

# Distance education Doctoral program for nurses as offered by the University of South Africa (UNISA)

VJ Ehlers, PhD, Department of Advanced Nursing Sciences, UNISA

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## Background Information

### Unisa

The purpose of this article is to provide brief overviews of distance education, the development of the University of South Africa (Unisa) and the Department of Advanced Nursing Sciences at this university. Doctoral programs as offered by this Department will be discussed in some detail. Distance education courses are offered throughout the world, but doctoral programs, especially in the field of Nursing Sciences, are not offered by all distance education institutions.

There are numerous forms of and definitions for distance education. They all have only one thing in common, namely the physical distance between the students and the teachers, and usually the absence of students from classrooms and even from entire university campuses. Pym (in Reinert & Fryback 1997:42) aptly described distance education as "...a set of teaching and learning strategies for connecting people who have learning needs with the resources required to meet those needs". Distance education has been offered in many forms for nearly 150 years (Rowntree in Reinert & Fryback 1997:42). In 1873 the University of the Cape of Good Hope, later to be renamed the University of South Africa (Unisa), modelled after the University of London as it existed at that time, was founded. Initially this University acted solely as an examining body, but commenced teaching external students by means of correspondence methods in 1946.

Students can write their examinations at more than 450 examination centers throughout the world. During 1998, Unisa conferred a total of 12 402 diplomas and degrees, including 400 Masters' and 83 Doctoral degrees, of which three were awarded by the Department of Advanced Nursing Sciences.

### The Department of Advanced Nursing Sciences, Unisa

This Department was established during 1975, admitting its first students during 1976 and boasting its first graduates during April 1978 graduation ceremonies. The Department offers undergraduate and diploma distance education courses only to registered professional nurses wishing to obtain post basic qualifications in Health Services Management, Nursing Education, Community Health Nursing, Occupational Health Nursing and Gerontological Nursing by pursuing undergraduate degree and/or diploma courses. This Department

fulfils the South African Nursing Council's (SANC's) requirements, enabling the successful candidates to register their additional qualifications with the SANC.

At post graduate level the Department offers a research based Master's degree (for students possessing Honours degrees), a course content Master's degree comprising five papers and a research dissertation (for students without Honours degrees) and a Master's degree specializing in Clinical Nursing Care - only available to students working in selected services where preceptors can be provided. During 1999 the total number of students registered for the different courses were:

COURSE	COMPLETED	REG: 1999
Diplomas in Advanced Nursing Sc	1 118	686
BA Cur	7 391	2 831
MA Cur	69	368
D Litt et Phil	25	37

(Statistics obtained from Unisa's Bureau for Management Information: June 1999)

## Distance education D Litt et Phil program as offered by the Department of Advanced Nursing Sciences, UNISA

### Introduction

The distance education (D Litt et Phil) doctoral program has been offered by this Department since the 1980s - instituted to meet the need for further education by the successful Master's students. A need for doctoral programs in nursing was also identified by the nursing services in the Republic of South Africa (RSA) who required nurse leaders prepared at doc-

toral level, especially for policy formulations. The first successful candidate graduated during 1984.

The total number of successful candidates until the end of 1998 amounted to 25. During 1999 the students registered for the D Litt et Phil degree were 37 - from the RSA (17), Botswana (4), Lesotho (4), Malawi (1), Swaziland (5), Zambia (1), Zimbabwe (3) and the United States of America (1 who moved to New York from Botswana during his studies). The fields in which these 37 students were conducting their research could be categorized as falling into:

Nursing Education	12	Psychiatric Nursing	2
Reproductive Health	8	Primary Health Care	1
Health Services Management	7	Clinical Nursing	1
Home Nursing	3	Caring	1
Health Education	3		

Students select their own fields of research usually in accordance with needs perceived by their employers, or their countries' identified health and/or nursing care priorities.

### Admission requirements

Any student wishing to be admitted to the D Litt et Phil program should be in possession of a Master's degree or equivalent qualification. The underlying rationale for this admission requirement is that the D Litt et Phil student should possess in-depth knowledge about the prospective field of research and should be capable of conducting independent research. The prospective student needs to submit a detailed academic record together with a research proposal, outlining the title, topic, purpose, scope, methodology and feasibility of the proposed research. This is a research-focused program, with the aim of preparing nurses who can contribute to the development of nursing knowledge and theory in general. Candidates can embark on research activities striving to develop the clinical science underlying nursing practice provided they work in areas where such research is feasible, where the employers support the specific field of research and where preceptors might be available. The decision as to the topic and title of the research rests with the student.

The promoter and joint promoter are appointed in accordance with their research interests and expertise, taking their respective academic responsibilities into account. The D Litt et Phil degree as offered by the Department of Advanced Nursing Sciences, Unisa, would seem to be similar to the D Phil degree offered in the USA, as described by Gorney-Fadiman (1981:654). In cases where students register at Unisa from foreign countries, these students are encouraged to conduct research in their respective countries, and co-promoters are appointed from the countries concerned if at all possible. In this way students are encouraged to conduct research meaningful and applicable to their own countries, the research capacities of the countries concerned are developed, and the members of staff can knowledge and expertise about the health care situations in a numbers of different countries.

The submitted proposal is reviewed by the Department's Research and Ethics Committee and a prospective promoter can volunteer to be appointed. Depending on the field of research a co-promoter can be appointed from within the Department of Advanced Nursing Sciences, or from any other relevant department such as Anthropology, Psychology, Sociology, Education, Law, Public Administration or Business Management. In certain cases co-promoters can be appointed from other universities or any other relevant institutions. This approach seems to be supported by authors from other countries, such as Baker (1995:62) who proclaims "*Faculty from other disciplines and sufficient support staff are needed to enhance the nursing research effort, strengthen the educational program, especially the cognate courses and electives, and generally ensure a quality enterprise*".

If the proposal is accepted, the promoter and the co-promoter appointed, then the student can proceed with his/her registration for the D Litt et Phil degree at Unisa.

### Duration of course

The minimum duration is two years, but most students require more than four years to complete their research and submit their theses for examination. After a period of four years has elapsed, the promoter needs to submit a written motivation as to why the student should be allowed to register for periods exceeding four years. Annual re-registration depends on progress reports submitted by the promoter(s). The rationale underlying this requirement is that information changes rapidly and students who take too long to complete their research and their theses run the risk of presenting outdated data. Most students are full time employees occupying demanding positions which leave limited time for pursuing their doctoral studies. Mainly those students who can manage to obtain study leave ranging from six to twelve months manage to complete their doctoral research and theses within five years.

### Organization of course: role of student and of promoter(s)

The D Litt et Phil program contains no prescribed course work. The Department of Advanced Nursing Sciences offers research workshops which all masters' and doctoral students are encouraged to attend, but attendance is voluntary. Each student is expected to demonstrate the ability to do independent research and to make a contribution to the field.

The initial role of the student really amounts to reading and compiling the chapters of the proposed thesis. Registered doctoral students can access the Unisa library by means of the Unisa Web-page, by fax, telephone or by e-mail. Once the student's registration has been processed the Unisa librarian will compile a list of available literature, based on keywords supplied by the student, using a variety of computer retrieval systems. This is supplied free of charge to the student, who then selects those items deemed relevant to the particular research. Books can be borrowed and photocopies of articles obtained free of charge from the Unisa library (the student only pays for the return postage of the books). National and international interlibrary loan facilities can also be utilized - free of charge.

The student is expected to submit chapter-by-chapter for review and comments by both the promoter and co-promoter. The fundamental role of the promoter is to "promote" the student's quality of work so that it reaches the outstanding quality of work demanded from doctoral theses. At Unisa, a D Litt et Phil degree will only be awarded if it is regarded as being at the level of attaining a distinction (75% or more) in ALL respects, academic contribution, editorial and technical standards and research merit.

Usually students compile the first three chapters and the research instruments prior to conducting the actual research. Statisticians are consulted once the research instrument has been compiled, as to the feasibility of its computerized statistical analyses. The pattern adopted by most students imply that Chapter 1 provides the general background information and rationale for conducting the specific research, Chapter 2 reviews literature relevant to the research, Chapter 3 discusses and justifies the research methodology adopted, then the research findings are analyzed and discussed in two or more chapters followed by the final chapter comprising the limitations, conclusions and recommendations of the research. Should the student have developed a model or a course for a specific group of nurses, this needs to be tested prior to submitting the thesis for examination. A bibliography containing accurate details of all references used throughout the thesis must be included. The research instruments, letters requesting and granting permission for conducting the research, and any other documents relevant to the research should be attached as appendages. (Those students who embark on qualitative research approaches may follow different procedures).

After data collection, statisticians and computer operators analyze the data and provide the student with computer printouts. It is up to the student to interpret the statistical findings and to obtain statistical, typing as well as editorial expertise to present an acceptable thesis. Editorial assistance is a requirement as most students present their theses in English which might be their second or even third language. The students need to inform the university in writing by specified dates should they consider handing in their theses for examination. The promoters need to approve each student's application. Subsequent to such approval, examiners are appointed.

## Examination

No formal examination is conducted. (Until the beginning of the 1990s each doctoral candidate was subjected to an oral examination by internal and external examiners, but this was discontinued due to financial and time constraints).

Four bound copies of the completed thesis are submitted for examination by the promoter, co-promoter and at least two additional external examiners from two different universities. In the case where a co-promoter had been appointed from a field other than nursing, at least one external examiner will be appointed from the same field. The four examiners submit their independent reports to a non-examining chairperson who prepares a combined report for the examination committee. The examiners' reports need to specify what contributions the thesis could make towards the science of nursing. Each examiner needs to indicate whether the thesis can be accepted unamended, whether specific aspects require

amendments or whether it should be rejected. Examiners are also encouraged to indicate whether the thesis, or parts thereof, would be suitable for publication. No mark is allocated, and no distinctions can be awarded, because a D Litt et Phil degree is accepted as being worthy of a distinction. Should there be marked differences among the examiners, an additional examiner might be appointed, or the student could be offered an oral examination opportunity, or the examination committee may decide to offer the student one more chance to amend the thesis. In the case of minor amendments the promoter and co-promoter need to inform the committee when the candidate had fulfilled the specifications, but in the case of major changes/improvements the thesis needs to be resubmitted for re-examination by four or more examiners.

Currently publications in scholarly journals are not required, prior to awarding the D Litt et Phil degree, but this possibility is being investigated. Students are encouraged to publish relevant aspects of their theses, and where applicable, promoters and/or co-promoters act as co-authors. Publication in accredited journals and peer reviews prior to submitting the thesis for examination purposes could add another dimension to the quality assurance aspect of the distance education D Litt et Phil program. In this way the research results could also be dispersed to a wider academic forum.

## Advantages and Disadvantages of a distance education doctoral program

The major personal advantage for the student of pursuing this distance education D Litt et Phil program is the ability to continue with his/her life and work obviating family disruptions by relocating to a university city, or even to a different country. Similarly the health care services are not disrupted by the absence of numbers of senior personnel. Students who continue with their jobs while pursuing their studies are more likely to remain in their countries once they have obtained their doctoral qualifications than those who relocate to other countries or continents for study purposes. Because the students remain within their communities, their fields of research are usually relevant to their specific communities' needs.

Ironically the very advantage of being able to continue with one's work and life whilst pursuing doctoral studies, is also its major disadvantage. This is the case because the studies are then simply just added on top of all the other responsibilities, whilst students who relocate to universities to pursue full time doctoral studies, need not fulfil their job obligations during this period, and sometimes other persons fulfil their family obligations as well. Thus the students pursuing distance education courses can be expected to take much longer to complete their studies than those who pursue full time studies at residential universities. Students who have made substantial progress with their studies are encouraged to apply for study leave, ideally once they have collected and analyzed their data. Study leave definitely enhances the students' chances of achieving success, although a number of students have managed to complete their studies without any study leave whatsoever.

Another disadvantage is the "distance" involved in distance

education. Although students are encouraged to meet their promoters personally, this is not always possible. Telephone, fax and e-mail contacts are encouraged. These can all be problematic in Africa where even e-mails often function by land lines which are disrupted every time any length of copper wire "goes missing". Postal services, including door-to-door deliveries can be expensive, unreliable and it can take weeks for a posted chapter to reach the promoter, and weeks to return. Postal delays can be demotivating for many students, but items which get lost in the post are the major problems delaying progress.

The answer would seem to send all completed chapters by e-mail. Deciphering e-mail attachments sent from different parts of the continent using different programs pose challenges to both students and promoters. However, as more and more Internet cafes are being established throughout Africa, this possibility is becoming a reality - at least for students living and working in areas with access to the Internet, and with reliable electricity supplies.

Because of the distance between the promoter and the student, and because neither of them is involved solely in research, much of the excitement inherent in successful research might never be actualized. The student and the mentor can never be fully immersed in research, and might not "... *experience the excitement of knowledge building, an excitement that comes from seeing one project lead to another in an evolving program or research*" (Keller & Ward 1993:266). Students following distance education D Litt et Phil programs might not have the advantage of working with more senior researchers nor of teaching more junior researchers. In this way the opportunity to learn from both junior and senior colleagues might be severely limited.

Another potential disadvantage of offering solely distance education D Litt et Phil courses, relate to the promoters involved. Because of the distance, and thus the lack of students on campus, the promoters' academic schedule can easily become overloaded with any number of "invisible" doctoral students, in addition to undergraduate and other structured postgraduate distance education courses. Under these circumstances the doctoral candidate's quality of guidance depends solely on the quality of the responses supplied by the promoter and joint promoter. "*The focus of the research doctorate should be on research, and it should be built around research-productive faculty members who mentor students in their particular areas of research. Research doctoral programs should carefully limit the number of students admitted to study and assure that all students will have the opportunity to become competent beginning researchers who will continue on into productive research/teaching careers*" (Grace 1989:269). The necessity to limit the number of distance education students might be more obscure than in the case of face-to-face teaching situations. However, it would definitely seem to be in the interest of both the students and the faculty members that the total number of students should be limited to manageable proportions for the faculty in general and for each specific promoter. "*Faculty costs need to be identified because without time for the appropriate mentoring of students, performance of students will suffer. Student advisement and dissertation supervision require faculty time and space considerations, as well as the individual intellectual output*

*of faculty members*" (Germain, Deatricks, Hagopian & Whitney 1994: 121).

## Conclusion & Recommendations

The Department of Advanced Nursing Sciences, University of South Africa, does have the infrastructure and the expertise to offer D Litt et Phil distance education programs. Standards are maintained by selecting candidates who have acquired a Master's or equivalent degree and who managed to submit an acceptable research proposal. Promoters and co-promoters monitor each student's progress and obtain subject specific expertise, such as statistical consultants whenever deemed desirable. Promoters' annual progress reports can be used to prevent students making unsatisfactory progress from re-registering year after year. At least two external examiners are appointed to examine each thesis, in addition to the student's appointed promoter and co-promoter. The major advantage of distance education programs is that the students can continue with their life and work uninterrupted but the major disadvantage is that the students need to focus on their studies in addition to all their other job and home related responsibilities. Students who have made substantial progress and who manage to obtain study leave seem to be able to finalize their theses within shorter periods of time than those who do not succeed in getting any study leave.

Further research would seem to be needed to establish the specific needs of students and to provide meaningful support structures enabling more students to finish their research preferably within four or five years. Further research would seem to be warranted to investigate the successful doctoral candidates' professional and academic activities subsequent to obtaining the D Litt et Phil degree.

However, the Department of Advanced Nursing Sciences, Unisa, would need to seriously reconsider its role, function, mission and vision to provide meaningful learning experiences for its increasing number of postgraduate students, especially the doctoral candidates. One way in which this department attempts to meet this challenge is by having a person responsible for coordinating the postgraduate students' affairs. It might require that specific persons be appointed specifically for postgraduate students, whilst others concentrate on the undergraduate students. "*Priority given to graduate education decreases commitment to undergraduate students and programs ... growth in nursing science requires re-conceptualizing the discipline*" (Baker 1995:63).

Distance education doctoral programs can definitely help to increase the number of nurses on the African continent with doctoral qualifications. These nurses, assuming leadership roles in many African countries, can determine the future of Africa's nurses and midwives and the standard of health care received by their patients/clients to a marked extent - especially if their numbers could increase substantially. Any effort to increase the number of successful doctoral candidates can result in enhanced health care for Africa's people.

The ultimate contribution of any doctoral nursing program might need to be judged by its actual and potential contribution towards the nursing profession's development. Enabling nurses to do independent research at doctoral level, might be

of pivotal importance for the future expansion of the profession. Although the distance education D Litt et Phil program offered by the Department of Advanced Nursing Sciences, Unisa, does have its disadvantages, at least it does seem to succeed in promoting a number of nurse leaders' research capacities in a number of African countries. "A profession not rooted in systematic research is a self-contradiction, a myth, rather than a reality... The silent revolution in all the professions came about as a result primarily of knowledge enlarged through research" (Merton in Murphy 1981:646).

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## Postscript:

All persons interested in doctoral education for nurses should access the following Internet address:

<http://www.umich.edu/~inden>

This organization's Web page is based at the University of Michigan's Nursing Faculty. Browsing through the contents and accessing specific information will enable the users of this Web-page to become familiar with, and to access addresses, of most universities offering doctoral programs for nurses throughout the world. All the papers presented at the 1997 and 1999 conferences (including this one) can be accessed from this Web-page. (Professor Shaké Ketefian, the Chairperson of INDEN, granted permission for the publication of all conference papers appearing at this Internet site, because this Web-page does not operate as any formal publication of academic papers. It strives to provide a service to all nurse academics throughout the world). INDEN would welcome new members and all academic institutions offering doctoral programs in nursing could benefit from becoming active members and sharing in its lively e-mail correspondence, as well as participating in its biennial international conferences which are planned to coincide with those of the International Council of Nurses (ICN) as far as possible. The 2001 INDEN conference will probably precede the ICN conference in Copenhagen 10-15 June 2001. Information will be published at this Web-site.

Professor Shaké Ketefian, the Chairperson of INDEN, can be contacted directly at the following e-mail address (but kindly indicate "INDEN Enquiries" as the subject of the e-mail to facilitate the answering process): [ketefian@umich.edu](mailto:ketefian@umich.edu)