"Hellopeter[1]!

On: HOW ARE THEY DOING?"

THE PERCEPTIONS, EXPERIENCES AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS AS CUSTOMERS OF AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING UNIVERSITY

INAUGURAL LECTURE to be presented by Prof AH (NICKY) ALPASLAN, Department of Social Work, University of South Africa on 18 July 2012

ABSTRACT

This paper originated from an explorative, descriptive Q-methodology study undertaken, with the aim to explore and describe social work student customers' perceptions about their social work studies at Unisa and only reports on the findings deduced specifically from their free comments. In responding to the question, on: "how are they doing?" the participants' unsolicited experience-based perceptions point to the fact that the Department of Social Work is not just doing "bad", or only performing "well". The student customers seem both and simultaneously satisfied and dissatisfied with similar and different aspects related to the quality of services offered by Unisa and the Department under scrutiny. In view of feeling both positive, and negative about the quality service delivery experienced by them, all is not lost, as the unsolicited recommendations forwarded by them invites both Unisa and its Social Work Department to consider these recommendations in order to enhance the customers' service delivery experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher education, due to their core business, should be regarded as "service industries" (Sander, Stevenson, King, & Coates 2000:309; Chen 2009:77). Objective-wise, these institutions' primary concerns are threefold:

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[1] The phrase "Hellopeter" was adopted from the website www.Hellopeter.com – an online customer service site where consumers have the opportunity to report on treatment they receive from any supplier – negative and/or positive – quickly and for free.

- to promote individuals' academic development by way of providing in-depth knowledge and skills through teaching and learning.
- to develop new knowledge through vigorous research and the dissemination of research findings for the benefit of society.
- to render community services to societies by means of consultation and engaging themselves in community-orientated service activities (Maliyamokono in Higgs & Van Wyk 2006:87; Chen 2009:77).

When labelling institutions of higher education as "service industries", the consumers of the former's services can no longer only be regarded as "students" but should be viewed as "customers". They are customers, who seem to be well-informed about their rights as consumers; who demand effective and quality services, who voice their concerns and dissatisfaction through formal and informal channels (i.e. in communications to University authorities; through public demonstrations, and in the media and on social networks (Sander et al 2000:309).) In underscoring the latter, one article in the printed media comes to mind (i.e. "Unisa students march to protest high fees, service" by Tsabeng Nthite, in *The Pretoria News* on 23 September 2006:3) and on 5 June 2012, a student customer, named: Student Unisa 1, added a complaint on the online customer service site "Hellopeter.com" under the heading: "No answer!!! No Help!!! Why do Unisa have phones?" and wrote: "I have been phoning this morning on various occasions, someone will pick up the phone and then just transfer me… after that no one answers!!!!! How difficult is it to pick up to phone, and assist someone, are the people late for work, or do they just don't answer the phone???"

Perceiving students as customers of higher education brings into its realm an urgent necessity to focus on what the customers really need, together with concerted and continuous efforts towards quality service delivery in order to create experiences that will be perceived as satisfying by students as customers. This calls for higher education institutions that, in the past, according to Tricker, Rangecroft and Long (2005:185) have followed "a supplier-driven, take-it-or-leave-it model", to replace it with a new model that I (as social work educator) would like to frame as "a societal needs-based, customer-informed and co-constructed model". This train of thought is endorsed by Sander et al (2000:309) who wrote: "Higher Education typically adopted an 'inside out' approach – with us on the inside assuming we know what students look for and want from Higher Education. However,

successful service industries have been shown to think 'outside in'. They research what customers expect of the service and then work to provide the service that meets those of customer expectations".

Against this backdrop of viewing institutions of higher education as "services industries" and their consumers as "customers", the phenomenon of "student/customer satisfaction" (which amongst others can be described as a short-term attitude based on the evaluation of their experience with an education service supplied (cf Elliot & Healy in García-Aracil 2009:2) needs to be placed on the agenda for debate and research in the context of open and distance learning (ODL).

The aforementioned suggestion is endorsed by Gaskell (2009:193) when proposing that such debates and research endeavours should be focussed on what student-customers' expectations are, how they perceive the services both onsite and online, and their general satisfaction with the service provided as "the limited amount of research on this topic suggests that student satisfaction is a complex, *yet poorly articulated notion* that is influenced by a wide variety of contextual factors which are not intrinsically related to the quality of teaching [only]" (Brennan & Williams in Gaskell 2009:193; cf García-Aracil 2009:2). In response to this, Chang and Smith (2008:412) state that the phenomenon of "student satisfaction" should be researched and improved so that all students can excel in ODL-settings. Gibbs (in Gaskell 2009:193) concurs and points out an interesting fact (based on student satisfaction surveys conducted in ODL-contexts in the United States) when stating that while students in general appear to be satisfied with most aspects of teaching in almost all contexts, these positive responses reveal little about the students' satisfaction on the quality of teaching in relation to specific courses.

Being made aware of the fact that student satisfaction surveys generally reveal little about students' satisfaction on the quality of teaching in relation to individual courses, I want to divert the focus of the discussion to social work education offered within an ODL-context.
Offering social work education programmes through ODL increased world-wide in recent decades (Oliaro & Trotter 2010:329). Despite the growth in the taking on of ODL as a vehicle for teaching social work, Collins (2008:436) mentions that distance education has been, and continues to be criticised as mode for teaching social work and has provoked a

considerable debate amongst social work educators in recent years with critics and proponents almost adding up in equal measure.

The opponents against teaching social work programmes through ODL use the following as their main and common arguments:

- Historically, social work education was premised on the philosophy that training students towards becoming social workers required quality classroom interactions (Banks & Faul 2007:780). ODL-based social work training and education consequently tend to deprive students of the necessary prospects for personal contact and opportunities to develop communication skills and a professional self through observation and modelling (Askeland & Payne 2007:167; Banks & Faul 2007:780–781). They are short-changed in terms of group involvement, relationships and socialisation (in order to become knowledgeable in cultural diversity). ODL falls short in providing sufficient opportunities for feedback to students, limits opportunities for direct oral communication and evokes feelings of isolation being experienced by students (Oliaro & Trotter 2010:330).

- While ODL attests to being effective for providing and transmitting theoretical knowledge; its effectiveness in providing optimal opportunities assisting students to learn and practise practical social work skills, which is paramount for them in making the transition from passive learners to active professionals, (Royce in McFall & Freddolino 2000:296) remains questionable (Collins 2008:432).

- Training students through ODL to become social workers conjures up terms like "masses of students", "mechanistic", "mass production" and "assembly line" (Collins 2008:422). This results in an added demand being placed on social work practice for more social work practical work placement settings and contributes to unreasonable pressure being placed on already stretched-out systems (Collins 2008:424).

- Both the train of thought and fear persist that employers may view a social work qualification obtained through ODL as "second-class" (Callahan & Wharf 1989; Oliaro & Trotter 2010:330) and inferior to a similar qualification obtained through the traditional and mainstream mode of social work education.

- ODL demands time, effort, energy, skills, knowledge, staff resources and requires exhausting logistical arrangements and long distance problem-solving to be effective.

These are added to the many other institutional pressures faced by "traditional" social work educators (McFall & Freddolino 2000:294; Collins 2008:424).

The proponents for the training of students through ODL towards becoming social workers in general provide the following arguments to justify their cause:

- ODL promotes social justice as it affords mature, employed, part-time, physically and geographically isolated students, as well as students with a disability, and those who lack resources and do not meet the prerequisite entry requirements to gain access into the traditional learning settings, an opportunity to obtain a social work qualification (Oliaro & Trotter 2010:340;York 2008:162; Collins 2008:430).

- ODL, viewed from a post-modern perspective, embraces and accommodates difference and diversity; is pluralistic in nature as it widens the range of available opportunities for those who wish to undertake social work education and training without imposing one group's "ideal vision" on all people (Collins 2008:430). ODL values "individuation", "flexibility" and is "learner-centred focussed". ODL enables students as individuals to follow their own educational pursuits, by providing the ultimate in "individualistic timing and localisation" in that students can study in a variety of locations (i.e. from home and/or work) at a time convenient to them with some degree of self-determination and through self-regulated learning (Artino 2008:261; Collins 2008:427,430). Within the ODL-context, the student gets into the driver's seat and manages and controls his own academic process by applying "self-regulated learning[2]" (Artino 2008:261).

- While the effectivity of ODL-training provided to students to become social workers has been, and continues to be questioned by critics in the field of social work education, studies conducted (referred to further on) reported positive outcomes for distance learning programmes. In spite of the fact that research findings on the effectiveness of ODL social work programmes in Britain seems to be lacking (Collins 2008;426), data available from studies conducted in the USA point to the following:

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[2] Self-regulated learning has been defined by Pintrich (in Artino 2008:261–262) as "an active constructive process whereby learners set goals for their learning and then attempt to monitor, regulate and control their cognition, motivation and behaviour, guided and constrained by their goals and contextual features of the environment".

The educational experiences and achievements of ODL social work students are equivalent to those of traditional students and the same grades are achieved by both groups (Haga & Heitkamp 2000:317; Potts & Hagan 2000:132;143; Collins 2008:426); ODL social work students indicate satisfaction levels at least equivalent to those obtained by traditional classroom teaching (Haga & Heitkamp 2000:313; Potts & Hagan 2000:132; Collins 2008:426). Furthermore, in comparing the field instruction provided to students enrolled for a Master's programme in Social Work at one local and two distance campus locations of the School of Social Work at Michigan State University, McFall and Freddolino (2000:306) arrive at the conclusion that "with planning and the willingness to commit sufficient resources, it is possible to implement a quality field instruction component in a distance education setting at least comparable to what was provided on campus and in some cases, even better" (Collins 2008:426). In the study undertaken by Oliaro and Trotter (2010:329) amongst a cohort of recently graduates from Monash University BSW-course, it was found that off-campus social work education appeared to meet the needs of a particular group of students (i.e. older students who are married with children, employed and living some distance from a residential university).

Whilst the views and arguments against and in support of social work training through the vehicle of ODL were clearly noted in the consulted literature (referred to above), I detected in the former the unified call for more systematic, qualitative and quantitative research about and on the evaluation of ODL in social work education and students' satisfaction with distance offerings (Haga & Heitkamp 2000:310; Collins 2008:427; Oliaro & Trotter 2010:334). This said call for research found in the literature focussing specifically on social work education in the context of ODL is sanctioned in the general literature consulted on student satisfaction with ODL. Sahin and Shelley (2008:217, 221) emphasise the importance of research into student learning and postulate that without investigating undergraduate students' perceptions and experiences about their distance education courses it will be difficult to meet their needs and improve the students' ODL experiences and satisfaction. Understanding students' perceptions about ODL is the first step for establishing, adapting and maintaining a successful online and off-site learning environment. Walker and Kelly (2007:310) concur and point to the fact that online and ODL-universities who are in the

business of offering entry level to doctoral qualifications should continuously grapple with the question of concern: "How are we doing?".

This question of concern, "How are we doing?", coupled with the call for more systematic, qualitative and quantitative research about and on the evaluation of social work education in the ODL context served as motivation for the Department of Social Work, one of the service departments in Unisa (a mega ODL-university/service industry) to embark on a research project *with the aim of exploring and describing the perceptions of Unisa's social work students as customers about their social work studies at Unisa.*

This research project will enhance and further the aim of the Department of Social Work at Unisa to, through research, compile a body of knowledge on their students' or customers personal and learning related situations in the context of open and distance learning (Lawlor 2008; Lintvelt 2008; Schenck 2009; Wade 2009; Alpaslan 2010a; Alpaslan 2010b; Alpaslan & Lombard 2011).

Research methodology

In an attempt to realise the aforementioned aim, *an explorative and descriptive research design* **and Q-methodology as research method** was employed.

In the social sciences, a large proportion of research is conducted with the aim to explore a topic or to start a knowledge building process on a "new topic" or learn more about issues where little is known (Babbie & Mouton 2011:79; Neuman 1997:17). Subsequent to the exploration of a topic, a descriptive design can be employed with the intention to provide a detailed description of what was explored. In essence, the researcher explores and then describes that which was explored and/or observed (Babbie & Mouton 2011:79; Neuman 1997:20).

Q-methodology, as a research method, has its roots in the psychology and the work of William Stephenson (1902–1989), a British physicist and psychologist who introduced the former in 1935 as an alternative and/or ancillary to the traditional qualitative and quantitative

research methods (Ellingsen, Størksen & Stephens 2010:395, 396; Petit dit Dariel, Wharrad & Windle 2010:60, Angelopulo 2009:21). Q-methodology aims to study subjectivity (Petit dit Dariel et al 2010:60) and is concerned with the individual viewpoints of participants as it wishes to provide them with the opportunity to express their opinions about a topic not hypothesised by the researcher (Dziopa & Ahren 2011:39). In endeavouring to study and analyse subjective viewpoints, through employing Q-methodology, a combination of techniques inherent to the qualitative and quantitative approaches to research are employed (Akhtar-Danesh, Dehghan, Morrison & Foneska 2011:68–69) contributing to the trend not to classify Q-methodology along the qualitative-quantitative divide (Petit dit Dariel et al 2010:60) but to rather describe it as "qualiquantilogical" by nature (Dzopa & Ahren 2011:39; Angelopulo 2009:22). In the literature consulted (Dziopa & Ahren 2011:39-42; Ellingsen et al 2010:397–404; Angelopulo 2009:23–27), Q-methodology as research method or technique (Dziopa & Ahren 2011:39) is implemented sequentially according to the following five steps:

Step 1: Identifying a concourse on the topic of interest: This step entails focussed communicating about and collecting all possible "viewpoints" or "vantage points" on the issue or topic of interest in order to constitute the "concourse" (Ellingsen et al 2010:397). In respect of the research project reported on (hereafter referred to as the social work study), the research team[3] did not, as suggested by the literature (Ellingsen et al 2010:397), engage in interviewing purposively selected participants with the intention to identify a concourse, but took on, condensed and adapted the existing 49 item Q-sample (i.e. a representative set of statements from a concourse) as developed by Angelopulo (in the press) for a study earlier undertaken with the aim to report on students' perceptions of the factors that govern enrolment and retention in the academic programmes of the Department of Communication Science at the University of South Africa. In condensing and adapting the existing Q-sample for the social work study, the research team omitted some of the statements not applicable to social work and replaced a few statements in the adopted Q-sample with social work related specific statements (based on the input from the social work professors who formed part of the research team). With reference to the remaining adopted items in the adopted Q-sample the term "Communication Studies" was replaced with "Social Work", for example: the item

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[3] This research team comprised of two professors from the Department of Social Work and one from the Department of Communication Sciences at Unisa.

reading: "The Department Communication Studies gives high quality responses to enquiries" was rephrased as: "The Department of Social Work gives high quality responses to enquiries".

Step 2: Developing a representative set of statements (Q-sample): In view of executing this step in the Q-methodology process the researcher can, as suggested by Shinebourne and Adams (2007:104) gather items for inclusion in the Q-sample from various sources: from direct quotations and themes from the interviews conducted with participants; from statements originating from academic literature and the popular media, or can implement, or take on an existing ready-made Q-sample. For this social work study, as mentioned under Step 1 above, Angelopulo's (in the press) Q-sample comprising of 49 items was adopted, shortened and adapted for the purpose of this study. All the items were stated in the positive and focussed on the following seven key marketing dimensions of service quality: professionalism and skills as technical competence or dimensions of quality; reputation, credibility and image; accessibility and flexibility of the service industry and department; its reliability and trustworthiness and service recovery (i.e. the ability to recover from service problems), and its "servicescape" (i.e. the environment in which the service is offered and consumed) (Angelopulo 2009:24; Angelopulo, in the press). Before implementing the Q-sample it was pretested.

Step 3: Specifying the participants for the study and defining the conditions of instruction: In a Q-study the participants, engaged in the study are referred to as the "person sample" or "P-set" and are drawn from a "P-sample" or a "population sample" (Ellingsen et al 2010:398; Angelopulo 2009:26). Based on the fact that the aim with a Q-study is to obtain subjectivity by revealing the number and nature of different points of view (or perceptions) that exist within a group related to the topic of interest (Ellingsen et al 2010:398–399), smaller sample numbers are drawn from the P-sample (i.e. the population sample) employing sampling techniques normally used in qualitative research (Petit dit Dariel et al 2010:67). The person sample might for example be purposively selected. With purposive sampling, the researcher will *purposely or intentionally* seek out participants for inclusion in the sample based on the fact that they are knowledgeable about the topic of interest and able to articulate their viewpoints (Donalek & Soldwisch 2004:356).

In this social work study, the P-sample (or population) comprised of all social work students enrolled at the Department of Social Work at Unisa in 2011 that were listed as having a myLife@Unisa e-mail address[4] on myUnisa[5]. The 35 item Q-sample was sent to each student registered for the core social work modules from levels one to four and the students enrolled for postgraduate studies within the Department with a myLife@Unisa e-mail address. ***The conditions of instruction entailed the following***: Once the participant opened the e-mail message entitled: "Department of Social Work Survey" the following message popped up: "The Department of Social Work wants to find out what you think of your Social Work studies at Unisa. Please give us your views by completing the survey. The process takes 10–15 minutes" Click the 'NEXT' link http://www.unisa.ac.za/SocialWorkSurvey2011. to get to the assessment." Upon clicking on this link, an ethical statement appeared which the participant had to read prior to getting to the Q-sample where he or she had to respond to each of the items or statements on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". The students were also informed about this survey by sending out an SMS to each of them. On the Q-sample, provision was made allowing for free and additional comments related to the Q-set.

Step 4: Administering the Q sort: In terms of this step, the Q-sorting procedure is conducted in the presence of the researcher. The statements in the Q-sample are presented to the participants, on cards, one statement per card and randomly numbered (Ellingsen et al 2010:398; Angelopulo in the press). The participants need to sort these cards on a grid that allows placement in order of some continuum ranging from "strongly agree" on the one side to "strongly disagree" on the other side (Angelopulo, in the press).

In this social work study the administering of the Q-sort discussed in the previous paragraph was impossible, due to the dispersion of the participants (i.e. being distant students) and the

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[4] myLife@Unisa is Unisa's student e-mail system and its primary use is for purposes relating directly to education and for correspondences and communication and is considered as an official communication standard between the students and the University.

[5] On the Unisa's Intranet, the "myUnisa" is described as follows: "myUnisa is a web-based system for academic collaboration and study related interaction. The system has been developed to supplement and enhance academic interaction and improve communication between Unisa and its students as well as to provide opportunity for engagement amongst students" (i.e. on the discussion forums).

Q-sort was conducted online by requesting the participants to execute the instructions referred to under Step 3 above. A total of 1 364 participants partook in this study.

Step 5: Factor analysis and interpretation: This final step consists of analysing and interpreting the results. For the purpose of factor analysis a PQMethod software programme that can be employed where each participant's Q-sorts are entered into the programme and the Q-sorts are analysed using a by-person factor analysis (Watts & Stenner in Ellingsen et al 2010:400).

In this social work study the final step of factor analysis of the participants' Q-sorts still needs to be conducted and the outcome will be reported in another publication.

The research findings to be presented in the next section of this paper were deduced from the process of data analysis conducted on the free comments the participants offered in addition to statements in the Q-set.

The textual, non-numerical and unstructured nature of the free comments provided by the participants dictated to me that a qualitative data analysis process needs to be followed. Qualitative data analysis in essence entails working with data "which are textual, non-numerical and unstructured, organising it, breaking it into meaningful units, synthesising it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what to tell others" (Bogdan & Bilken 1982:145) In assisting me to analyse the free comments totalling 125 pages (typed in landscape format, in 1½ line spacing and 12 pitch font size), I used the eight steps for analysing qualitative data as proposed by Tesch (in Creswell 2009:186).

In order to enhance the trustworthiness of the research findings deduced specifically from the free and additional comments provided by the participants, I employed triangulation of data sources which per definition means combining the perceptions of more than two participants to underscore the identified themes (presented further on) (McBrien 2008:1288; Shenton 2004:66). To enhance the credibility of the findings, and based on the suggestion by Shenton (2004:64), I employed a widely-accepted qualitative data analysis protocol (i.e. the eight steps proposed by Tesch in Creswell 2009:186) to ensure that the empirical evidence to be

reported is representative of reality. Additionally, I engaged the members of the research team and fellow-colleagues to critically read the section on the research findings and my interpretation thereof as it provided a helpful opportunity to challenge and critique the robustness of the themes I have identified (McBrien 2008:1287).

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The research findings presented in the next part of this paper resulted from the analysis of free and additional comments the participants made in the space provided following the Q-set.

The discussion on the research findings is presented under the following sub-headings:
- o The biographical profile of the participants
- o A discussion on the themes (and sub-themes) that emerged from the processes of data analysis. This discussion is supported by narratives from the transcribed interviews and complemented by a literature control.

THE BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

A total of 1 364 participants partook in this study and in the table below a biographical profile of the participants is provided:

Table 1: Biographical profile of the participants

Gender		Race	N	Occupation	N
Male	**Female**	**Black**	1171	**Employed**	960
N	N	**Coloured**	39	**Unemployed**	404
233	1129	**Indian**	18		
		White	136		

Looking at the table above it becomes clear that the majority of the participants in this study were female, which confirms the trend that social work is a "female-dominated profession" (Pease 2011:406–407; McPhail 2004:323; Christie & Kruk 1998:25). With reference to race, the majority of the participants were black. This phenomenon typifies Unisa's student profile, because according to Unisa's Hemis figures for 2011 on Unisa's Intranet, 69% (or 227 680

out of 328 179) of the undergraduate and occasional students registered at Unisa are from the black race group.

More than two thirds of the participants in this study indicated that they were employed whilst pursuing their social work studies at Unisa. A similar trend was noted in Lintvelt's (2008:72) research, where 40 out of 90 respondents (i.e. student social workers) indicated that they were employed whilst studying at Unisa (cf Alpaslan & Lombard 2011:436). ODL-institutions, as stated earlier, promote social justice as they afford employed students the opportunity to study to obtain tertiary qualifications or further their qualifications (Oliaro & Trotter 2010:340; York 2008:162; Collins 2008:430).

DISCUSSION OF THEMES AND LITERATURE CONTROL

In this section the themes that emerged from the process of data analysis are presented and underscored by the free comments provided by the participants and complemented with a literature control.

THEME: MOTIVATIONS FOR CHOOSING THE UNISA BRAND AS UNIVERSITY OF CHOICE FOR STUDYING TOWARDS BECOMING SOCIAL WORKERS

A "brand" refers to "a name, term, sign, or symbol or any combination of them, that represents the unique benefits a company can provide through a particular product or service, in terms of attributes, value and culture" (Kotler in Wang & Yang 2010:177).

The motivations, deduced from the free comments, pointing to the benefits provided by Unisa and the latter being the "preferred brand" or the participants' university of choice in pursuing their social work studies are summarised below with direct quotations to underscore the former:

- ***Unisa is a recognised ODL-university in the world, produces quality students and a Unisa qualification ensures employability***
  "It's one of the best recognised distance open learning university in the world and it caters for all the people in the world".

"... it produces best students".

"... I know that with my social work qualification I get at Unisa I will be able to work everywhere".

"I chose Unisa ... it has a highly respected qualification".

"... Unisa is one of the highly recommended institutions when it comes to Social Work as a course".

"... Unisa Social Work is the best in the World. Other professional persons speak highly of Unisa Social Work Students who are doing ... practicals at their organisations".

- **Unisa provides the working person an opportunity to study and caters for mature students**

  "Studying social work at Unisa feels right to me because I'm working and study after work hours".

  "Unisa is one of most accessible Tertiary Institutions in Africa and I firmly believe that it produces some of the most competent graduates in the world".

  "... Unisa ... is an open and distance learning, so it enables them to work while they studying so that they can fulfil their needs and pay their study fees".

  "... the system [is] *very flexible and accommodates people who are full-time employed".*

  "Studying social work through UNISA has offered me a chance for a second career in my middle-age".

  "I thank God to use Unisa to reach the dream of my heart especially at my age .Unisa you proved [to] *me that it is never too late to study".*

This motivation forwarded for studying social work at an ODL-institution resonates in the literature pointing to the fact that ODL promotes social justice as it affords mature, employed, part-time, physically and geographically isolated students, as well as students with a disability to access tertiary education and an opportunity to obtain a social work qualification (Oliaro & Trotter 2010:340; York 2008:162; Collins 2008:430).

- ***Unisa is affordable, and being ODL, it is accessible***

  "I chose this institution because is affordable"... "... and reliable".

  "... Unisa is good for me ... I have to register for the modules I can afford, paying for them only".

  "It is affordable to us because we read at the same time we are working in order to survive and it is less than going to university and study full-time".

  "...Unisa is affordable ... You can study at home ... even if you do not have money to pay rent for flats ..."

  "… It offers distant learning and is ... accessible to a majority of students".

The fact that Unisa is perceived by the participants as "accessible" and "flexible" in terms of allowing students to study at their "own pace" (see the next sub-theme) ties in with key marketing dimensions as pointed out by Angelopolou (2009:24; in the press). The motivation for choosing Unisa as university of choice on the ground of its affordability is underscored by Kilfoil (in Schenck 2009:299) who states that Unisa attracts a large number of students who just come straight from school because Unisa is the most affordable tertiary institution.

- ***Unisa allows for independent study at the students' own pace***

  "I like to be part of Unisa because I study at my own pace".

  "... to be a Unisa student gives enough time to study on your own".

  "I like the fact that I study independently".

In confirmation of the previous motivation and quotations provided, the literature states that ODL enables students as individuals to follow their own educational pursuits, by providing the ultimate in "individualistic timing and localisation". Students can study in a variety of locations (i.e. from home and/or work) at a time convenient to them, at their own pace, and with some degree of self-determination and through self-regulated learning (Artino 2008:261; Collins 2008:427,430).

- ***Unisa provides students access to tertiary education who would otherwise not be allowed entrance to other universities as they do not meet the prerequisite entry requirements***

  "... my application was rejected by Unibo University and when applied at Unisa the service was fast and I was instantly a student irrespective of my lower marks. Studying @

Unisa it was like a dream come true and I've never seen a versatile institution like Unisa".

"... the admission that Unisa gives to us people who didn't have admission to any university ... Unisa ... helps a lot of students who would not have had the opportunity to access the university. I love the strategy that Unisa uses to reach out to the less-fortunate".

"I study at Unisa because I passed my Matric with a very low symbol but Unisa did not reject me".

Literature confirms that ODL allows students, who do not meet the prerequisite entry requirements, access into the arena of tertiary education (Oliaro & Trotter 2010:340; York 2008:162; Collins 2008:430).

In conclusion to this theme: By being an ODL-institution, Unisa as a brand is fulfilling a critical social mandate to serve people who would otherwise not have access to education – either for financial reasons, or because of employment, or living in remote areas, or they cannot access residential universities due to a disability (Unisa Self-evaluation Portfolio for the HEQC Institutional Audit 2008:15).

The focus of the discussion shifts now to the participants' perceptions of their experiences of being customers of Unisa. After scrutinising and analysing their remarks I arrived at the conclusion that the participants' perceptions in relation to how is it is to be customers of Unisa (hereafter also referred to as "the service industry") and the Department of Social Work (hereafter referred to "as a service department" within this industry), were experience-based, and were *neither* positive *or* negative, but *rather positive and negative and realistic*. To substantiate, the following quotation (one of many) points to this: "*I'm just a proud Unisa student and knowing that as an institution it's not possible that all of my needs and expectations can be met*". They have shared in great specificity their experiences and experience-based perceptions by referring to aspects that satisfy them, or that they feel positive about. Likewise, aspects that dissatisfy or cause them to feel negative were also

mentioned. They also forwarded recommendations to enhance their experiences whilst shopping for knowledge and skills at Unisa and its Department of Social Work.

Based on this conclusion (referred to above) I would like to present the participants' experiences and experience-based perceptions according to the following themes in the discussion to follow:

- The social work student customers[6] are satisfied and perceive and experience studying at Unisa as positive.
- The customers are satisfied and perceive and experience studying at the Department of Social Work as positive.
- Aspects related to Unisa that the customers are dissatisfied about and perceive negatively
- Aspects related to the Department of Social Work that the customers are dissatisfied about and perceive negatively
- Recommendations from the customers to enhance their experiences whilst shopping for knowledge and skill at Unisa and its Department of Social Work.

THEME: THE CUSTOMERS ARE SATISFIED AND PERCEIVE AND EXPERIENCE STUDYING AT UNISA AS POSITIVE

In underscoring this theme, the following comments summarise the combined voice of the participants in testifying to their experience-based satisfaction and positivity about studying at Unisa:

"Studying at Unisa is good and interesting … Unisa, it's impressing because [it's] *giving us high education on studying alone".*

"It is very nice and enjoyable… to study at UNISA…"

"Unisa is the Best in studying social work with".

"Studying at this institution is one of the best experiences of my life".

"According to my own point of view there is nothing wrong with studying Social work at UNISA because UNISA has changed my life from bottom-up…"

"… here at Unisa the service is excellent".

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[6] Hereafter the phrase "social work student customer" will be referred to as "customer", unless otherwise stated.

"... I find Unisa very reliable and I am glad I chose it".

Aspects that were repeatedly mentioned pointing to what underlies the participants' satisfaction and positivity about Unisa are encapsulated by the following comments:

"The staff is always very friendly and helpful", and "very effective".

"... our tutors are very friendly and helpful".

"... the course content is accurate and well organised or I may say, it's perfect for one to study social work with Unisa".

"... with the support you get from Unisa the sky is the limit".

"... I think that your examinations are fair to students".

"Unisa ... makes things easy for me through their study materials and easy access to its internet ..."

"What I can say is that I don't have bad experience with Unisa. Everything is being handled well. The communication from lectures to students is excellent".

"... all in all Unisa is excellent and I love the service I get".

THEME: THE CUSTOMERS ARE SATISFIED AND PERCEIVE AND EXPERIENCE STUDYING AT THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK AS POSITIVE

Interspersed in the participants' comments were accounts pointing to their satisfaction with and positivity about studying at the Department of Social Work. The following comments portray the collective voice of the participants in this regard:

"Studying Social Work with Unisa is fantastic, nothing needs to be changed. I ... am satisfied..." "So far I am very happy about the social work division at Unisa".

"Studying social work at Unisa made me feel like a qualified one on my first level".

"The Department of Social Work at Unisa is doing quite well, they know their job".

"I just want the social work department to know that I ... enjoyed the studies so much that I have decided to do as my masters".

Some of the comments above correspond with those of the respondents (i.e. fourth level student social workers) in Lintvelt's (2008:80–81) research.

The specific factors contributing to the participants' satisfaction with the Department specifically (illustrated by way of summarising the common experiences and perceptions) were the following:

- ***The user-friendliness of the social work study material***: "*I want* [to] *express how nicely the social work modules have been compiled. I find them very easy to use and really beneficial"; "the course content very much accurate and understandable"; "I loved to read my study guides it was like I had someone sitting there with me teaching me",* and "… [the] *social work study materials are easy to follow even without help".* Fifteen of the 90 respondents in Linvelt's study (2008:80:118) also made reference to the user-friendliness of the study material.

- ***The support from the staff in the Department***: "*I believe that the Department of Social Work caters for us and care about their student*[s]*…"; "...the kind of support get from Department of Social Work makes learning to be easy"; "...the social work department is helpful in all ways…",* and *"I like good services that social worker staff they offer to students".*

- ***The friendliness, professionalism and efficiency of the department's staff members***: *"...The staff members are friendly and the services they offer are perfect"; "I am pleasantly surprised by how helpful, efficient and friendly members of the department are"; "... [they]... have time to explain to us anything that we don't understand"; "I am happy and I like the professionalism and the care that is shown"; "Social work lectures are trustworthy you can rely on them"; "... [they] … are highly trained people with lot of experiences as they are also social workers they teach very well",* and "*Social work is the best discipline in the category of human science and the social workers of Unisa are amazing people… I like the fact that they are a team and they are willing to help each other and the students these guys really love their jobs and they make it look so easy".*

The previously mentioned sub-themes' corresponding comments referring to the staff in the Department, match the utterances made by the respondents in Linvelt's research (2008:80–81) where 30 out of the 90 respondents were of the view that the Department of Social Work

is the one department where lecturers go out of their way to assist students when they need help.

- ***Tutorial classes and workshops are helpful***: *"... doing workshops helps a lot to gain experiences about the work of the social worker"* ; *"... the workshops conducted by committed lecturers ... helped me in my learning process"; "We ... benefit from the Tutorials",* and *"The tutorials are easy to understand and make studying easier".*

- ***Easy access to Unisa and lecturers****: "...myUnisa is very helpful and the lectures are communicating with is via myLife. It's easy to get access to lectures at Unisa and they are helpful",* and *"Good communication with students that is via myLife, SMS, and myUnisa".*

To sum up the previous two themes illuminating aspects contributing to the customers' satisfaction about Unisa and its Department of Social Work, the following comment: *"It has been a very valuable learning experience studying Social Work at Unisa generally I have been satisfied with the service I was given as a student and over the past five years have experienced few problems but these were easily resolved."*

THEME: ASPECTS RELATED TO UNISA THAT THE CUSTOMERS ARE DISSATISFIED ABOUT AND PERCEIVE NEGATIVELY

The aspects, related to Unisa specifically, that the participants felt unhappy about and perceived in a negative light are presented next as sub-themes. These are underscored by participants' comments highlighting their commonly shared experiences and experience-based perceptions in this regard.

- **Customers' dissatisfaction relating to registration and lack of guidance on subject-choices at registration**

While prospective customers of Unisa are extensively informed that they must "apply" before "they can register", participants experience registration negatively for the following reasons: *"During registration periods it is difficult to register at the centres as it is congested,* [and] *the queue for registration is always long".*

"... [There is] a lack of support during registration ..." "... you are just given the calendar there is no one to guide/help you" ... choose perfect subject. You find yourself doing wrong things and you have to ask your fellow student s/he will give what best for him or her so you end up repeating one thing because you didn't get exact info". Also *"... the subject advisors* [available]*" "...sometimes they confuse you about what modules to take and which are the prerequisites. When you prepare to register for fourth level, you then discover you have been misinformed you have unnecessary modules which you need to throw away and you have modules missing and you cannot do your fourth level the way you intend".* Furthermore, *"The service ... at the Admin lab (Joburg campus) is poor they don't take students serious and they misguide us especially when you want to add or cut subjects or when u desperately need their services".*

These experiences concerning registration corresponds with the findings from Alpaslan and Lombard (2011:441) and Linvelt's studies (2008:75), and match a comment made by the Bureau of Market Research at Unisa (2010) following a study into Unisa student registration and campus perception study, stating that students perceive staff at registration as incapable of assisting with course choices relevant to career aspirations due to their lack of exposure and insight into certain highly specialised fields.

- **The late arrival of study material**

Reference to this sub-theme was noticed throughout the data set and the following storylines are reflective of this:

"Study Materials arriving late...", as well as "*… practical assignment workbooks", "... and sometimes we don't receive tutorial letters on time especially for exams preparations".* When the study material "*… to complete the assignments or tasks ... reach us late & we end up writing things that we don't understand and even copying from our friends because of the time".*

In underscoring the above sub-theme and comments, 28 out of the 90 respondents in Lintvelt's study (2008:77) who were students who had registered for at least one fourth level module in January 2007 indicated that they experienced problems with study material. Some of them did not receive all their material in time (Alpaslan & Lombard 2011:441; Botha 2011:458) while other students complained that they did not receive some of the material at

all. Delays in the supply of course books were also mentioned as reason for unhappiness amongst distance students at the University of Education, in Winneba, Ghana (Asante 2008:70).

- **Assignments getting lost in the post**

In reflecting the participants' dissatisfaction in relation to this sub-theme the following supporting comments are provided: "*I get frustrated when one of my assignments submitted is not received by UNISA*"; "*… assignments tend to get lost*", and "*… here in Umtata there is a problem that the students' assignments are getting lost*".

- **Dissatisfaction around Unisa's examinations**

Three comments were found related to students' unhappiness with the examinations: "*... examinations, it's difficult. It's unfair to write major subjects/modules in succession it means that you want us to fail and remain Unisa student for years*"; "*The examination dates are too close to each other for social work subjects*", and "*Unisa's examinations were set for full-time students, not all of us are able to attend classes on weekdays and weekends*".

- **Unisa not responding promptly to requests for remarking of scripts and assignments**

In a sense related to the former sub-theme, three participants made reference to the fact of Unisa not responding promptly to requests for the remarking of scripts and assignments. In conveying their sentiments, one wrote: "*…UNISA do*[es] *not respond about the remarking and checking of the script sometimes the lie that they take it into consideration. If you send an SMS or email they do not respond to that query of remarking and checking*".

- **Customers' dissatisfaction with Unisa's ICT-services**

In summarising the communal dissatisfaction, amongst the students related to this sub-theme, the following comments: "*I struggle for a long time now to get myUnisa password*", I *struggle to logon to myUnisa, I only logon to myLife account*"; [I struggle] *to get my study material online*"; "*... myUnisa always have a problem to access it*"; "*... here in Mthatha ... the myUnisa system is very poor…*"; "*Submission of assignments can be difficult due to myUnisa* [being] *off-line*", and "*... the fact that myUnisa is having so many technical problems is annoying and disrupting*".

- **Negative perceptions about, and dissatisfaction around, the closure of the Call Centre**

The following comments encapsulate the collective voice of the participants around the closure of the call centre: "…*contact has not been good since the Contact centre doesn't work anymore... and we can't phone!!!! This has made Unisa an unpleasant place to study through"; "This has made it more difficult to have my enquiries replied to. I can't even get hold of the numbers I should be phoning because this system is so inefficient"; "The closure of the call centre is a disadvantage for those students who do not have access to computers as it sometimes takes a number of days to respond to the SMSs",* and *"I tried many times to phone and tried to use the new SMS system but failed to get any response. The email address also did not work. As far as I know I was not the only one that had problems with this (communication board of myUnisa). I heard similar comments from other students".*

- **Dissatisfaction experienced in relation to library matters at Unisa**

Comments concerning the unhappiness experienced in terms of library matters were made along the following lines: "… *we have problems with books. ... there are no books if you find a book it will be very old (year) ... there are no air-condition in the library ...";* **"…** *we struggle to study for our exam due to unavailability of space (LIBRARY)"; ... at rural areas ... there is a shortage of resources ... a lack of computers and libraries which affect us ...";* "*I am not happy with the shortage of study materials especially social work research materials in Polokwane library",* and *"libraries are too far ...".*

The dissatisfaction experienced by this study's participants corresponds with the complaints of a minority of participants in Linvelt's study (2008:75) where they felt negative about the lack of books (especially at the Regional Libraries) and the lack of space to study. Asante (2008:70) in a study amongst Basic Education Students at the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana, found that 81,3% of 268 of the participants expressed low perceived satisfaction in relation to library support in that libraries are either non-existent, or far away and ill equipped.

- **Customers' dissatisfaction with the state of facilities, lack of resources for and lack of workshops, tutorial and discussion classes at regional offices, and the nature of services rendered by staff at regional offices**

From the comments made it became clear that "*the staff @ the Bloemfontein campus is not helpful to students when registering courses*" resulting in students "*… registering wrong courses*". They are "*… not friendly and they are sloppy and even eat behind the counter even if they are not on lunch. They help you as if they are doing us a favour*". Focussing on Mthatha, "*the staff employed here is not knowledgeable about most of the queries presented to them*".

The lack of resources at some of the regional offices was specifically referred to: "*… in Polokwane we are still suffering for resources*"; "*… at Bloemfontein branch there are no tutorial classes, no satellite class and no group discussion*"; "*…"The facilities (in Durban) e.g. toilets, sometimes the lift* [doesn't] *work, it's overcrowded*": "*… In the Mthatha area ... there are no facilities like libraries and this is a great challenge as there is no space for studying ... Unisa is not prepared to offer discussion classes in this region … Mthatha region's lab IS OVERPOPULATED always occupied by students doing computer-related courses. There are times where we do not get any access*", and "*The Unisa building in the CBD of Johannesburg is in a poor state and not well-maintained*".

The lack of resources referred to above, is confirmed in Alpaslan and Lombard's (2011:443) study where the social work students using the Durban Regional Office of the Department of Social Work in Boland House and Unisa's Stalwart Simulane Street Campus in Durban experienced similar challenges causing unhappiness.

One customer stated "*video conferences are just waste of time and money*" and to qualify this experience-based perception the following comments: "*The equipment of Unisa is not enough and good for an example the sound system during discussion classes. The video conference volume is very low we cannot hear correctly*", and "*Video conferencing is really not the best option for having class as the openness of the students is automatically not present anymore*".

The aforementioned discussion focussed on aspects related to Unisa that the customers are unhappy about and on which they have negative experience-based perceptions. In the discussion to follow *the aspects that the customers are dissatisfied about and perceive negatively related to the Department of Social Work* are presented.

THEME: ASPECTS RELATED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK THAT THE CUSTOMERS ARE DISSATISFIED ABOUT AND PERCEIVE NEGATIVELY

This theme is be presented under sub-themes and, in substantiating the former, excerpts from the participants' comments are quoted in a summarised fashion to convey the shared experiences and experience-based perceptions related to this theme and its accompanying sub-themes.

- **Assignment-related dissatisfactions**

The student customers' dissatisfaction about this aspect was frequently noted in the data set. The participants were unhappy about the fact that "***the department of Social work delays the assignments feedback***" and "*we receive feedback on assignments late*", especially in view of the fact that "*… some modules don't have tutorial classes*". This resulted in a commonly shared experience where *"… we are writing our examination without having our assignment results and feedbacks which ... leave us not knowing where to improve*". Furthermore, "*... the date of submission [of assignments] constantly change ... This disadvantaged me because I had submitted mine on time and those who had late submissions benefited*" Also, "*… marks for assignments not posted*".

This high turnaround time of submitted assignments causing unhappiness as stated above, also surfaced as complaints in the studies of Botha (2011:458) and Lintvelt (2008:142) conducted amongst Unisa's social work students and the same was also mentioned in a study conducted by Asante (2008:70) amongst distance students at the University of Education, in Winneba, Ghana.

- **Unhappiness about the way of marking of assignments, incorrect answers on MCQ-papers and incorrect allocation of marks**

Comments pointing to the customers' unhappiness about this aspect were noted frequently in the data set. Comments portraying their shared experiences and perceptions in this regard were:

"*The answer scripts to exams are marked by different markers and thus there is not enough control of the subjectivity of the marker or his/her expertise in marking. Therefore, a good*

mark is not based only on the student's knowledge but is also based on luck of the draw when it comes to markers. The same applies to assignments. I have proof of this lack of standardisation in marking assignments both last year and this year".

"Queries regarding incorrect or ambiguous answers to MCQ Assignments are disregarded with remarks like" 'it doesn't count that much towards your final mark so we are not going to correct (our obviously wrong) answers'."

"… some lecturers provide thorough feedback on problems and assignments whilst others don't …"

"… I was not happy with … the communication on the assignments". "We wrote an essay-based assignment and never received any feedback or the marking criteria that we were told we would receive in order to mark our own assignments. It was the only relevant assignment that we did. We went into our exams not having any idea where we stood".

"Marks on written assignments added up incorrectly resulting in students having to resubmit assignments (at their own cost and obviously increased stress levels!)".

"… [with] written we find that some places are not marked …"

"… Sometimes assignments are returned without comments and sometimes unmarked".

In Lintvelt's study (2008:81,119) the respondents had similar complaints as the ones mentioned above.

- **Unhappiness about the non-availability of staff members (telephonically) and slow/no response to emails**

This aspect was noticed the most in the data set and while a few of the participants shared the experience-based perception that some lecturers *"… reply promptly to emails and voicemails"*, the majority had an opposite perception and experience: *"Getting hold of some lecturers are near to impossible"*; *"Some lecturers often do not respond to emails and are seldom available telephonically"*; and this challenge *"… to get hold of the lecturers or course leaders and results to frustration and loneliness on the side of students." "Trying to call lecturers is like gamble because often the phone will ring without being answered and if answered there's sometimes a feeling that you are bothering them and you are unreasonable for not automatically knowing the answer"*, or *"once contact is made the lecturers … are very abrasive with the students"*.

The said obstacle contributing to the participants' unhappiness was also found in the studies of Alpaslan and Lombard (2011:442), Botha (2011:458) and Lintvelt (2008:119) and Galusha (sa) is of the opinion that "the perceived lack of feedback or contact with the teacher is one of the common barriers to distance learning".

- **Unhappiness with the content and quality of the study material**

One participant, a first year student, stated: "*I find the study material was written for persons that are already in the field and know the terminology. I found it very difficult*". Some of the participants in Alpaslan and Lombard's (2011:442) study shared the same sentiments.

Pertaining to the quality of the study material, the shared critique was: "*Numerous spelling and grammatical errors in study guides resulting in it sometimes affecting the whole essence of the message*" and "*There are often typos, poor language use and inconsistent instructions*". "*I find the standard of the multiple choice assignments to be of a poor quality*".

- **Complaints around and frustrations with supervisors; workshop facilitators, workshops and tutorial classes**

The complaints concerning the workshop facilitators and supervisors can be summed up along the following lines: "*Many of the workshop facilitators and supervisors are not motivated or don't know the person-centred approach*"; "*… are unfamiliar with the course material and are poor at facilitating*; "*… are not prepared*"; I *… really got frustrated with workshop facilitators being so person-centred that it ended up that no work gets done because fellow students don't prepare*"; "*… Some of the facilitators are rude and impatient with us*".

The complaints and frustrations concerning the tutorial classes and workshops were generally about the fact that there "*… are no tutorial classes for social work modules and no satellite classes too*" at some of the regional offices", and if they are available "*… tutoring is not at the expected quality level in small towns*". While tutorial classes are available to students at first level in the larger regions, "*A lot of students … are having difficulties in their second year because there are no tutorial classes*". Adding to this is "*… the fact that the second level students don't have workshops anymore … we often don't know what to do with the*

portfolio and the failure rate is high". This aforementioned difficulty hints at the need for more workshops and corresponds with a similar request expressed by some of the second and third level students in Alpaslan and Lombard's (2011:443) study.

Another common complaint was: "*The social work tutorial classes are only conducted on Saturdays[7] and the classes are too big; it's hard to concentrate*", and "*… we did not have enough classes to discuss the work*". Some participants complained that they "*… had to put in leave for these sessions*", and "*… while Social Work students ... are not getting enough workshops regarding our course, if we do get them, sometimes, you feel like you wasted your time being there .... I feel that when we have workshops it should be worthwhile*". (cf Alpaslan & Lombard 2011:443). What frustrated some of the participants was the "*… cancellation of workshops without proper notice*" and changing of dates of tutorial classes and workshops: "*I do not like the fact that dates for tutorials change. As a person working full time one has to plan dates a while ahead so that employers are in the know. Almost every workshop date has changed this year which is extremely frustrating*".

Some participants also noted that they had to take leave to attend workshops, with the latter being "*… too far from us and it costs a lot to get there*" and "*… we have to travel long distances[8]*" (cf Callahan & Wharf 1989:64; Lintvelt 2008:119). Also, "*… sometimes it is difficult* [especially] *to attend workshops on three to five consecutive days for more than six hours a day*". Adding to this was another train of thought that the "*… workshops are too much*".

- **Unhappiness with fellow-students being undisciplined about attending and unprepared for workshops**

Comments underscoring this sub-theme are:

"*… Lack of discipline during workshops. The Department said that workshops are compulsory but some of the students were always absent*".

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[7] Deducing from some of the comments in the data set the researcher noted that the "full-time" and unemployed students would like to have more tutorial classes (cf Lintvelt 2008: 74) during the week, and for all the modules and some even mentioned having lectures every day.

[8] The students from Mthatha have to travel to Durban for workshops, while the ones from George/Oudtshoorn have to go to Cape Town.

"*Workshops are INCREDIBLY frustrating to me as students arrive unprepared and unwilling to work or participate. This is just ignored and students who are prepared suffer*, and "*… workshops are a waste of time is because students are all different in their level of participation and commitment and preparation and this leads to the workshops not really functioning properly. The groups are too big and it is cumbersome and does not really work.*"

- **Dissatisfaction around calendar changes and rules and restrictions in relation to the number of social work modules students are allowed to register for**

The following comments provide a general summary of the students' discontent concerning the aforementioned sub-theme:

"*One thing I do not like about social work is the fact that it has way too many restrictions/rules such as: students are not allowed to register for more than 10 modules per year*", and "*The fact that Unisa is always changing the Calendar every year. That affected me because I was supposed to do 12 modules this year* [referring to 2011] *as was documented on the 2010 calendar and now I am doing only 10 modules because Unisa did not allow me to register that 12 module as was* [stated] *in the 2010 curriculum … which is not fair to me because the social work curriculum change every year and there is no one who is willing to help*. Furthermore, "*… when you fail one year course you can't register for the following year courses. You* [are] *stuck*", and "*Their* [referring to the Department] *rules … don't allow students to take ten subjects for the last year unless you got 60% in each subject*".

In support of the aforementioned, 16 participants' in Lintvelt's study (2008:81) were, amongst others, dissatisfied with the fact that the Department decided during their third level in 2006, that students whose average mark for social work is under 60% will not be allowed to register for certain modules for the forthcoming fourth level and that these students will have to complete the fourth level over a two year period. They also complained about the fact that rules are set and changed without calculating the impact on students' lives, and informing them timeously and comprehensively.

Before providing the concluding remarks, the last theme derived from the participants' comments is presented.

THEME: RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CUSTOMERS TO ENHANCE THEIR EXPERIENCES WHILST SHOPPING FOR KNOWLEDGE AND SKILL AT UNISA AND ITS DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK

The comments made by the participants in this study did not only focus on the aspects they were satisfied and dissatisfied about, whilst shopping for knowledge and skills towards obtaining a social work qualification at Unisa. They also forwarded some recommendations and suggestions on how this shopping experience can be improved. These recommendations are presented next, sub-theme wise, and excerpts from the participants' comments encapsulating and illuminating the common thread in relation to the specific recommendations forwarded, will be provided in an integrated and collapsed manner.

- **Capping student numbers so that quality academic standards are not compromised**

"I think Unisa must reduce the number of intake for social workers students' coz lot of unmanageable students by staff will produce poor academic qualification. Limited student[s] *per year is advisable because it not about the money but quality of our education …"* A participant in Lintvelt's (2008:74) study underscores this sub-theme by stating: *"To address overcrowding, there should be a limit to the number of students who register".*

- **Employ more staff**

Latching on to the former suggestion was the recommendation that Unisa should employ more staff in the Department. This was mentioned along the following lines: *"… the university must hire more lecturers so that the current lecturers do not do more work and be seldom available at their offices at all times"; "More tutors for second level",* and *"… all UNISA centres should have a facilitator for workshops".*

- **Appoint competent staff and evaluate their performance**

This recommendation is related to the aforementioned sub-themes and the participants suggested the following: *"Get the qualified markers when they mark our portfolios"; "I would like UNISA to just check their facilitators – the fact that we had the two extremes in two modules meaning one was amazing and one was terrible is worrying for me". "One thing that I believe needs some attention are the facilitators the department gets to facilitate the workshops".*

"*Another issue is the quality of tutors you employ ... some of them know their subject matter but others do not ... I would be so pleased if you can look into the matter for us*". Furthermore, "*… The Department of Social Work should regular*[ly] *evaluate their tutors. Some tutors are very lazy and do not prepare their work before going to class …*".

"*… make sure that the supervisors* [appointed] *are equipped with the relevant knowledge to help them through their studies at fourth level*", and "*May I ask you to develop means of evaluating our lectures because we found some being too harsh on us without being clear on what they actually want?*".

- **Recommendations related to career guide and assistance in choosing the right modules**

Firstly, *"Make career guidance compulsory for all students"* (cf Mohapi & Baloyi 2011:18). Secondly, *"I would appreciate if Unisa can give us well-trained and patient counsellors, reason being: university is different to high school and we don't understand the requirements stated in the brochure and they need to be there ... to give guidelines especially when you are a 1st time student"*. Thirdly, *"The department should place people who know social work modules and how to select them. Those who are working at the help desk for registration"*, *"… please train staff to have sufficient information, especially, on satellite campuses"*, or *"... employ qualified people who can manage the expectations of students and on how to select subjects"*. Haga and Heitkamp (2000:309) concur with this recommendation when stating: "Academic advisement should be provided on-site … to assist students in securing necessary information about program offerings".

"*During registration ... it is difficult to register at the centres as it is congested. Please could UNISA deploy more staff?*" (cf Lintvelt 2008:75).

The researcher would like to add to these recommendations by stating that the Department, as a matter of urgency, should revisit how user-friendly the current brochure is in assisting the students to choose the correct and required menu of modules to meet the requirements to qualify as social workers. Choosing the wrong modules prolongs students' study time and incurs extra costs. Consideration must be given to the idea of providing a brochure with set menus of modules the students can choose from and this must be accompanied by CDs or DVDs explaining the menus of modules.

- **More contact teaching suggested**

"*I wish there could be more face to face contact with the lectures*"; "*We would appreciate if the university* [can] *offer us everyday classes to improve our education and results*"; "*Having classes for all the subjects will really help us as students ...*" These recommendations correspond with ones made by the student social workers in Lintvelt's (2008:74–80) study.

Should the former not be possible, "*… more workshops or video conferences be held during the year*"; "*… more discussion classes ... via satellite broadcasts*", and "*offer workshops again for second year and third year*".

"*The department can add more days for the workshops*"; but "*must set their dates for workshops on holidays or weekends because most of the students are working*". "*It could be more convenient to have discussion classes at our branches, not only one town per province, or if the department will check which regional campus has a great number of students and then bring discussion classes closer*". "*Make the discussion classes longer* [hour-wise] *especially for students who have to travel to get there*", "*… and after the discussion the information be posted on myUnisa*".

While the majority voice recommended more teaching contact one participant recommended: "*limit workshops in fourth level*" (cf Alpaslan & Lombard 2011:443). The reason for this recommendation might be provided by another who wrote: "*The practical part during* [the] *fourth year which requires students to attend a session once a week at a recognised institution is not suitable for distance learning, [especially] for those who are working. Honestly, what kind of company would allow you to be away from duty once a week? This simply leads to losing the job which is supporting your studies. I suggest the programme should be done continuously like for three or four months. One can easily take a leave and finish the whole programme without losing the job.*"

- **Recommendations related to better communication and more contact with staff in the Department**

This sub-theme ties in with the former and a common suggestion was "*… the communication between the staff and the students can be improved*". On how this can come to fruition, the following suggestions were forthcoming: "*I would like to see the group visits by lecturers*

increased as that would enable the students the opportunity to raise concerns, difficulties that we encounter in our studies", or "*… at least once a year, one lecturer could come to our branch before exams to clarify some of us with the content of the module and not only for first year students but other higher levels*"; "*I would like the lecturer to answer email from time to time*"; "*Lecturers should commit themselves to respond to questions posted by students in myUnisa*" "*… and participate in the discussions that students have on myUnisa, [this] would better the relationship between students and lecturers and students will have answers to most if not all their problems*"; "*I request that even lecturers cell number must be found in the Tutorial letter*", and "*I would appreciate better simplified information about my course, e.g. receiving an SMS to notify us if there is any information on myUnisa that we should know about. Most of us are working and we can access the computer lab only on weekends. I would appreciate it if an SMS can be sent so that we can make means even, if it means paying for internet café*".

- **Recommendations related to the content, packaging and presentation of the study material**

With reference to the *content* the *participants suggested*: "*I don't have a problem with the course content as much as I believe there is a problem when any one approach* [i.e. The Person Centred Approach] *presents itself as the only way of facilitating change. I believe that exposing students to other schools of thought and possibilities would be beneficia*l"; "*I think the department of Social Work must teach us something about the Children's Act,* and "*More information about statutory work should be given*" (cf Lintvelt 2008:132). "*I strongly feel that the modules need to deal more with realistic situations and should point out exactly what needs to be done in a case where, for example, a child is removed from the family system and the social worker needs to help the child and family incorporate back into society and information* [on social problems need to be provided]." "*More up to date study guides containing ... current literature*" and "*… carry*[ing] *relevant information relating to Social Work in South Africa* (i.e. "*make sure that the correct Acts are in the modules*). "*Students need to be given opportunity to make presentations to better their language skills*".

On the packaging and presentations of the study material the following was recommended: "*Some of the course content needs to be more explainable and better outlined, for example: more pictures, diagrams and making the reader more active in the content*", and "*The*

vocabulary that you use in study material is too much complicated. I wish that you could simplify it".

"… The department could provide us with some audio visuals which contains the lecture's record about each module"; "I would like if our lecturers" "... make the video presentation part of the enrolment package" or "... provide CD's or DVD's for discussion classes so that If you missed it you can buy it and proceed with your studies" (cf Lintvelt 2008:129) and *"It is difficult for us students to complete some of the tasks given ... when ... are asked to use certain materials which are scarce or very difficult to access, for example, getting a DVD or CD to complete an assignment... make sure that those resources where easily available in the market".*

- **Recommendations related to the delivery of study material, the turnaround-time for assignments and the marking of assignments**

"A room for submission of assignments [at each regional office] *while late or if* [problem] *is with Unisa ... or national problems like post office strikes".*

"...study material must [be] *delivered very soon when the student receives assignments"* and *"It would help to get our assignments back before we start final exams ..."and "...Please in future try and send results for assignments sooner instead of keeping us waiting for weeks after we submit them".*

"Marking must be done by professional people and those people must have a clear understanding of the module ... because it discourages committed individuals when their assignments are poorly marked" and *"... When our assignments are marked, the marker needs to legibly identify themselves and not just provide a signature which is impossible to identify the person concerned. Also both positive and negative feedback needs to be given so that we are able to gauge where we are working at a satisfactory level and where we are failing".* Also, *"…written assignment*[s] *need to be checked before being posted back to students as we find that some places are not marked or the marks have not been calculated correctly"* These recommendation resonates with the ones forwarded by the participants in Lintvelt's (2008:130) study.

- **Earlier exposure to practice and more practical work training**

"I have not always received positive feedback from professionals regarding current Unisa students practising in the field as most feel we have had good theoretical training but those already employed in the field are lacking with regards to their practical skills"; "I strongly recommend that social work students be exposed to more practical work"; "... the practical work should ... start earlier... (cf Lintvelt 2008:132). *"This should be done from first year level and not just at fourth year ...; and include more workshops and practicals especially on the second level and third level"; "[actually] in each and every level of the course."* For example: *"This practical work should ... include work with organisations that are related to the profession's practices and maybe some voluntary work by students to such organisations",* and *"Second year must engage in social auxiliary work and participate in a community project. Third and fourth years do more practical in different fields for six months and six* [months] *in training".*

- **Provide a database with information on practical placement settings**

"The Department of Social Work must provide the students with the list of institutions for practical studies. This will enable the students to be more acceptable in the institutions"; "UNISA must help students to have block placements just like other universities"; "Please help with information as how to get leads to practicals what is needed after completion of the course", and *"… when students are placed at different organisations I suggest that the Unisa and organisation to have some kind of workshop with them to avoid some problems and chaos with student and the contact person – The expectations and the requirements* [for all parties] *concerned should be clear".* In support of the last comment, Raphael and Rosenblum (in McFall & Freddolino 2000:296) postulate that "providing expertise in the appropriate use of liaison activities to facilitate learning, identify problems and offer consultation are services that demonstrate the [Department's] commitment to collaborate with agencies".

- **Venue-related recommendations**

"[With the] *lots of students, the tutorial venues are usually packed. Strategise to divide students from the beginning"; "... keep the workshop classes small",* or *"... please find bigger venues for discussion classes"* [as] *"… there is not enough space available for all students",* and *"... you hardly hear what the facilitator is saying and there's never enough chairs for students to sit".* Also, *"… please help make discussion rooms available for us*

mostly during Saturdays or try to talk to the securities on the access points ... that we may not be denied access". The aforementioned recommendations correspond with similar recommendations forward by the respondents in Lintvelt's (2008:74) study.

"I would like to see Sunnyside campus with ... printing equipment because the one in the main campus is not made to meet our needs".

- **Unisa must avail more bursaries to students studying social work and Department of social work must act as advocate for students to resolve challenges around the payment of bursaries offered by the Department of Social Development**

"We need more bursaries" and *"S*ocial Work Scholarship needs to be made available to all deserving students". *"I would like effective communication between Department of Social Work and Department of Social Development because I am the bursary holder and I am unable to get my funds from the Department of Social Development"*, and *"The Department should be capable of awarding bursaries to needy students just like any other university from the Department of Social Development."*

- **Inform administration about and assist us with registering as student social workers at the South African Council for Social Service Professions**

"The social working department should inform the administration department of the procedure of registration with the SACSSP in the student's second year as no one knew what we were talking about", and *"When you get to second year studying for a BSW-degree no one knows how to register at the SACCS Council – assist us"*

- **Examination-related recommendations**

"Please orientate first time leaners in examination venues [how to complete the] *exam attendance register some do not know…".*

"Please strongly consider extending the duration of exam papers from 2 hours to 3 hours for the longer written papers".

"Try to put distance (of days) on the exam dates as we do have lot of modules to write" [with] *"Those requiring much time must be put at the end of exam".*

"Lectures must give out more accurate scope for the examination", and *"Try to make previous questions papers available for students"* or *"… at least that we should get the*

memorandums for previous question papers as well as some of the answers we are not sure about".

"*I personally feel that the Department of Social Work should move away from repeating question papers from the previous years for the Final Year Exams Papers … as this encourage*[s] *students to study the previous question papers instead of studying and understanding the subject-content prescribed books and other study materials*".

- **Change the restrictive rules and regulations related to the social work modules**

"*… allow us to take as many modules as we can depending on our abilities ... I am having more time ... I can register* [for] *more modules*"; "*It would be appreciated if students can be allowed to register* [for] *as many modules as they like even if they are more than ten*", and "*The social work department must not spread fourth year over two years student must take ten modules per year even we had below 60%*" and "*if a student failed the SCK module the student must* [be] *allow*[ed] *to register for next level SCK module*".

- **Bring back the Call Centre**

"*I seriously need the telephone system back – it was faster and we could get our problems/enquiries dealt with the same day…*"; "*I would however appreciate the use of the telephone enquiry system as it is more user friendly*", and "*… the new SMS system (when making enquiries) was very frustrating for me at 1st but I have gotten the gist of the system and it's working effectively. So, much thanks, but speaking to someone directly makes the distant studying more personalised*".

- **Provide library facilities with required resources**

"*Provide us with libraries*" "*at our centre*" [and] "*access with material we need*" (cf Lintvelt 2008:117) and "*Please avail Social Work Journals and News at all Unisa libraries*".

- **Recommendations related to myUnisa**

"*Not everybody has excess to internet so I think the information given on myUnisa should be posted also*"; "*… myUnisa ... should have options of 'requesting a re-mark' as well as 'requesting a deferment of exams' online as I have found it incredibly hard in some of my subjects to get hold of anyone to deal with those queries …*" "*… we would like that there be internet access even here at Sunnyside campus*". "*They should make it easy for us to be able*

change our passwords on myUnisa. I can't access mine because I don't remember my password", and *"Me as a student at Unisa experience difficulties using Unisa's internet service and the administration forms that are made available to us are not as easy to complete. I would like you to make some classes or tutorials that would help students to use the system better".*

- **Need for computer literacy classes**

"We also wish to graduate as computer literate graduates. This can be achieved through Saturday classes and we are prepared to pay extra fees for that"; Computer classes please introduce lectures" [as] *"It's difficult for me to access myUnisa. Introduce computer course to the first level so that we can use it to do researches about our course".*

IN CONCLUSION

Dear *Hellopeter*,

On the question of "how are they doing?" and based on the answers to this question provided by the participants (i.e. the social work student customers enrolled at the Social Work Department of the University of South Africa), I arrived at the following conclusions:

- Unisa and the Department of Social Work is not simply doing "badly", or only performing "well". In qualifying this I arrived at the conclusion that the **customers seem both simultaneously satisfied and dissatisfied with similar and different aspects related to service delivery and the quality of services offered** by the service industry and the specific service department under scrutiny. Their perceptions on how it is for them to study Social Work at Unisa were mostly experience-based or informed and the experienced satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction can be best described as a short-term attitude based on the evaluation of their experience with an education service supplied (cf Elliot & Healy in García-Aracil 2009:2).
- From this, I arrived at the conclusion that "student satisfaction" and "dissatisfaction" are flipsides of the same construct. Furthermore, the features of student satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction in this open and distance learning arena are dependent upon how academic-related and non-academic related factors or variables (Tessema, Ready & Yu 2012:35) are experienced, integrated and how students customers give them meaning.

- In view of the customers feeling both positive and negative about the quality service delivery experienced by them, all is not lost, and the unsolicited recommendations forwarded by them (and presented as the last theme in this paper above) invites both the service industry and the service department in the spirit of Hellopeter.com, to consider these recommendations in order to enhance the customers' service delivery experiences.

In a sense, the recommendations provided, also confirm the customers' continuous belief in Unisa as ODL-brand and while open and distance learning in the context of social work has been labelled as "the province of the others – a minority" (Collins 2008:424), in this respect, Unisa is fulfilling its social mandate in promoting social justice for those seeking social work education but who lack the resources for gaining it through the traditional means (York 2008:162). Furthermore, and specifically in the context of developing countries, social work through distance education has the potential for meeting one of the most serious and long-standing needs in social services – the need for people to be trained in rural and remote communities and remaining within these communities practising as social workers, and through their practice impacting on the social and economic circumstances in and upliftment of their communities (Callahan & Wharf 1989:79; Ojo & Olakulehin 2006:4).

Dear *Hellopeter*, in conclusion and apart from the customers' belief in the Unisa-brand I want to leave you with the following excerpts taken from their comments that speak of their gratitude towards Unisa and the Department of Social Work: "*I love the strategy that Unisa uses to reach out to the less-fortunate*"; "*Thank you social work department for your empowerment ... thank you for giving us the opportunity to learn social work ...*" and "*... to be a student in your department ...*"; "*I appreciate each and every moment with my studies ... thank you once again to have this time with you*", and "*…I enjoy studying Social Work at Unisa ... I can and will recommend this course to anyone anytime with all my confidence. I want to congratulate you for the good work you are doing at Unisa*".

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