balance because her employer offers study leave. She explained that:

“Well, as I work full-time, I study in the evenings and then on weekends as well as holidays, and then when it is close to exams, my work gives me study leave to be able to study”.

The financial assistance aspect was well explained by Participant ST73, who described the process in detail beginning with an explanation of her studies, saying that:

“In 2011 [when she began her studies] I could only afford to take two modules a year ... but from 2014 our school introduced a teacher programme. They are now paying for our fees, so from 2015 I again started [sic].”

Without the financial assistance from her employer, Participant ST73 would not have been able to complete her studies. According to her, the school at which she works makes use of professional development in order to support their employees by paying a set amount per year for their studies. Like many other employers though, this financial aid is tied to a contractual obligation that employers need to fulfil. Participant ST73 said that:

“My workplace were giving us US\$500 per year, so if you were getting US\$500 then it was just enough to cover just two modules per year.”

For one student, Participant ST46, being employed offered a range of support mechanisms, including financial assistance, study leave, as well as personal support. He explained the first aspect of support from his employer was financial support, stating that:

“I am employed. For instance, it’s not possible or practical for me to leave my job and concentrate on my studies ... the company approve[s] the programme, so the motivation is after completing my studies. After graduating, they will refund my course costs ... I can get study leave when I want to go for study leave and if there are any changes in paying for fees I can apply for an advanced salary, then I pay off my school fees.”

He goes on to explain that there is an expectation from his employers that:

“After completing [my studies] I have to work for them for at least ... at most two years.”

Some employees may view these conditions in a negative way, as it ties them to a company that they may want to separate from once they complete their degree. For Participant ST46, however, it created a sense of job security. He is guaranteed a position with his current employer for two years following his graduation. Many recent graduates struggle to find work opportunities immediately after they have obtained their degree. They often have to start as juniors and work their way up. Participant ST46 not only benefits from remaining employed, but he has also been able to advance his position in the company through a promotion. He explained that:

“I started studying this programme in 2014. And in 2015 I was promoted to the position that I currently have.”

When asked by the interviewer whether he thought the promotion was related to his studies, he replied emphatically, “Yes!”

One unexpected, but additional benefit Participant ST46 experienced as a result of his employment was the support he received from his colleagues, who like him are also studying through Unisa. He described his family situation as supportive (see section 6.3.1), explaining that his family gives him the time and space he needs to work on his studies at home. While this is beneficial during the week, Participant ST46 prefers to work on studies away from home on the weekends. He explained that:

“Usually during the weekends we could meet with my colleagues, I have three study colleagues, we meet say [sic] to oversee maybe for six hours a day during weekends and we could cover much [sic] ground. I’ve got two other colleagues who are studying the same course and we could choose the same modules.”

This relationship with his colleagues is extremely beneficial to Participant ST46 as he prefers working with them rather than joining the various WhatsApp or Facebook groups that are available to Unisa students. He acknowledged that:

“I would usually relying [sic] on my colleagues. I’m not on Facebook or Twitter so usually I was relying on my colleagues and we could share ideas, study together, encourage one another.”

Studying via distance education while working does not come without its challenges, as outlined earlier, and while Participant ST53 acknowledges these challenges, she does believe that success in DE is possible when a student is committed, hardworking and shows dedication to their studies. This mindset, along with support from colleagues has allowed her to succeed. She explained that:

“When I started, I will [sic] take for instance two modules and three modules, just to try to juggle my day with work. And then my colleague here at work, an executive, told me, ‘Look, you can manage to take five modules.’ So, I took my five modules last year and I had one supplementary that I had to rewrite this year, so I managed to pass. So this year, I took five modules again and so far so good ... and you set an examples [sic] to the little ones that my mum is studying while working, so eventually, one day they will grow up and remember this.”

Both personal and family commitments, and work–life–study balance make a student's transition through their studies difficult. These challenges however, can be overcome through the support and understanding from those around them. The participants have shown that support can come from a variety of places, even from the most unexpected places. These challenges, as difficult as they may be, are personal in nature, and as such, the students have some control over the outcome of them.

The section that follows however, highlights issues that are beyond the control of the student. These issues focus on the role of the institution, and the difficulties international students face when studying via DE. Although these challenges may not be as easy to overcome, student's insights and suggestions will identify areas that the participants felt could be improved upon, so that the experience of international students is similar to the experiences of local students.

7.3.3 Struggles as an International Student

With the Unisa campus being located in South Africa, it is to be expected that the majority of the student population is comprised of South African nationals. Based on data gathered in 2020, there were 389,876 undergraduate students enrolled at Unisa (Unisa, 2020). Of these, 11,667 were international students (Fynn, 2021), therefore, international students make up just less than 3% of the total undergraduate student population at Unisa.

While international students make up a small percentage of the total student population at Unisa, their academic experience is just as important as that of the local students, yet, it appears that there are fewer resources and services being directed at this group of students, when compared to the local students. The discrepancy has not gone unnoticed by the international student population.

Participant ST41 described one such disparity, noting that:

“When I talk to the guys [students] in South Africa they say, ‘We have regional centres, we have stuff, we can go to regional centre[s] and access materials easily, [like the] university’s computers’, but here in Zimbabwe we are using our own money to access that myUnisa platform.”

The participant then went on to explain that the lack of regional centres in his country means that he has to pay extra to access the content that is online, since he has to make use of his own private internet services to do so. While this may seem to be inconsequential, as most students engaged in DE would be in a similar situation, it does highlight an inequity that exists. The majority of local students have the choice to use the

internet services provided by the university at any of their regional branches, while the majority of international students are unable to do so.

The same participant went on to explain that as a result of having to pay an additional amount to secure a reliable internet connection that would allow him to engage with the course material, he has had to make many adjustments and sacrifices to his personal life. He said that:

“It’s [the cost of a reliable internet connection] expensive. You just have to sacrifice. If I tell you I haven’t bought even [sic] clothes for myself for the past three years, I [am] just wearing old clothes, for that time to sacrifice so that I finish the degree. So, you just have to fit your priorities right.”

Aside from his own personal sacrifices, when asked about his thoughts on being an international student, Participant ST41 went on to state that:

“I think if you try to compare yourself with a South African [student], it’s really ... painful. I think the South Africans are benefitting more and the foreigners are just being treated as if they don’t exist at all ... Even the policies of the university, I don’t think they are supportive enough.”

Participant ST42 also felt that being an international student had more drawbacks and disadvantages, referring specifically to the lack of contact with lecturers, which limits the amount of information they receive:

“Yeah, there’s more disadvantages, being far away, you don’t really have contact with the lecturers and the university itself, it’s difficult to get information and answers from them.”

Later in the interview, the same participant reiterated the isolation that they felt being situated far away from the campus, saying:

“Yeah, I have to study on my own ... if you have a question and you can’t get hold of the lecturers then you don’t really know what’s the answer to your question.”

Participant ST42 again brought up issues they had as a foreign DE student, saying that being far away from Unisa:

“makes it quite difficult. Two years ago, I flew to Pretoria to the Unisa campus to go see the lecturers there, to get answers from them about subjects that I was studying in the course. And after visiting the campus, I was easily able to pass these subjects so, I think if there was a bit more support to international students it would’ve been easier to study this degree, because it is quite expensive to fly or to go to Pretoria from Namibia.”

When asked why the student chose to travel to the campus rather than to email or call the relevant lecturers, Participant ST42 explained that:

“I was unable to get the answers that I needed and I already failed the subject ... I think I failed twice already, so then I decided to go there so

that I can go see the lecturers and get help from them to understand the subjects better.”

Even taking the cost of travel out of the picture, the need for the student to travel to the campus to engage in their learning nullifies what it means to engage in distance education. The premise of DE is to provide opportunities for education without the student needing to physically be on campus. It also highlights a possible concern which is that a student was unable to pass certain subjects without physically meeting with their lecturers. It casts doubt on the services that are offered by the university to support student learning and student success, especially for international students.

There appears to be a widely held belief among international students interviewed for this study, that they are in some way inferior to their local counterparts. This was reiterated by Participant ST42 who said that:

“They [Unisa] have great support for the students that are in South Africa ... the classes they have, they provide the students within South Africa with a class ... they will broadcast the class too. So, I queried why they can’t broadcast it to students in Namibia as well so that we can also have access to classes to enable us to also get explanation[s] from the lecturers but then they couldn’t really give me an answer. So, the support to international students is not good.”

Participant ST62 again highlighted the popular opinion that South African students had, in some instances, a greater number of resources at their disposal, and that these

resources allowed the South African cohort to be more successful than the international students. The participant explained that:

“We don’t get the tuition which those in South Africa do get [sic]. A student of Unisa in South Africa, they would be [sic] opportunities to meet, maybe for a discussion or for sharing information. But when they are outside, when you are in Zimbabwe, there is [sic] no such coordinated meeting groups since there’s not any tuition centre ... So, mostly it’s so you are doing your own thing, you are reading on your own, the best you can get to colleagues is via the discussion forums on the ... website.”

One other area that has been identified as a disadvantage for international students is the lack of access to textbooks and other reading materials that students need to access in order to adequately engage in their studies. Local students in South Africa are better able to access these resources since they not only have access to the full libraries that are available on campus, but they also have access to the local bookstores which stock the relevant materials. Participant ST62 describes the challenges saying that:

“The other disadvantage [sic] are like locally here in terms of textbooks, with that programme there is [sic] some recommended textbooks and locally you may not find that book which you are looking for. So, in terms that’s when you get maybe photocopied books which sometimes may not be the current edition. You might be on the sixth edition which is the current one, but you might get maybe a fourth edition that are photocopied or what, so that’s a disadvantage You don’t have much

material with Unisa in the bookshops locally. I think it's all because of how [sic] the absence of a tuition centre."

Similarly, Participant ST60 felt the discrepancy between South African and international students, noting that:

"I think it's a bit difficult when you are in another country, especially in Africa, we're [international students] not getting one-on-one tutorials, like ... we don't get the chance to see the lecturers, like one-on-one, attending classes and what have you. We just have to read because a travel [sic] to South Africa to go and attend the school is another cost."

Participant ST60 noted that fees were another challenge that only international students face. During her studies, the foreign levy has increased on more than one occasion. These increases place additional stress on the students as they either need to come up with the additional fees, or reduce the number of subjects they enrol for as a way to afford the fees. Participant ST60 explains that:

"So finding the money, it was a big challenge, because the foreign levy is much more expensive than the module fee ... so, at some point I ended up registering three subjects, three modules, instead of five ... because I couldn't afford it, so that's what made me lag behind".

The extra cost of the foreign levy is at times too much for some students. In those instances, the students choose to travel to South Africa to register as a local student, as explained by Participant ST64:

“I know some students actually who will opt to go and use a South African centre so as to avoid the foreign levy. But then you know you now have to have another problem of travel expenses, accommodation when you get into South Africa and things like that. So, it’s pretty tough for international student”.

Participant ST64 noted several instances where it appears that South African students have an advantage over international students. Some examples include:

“I don’t understand why the South Africans should suffer [with assignments] that much because I’ve noticed they seem to have some weekend classes or something where they meet the tutors, so I don’t know why they sometimes end up having similar issues to us. Yeah, they [South African students] have an advantage in the lesser fee.”

Furthermore, Participant ST62 explained that:

“You feel that for you in Zimbabwe you have a disadvantage compared to the South African students because you don’t have the materials and you don’t have the interaction with the lecturers and the tutors.”

Participant ST62 does acknowledge that there are resources that all students have access to, but that even with the resources they are able to access, there are still disadvantages:

“Yes, you have got your e-tutor there in the discussion forums. You can post some questions. You can get your responses so which is fine, but I

would think we are at a disadvantage as compared to someone who is there in South Africa who has got maybe face-to-face interaction with the tutor. They can have a proper discussion.”

The idea that international students are treated differently when compared to South African students is a recurring theme throughout the interviews. Another example of how participants feel that there are discrepancies in the opportunities that the two groups of students receive is explained by Participant ST70, who felt that studying at Unisa has not created any opportunities because:

“I’m a foreign student, so most of the opportunities ... they are not only for us, they are for South Africans so it’s difficult for me to get anything because I am not South African.”

The participant then went on to give an example, saying that:

“There are some programmes that they share, for training, especially for us undergraduates, they are looking for a student, a Psychology student or whatever, to come for autism awareness, or a job opportunity stuff like that.”

What the participant is suggesting is that international students are unable to participate in certain events and on-campus training exercises since they are unable to travel to the institution.

For one participant, Participant ST74, the isolation that international students experience led them to the perception that international students:

“work more than our South African counterparts, because they can go to any Unisa campus and find the lecturers and ask whatever things that they’re having challenges with. But for us, we don’t have that referral ... even if you write an email, it’s not the same.”

This is made more challenging because, as discussed in previous chapters, communication between the students and the institution (including teaching staff) is not ideal, and students often wait for long periods to hear back from the institution.

Access to resources, even basic resources, such as access to additional learning materials, make many international students feel as though they are unfairly treated. Participant ST74 explained that one of the issues with being an international student are “library issues”. They went on to explain how a lack of learning materials and access to library resources meant that:

“When we’re writing exams on one module, the things that we wrote, they [the examiners] asked, they were not even in the module. But others [referring to South African students] are content because they’ve got access to the library, they’ve got access to extra material which we don’t have.”

One of the most recurring challenges that students identified was difficulty accessing prescribed textbooks. Without these resources, the students are at an immediate disadvantage to other students, especially those that are unable to access the institution's libraries in South Africa, as explained by Participant ST74. This in turn impacts the

student's integration and adjustment to their studies. Participant ST38 explains that it is a challenge to get hold of the necessary learning materials, like textbooks, stating that:

“For us in Zimbabwe, we say, ‘Well, we can’t get a textbook in the book shops in Zimbabwe’, so it is a challenge here to send somebody to South Africa to buy the texts ... that’s the biggest challenge that there is.”

They went on to explain that they are able to overcome this challenge by using a “buyer” to purchase the books:

“You have to give somebody the Rands and then when they cross over [the border from Zimbabwe to South Africa] they buy those books.”

However, what Participant ST38 found is that the buyers do not buy new textbooks, they end up photocopying a book, and not delivering a new copy.

“the problem is now you find that ... they really are photocopying ... so you cannot read something.”

Since the buyers are more likely to be photocopying previously photocopied materials, it is possible that what the students are purchasing is difficult to read.

Aside from access to resources, communication with the institution is another commonly reported issue among the participants in this study. Poor communication was reported by 11 participants in this study. Participant ST35, for example, noted that communication with the institution was incredibly difficult and to ensure that their studies would not be negatively impacted by this, the student decided to find a work-around. In

this instance, the loop-hole involved the participant contacting Unisa's regional offices, rather than the main office. Participant ST35 explains that:

"You don't know if someone's going to reply to your email ... I found a trick around Unisa. I call one of the regional offices, like you know, George ... I don't know where George is, but I know if I call the office in George, they will answer my call and can answer my query."

Another issue that students have when studying via DE at Unisa is submitting assignments on time. There are a multitude of reasons why these delays happen, ranging from a delay in receiving learning materials which impacts a student's ability to complete the assignment, to a lack of reliable internet connections, but for one participant, a delay in submitting their assignments was not an option. The student, Participant ST38, explained:

"I never postponed work. It [poor internet connections] makes some challenges when submitting maybe assignments, but now I always do my assignments early so that I don't get those problems."

It is evident that the participants have multiple concerns and challenges with the institution. Rather than simply focusing on the negative, the participants looked also at ways that those challenges could be overcome.

As part of the open-ended nature of the questions the participants were asked, several students put forward suggestions that they felt could be implemented by the institution that would benefit the international students. Participant ST49 noted that since Unisa is a notable global institution, providing HE to many students across the globe, it

would be beneficial to the students to engage with content that is not solely focused on South Africa. When asked to explain the changes he would recommend, he stated that it would help if:

“they [Unisa] would be open to international systems, for example, if I wanted to submit an assignment based on something which is not the South African curriculum, I’d be very happy if that change could be brought about that they just have a more open ... Rather than saying, ‘According to South African documents, how would you teach this lesson?’ to say, ‘According to where you teach in the world, base your assignment on the way you teach or how you teach or your experiences,’ rather than just being rigid to use the South African system.”

Following this, the interviewer then asked whether the participant felt that the current curriculum was skewed towards South African students and potentially ignores international students, the participants agreed, saying that:

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m saying and I understand they have to train teachers for South Africa, I mean it’s for their own countries, their own development but if it were me, perhaps, I’d have an international students’ section with a certain ... whether it’s a quota or just a different section, where those students are free to do it how it works for them in their countries without it impacting the other students.”

Participant ST52 believes that it is costly to be an international student at Unisa, since the students not only have to pay the regular fees, but an international levy as well. As such,

the participant suggested that the institution should *“maybe consider reviewing some of the fees, like the foreign levy. I think [the levy] is too high.”*

The participant also feels that students in the region would benefit from having a regional office, suggesting that:

“they [Unisa] should also open an office for us in Zimbabwe ... there is no office, they should have an office so that we can go without issues and even for registration, we should have an office here in Zimbabwe.”

Many participants felt that international students, especially in Zimbabwe, could be better supported if the institution established regional centres in areas where there are a large number of students. These centres could provide a range of services that students felt they would find useful. One such participant, Participant ST62, suggested that a regional centre would create an opportunity for students in the region to come together and form groups that could act as a sort of tutorial group. He (Participant ST62) suggests that meeting people in the same locale, who are doing the same courses, would be better facilitated by the institution, since:

“you don’t quite know who else is doing this programme ... if it is ... coordinated by the school, by Unisa, it’s a different thing, but if it’s coordinated amongst yourselves, it could be tricky. And I would prefer it if it’s just in a way, if it’s coordinated like various centre locally and I have got people whom you know are doing this programme locally ... so, I think if it, if there is any way of coordinating these so that it is you know, one or two, or even a group of people doing the same programme.”

Participant ST62 agreed, stating that:

“Maybe just an office which coordinates the students if they want to study together, they know they can go to this place or know that they would see who my fellow students are or they have got a database. It may not be a classroom, but it might be an office which would provide.”

Participant ST77, like other participants, suggested a regional office that could *“assist students if we have queries”*.

In the case of Participant ST77, a regional office would have provided her with the assistance she needed with enrolment and registration. These suggestions highlight the challenges that many international students encounter, especially during the registration period, when they are without support. International students are unable to seek assistance from the university in person. These regional offices, like many that operate within South Africa, would provide students with a physical space where they could interact with representatives from the institution to assist them and to provide support where needed.

As an alternative way to overcome issues surrounding registration and enrolment, and to acclimatise to the systems, services and platforms that Unisa uses to engage learners with their materials and teaching staff, Participant ST64 suggested that the institution should have *“initiation”* (meaning orientation) at the beginning of each school year, stating that:

“There are just too many things which somebody initially has to show you for you to get off. I struggled a bit and I’m sure a lot of us did because I

thought it would have been a good idea if Unisa would at least do an initial initiation ... even one day, just a live initiation, if they start in the morning to end of day, show us this is where you go, this is where you go, this is what you do, but for them to just start sending emails and say 'do it', I think is a bit of a problem".

The lack of physical representation in some areas is further compounded by the lack of communication many of the participants described. There were several students who suggested that their experience with Unisa would be improved if their communications were addressed in a timely manner. Participants ST41, ST54 and ST64 all suggested there needed to be an improvement in communication.

Participant ST64 conveyed her frustrations with the current state of communication with the university, saying:

"[I'm] asking Unisa if they can have a way of improving on their responses to students, even prospective students, because these automatic responses which are not followed up doesn't help much ... most of our communication are sent from a 'no-reply' email address, but somewhere along the line you are given the individual emails for some people you are supposed to get hold of, but you don't get any response."

When asked about the changes he would like to see implemented to improve the overall experience, Participant ST54 could only identify communication as needing improvement. He explained:

“I’ve heard of other students complaining about the fact that Unisa staff does not answer their calls ... maybe that’s something they [Unisa] could improve on.”

Participant ST41 shared a similar perspective, noting that the only thing he would change is their communication with students via cellphones and emails:

“They [Unisa] must give more priority to those things ... it seems as if the people [who] do the emails and phones have other jobs to do. They don’t even have time to attend to the phones or emails.”

Communication, especially clear communication, is an important aspect in many areas of life. This is especially true in a context where the student is geographically separate from the institution and relies on open channels of communication to engage with the institution. Communication is a key component of distance education (Kayode, 2018) and is especially important for the students who are located at a considerable distance from the main campus. A student’s ability to transition hinges on information that they are able to access. A student is less likely to succeed if they are faced with numerous challenges, especially when it applies to communication.

One such student, Participant ST68, explained the benefit of having local centres for students as a way to improve communication with the university, saying that:

“We have [had] two centres here ... I went and I registered with them and they looked at my details and said that my application had already [been] processed and had been accepted and I was late to submit the rest of my supporting documentation, but I had not received any materials from

Unisa ... so, the centre here was really ... key in dealing with Unisa in general, because when I had actually physically phoned the South African offices, I sort of got 'bounced' from office to office with no one really being able to give me an answer, whereas I suppose these guys [staff at the local centre] have been dealing with them [Unisa] for so long they know the direct channels and they were very instrumental for me ... it was incredibly helpful, they're the only way I was able to communicate efficiently with South Africa."

When asked if the participant tried to communicate with the institution in any other ways, Participant ST68 said: *"I tried by email and by phone and none of it was successful."*

The interviewer then mentioned that other students also notified them of their struggles with communication with the university and that they had also been informed that the regional centres had been closed and briefly described how this would negatively impact student communication. Participant ST68 then went on to say that:

"I don't know how people will manage without them, because like I say, they [the regional centres] are so instrumental and they can get answers out of people whereas if we, as students, try to phone the centre or email the centres, we tend to get bounced around and never get an answer".

This participant, like many others, felt that the regional centres needed to be reopened to assist international students, just as the regional centres in South Africa benefit local students.

Since international students do not have access to libraries like the South African students do, Participant ST74 suggested that any additional learning materials be put onto the online learning portal, so that all students have access to it, and not just those students who are able to access regional libraries in South Africa.

One of the key ways that students communicate with each other and with their tutors is through the use of social media and online forums. However, the size of these groups is so large some students feel overwhelmed and that the communication gets lost as new topics are discussed. Participant ST64 suggested a reduction in the size of the various social media and tutorial groups because:

“There is too much because imagine you are doing a discussion for an assignment you are supposed to comment on four or five, there are over 50 people in that group, you have to over and above prepare for your own assignment, you have to read all those 60 or 50 people. It’s a lot.”

These interviews have highlighted various challenges that mature age international distance education students encounter while they are studying. They have also shown that this particular group of students are resilient and tend to overcome challenges through the use of support structures and their own determination. The section that follows focuses on motivation and how it impacts learning.

7.4 The Role of Motivation in the Transition and Adjustment of Students

Unlike most university students, the participants in this study are older, work full-time and attempt to balance all aspects of their lives, their roles and responsibilities whilst pursuing their education goals. Motivation plays a key role in student success, and is a necessary

element in both the teaching and learning processes (Keller, 2010). Motivation can also be a factor in whether a student chooses to carry on with their studies despite challenging setbacks (Chuter, 2019).

There are two main theories linked to motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is an internal desire to do something, without any expectation of reward, and without an external driving force (Cherry, 2019). An example of how intrinsic motivation is identified in mature students can be seen because a student wants to gain knowledge from their studies, and is personally satisfied when learning is complete (Waters & Lemon, 2019). These students will often use the knowledge they have gained to assist in other areas (Waters & Lemon, 2019). Students who are engaged in distance education are more likely to succeed if they are intrinsically motivated because their sense of purpose and achievement comes from what they have learned and allows them to study on their own (Firat, Kılınç, Yüzer, 2017).

Unlike intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation uses external rewards or punishments to encourage learning (Chuter, 2019). Most commonly, extrinsic motivation is often identified in mature students who are engaging in learning for long-term career goals (Waters & Lemon, 2019).

Both types of motivation were identified among the participants of this study. Since motivation is a key part of student transition, it is helpful to determine how mature age international students are motivated as it could be useful in teaching and learning strategies.

7.4.1 Intrinsically Motivated Students

Five key elements of intrinsic motivation have been identified by Deci and Ryan (2008): interest and enjoyment, value or usefulness, perceived choice, perceived competence, pressure/tension and relatedness.

Participant ST51 showed two of the characteristics: interest and enjoyment, as well as value or usefulness. Interest and enjoyment are features of intrinsic motivation because individuals want to engage in activities that they find interesting or which they find enjoyable (Deci & Ryan, 2008). This is evident in the responses of Participant ST51 because they use words like “passion”, “self-driven”, “I love taking up challenges”, which is evidenced in the interview excerpts below.

Participant ST51 noted that their motivation for studying comes from their

“passion for defence of human rights ... I’m someone who is self-driven, who is determined, who is goal oriented and I’m also hard working ... and also the other thing that motivated me is ... the church where I go.”

This combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors is what motivated the participant to succeed in their studies. The participant also acknowledged that:

“With long-distance learning, you need to be responsible, you need to take responsibility for your studies ... you need to be determined, you need to be someone who is good at timekeeping ... I can say that the studies forced me to become one of, a more disciplined person.”

It was this self-determination and motivation that allowed Participant ST51 to succeed as a student. She explained that:

“I love taking up challenges so I’ve registered five modules but I wasn’t sure if I was going to pass them or not. And as someone who is self-driven and goal orientated, I just decided to do the five and made sure I passed, then I passed with four distinctions and a pass.”

Personal success is a strong motivating factor that is a key driver of student success.

Participant ST60 explained that:

“I am striving to finish my degree. At some point I thought of quitting, it was hectic, I thought, ‘I can’t do this anymore.’ You can imagine when you have registered like three modules and you fail one of those three, then it feels like you are not progressing, so at some point I have thought of quitting, but then I said, ‘No, quitters can’t win, so I have to soldier on, maybe one day I will get this degree.’”

When describing how she approaches her studies as a DE student, Participant ST60 explained that:

“I just set time for myself to read and if I set a timetable for myself, I have to really stick onto it, do more research, do more research to get past the [sic] exam papers, work on them day in and day out, I have to spend much more time on my studies to get it.”

Being a mature student engaged in DE often means that students have many roles and responsibilities aside from their studies. For some students, being a parent, especially to a young child, is challenging. Many students speak to their internal motivation to carry them through their studies; this highlights the key element of perceived choice. Perceived

choice can be identified in individuals who want to achieve something, and are motivated by the desire to succeed (Deci & Ryan, 2008). One such student, Participant ST68, explained that:

“I’m studying full-time. It can be difficult because I’ve also got a family on top of it. I’ve got a 13-month-old child. I’m a very motivated somebody, so if I’m motivated enough to do it, I will always make the time to do it but it’s not always the easiest because there can be a lot going on at once.”

There are students who acknowledge that studying part-time and working full-time come with an array of challenges, but that there are factors that make it easier to do. Participant ST70 stated that:

“It has been challenging though because I’m a part-time student; I’m currently working even though I’m studying at the same time and I was taking all the five modules this semester ... the pressure that I was supposed to keep up with it was too much, I didn’t have much time on my own but I had to do it and actually I think it’s good to study what you love because I enjoyed every minute of it, so that made it bearable for me.”

She went on to explain her schedule:

“[It was] really difficult but I managed ... I start work at 8 am and I finish at 5 pm, so I get home, do my errands, I’ll say by 8 pm, I take my books, from 8 pm to 11 pm I do my schoolwork and then after that I can sleep.

So, I used to do that throughout the week, but on Fridays I wouldn't touch my books or even on Saturdays, I wouldn't touch my books, I will only do [so] on Sundays ... I knew I was going to manage, I was determined that I am going to finish my degree in three years, so I knew that was enough for me and I was really motivated that I'm just going to stick to that and make it and I'm actually happy."

7.4.2 Extrinsic Motivation

Fewer respondents fit into this category. Although only two participant excerpts are used in this section, there are other students who are motivated by external factors. Employers are not just supportive of students and their studies, in some cases, the employer does provide motivation for the student to succeed. One student, Participant ST46, explained that she was able to study because the company she was employed by approved of the study programme:

"...so the motivation is after completing my studies, after graduating they will refund my course costs."

Additionally, since the student is required to pay for their fees upfront, with reimbursement from the employer only possible on completion of the degree, this particular employer also financially aids the student during their studies by allowing the participant to access funds if needed to pay for their fees. Participant ST46 explains that:

"if there are any challenges in paying for fees, I can apply for an advanced salary then I pay off my school fees."

These support measures are not without trade-offs. In the case of this participant, these loans come with the condition that the student remains with the employer for two years after completion of their studies. Not only is this particular employer offering financial incentives that motivate this participant, they also provide support in other ways, such as allowing the student to take time off during exams.

Some students are motivated to succeed because they can see other students, in similar positions to them, succeeding. One such student, Participant ST53, stated that:

“I contact certain ladies on a regular basis ... and while the one doesn’t work, the other one has her own company and she kind of motivates me as well, because she has her own company, she’s doing [her] LLB, she has a family, she has three kids, and I tell myself, “If this person can do it, I’m not different from her.” So, you know, you get motivated”.

7.5 Conclusion

As a distinctive population, international, mature age part-time students studying through DE experience adjustment and transition to HE in a unique way as they attempt to negotiate their various roles and responsibilities that set them apart from their younger counterparts. Ultimately, the choice to study is a personal one, and it is not without challenges. Mature age students choose to pursue their studies for a variety of reasons – the advancement of their careers is just one example. Since there are no time or age boundaries preventing mature students from studying (Jabal, 2021), the characteristics of the individual student become important in ensuring success. Motivation and personal resilience, as well as a positive attitude toward learning (Jabal, 2021) are some of the key

attributes that allow mature age students to successfully adjust and transition to their new role as students in higher education.

There is an array of support systems that students rely on to overcome many of the challenges they experience: some relied on the support of their family members, others felt that their employers offered assistance that benefited their studies. Support from the institution felt lacking and most of the participants felt that they were undervalued and mistreated since they had access to fewer resources and support structures compared to the South African students. This lack of support meant that students had to get creative in their endeavours to create the same opportunities as their counterparts in South Africa.

Several suggestions have been made by the participants regarding ways that the institution can make improvements that can benefit them as international students. These suggestions are based on their own individual experiences and highlight a need for services and support mechanisms that ensure their success as mature age, international, distance education students.

The chapter that follows provides a conclusion to this research. It outlines the problem statement and the background before addressing the research design and methodology. The main findings are then discussed with specific reference to the aims and objectives of the study, and how these were achieved. Research limitations are noted, and recommendations for the study and for future research are made.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION: OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING IN THE INTERNATIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE SADC REGION

8.1. Introduction

This study aimed to examine the role that Open Distance Learning (ODL) plays in the provision of higher education to unique groups of students who would otherwise be limited in their pursuit of their higher education goals. In making this determination, several objectives were identified. The first objective focused on access to Higher Education (HE), specifically the effectiveness of ODL programmes in creating access for students despite their location. The second objective analysed the tools and technologies used by the institution to allow knowledge to flow across physical space, overcoming certain barriers, to ensure that the students could engage with their studies, despite being far removed from the campus. The final objective investigated the ways that mature age, international students transitioned and adjusted to their studies at Unisa. It focused on the specific challenges that these students encountered and the ways that they were able to overcome these challenges to be successful in their studies. These objectives were achieved through the use of in-depth interviews, which gave voice to the students who were the focus of this study and let their experiences guide the findings.

In this final chapter, a summary will be given of the background to the problem, as well as the aims and objectives of the study. Following this, a description of the research design will be presented. A brief discussion regarding the results of the study, and the contributions of the findings to the field of geography will be included. This chapter will

conclude by outlining the limitations of the research, as well as highlighting recommendations as they relate to the problem investigated in the study, as well as proposing suggestions for further research in this regard.

8.2 Problem Statement and Background

8.2.1 Background

The last few decades have seen a shift in the agendas of higher education institutions and government agencies to include an international dimension (Ergin & Morche, 2018). Traditionally, internationalisation occurred through the physical mobility of students across geographic borders. Recently however, researchers have questioned whether internationalisation should solely be defined by the physical movement of students from their home country to another country (Ergin & Morche, 2018).

Internationalisation that focuses only on the physical mobility of students is often unable to meet stakeholder expectations, since only a small percentage (roughly 2%) of tertiary students globally are in a position to travel abroad for their studies (Ergin & Morche, 2018).

Consequently, the concept of internationalisation in higher education has shifted from “abroad” to “at home”, highlighting that internationalisation can, and does occur even when students remain at home, studying via distance education.

8.2.2 Problem Statement

Over the past several decades, internationalisation has become an important goal for higher education institutions, especially since the global labour market requires graduates

to have a range of skills, such as international and intercultural skills, that translate easily in a global setting. These skills were previously only gained through student mobility and exchange programmes, which created a small, niche group of graduates who were appropriately skilled. Recently, ODL has been identified as a way to meet internationalisation goals through the inclusion of intercultural and international dimensions into the curriculum (Msweli, 2012; Wächter, 2003). This allows students to develop the necessary skills needed to participate in an increasingly globalised and internationalised work environment without ever leaving their country.

8.2.3 Aim and objectives

With a growing number of students enrolled in higher education, especially through ODL, it was necessary to determine whether this type of learning provides the students with the opportunity to engage with higher education in a manner that is useful and appropriate to them. In order to determine the effectiveness of ODL, the research aimed to:

Explore the role that ODL plays in the provision of higher education to a unique group of students who would otherwise be unable to pursue their higher education goals.

In considering this aim, three objectives were identified in order to develop a comprehensive awareness of how ODL can remedy some of the challenges that some students face when trying to access higher education. These were:

Objective one: Determining the effectiveness of ODL programmes in creating access for students, despite their location;

Objective two: Analysing the flow of knowledge across physical space in ODL programmes; and

Objective three: Understanding the transition and adjustment of mature age students at Unisa.

8.3 Research Design and Methodology

This study employed a qualitative framework to collect and analyse the data, as described briefly in chapter 1 and in more detail in chapter 2 of this thesis. The collection of qualitative data allowed for a deep and rich understanding of how the students themselves felt about the ODL offered by Unisa.

8.3.1 Study Location

The study took place at the University of South Africa and focused on students who were enrolled at the institution as undergraduate students. Since this study formed part of a larger project, it made use of the same set of students who were interviewed as part of that project.

8.3.2 Qualitative Methodology

This research used qualitative interviews of international students enrolled in their undergraduate studies at the University of South Africa. Criterion-based selection was adopted in this study, using a group of attributes that were deemed necessary for the study. Since this study formed part of a larger study, the population for this study were drawn from students who had completed the SACQ questionnaire as part of the initial

study. Students were able to check a box at the bottom of the survey to indicate that they were interested in participating in the second phase of the research, the in-depth, individual interviews. Since the number of volunteers was low for this part of the study, an email was sent to all international students who resided in the SADC region (regardless of whether they participated in the initial study).

Non-probability sampling and the use of a purposeful strategy allowed for the collection of data that addressed key aspects of the research, namely the effectiveness of ODL programmes, as well as understanding the effectiveness of the flow of knowledge from the institution to the students despite the physical gap between the two.

8.3.3 Key Theoretical Contributions

Chapters 3 and 4 used information gathered from the vast array of international literature and resources to provide a background to and further insight into the key aspects of this project. As an ever-evolving concept, the internationalisation of higher education does have several key authors, whose work was examined as part of the literature review. Since Unisa is one of the oldest institutions offering higher education at a distance, there is a plethora of information relating to the various aspects of the university and its role as a distance education provider.

Chapter 3 began by defining the term “internationalisation of higher education” before examining the motivations and rationales that have led to the increase of this phenomenon globally. Next, the chapter discussed the stakeholders and identified their role in the internationalisation of higher education. The opportunities and challenges that

emerge as a result of the process were then assessed. Finally, Chapter 3 examined and described ODL programmes.

Chapter 4 focused on higher education in Africa by giving an overview of HE in Africa before focusing specifically on the SADC region. This chapter continued with a critical analysis of HE in South Africa, identifying the factors of transformation which influenced the evolution of HE in the country and which therefore impacted the provision of HE in the region. The chapter concluded with a review and discussion of Unisa as a provider of DE in Africa and the world.

The methodology and information gathered from the literature review were used to achieve the objectives of this study, before determining the success in achieving the primary aim of the thesis. The sections that follow use each of the objectives of this study, to identify the main findings of the thesis.

8.4 Addressing the Research Aims and Objectives

The internationalisation of higher education is an objective that many institutions are striving to achieve as a way to ensure that their graduates are adequately prepared to participate in and shape global thinking.

Aim: To investigate the relevance of ODL programmes in creating/contributing to internationalisation in the Southern African Development Community.

This research has shown that ODL programmes, specifically those offered by the University of South Africa, are able to contribute to internationalisation by increasing access to a greater number of students who would otherwise be unsuccessful at pursuing

higher education since their requirements to be able to study are not met in traditional settings.

Internationalisation is also achieved because the open distance model used by Unisa increases the mobility of students by allowing them to engage with their peers who are located in countries apart from their own. Known as internationalisation at home, this sharing and shaping of knowledge across physical borders makes ODL an important manner in which to achieve internationalisation.

Objective 1: Determine the effectiveness of ODL programmes in creating access for students to higher education despite geographical location.

The analysis of the international distance education students who were enrolled at Unisa showed that ODL programmes were necessary in providing students with access to HE despite being geographically isolated from the institution. For many of the participants, access to HE would have been unattainable without access to ODL programmes. Several key areas made access achievable. For many participants, cost was an important variable. The cost of ODL, and more specifically, the cost of studying through Unisa, was significantly less than at many other in-person and distance education options. The affordability is what made access possible for a number of participants. Often, choosing to study via ODL will lessen a student's auxiliary costs, such as transportation and travel, and child care.

Despite the affordability aspect, there were, however, a number of challenges that participants faced when trying to pay for their studies. One challenge was the ability to source funds for their studies. Several students made use of personal loans, as well as

professional development programmes offered by their employer to pay their fees. Other participants alluded to making personal sacrifices, such as avoiding shopping for non-essential items in order to make payments. Another challenge that many of the participants from Zimbabwe highlighted was the inability to convert the local currency, Zimbabwean Dollars, to South African Rands. Due to economic challenges in Zimbabwe, some participants were forced to find South African Rands on the black market. This created a set of unique challenges in and of itself. Another cost-related challenge was the international levy that is imposed on students who reside outside of South Africa. While students in the SADC region have a lower levy than students in other countries, many participants complained that the levy was very expensive. The international levy made it challenging for some of the participants to finance their studies. Since there were a number of communication issues between Unisa and the students, many participants felt forced to travel to South Africa to address the queries they had. Given that the participants were located far from the main campus, the cost of travelling is burdensome, and increases the overall cost of their studies significantly.

Flexibility was the second variable that was an important determinant identified by the participants in creating access to HE. The research identified eight distinct groups that related to flexibility according to the participants. These are the ability to:

1. work and study;
2. support family while studying;
3. remain in home country;
4. determine own learning schedule;
5. complete degree in own time;

6. gain work experience whilst studying;
7. study and travel simultaneously; and
8. maintain independence.

These categories highlight how flexible ODL is, especially when compared to traditional in-person learning. It is this flexibility that creates access for students who would otherwise not be able to participate in HE.

The third variable that relates to access is reputation and entry requirements. An institution's reputation is key in attracting students. According to the participants in this study, Unisa's reputation encouraged them to pursue their higher education goals with confidence. The reputation of the university meant that participants believed that the degree they would obtain would open up a greater number of options and provide greater access to jobs.

The final, and most obvious variable relating to access is enrolment. Simply put, greater enrolments equate to greater access. Therefore, challenges in the enrolment process may reduce access as fewer students are able to successfully enrol at the institution. While Unisa is the largest university in Africa based on enrolment numbers, there are a number of challenges that the participants identified as possible barriers that could negatively affect enrolment. These issues tend to centre on the theme of poor communication from the side of the institution which resulted in unnecessary delays. One participant noted that difficulties in their enrolment process resulted in a two-year delay in their ability to study at the institution. Without clear guidance and a lack of regional centres, many of the participants expected these difficulties and delays to continue. It is difficult to speculate on the number of students who have altogether given up on their

enrolments due to these challenges, and unless Unisa is willing to make changes, it is likely that enrolment number may be affected.

It is important to consider that while creating access for a greater number of students to participate in HE is important, especially when the students are multinational and engaged in learning from geographically separate locations, it is also important that those students are given the resources necessary to enable them to succeed.

Objective 2: Analysing the flow of knowledge across physical borders

Distance education creates opportunities for internationalisation as more students are able to interact and participate in global education markets. However, the same institutions that offer DE are required to distribute knowledge across both space and time to create fair and equitable learning opportunities for all of their students.

Knowledge at a university is distributed in a variety of ways. At Unisa, knowledge is distributed primarily through the use of two platforms: the learning management system, myUnisa, and Web 2.0 applications, such as social media platforms.

The inherent nature of DE is that it places students in a state of isolation. Students are expected to engage with and make sense of learning material on their own. Social media (SM) platforms, such as WhatsApp and Facebook, are widely used by students studying at a distance because participants felt connected to other students, and most importantly because they felt that SM platforms allowed them to receive motivation, encouragement and support from their peers. Participants also explained that SM platforms led to a sense of community, as they were able to make social connections with fellow students.

While the SM platforms generally created opportunities for students to interact with one another in an informal manner, university applications focused on creating virtual learning environments. The LMS utilised by Unisa to create opportunities for students and teaching staff to connect is known as myUnisa. Knowledge and understanding are created in collaborative environments, where ideas and opinions are shared. International-mindedness and open-mindedness are important attributes of internationalisation. Participants were able to interact with students from different countries, across different platforms and were ultimately able to make connections with students with whom they may not have interacted had they chosen to study elsewhere.

Although there are multiple opportunities for students to connect, collaborate and learn, the participants identified several factors that inhibited the flow of knowledge. The first factor is isolation. Despite having hundreds of thousands of enrolled students, some participants noted that they felt isolated. The large social media and learning groups overwhelmed participants and for this reason, some participants felt unsure of themselves and therefore chose not to participate.

The second factor is a perceived lack of support from teaching staff. Participants felt that a lack of communication and delays in receiving responses from teaching staff meant that they felt unsupported and this made learning challenging.

Objective 3: Determining the integration and adjustment of distance students at Unisa

Focusing specifically on mature age students was necessary since the majority of the participants' ages ranged from 25–62. The socio-demographics of the participants indicated that most of the students were married, had children and were employed full-

time. It is these characteristics that set many distance education students apart from their younger in-person counterparts. Consequently, the adjustment and transition of these students directly impacted the way that they adjusted and transitioned to university study.

The majority of participants indicated that they had some familial responsibilities, so while some participants may not have had children, the cultural context meant that they still had to care for and support other members of their extended families as is the norm in many African contexts.

Despite the complex nature of family responsibilities, some participants were able to rely on their family members to support them when they needed time to focus on their studies. This support ranged from family members providing a quiet and calm home environment which allowed the participants to study at home, to providing moral and financial support for their studies.

A supportive home environment is an important aspect of adjustment and transition, but a work–life–study balance is as important. The flexible nature of ODL, while a key driver in creating access for students, can also be difficult to manage when students are trying to find the ideal balance between their work life, home life and their studies. With the majority of participants working (whether full-time or part-time), many described challenges finding time to study after being at work and needing to be present at home for their families. This constant pressure to fill several different roles all at once left several participants exhausted.

One area where participants felt negatively impacted was as international students. While international students are located away from the main campus (which is often in another country), they should have the same experience as the local students.

This does not appear to be the case for the participants interviewed for this study. The majority of participants expressed concern over how their student experience was markedly different from that of their South African peers. Participants cited the closure of regional centres as a primary factor for these differences, since South African students were able to make enquiries about enrolment and other learning-related questions at the main campus and other South African regional branches. International students were only able to communicate with both the institution and teaching staff via email, which in many cases proved unsuccessful as the turn-around time between their query and a response was often greater than a week, and closer to months.

Another noted distinction between local and international students was the availability of learning resources. Local students had access to thousands of books at the library, but international students often struggled to access their basic learning materials, not just additional resources that local students had available to them. Participants also noted that South African students had access to the internet through the institution, while international students were responsible for establishing their own online connections, which in some cases proved challenging and expensive.

These stark contrasts between learners located in different countries despite being registered at the same institution, highlights an educational inequality that should not exist for students who are studying the same course. Many of the participants felt overlooked and exploited by the university since they paid more than the local students for their fees, but received fewer resources and had very limited and poor communication with the institution.

Motivation is a key factor when understanding the way that students transition and adjust to their studies. Since the majority of participants, and students in general at Unisa for that matter, are older, have full-time jobs and often have family responsibilities, motivation is necessary for them to succeed. The study showed that participants were mostly intrinsically motivated. Many participants noted that they felt driven and motivated to complete their studies in order to better themselves, their family situation or even in one case, their community.

8.5 Results in Relation to the Theoretical Perspective: Spatial Diffusion in Open Distance Learning at Unisa

Tobler's First Law of geography explains that diffusion occurs because interactions exist between everything, but that things located closer to each other are more likely to interact than things that are separated by some distance (Tobler, 1970). Similarly, spatial diffusion builds on this by asserting that the movement of things happens as a result of a carrier, but that barriers impact the rate at which things move (Gould, 1969). In the case of this study, the movement is the flow of knowledge from the institution to the students via online learning. The barriers are the challenges that the participants in this study identified.

The findings of this study suggest that while distance education does create opportunities for students in foreign countries to further their education while remaining at home, there are numerous barriers that make the experience less than ideal. As stated by TFL, the closer things are, the easier it is for them to interact. This is true of many of the participants who felt that they were at a disadvantage when compared with local students studying at Unisa. The research showed that the participants believed that local students (due to their proximity to the institution and the regional branches located

throughout South Africa) were better equipped with access to resources provided on campus, such as libraries, computers, and even staff. Other barriers identified by the participants was access to foreign currency to pay fees, access to relevant study materials, and a lack of communication with the institution. These barriers made some of the participants experience feelings of isolation, which, as stated in TFL, suggests that as distance increases, so does the interaction.

8.6 Research Limitations

When this study began in 2018, there were certain policies in place at Unisa that impacted the students directly, such as the switch from telephone to email as the only way to contact the university. Since then, however, changes have again been made in relation to contact with the institution, and as such, some of the issues expressed by the students may no longer be relevant to the current model.

Since this study began, the world of DE has grown significantly as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic which saw the closure of in-person learning in favour of remote learning. As a result, many institutions were forced to switch to remote learning and ultimately saw the benefits of DE. As a result, more institutions are adding DE components to their portfolio.

Another limitation is the language barrier which existed between the interviewers and the participants. For many of the participants in the study, English was not their first language, and since the interviews were conducted in English, some participants struggled to express their thoughts and their experiences.

The use of one quantitative method, that is semi-structured interviews, can be viewed as a limitation. Most research could benefit from the use of multiple research methods, as this would create a wealth of data, which when viewed together can create a more in-depth view of the research.

Since this study formed part of the IDEAS project, the interviews were conducted by other researchers associated with the project. This could be seen as a limitation since it could introduce interviewer bias that could have occurred during the interviewing stage. This possible bias could have occurred since the interviews were semi-structured, allowing for the interviewers to deviate and direct the interview in any direction. This however could still have occurred if the researcher had conducted the interviews themselves.

The participants interviewed for this study were at multiple levels of their study, i.e. there were students from almost every level of study (from first years to fifth year students). This diverse range of participants could have potential bias in their reporting of their encounters with the university. It could be expected that first year students would encounter more challenges than their peers who are further along in their academic journey. Since first year students are new to the institution, they may not know where to go, or who to contact when experiencing challenges, which may lead them to feel more isolated for example. This could be overcome if future research is conducted with an equal number of participants from each level of study. The outcomes for each year of study could then be compared with the other to see if there are any similarities or differences in how the students perceive and interact with the intuition.

8.7 Recommendations of the Study

Many of the recommendations of the study come directly from the participants themselves. Since they encountered the various challenges and experienced what it was like as an international student at Unisa, the researcher feels that they are best suited to put forth several suggestions.

Since international students incur an additional levy, they should have access to the same resources that the local students do. In several countries, regional centres that in the past provided international students with access to the internet, information officers and other resources, were closed. This researcher believes that these regional centres should be reopened and be equipped to assist students with various needs and services, such as help with enrolment and accessing learning materials.

These regional centres proved to be invaluable to students when they were open and available for students to use. Reopening these centres would cut back on additional costs that international students currently incur when they need to travel to South Africa simply to make an enquiry or to purchase learning materials.

These regional centres could be established based on the number of students within a given area. Locations with a large student cohort should ideally be used, since it would have the most benefit for more students. Other students located within the country but located far away from the regional centre, may find it cheaper and easier to access the regional centre in their country rather than needing to travel to South Africa.

The institution should develop a policy that ensures that all communication between students and the institution, including teaching staff, follow a specific turn-around time. Students should be able to escalate their communications if they have not received

a response within the given time frame. This creates accountability on the part of the institution and ensures that the students know that their communication, whether in the form of an enquiry, request or assistance with course work, is important.

8.8 Recommendations for Future Research

Since this study focused on only a select number of students through in-depth interviews, the use of direct observations of group discussions and social media groups could be used to generate a deeper insight into how students and teaching staff are able to overcome challenges that they may encounter in this environment.

8.9 Conclusion

The university of South Africa, as an open distance learning provider plays a role in the internationalisation of higher education in Southern Africa. This happens as result of creating access to learning to a greater number of students who would otherwise be excluded from further studies. The diverse nature of students enrolled at Unisa also contributes to internationalisation since students are able to meet and engage virtually with peers from a multitude of different backgrounds, cultures and countries without needing to change their geographic location. This is an example of internationalisation at home, where student mobility happens as a result of connections made with students via learning managements systems and through social media.

While Unisa's role in internationalisation makes access to HE possible for a large number of individuals, who would otherwise be excluded from pursuing their HE ambitions, several challenges experienced by students can have a negative impact on

the process. Many international students experienced challenges that they believed were not experienced by students who were studying in South Africa. This made the students feel as though they were not as important as their South African counterparts. Cultural aspects also challenged many students who felt unsure of themselves in the large group settings that Unisa is known for. Not surprisingly, some students tended to interact with students from the same country, as a way to avoid possible situations where they may be misunderstood.

This unique set of circumstances that many Unisa students face makes them different to other traditional university students. Subsequently, this diverse group of students also makes internationalisation challenging to achieve without directed efforts on the part of the institution.

The factors needed for internationalisation to occur are evident at Unisa, however, there are a number of challenges that limit the success of internationalisation. Continued integration between students and a more directed focus towards internationalisation can see the institution grow as a leader in internationalisation in the Southern African region.

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Appendix 1: Ethics Approval Letter



UNISA HEALTH RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Date: 09/07/2018

Dear Ms Sheriff-Shuping

NHREC Registration # : REC-170616-051
REC Reference # : 2018/CAES/031
Name : Ms RD Sherriff-Shuping
Student # : 42151066

**Decision: Ethics Approval from
05/07/2018 to 30/06/2019**

Researcher(s): Ms RD Sherriff-Shuping
42151066@mylife.unisa.ac.za

Supervisor (s): Prof A Gunter
gunteaw@unisa.ac.za; 011-471-3390

Working title of research:

The role of open distance learning in the internationalisation of Higher Education in the SADC region

Qualification: PhD Geography

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the Unisa CAES Health Research Ethics Committee for the above mentioned research. Ethics approval is granted for a one-year period, **subject to submission of the updated research proposal**. After one year the researcher is required to submit a progress report, upon which the ethics clearance may be renewed for another year.

Due date for progress report: 30 June 2019

Please note the points below for further action:

1. The researcher is requested to incorporate the additional information provided in the resubmission in the research proposal, and to submit the update proposal to the Committee for record purposes.
2. Is it realistic to state that the interviews will take one hour per participant? Should the interviews last longer than that, the researcher should ensure that participants remain comfortable and should provide body breaks if necessary.




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*The **low risk application** was reviewed by the CAES Health Research Ethics Committee on 05 July 2018 in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.*

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.
2. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the Committee.
3. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
4. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing, accompanied by a progress report.
5. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
6. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data require additional ethics clearance.
7. No field work activities may continue after the expiry date. Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal of Ethics Research Committee approval.

Note:

*The reference number **2018/CAES/031** should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.*

Yours sincerely,


Prof EL Kempen
Chair of CAES Health REC
E-mail: kempeel@unisa.ac.za
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Prof MJ Livingston
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URERC 25.04.17 - Decision template (V2) - Approve


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Appendix 2: Copy of Email sent to students requesting participation in the study

Email invitation to students

Dear [Student Name],

Now that you have been studying at UNISA for a few months, we are interested in understanding your university experiences so far. As staff, we see only a limited part of students' lives. This is why your opinions are valuable: understanding your experiences with UNISA so far can help support our goal to improve your adjustment to university life. Therefore, we invite you to participate in a research study by completing a questionnaire (link is below).

The questionnaire should take you approximately 15 minutes. After the questionnaire, some students may be contacted about participating in a short interview. For more information about the study, please review the attached document. If you have any further questions, you can always contact us at: UNISA, Prof A Gunter, gunteaw@unisa.ac.za Tel: 0114713390.

To participate, please visit: [\[link\]](#)

Please have your Student ID number ready to participate.

Thank you for considering.

Kind regards,

Prof Ashley Gunter

gunteaw@unisa.ac.za

011 471 3390

Informed consent

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study.

All answers will be kept confidential and no personally identifying information about you will be shared. More information about the study can be found at: [\[Link to internal site with information sheet\]](#) This survey will take approximately 15 minutes of your time, and will ask you questions about your academic and social experiences while studying with UNISA.

As a thank you for completing the survey, you will be sent a detailed summary of your results, including resources to increase your success while studying at UNISA. All participants who complete the survey will also be entered in a PRIZE DRAWING.

Agreement to participate

I agree to the terms and conditions addressed in the study information sheet and wish to participate in this study.

First name	
Surname	
Student ID	

Post-submission page

Thank you for participating in this study. We will provide feedback on your responses after the questionnaire closes to the email address associated with your Student ID number. Some survey participants may also be contacted with an invitation to participate in a short interview. If you have been selected to win PRIZE DRAWING, you will be contacted by email after the questionnaire closes.

Appendix 3: Sample of interview transcript

File name: ST42_INT_WM_NA_NA

Key

I: = Interviewer

P: = Participant

[time e.g. 5:22] = inaudible word at this time

[IA 5:22] = inaudible section at this time

[word] = best guess at word

... = interruption in sentence, trailing off or short pause

P: Hello.

I: Ah, is it XXX?

P: That's correct, yes.

I: This is XX, I'm calling for the interview about the Unisa studies.

P: Yes.

I: Are you happy to talk now, are you free to speak for about half-an-hour?

P: Yes, I can speak.

I: OK, great. So first let me introduce myself, my name is XX and I'm a researcher on the IDEAS project, which is a collaboration between Unisa and the Open University in the UK. Did you see the email, there was a consent form in the second email that I sent you, did you see that?

P: Sorry, in the second email?

I: Did you see the consent form, I sent you a form with some information about the research.

P: No, I didn't see that.

I: OK, so I will just read it out to you and if you are happy to participate in the research I just want you to confirm that.

P: Oh, I'm sorry, yeah, yeah, yes I saw that.

I: OK, so you understand that your participation is voluntary and that you can withdraw at any time without giving me any reason and if you don't want to answer any question you can decline and your name will not be used in any of the materials so we will use your answers to analyse data and experiences of students at Unisa but we won't link

your name in any way to the materials that we publish and the interview will also be recorded. Are you happy to participate under these conditions?

P: Yes.

I: Thank you very much. And if you have any questions or reservations feel free to interpret me and ask me at any time, OK?

P: OK.

I: Great. So today is the 1st of May 2018, can you just introduce yourself briefly with your name and age?

P: I'm XXX and I'm XX years old.

I: Great. And you live in Namibia as I understand it?

P: Yes, I'm in Namibia.

I: OK, so which course are you studying at Unisa?

P: It's a accounting course.

I: Accounting?

P: Yes, the course number is 98302.

I: OK, and why did you choose that course?

P: Oh, I wanted to become a chartered accountant.

I: Have you studied before in higher education?

P: I did my first year through fulltime university in [3:32], XXXX University. So I did my first year through them and then I came back to Namibia and then I studied through Unisa.

I: OK, so did you complete the first degree?

P: No. It's for the same degree, it's just the first year I did through them.

I: Oh OK, so you can do one year there and then you continue through Unisa for the same degree?

P: Yes, that's correct.

I: Oh I see. So why did you decide to change when you'd done one year, why did you change and start at Unisa to complete it?

P: It's just because I wanted to come back to Namibia and at that time Namibia also [4:20], our university in Namibia, XXX, they didn't have that degree.

I: OK, so sorry, you were studying in South Africa for the first year?

P: Yes.

I: Oh OK. So why did you want to come back to Namibia, did you not like it in South Africa?

P: Yeah, and to start working and yeah 'cause I was born in Namibia and I couldn't get used to South Africa that easily.

I: OK, what was the issue in South Africa?

P: Difficult to... I don't really know how to answer the questions, it's –

I: That's OK, don't worry. But you had planned to stay there for longer initially, you had planned to do the whole degree there?

P: Yes, my plan was to finish the degree there but then within the first year I decided that I would rather come back to Namibia and just do the degree part time.

I: So how are you finding the distance education, is it very different from being on campus, are there advantages or disadvantages?

P: Yeah, there's more disadvantages, being this far away you don't really have contact with the lecturers and the university itself, it's difficult to get information from them and answers from them.

I: Right I see. So why did you choose to study for a South African degree in the first place rather than studying in Namibia?

P: In Namibia they didn't have the degree at the time and now they do have the degree but it's also just fulltime not part time.

I: OK, so it's for you the flexibility is important for you?

P: Yes.

I: Are you working in a similar business, do you work with accounting already or are you working with something else at the moment?

P: No, I do accounting.

I: Sorry?

P: I'm also working as accounting.

I: But with another kind of... oh with accounting, sorry. Sorry the connection is not great all the time but I can hear you.

P: Oh no, sorry. <Chuckles>

I: So the degree from South Africa, do you think it has higher value in Namibia than a local Namibian degree?

- P:** No, the degree that they have in Namibia is also linked to the South African degree so it's basically the same degree.
- I:** OK. And do you have to do anything to convert your South African degree so that you can use it in Namibia or does it work as it stands?
- P:** No, you don't have to convert it, they accept it here as well.
- I:** OK. So before you went to South Africa did you consider any other countries to study in?
- P:** Yeah, I did consider going abroad but at the moment it wasn't possible.
- I:** Which countries were you considering?
- P:** I was considering the UK or Sweden.
- I:** OK, and why was it not possible?
- P:** Because it's finances and the living arrangements if I go there.
- I:** Would you be able to obtain visas or are there difficulties in getting visas?
- P:** The visa is quite easy to get.
- I:** OK so it's more the financial aspect?
- P:** Yes.
- I:** And if you wanted to go into university in Namibia would there be any issues in terms of entry or gaining entry and access?
- P:** The only problem with the university in Namibia was at that moment very.... they didn't have the degree and then when I started studying part time they didn't offer the degree part time.
- I:** OK. So if your grades are good enough you can get into university without a problem?
- P:** Yes.
- I:** OK. Is it expensive to study in Namibia?
- P:** No, the expenses is basically that same.
- I:** So there was no option of distance education in Namibia for you, only from South Africa?
- P:** Yes, there was no option from Namibia.
- I:** OK. Did you consider distance education from any other countries?
- P:** Did I complete any of...

I: Sorry?

P: Did you ask did I complete any distance education?

I: No, just did you consider any other countries than South Africa for distance education?

P: Oh, I also considered UK but they didn't have the degree in the distance programme.

I: Oh I see. So what do you think your degree will enable you to do in the future?

P: At the moment when I finish the degree I have done about four years articles with a chartered accountant, so I'll be able to use those articles to become a CFA in Namibia.

I: Sorry, what's CFA?

P: It's a level just under chartered accountant.

I: Oh OK.

P: [10:55 IA].

I: That's OK, don't worry. So you think your job opportunities will improve by studying in South Africa?

P: Yes, by doing the degree my job opportunities will improve.

I: OK, but you don't think there is any difference if you're having the degree from South Africa or Namibia?

P: Yes, it won't be a difference.

I: So has the degree already opened up new opportunities or not yet?

P: It did open opportunities for me to be able to work in the position I'm in, so if I wasn't busy with the degree I wouldn't have been able to get the job.

I: OK, so it has already gotten you a job?

P: Yes.

I: OK, great. So why did you choose Unisa for your distance education? There are a few other options in South Africa as well.

P: At the moment that's the only university that I've found that was easily accessible and that offered the degree part time.

I: OK, so like you said before, it's mainly this is the only university that seems to be offering the degree that you wanted?

P: Yes.

- I:** So how did you find out about Unisa in the first place, have you known about it for a long time or did you find it by searching online or did you hear about it from friends?
- P:** No, when I decided to come back I did research and that's how I found out about the university.
- I:** So you didn't know about it before?
- P:** No, I didn't know about it before.
- I:** And you decided to continue after you came back to Namibia, that's when you decided you wanted to complete the degree through distance education?
- P:** Yes, but in my first year when I decided to go back to Namibia I knew that the year after I'd apply to continue the degree to finish the degree.
- I:** OK, great. So could you describe your experience of starting and getting enrolled into Unisa?
- P:** My experience?
- I:** Yeah, did you face any problems or was it straightforward?
- P:** With studying through Unisa for a degree?
- I:** No, sorry, starting, signing up, getting enrolled.
- P:** Oh yeah, that was difficult but in the first year that I signed up with Unisa I was unable to apply for the entry on the subjects I already had with the university in South Africa because of the [14:06] to international students, it wasn't that [14:10] if you call them, you don't really get any answers from them. So it took me a year to be able to apply for exemption or the subject I already had towards the degree.
- I:** Oh right, but they approved it in the end?
- P:** Yes.
- I:** OK. So what is it like to be an international student at Unisa?
- P:** It is like I said, the only university that offered the degree and wanting to complete the degree but in Namibia that is my only option.
- I:** OK, but you mentioned something, you're not working with other students and you have to study on your own?
- P:** Yeah, I have to study on my own. In the town I'm living in I'm basically the only student that is doing the degree.
- I:** Does it affect your study in any way?
- P:** Sometimes yes because if you have a question and you can't get hold of the lecturers then you don't really know what's the answer to your question.

- I:** Yeah, do you use these WhatsApp groups or Facebook groups to ask questions and engage with other students?
- P:** I haven't found any in Namibia that do the same degrees as I do.
- I:** OK, so you work completely on your own?
- P:** Yes.
- I:** And you've mentioned this already a bit, but the material that you study, is it very general or is it relevant to the context of Namibia? I understand that accounting is kind of universal in one way but is the course adapted to the Namibian context and you use it in any way, are there examples in the materials from Namibia or that are relevant for you?
- P:** No, the course is... it's fairly South African, for example, the text that we study is South African text, you don't have any option to study Namibian text in any way. All the course material is based on South Africa.
- I:** How does that affect your study?
- P:** It makes it a bit difficult because I have to used to some of the South African company law and tax law and it's quite different from the Namibian company and tax law.
- I:** OK. Do you think it's a problem for you or is it something you can overcome?
- P:** No, I overcame it easily, it's OK, it wasn't a big problem.
- I:** Right. So how does being so far from the main campus impact your studies?
- P:** I'm sorry?
- I:** How does working on your own and being so far away from the Unisa campus, how does that impact your studies?
- P:** Oh, it makes it quite difficult. Two years ago I flew to Pretoria to the Unisa campus to go see the lecturers there to get answers from them about subjects that I was studying in the course. And after visiting the campus I was easily able to pass these subjects so I think if there was a bit more support to international students it would've been easier to study this degree, because it's quite expensive to fly to or to go to Pretoria from Namibia.
- I:** I'm very surprised to hear that you actually went there; was that because you emailed and called and you couldn't get the information you needed, is that why you chose to actually fly there?
- P:** Yes. I was unable to get the answers that I needed and I already failed the subject... I think I failed them twice already, so then I decided to go there so that I can go see the lecturers and get help from them to understand the subjects better.
- I:** Right. And did that resolve your problem?

- P:** Yes, it resolved the problem.
- I:** And has it helped you afterwards as well because you already established a connection with them, is it easier to approach them and you get more response afterwards?
- P:** Yes, one lecturer, it's easier to contact her now but she, now that I've passed the subject she's able to help me with some of my credit at the university as she is there, but she is able to really except with the subject that I am... the three subjects that I am writing now.
- I:** Right. I see. So can you say something more about student support, how it is organised and how it is working or not working?
- P:** They have great support for the students that are in South Africa, the others they are so [19:54] the classes they have, they provide the students within South Africa with a class and then the students that are not in the town they are doing the class, they will broadcast the class too. So I queried why they can't broadcast it to students in Namibia as well so that we can also have access to the classes to enable us to also get explanation from the lecturers but then they couldn't really give me an answer to that. So the support to international students is not good.
- I:** I see. So if there was one thing you could change about being an international student at Unisa what would that be?
- P:** It would be easier to get support from their side, they have international number and all that but when you contact the university from Namibia if you have a question you never get through to get the answer. Like now at the moment I emailed a lecturer that I met and she is able to get answer for me, but then if I haven't had met her before I would [21:26] not be [21:27] from the university side.
- I:** Right. So it makes a big difference that you were actually able to go there and speak to people and then build the connections with them?
- P:** Yes.
- I:** So what is your first language?
- P:** It's Afrikaans.
- I:** And do you speak any other languages?
- P:** No, only Afrikaans and English.
- I:** So could you say something about how you balance your studies and your work time?
- P:** Sorry, there was a beep when you spoke.
- I:** How do you balance your studies and your work, how do you find time to study?

P: Well, as I work fulltime I study in the evenings and then on weekends as well as holidays and then when it's close to exams my work gives me study leave to be able to study.

I: OK, does your workplace also support you financially or in any other way?

P: No, they don't support me financially.

I: So you are self-funded and you pay the fees yourself by working?

P: Yes.

I: Right. Could you say a bit about your own background, do you come from a wealthy family or a poor family and so on?

P: Basically your average family and I come from a rural town.

I: OK. Did your parents also study at university or are you the first to study?

P: My mother studied at the University of XXX and then my father did some subjects through also distance learning but it was for diploma, for the certificates, study for degrees.

I: I see. So your family are currently living in Namibia as well?

P: Yes.

I: And are you living with them or are you living on your own?

P: No, I'm living on my own.

I: So do you have any responsibilities to look after, children or parents or anyone else or are you just looking after yourself at the moment?

P: No, I'm basically just looking after myself and then [24:06].

I: OK. But do you live in the same town as your family or in another part of the country?

P: I live in the same town as my mother but my father moved away to another town.

I: OK, so you see your mother on a regular basis?

P: Yes.

I: You mentioned that you lived in South Africa for your first year; have you lived in South Africa or any other countries before for extended periods of time?

P: Yeah, well I lived for the one year in South Africa when I studied there [24:49], but yeah that's the only country that I lived in for a year or longer so have only been in Namibia [25:00].

I: OK. So can you say a bit about your goals for the future?

- P:** Well, it's to pass my degree and then after I pass my degree be able to obtain the CFA, I think it's Chartered Financial Analyst, to be able to become one and then to work myself up in my work to better positions.
- I:** OK. So what are the necessary skills that you will need to achieve this?
- P:** It would be to obtain my degree, yeah basically to obtain my degree as I already have the relevant experience and articles.
- I:** Right, so the Unisa degree is a very good match for you because that's the only programme that fits what you really want to do, right?
- P:** Yes.
- I:** So what are you planning to do when you complete the degree, are you staying the same company and trying to get a promotion or are you looking to go somewhere else to another city and start another job?
- P:** So first I will stay with the same company and see the promotion availability **and so on**. But I'm also interested in moving to the UK.
- I:** OK, why?
- P:** I have a lot of friends and family live there and yeah, it was just the living and the working environment is a lot different from where I am.
- I:** And do you think it will be possible for you to actually go?
- P:** Yeah, I think it would be possible given the correct opportunities.
- I:** Right, and do you think you will be able to use your degree in the UK to get a job and that it will be relevant to the job market here in the UK?
- P:** I hope so. According to Unisa the degree is international, so yeah, I hope that it will be acceptable there as well.
- I:** Right, so do you think that your distance education experience has affected your migration plans?
- P:** Yeah, in a way it has, to be able to get closer to **[27:54]** financially... so you can be closer to where the information is coming from, closer to get experience and... what's the word I'm looking for?
- I:** Take your time.
- P:** The knowledge.
- I:** OK. So do you think you would have the same career prospects if you had studied in Namibia or different ideas of what you would do for the future?
- P:** No, I think my ultimate goals and what I'm planning for the future would have still been the same.

I: OK, great. I don't have any more questions, is there anything you would like to add about what we talked about in terms of your future plans or your experience with Unisa or anything else?

P: No, I don't have any questions.

I: OK, in that case very much and I wish you all the best with completing your degree.

P: Thank you very much.

I: Thank you, have a good day. Thank you for participating.

P: OK, thank you, enjoy your day.

I: Thank you bye, bye.

P: Bye, bye.

<End of Interview>

Appendix 4: Categories related to codes

Clusters																														
#	Cluster Name	Categories/Codes	ST 34	ST 35	ST 36	ST 38	ST 40	ST 41	ST 42	ST 45	ST 46	ST 48	ST 49	ST 50	ST 51	ST 52	ST 53	ST 54	ST 56	ST 59	ST 60	ST 62	ST 63	ST 64	ST 68	ST 70	ST 73	ST 74	ST 77	TOTAL
4)		A) Cost/ Affordability		1	1					1	2	1				2	1	1								1	1		12	
		B) Flexibility						1			1	1					1				1	1		1					7	
		i) can work		1	1			2		3	3	1		1	1								1				2	1	17	
		ii) can support family								1											1	2	1				1		6	
		iii) an remain in home country				1									1														2	
		iv) can determine own schedule and study blocks						1					1							1			1					1	5	
		v) can complete degree in own time frame (longer or shorter as needed)						1				1										1							3	
		vi) work experience (ability to gain knowledge about the field whilst in the field)												1					2							1			4	
		vii) can study and travel at the same time												1															1	
		viii) maintain independence												1															1	
		C) Reputation				1		1								1					1	1	2						7	
		i) Quality of course		2		1	1				1											1	1			1			7	
		ii) internationally recognised degree		2	2		1					2	1				1					2							11	
		iii) other students recommended the institution								1				1	1								1		1				5	
		iv) Institution seen as a global leader in DE			1		1				1																		3	
		v) Perceived global ranking					1				1				1							3			1				7	
		vi) well known											2					1				1			1	1	1		6	
		vii) Studied through UNISA before																						1		1			2	
		D) No other options					1				1																		2	

Clusters																															
#	Cluster Name	Categories/Codes	ST 34	ST 35	ST 36	ST 38	ST 40	ST 41	ST 42	ST 45	ST 46	ST 48	ST 49	ST 50	ST 51	ST 52	ST 53	ST 54	ST 56	ST 59	ST 60	ST 62	ST 63	ST 64	ST 68	ST 70	ST 73	ST 74	ST 77	TOTAL	
	Reasons for choosing Unisa/ Benefits of studying at Unisa	i) no local options			2	1	1		1			1				1	2							1			1	1		12	
		a) lack of international recognition for local universities						1					1		1															3	
		b) local universities do not offer DE			1	1		1	3		1						1		1		1		1								11
		c) local universities are more expensive							1																						1
		d) The country's reputation in a global context							1			1																			2
		e) lack of flexibility at local institutions					1				1								1				1						1		5
		f) quality of the local universities is perceived as being poor				1									2									2	1	2	1				9
		g) local university does not offer course			1																1						1			3	
		ii) other DE institutions are impractical								1																					1
		a) too expensive		1		1				1																					3
		b) local requirements - visa's																													0
		c) qualifications are not relevant in local context			1								1																		2
		E) Choice of degrees					1																1								2
		F) Relevance of degree																													0
		i) Degree is relevant to local context (i.e. accredited)			1						1							1					2		1						6
		ii) relevance of the degree to the 21st century																										1			1
		a) the content is relevant and up to date																								1	2				3
		iii) Course content applies to the local context																								1					1

Clusters																														
#	Cluster Name	Categories/Codes	ST 34	ST 35	ST 36	ST 38	ST 40	ST 41	ST 42	ST 45	ST 46	ST 48	ST 49	ST 50	ST 51	ST 52	ST 53	ST 54	ST 56	ST 59	ST 60	ST 62	ST 63	ST 64	ST 68	ST 70	ST 73	ST 74	ST 77	TOTAL
		iv) Unisa offers the specific degree student wanted to study					1							1										1		1		1	5	
		v) the content of the course appeals to the student	1		1									1	1							1			1		2		8	
		vi) the degree relates to the work the student is currently doing			3		3	1			1	1	2		1		1					1	1		1		1	1	18	
		G) Access /Acceptance				1													1									1	3	
		i) entry requirements allow access		1					1																				2	
		H) Timeframe																											0	
		i) Unisa degrees can be completed in a shorter time frame									1													1		1			3	
		ii) Students can choose how long their studies take (increase/decrease depending on situation)					1			1								1		1			1			1			6	
		I) Availability of Information about the institution and courses												1															1	
		i) Website contains a wealth of information					1	1														1							3	
		ii) Magazine									1								1										2	
		iii) word of mouth - know others that have studied there		1	1	1		1		1		1		2	2									1	1	1			13	
		iv) brochures														1													1	
		J) Other																											0	
		i) Advantages of ODL																											0	
		a) Meeting people from other countries	1					1		1													3	1	2	2			11	
		ii) Job Benefits		1					1	2												1							5	

Clusters																																
#	Cluster Name	Categories/Codes	ST 34	ST 35	ST 36	ST 38	ST 40	ST 41	ST 42	ST 45	ST 46	ST 48	ST 49	ST 50	ST 51	ST 52	ST 53	ST 54	ST 56	ST 59	ST 60	ST 62	ST 63	ST 64	ST 68	ST 70	ST 73	ST 74	ST 77	TOTAL		
	Reasons for choosing Unisa/ Benefits of studying at Unisa	a) Candidate likely to be chosen over other candidates with similar degrees because of the reputation of UNISA					1																							1		
		b) Student believes that having a degree will lead to a promotion and therefore better pay						2			3	1	1				3	1	1					3					1	1	17	
		c) the degree could lead to other job opportunities		1			2			1			1												1	1	1			2		10
		K) Convenience				1		3			1			1												1						7
5)	Challenges of studying at Unisa	A) Lack of communication	1	2		1						1						1			2	1								9		
		i) unable to contact university via telephone	1								1								2			1	2					1	1		9	
		ii) emails take long to be replied to			1																									1		6
		iii) important announcements are delayed or made too late																								3				1		4
		B) Teaching staff and tutors	1																													1
		i) Not able to contact staff via phone - no phone numbers given																	1													1
		ii) Lecturers do not respond to emails in a timely manner														1			2													3
		iii) Student complaints lead to lower marks	2																2													4
		iv) Feedback from teaching staff regarding assignments is poor														1																1

Clusters																														
#	Cluster Name	Categories/Codes	ST 34	ST 35	ST 36	ST 38	ST 40	ST 41	ST 42	ST 45	ST 46	ST 48	ST 49	ST 50	ST 51	ST 52	ST 53	ST 54	ST 56	ST 59	ST 60	ST 62	ST 63	ST 64	ST 68	ST 70	ST 73	ST 74	ST 77	TOTAL
		C) Lack of support (general)											1								1								2	
		D) Perceived safety issues																											0	
		i) Xenophobia																											0	
		ii) Crime																											0	
		E) Isolation																											0	
		i) not being able to attend classes																											0	
		a) too expensive																											0	
		b) too far to travel																				1							1	
		ii) no in-person study groups to attend											1										1						2	
		iii) excluded from certain groups because of location															2												2	
		iv) no contact with other students																											0	
		v) age	1																										1	
		vi) feeling of being just a number rather than a person	1										1																2	
		vii) little to no interaction between lecturers and students	2																										2	
		F) Accessing study materials																			1								1	
		i) internet connection issues				1																1							2	
		ii) prescribed books difficult to get				1																	2				1		4	
		iii) supplementary resources difficult to obtain																				1						1	2	
		iv) no library access				1													1										2	
		v) cost of services and resources				1		3																					4	
		vi) study materials not delivered on time																				1			1				2	

Clusters																															
#	Cluster Name	Categories/Codes	ST 34	ST 35	ST 36	ST 38	ST 40	ST 41	ST 42	ST 45	ST 46	ST 48	ST 49	ST 50	ST 51	ST 52	ST 53	ST 54	ST 56	ST 59	ST 60	ST 62	ST 63	ST 64	ST 68	ST 70	ST 73	ST 74	ST 77	TOTAL	
	Challenges of studying at Unisa	G) Submission of assignments																												0	
		i) Unisa website down									1																				1
		ii) study materials arrive late																				1									1
		H) Payment of fees																													0
		i) foreign currency				1																	1	1							3
		a) buying currency on the black market										1										1	1		1		1				5
		b) exchange rate is costly																						2							2
		c) difficulties converting local currency to Rands for payment of fees										1										1		1		1	1				5
		ii) cost		1		1		1											1			2							2		8
		a) in order to afford fees student has to have multiple jobs																					2								2
		b) Parents/ spouses pay for fees - student not able to do so																									1				1
		c) student loans needed									2					1															3
		d) student uses savings/retirement funds to pay for fees																							1	1					2
		e) student is unable to afford fees unless they are employed																	1								1	1			3
		f) student would be unable to afford fees without employer support (i.e through professional development)																											1		1
		iii) foreign levy		2														1	1				1		1				1	1	8
		iv) unable to see results until payment is made																	1				1								2
		I) Enrollment issues				1			1										1								1	1		1	6

Clusters																															
#	Cluster Name	Categories/Codes	ST 34	ST 35	ST 36	ST 38	ST 40	ST 41	ST 42	ST 45	ST 46	ST 48	ST 49	ST 50	ST 51	ST 52	ST 53	ST 54	ST 56	ST 59	ST 60	ST 62	ST 63	ST 64	ST 68	ST 70	ST 73	ST 74	ST 77	TOTAL	
	Challenges of studying at Unisa	i) lack of communication		2										1		1											1			5	
		ii) confusion about the enrollment process													1	1	1												1		4
			1					1																	1				1		3
			iv) difficulty sending necessary documents (i.e using fax or needing to send via courier)															1											1	3	5
			J) Time lost/ Progress											1									1								2
			i) Enrollment issues														1								2			1	1		5
			ii) lack of communication											1															1		2
			iii) Suspension																							2					2
			iv) Cost			1																1	1		1			2	1		6
			v) lack of study materials																			1	1		1				1		4
			vi) results withheld until payment is made							1													2								3
			K) Travel																												0
			i) Needing to travel to South Africa																												0
			a) to meet with lecturers																												0
			b) to sort out enrollment issues								1											1							1		3
			c) to obtain study materials																								2				2
			d) to write exams							1																					1
			e) to complete course requirements (i.e. practicals)																				1								1
			f) to pay fees																				2		2						4
			ii) Needing to travel far (> 100kms) within their home country																												0
			a) to write exams														1														1
			L) Family responsibilities																												0

Clusters																															
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		i) Work full-time															1			1		1						1	4		
		ii) Work part-time																												0	
		iii) Caregiver														1												1		2	
		a) child/ren		1	1	1				1	1					1				1		1		1		1	1	1	1	12	
		b) parent/s				1	1																				1			3	
		c) sibling/s						1																						1	
		d) other family members				1		1																			1			3	
		e) pregnant while studying																										1		1	2
		iv) Financial Provider																												0	
		a) single income																										1	1	2	
		b) dual-income																												0	
		v) No responsibilities																												0	
		vi) gender roles					2			3											2				1					8	
		M) Social Media												1																1	
		i) can be overwhelming	1											1	1		1				1		2	2						9	
		ii) problematic										1																		1	
		iii) Off topic										1		1			1				1									4	
		iv) student expericed racism/xenophobia															1	2					1					1		5	
		v) language barriers (either intentionally or unintentionally)															1											1	1		3
		vi) students do not recall receiving information about the groups so have not joined them																				2									2
		N) Course Concerns							1					1							1									3	
		i) Course Materials							1												1								1		3
		ii) Course requirements																			1										1
		iii) Culture																									1				1
		O) Digital Divide								2	1																		1		4
		P) Time management (work/life/studies balance)																										1			1

Clusters																																
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6)	Support for students	A) Social Media														1							3							4		
		i) Whatsapp	7	1				1					1			2		3	1	1					2	3			1		23	
		ii) Facebook																1	1					2							4	
		iii) Telegram																	1											1	2	
		iv) Other Social Media Applications	1																												1	
		v) discussion boards						1	1		1																	1	1		5	
		vi) Student does not engage with social media platforms																							1							2
		B) University Groups							1																	1						2
		i) MyUnisa			1	1	1														1				3	1			2			10
		ii) Tutors																						2					1	1		4
		iii) Online lectures																													2	2
		iv) discussion boards																			1				1				1			
		C) Social connections																														0
		i) In South Africa																														0
		a) family members						1		1																					2	4
		b) other students																														0
		ii) Online	1																	1							3	2				7
		iii) "runners" - people unknown to the student who assist them for a fee													1																	1
		D) Families																														0
		i) Family gives space and time							1				1												1						1	4
		ii) Spouse/family takes on responsibilities to ensure student has time to study								1								1														2
		iii) Spouse/family are paying for fees															1	1				1	1									4
		iv) family/spouse is supportive of studies							1						1													2			1	5
E) Physical Study Groups																													1	1		

Clusters																																
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		i) Local students who are doing the same degree									2		1		1				1					1	2	1		1	1	11		
		F) Teaching staff (Lecturers and Tutors)					2				1	1			1							1	1		1		1			9		
		G) myUnisa platform - Access to study materials, timetables etc														1											1	1		3		
7)	Overcoming Challenges	A) Submitting assignments early					1				1	1																		3		
		B) Using people local to South Africa to assist with certain issues		1														1									1		1	4		
		C) Travelling to South Africa							1												1							1	1	4		
		D) Using South African exam centre to avoid international levy																								1				1	2	
		E) Sharing/exchanging materials with other students																		1										1	2	
		F) Saving money in order to afford the fees									1																1				2	
		G) Student uses local centres to help with enrollment (when they existed)														1				1			1			1		1			5	
		H) Using external tutors from South African to help study																									1				1	
		I) Using the myUnisa portal to access materials if materials do not arrive on time																											1		1	2

Clusters																															
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		J) Using 'agents' to travel between countries and get necessary resources, such as books				1																					1		2		
		K) Adjusting budget to account for increase in study fees																										2	2	4	
9)	Student Success	A) Employer support																									1		1		
		i) Financial Aid					2				2																	3		7	
		ii) Study Leave							1		1							1												3	
		iii) Job security									1																			1	
		B) Types of Motivation																												0	
		i) Intrinsic												1		1		3					2				2	1		10	
		a) Competence																												0	
		b) enjoy the subjects and want to do well in them						1																						1	
		c) feeling self-pride					2				1																			3	
		ii) Extrinsic																												0	
		a) Money									1																			1	
		b) Competition									1	1														1				3	
		c) Spouse/ family motivation									1						1													2	
		d) seeing the need in the community															1													1	
		C) Self Reliance														1		1												2	
		i) planning and time management										1		1				1		1		3		1		1	1	1	1	1	12
		ii) sacrifices									1			1				1				2	1	1			1	2		10	
	iii) hard work														1											1			2		
	iv) self-driven														3							1							4		
	v) realistic expectations																											1	1		
	D) Maturity									1																			1		
	E) Familial Support						1																								
10)		A) Based on number of students, mini branches can be established - resource centers					1																						3		

Clusters																														
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	Suggestions	i) to socialise					1																						1	
		ii) to engage with other students					1															1								2
		iii) to form study groups					1																2							3
		B) Broadcast classes							1																					1
		C) Open Satellite centres for assistance with enrollments and distribution of resources			1		1	1									1			1									1	6
		D) Put additional resources on the eLearning or mylife platforms					1																						1	2
		E) Prioritise communication							1										1						1					3
		F) Provide better communication regarding finances for international students																						1						1
		G) Cost - make fees more affordable									1		1					1												3
		H) Course content - more broad so as to incorporate a number of international systems																												2
		I) Offer some form of initiation																									1			1
		J) Reduce group sizes on MyUnisa platform																								1				1
11)			Students are planning on using their degree to:																											0
	A) Move												2									1							3	
	i) to another region within their country																		1				1	1						3
	ii) to South Africa																												0	

Clusters																															
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	Mobility	iii) to another African country		1																										1	
		iv) globally																													0
		a) UK							1						1																2
		b) USA																													0
		c) other																										1			1
		B) Remain where they are		1			2					1					1				1			1	1					1	9
	C) Keep options open (not actively looking to move, but if the opportunity arises then they would consider moving)				1		1			1				2	1			1		1					1			2		11	
	D) Limitations to emigration																						1							1	
12)	Being an international student	A) Challenging								1															2	1				4	
		i) network challenges - lack of stable internet connection																					1								1
		ii) managing responsibilities and studies									1																		1		2
		B) Disadvantaged (SA students are perceived to have more advantages)		1			1	1	3															3	1		1		2		13
		C) Overwhelming																							1						1
		i) too many social media groups to join																1													1
		D) Uncertainty																													0
		E) Unwelcome							1																						1
		F) Isolated						1	3		1				1				1												7
		G) Disconnected / Unsupported							2						1																3
	H) Wonderful									1																				1	

Clusters																															
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		I) Exciting																						1						1	
		J) Supported													2					1					1					4	
		K) Interesting																							1					1	
13)	Furthering Studies	A) Wants to continue studies											1														1			4	
		i) with Unisa										1							1								1		1	4	
		a) cost - it is affordable															1											1			2
		ii) Through another institution																									1	1			2
		a) possibility to get a scholarship								1																	1	1			3
		iii) via DE but no necessarily UNISA							1						1														1		3
		a) UNISA degree allowed for entry into institution																													0
		b) Well accredited																										1			1
		c) Affordable																									1				1
			Total number of codes used per interview	14	22	19	28	35	26	16	31	31	19	25	18	22	18	34	22	15	19	34	30	32	33	37	32	37	30	33	