

**ACCESSING LEARNER SUPPORT SERVICES IN A DISTANCE EDUCATION
CONTEXT AT UNISA ADULT BASIC EDUCATION DEPARTMENT**

by

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

MASTERS IN EDUCATION

in the

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

at the

UNIVERSITY OF FORT HARE

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January 2013

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the access to learner support services by Unisa's ABET students in the Department of Adult Education in one of the rural provinces in South Africa. Specifically, a survey using questionnaire and focus group interview was carried out to determine the access gaps in to the learner support services by Unisa's adult students. A literature study preceded the empirical study to fully comprehend the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of the role of learner support in bridging the transactional distance between students on the one hand and the institution on the other hand. In the empirical study phase, a questionnaire was administered to 150 ABET Students in one province in South Africa through the stratified sampling technique and one focus group interview comprising 10 students who access support services at one of the regional offices to assess the importance they attach to the support services that are offered at the regional centres and the extent to which they are able to access them. The focus group interview comprised questions on the students' understanding of learner support services and their experiences in accessing them. Moore's theory of transactional distance was used as the theoretical base for the study. Out of a total of the 150 questionnaires that were distributed, 117 were the usable representing 78.0% response rate.

One of the conclusions drawn from this study is that, although Unisa has most of the learner support services in place but for various reasons, a lot of the students are not able to access the support services as expected as the needs gap for almost all the support services were high. The chi-square tests found significant differences (p is less than 0.05) between the students on the extent to which they are able to access the support services. An integrated learner support framework was suggested for Unisa and other distance providing institutions to address the access gaps adult students' encounter in their studies.

Key words: Access, learner support, transactional distance, open distance learning

DECLARATION

I declare that **ACCESSING LEARNER SUPPORT SERVICES IN A DISTANCE EDUCATION CONTEXT AT UNISA ADULT BASIC EDUCATION DEPARTMENT**

is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

SIGNATURE

(Mr A Arko-Achemfuor)

DATE

DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to the memory of my late mother, Madam Rose Annah Boateng, who supported and encouraged me during the tough days in school. She encouraged me to stay focused in life and instilled discipline, honesty and the fear of God in us. Secondly to my father, Opanin Kwabena Boffuor, a peasant farmer who never had the chance to attend school but ensured all his children went to school.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am grateful to the following people for all the support, guidance and encouragement and the different roles they played to enable me to complete this study. My sincere thanks go to Professor Xoliswa Mtose and Professor George Moyo (University of Fort Hare), my supervisors for useful guidance, encouragement during the difficult times in my studies. I am deeply thankful and appreciate your understanding.

I am grateful to Mrs Maria Van der Walt (University of Fort Hare) for the valuable contributions she made to this work.

To Professor Kofi Poku Quan-Baffour (Unisa) for your mentorship role and encouragement.

I extend my appreciation to Mr Kafui Agbotame who assisted me with the data capturing and to Mr Andries Mashige (Unisa) for his assistance with the statistical data analysis. Dr Ernest Klu played a very crucial role to spend sleepless nights to ensure that I got the language done at short notice. I am grateful to him for the gesture.

To my family members and friends:

- my children Yvonne and Kwabena, whom I encourage to follow the path.
- my dear wife Jemina, for her prayers, support and encouragement.
- my father who never had the chance to go to school but told us that he would sell his clothes to take care of any of his children who wanted to study.
- my siblings, friends, colleagues and my other extended family members who have contributed in diverse ways to my education

The greatest of all goes to my God for sustaining me and seeing me through this work.

Akwasi Arko-Achemfuor

Pretoria

January 2013

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CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

All students who pursue their studies at the University of South Africa (Unisa) study through distance learning mode for various reasons. Studying through distance learning poses serious learning challenges to students. It is therefore imperative for institutions that offer education through distance to make learner support an integral part of their offering.

However, Unisa has many support services in place to help its students to achieve the required learning outcomes during their studies. Some of the support services Unisa offers include face-to-face tutorials, guidance and counseling, information and communication technology (ICT) etc. Brindley (1995), Saide (1995) and Lentell (2003) emphasise that learner support is integral and critical for the delivery of a quality open distance learning (ODL) system (Unisa, 2008). Learner support is a generic term which is applied to the range of services that are developed by institutions in order to assist their students to meet their learning objectives; to gain the knowledge, expertise and skills to be successful and, complete their course or studies. Institutions use different forms of student support services to assist their students in their studies. Some of the support services include the face-to-face tutorials, workshops, guidance and counseling, the use of information communication technologies, audio-visual technologies and the use of telephones just to name a few. Unisa uses some of the above mentioned tools to support its students as mentioned above.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

As indicated above Unisa provides its students with face-to-face tutorials as part of its student support services. This is important because most of the students live in rural areas where learning resources are scarce. There are also growing numbers of black students in South African universities who come from poor socio-economic backgrounds who are trying to access tertiary education to better their living conditions. Most of these students live in rural areas and the countryside where access to student support services is difficult to come by. Qakisa-Makoe (2005) alludes that the proportion of black students in South African universities increased from 32 percent in 1994 to 60 percent in 2000. She adds that the University of South Africa's black students increased from 56 percent in 1993 to 66 percent in 2001. There are various policies the government of the day has put in place to address the issue of low levels of education among the black majority but it appears that the lack of an integrated support system for students in distance learning institutions is thwarting the well intended policies.

A lot of adult learners in South Africa are trying to improve on their qualifications to better their chances of securing employment, promotion at work or the opportunity to study further. Since most of these students happen to be adults, they are not able to attend the traditional full-time schools. They have therefore have to pursue their studies through distance education. Meanwhile, studying through distance education has its own challenges which learner support is supposed to bridge. As the main distance learning institution in South Africa, Unisa is fulfilling the dreams of a lot of people who need tertiary education. Provision is made to support Unisa students through various learner support systems at all levels but it appears that they are not enough or not reaching some of the students as expected.

Qakisa-Makoe (2005) points out that a lot of changes have taken place since 1994 to improve the education and living conditions of the previously disadvantaged in South Africa but those who go to schools and to universities do not perform to their maximum potential. She adds that the possible reasons may be due to political, social and educational inequalities. Attempts are made by Unisa therefore to

provide students with face-to-face tutorials and other support services to enable them to achieve their learning goals. The Tutorial Services, Discussion Classes and Work Integrated Learning (TSDL) works in close collaboration with Departments and directorates at the University to provide the needed learner support for students.

Among other things, the TSDL directorate is responsible for the following key learner support functions:

- Development and coordination of all Tutorial Support Services (face-to-face and through the use of Information Communication Technology) especially for first and second year undergraduate students.
- The coordination of the Discussion / Contact classes.
- Development of support strategies to cater for learners who require Work-integrated Learning placement opportunities.

From his experience as a former tutor, the researcher has observed that a lot of students who live at the countryside who register for the studies with Unisa often complain to tutors about the difficulties they face in their studies especially when it comes to the support systems in place and accessing them. Lephalala and Pienaar (2007) point out that at Unisa there has been an increase in intake of students which has not been accompanied by an equal increase in academic and administrative student support structures. They identify some of the following factors as having implications for “access and success”:

- open and uncontrolled student enrolments
- the high student-to-lecturer ratios
- varied range student competencies
- teaching and assessing through multiple choice questions at undergraduate level
- the use of formative as opposed to summative assessment
- limited and delayed feedback to students
- limited interaction between students and lecturers

These are some of the realities and challenges Unisa faces in its efforts to provide the needed support for its students. The views of the adult learners on their distance learning experiences and access challenges appear not to have been thoroughly investigated. This study can share light about the challenges the students face from their own perspective.

1.3 RESEARCH PROBLEM

Unisa as an open distance learning (ODL) institution needs to provide learner support services to its students as learner support is one of the key aspects of ODL. It should be noted that there is the separation between the students and the institution but as Chen (2001) observes that the “distance” which is normally referred to as transactional distance is pedagogical, not geographical. There is therefore the need for ODL institutions such as Unisa to ensure that this psychological space is bridged through learner support. Unisa makes provision for the support services but accessing the services appears to be a hustle for a lot of students. The problem therefore is the need for learner support services vis-à-vis the access gaps that appear to exist in accessing the support services.

The main question that arises from above statement then is:

How do adult distance education students access the learner support services at Unisa?

1.4 SUB-QUESTIONS

1. What are the main student support structures in place to support adult learners pursuing distance learning at Unisa?
2. Where does face-to-face tutorial fit in the whole student support system of Unisa?
3. What challenges do the adult learners face in accessing the student support services offered by Unisa?

4. What are the implications for developing an integrated learner support system?

1.5 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the access gaps to learner support services by Unisa's adult students studying through distance. The study will indicate how the support services can be integrated to ensure that learners are supported properly in their studies so that they can realise the desired outcomes as specified in the student support policy framework. The stated purpose will be realised through a thorough literature study and an empirical investigation.

1.6 ASSUMPTIONS

This study is based on the assumptions that:

- effective learner support could positively impact on learner retention, achievement and experience.
- a lot of Unisa students are from rural areas where access to support services is difficult to reach. Meanwhile, they are the people who need support most as there are limited sources for them to use for their studies.
- quite a sizable proportion of the student population is poor and faces economic challenges which compound their ability to reach centres where the services are offered.

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study will have both policy and practical significance. Unisa and other open distance learning (ODL) educational institutions can use the findings to improve their policy decisions in learner support including face-to-face students support (tutorials).

The study will provide opportunity for students to assess the effectiveness of all student support services including face-to-face tutorials provided by Unisa, which is whether they are sufficient and conform to the University's policy on learner

support. The study will also evaluate the extent to which the learning centres conform to the university's policy on learner support.

1.8 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The provision of distance education in the South African context has attracted considerable attention from government, the private sector and the education circles because of the past history of apartheid which deliberately denied majority of the citizens from attaining quality education. The study dwells on the access challenges distance learners in general and Unisa's adult learners face in accessing the support services the institution provides to the students for them to be able to achieve their educational goals. The study uses both the qualitative and quantitative methods through a set of questionnaire and a focus group interview to obtain the views and experiences of Unisa's ABET students on the challenges they face in accessing the support services and their distance learning experiences.

1.9 DEFINITION OF TERMS

Academic performance is defined by Nonyongo and Ngegebule (2008) as learners' active participation in learning events, course completion and to achievements measured through grades achieved, for example in projects, assignments and examinations.

Distance education – refers to a set of methods or processes for teaching a diverse range of students located at different places and physically separated from the learning institution, their tutors/teachers as well as other students (Unisa, 2008).

Learner – may be defined as a person who is learning; student, pupil, apprentice, trainee usually from a teacher/instructor.

Open distance learning according to Unisa (2008) is a multi-dimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, and educational and communication distance between student and institution, student and academics, students and courseware and student and peers. It focuses on removing barriers to access to learning, flexibility of learning provision, student-centredness, supporting students and constructing learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed.

Learning support – is the academic assistance given to a learner enrolled for a distance education course in order to enhance academic performance (Simpson, 2002; Tait, 2000; Thorpe, 2002).

Learner support – is a broad term that refers to the services that are provided to distance learners so that they can overcome the barriers to learning and complete their studies successfully. Simpson (2002); Tait (2000); Thorpe (2002) refer to learner support as comprising three areas namely learning/academic support, personal and administrative support. It should be noted that although three activities are mentioned in learner support, they have to be managed in an integrated manner as if one of them is not working well the whole system will fail.

Tutoring according to Unisa (2008) encompasses a broad range of teaching, coaching, mentoring and monitoring activities that guide students through their courses, mediating the packaged learning materials and facilitating the learning process.

1.10 METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research is to examine the learner support service offered by Unisa to support their adult learners and the access gaps that exist in accessing the available support service and how an integrated approach can be used to reach majority of the learners. To achieve this, the researcher has to investigate, assess and analyse empirically and rationally in order to draw conclusions. Both

quantitative and qualitative methods were used. In effect, both the positivist and interpretivist epistemologies were used in the study. The reason is that explanations were given on the perceptions of the learners which needed a qualitative approach. Data from a set of questionnaire were organised and analysed quantitatively. A survey which utilized a cross sectional focus group interview was applied to support the quantitative data which was obtained from the questionnaire based on the objectives and the research questions discussed in the previous session. Both the questionnaire and the focus group interviews were designed for the students.

The following specific procedures were adopted to answer the research questions:

- 1 Literature study that examined learner support systems and the access challenges adult learners face in accessing the support services.
- 2 A survey using questionnaire and focus group interview was administered to Unisa's ABET students in one of the provinces in South Africa.
- 3 Quantitative analysis of survey data was performed using the Statistical Package for Social Science Research (SPSS) computer package. The analysis involved the identification of different variables being explored in the study and assigning each variable a name that is used to describe the variable to the SPSS package. The qualitative data was categorised into themes to identify general patterns to make sense of what the data means. This was done manually. Details of the research methodology are further discussed in Chapter 3.

The target population for this research is made up of all registered students in Unisa's ABET certificate and diploma programmes who are 7000 in number. A sample frame of 419 students in one province in South Africa is used for the study. The study used a stratified random sample of 150 ABET students out of the 419 registered the province. Another 10 students from one regional centre were used for the focus group interviews.

The data was collected from current ABET students in the certificate and diploma programmes across the province and one focus group interview at one of the three regional centres. The details of the respondents were obtained from the Department of Adult Basic Education and the ICT sections at Unisa.

1.11 RESEARCH DESIGN

The study is underpinned by Moore's (1993) theory of transactional distance. The mixed design namely interpretivism and positivism was used for the study. The reason for using the mixed design was for triangulation purposes so that the weaknesses of one design could be mitigated by the other. A set of questionnaire as well as a structured focus group interview schedule were designed to assist the researcher to obtain a range of information from the respondents. These include biographical information about the respondents. The questionnaire comprised items that survey the level of awareness of the learner support services provided by Unisa with particular focus on all the support services the institution offers to students and the problems they face in accessing those services. Other items in the survey included statements which required students to indicate the importance they place on the different services and the extent to which each of the services is available to them. Another part of the questionnaire was based on their ODL experience.

1.12 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The study uses primary data mainly from the questionnaire and focus group interviews. These techniques are preferred because they allow both the qualitative and quantitative approach to be used. The questionnaire was administered to the respondents for them to complete and return them to the researcher through the post in self-addressed envelopes. The focus group interview was carried out at one of the study centres to identify and determine the thoughts and feelings of the respondents on how the learner support programmes including the tutorials meet their learning needs as well as the challenges they face in accessing the learner support services the university provides. The responses from the questionnaire were analysed utilising simple frequencies and cross-tabulations. Descriptive

statistics from the survey were used in the study to support findings from the focus group interview schedule as well as spiral analysis from the focus group interview for themes that emerged from the study.

1.13 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this study, the researcher applied to the University of Fort Hare for ethical clearance where all the ethical requirements were met. Another ethical clearance certificate was also obtained from the University of South Africa whose students were involved in the study. The participants were informed of their right to take part in the research; they were told they could withdraw at any point of the research. An informed consent form was signed by all the participants.

The interest of the participants was safe guarded by ensuring that the privacy of the participants was protected as their names were not required. Questions that could harm them psychologically were avoided at all cost as well as avoiding questions that could be intrusive and sensitive to their private lives. They were also assured that the research was going to be used purely for academic purposes and the summary of the results was going to be made available to them. The safety of the participants from harm was also ensured as well as them being given the guarantee of their privacy, anonymity and confidentiality.

In this study, the issue of conflict was managed in the best possible manner. The researcher's position was made very clear to the participants. The researcher avoided any form of misrepresentation of himself and the purpose of the study. The reason for the data collection for the study was thoroughly explained to the participants at length before the focus group interview. A debriefing session followed the interview session to ensure that their views were accurately captured as the tape recorded interview was replayed for them to listen.

1.14 DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

It is acknowledged that learner support system in an ODL system is complex and multi-dimensional. This study focuses on the pedagogical space and the technological medium (learner-interface) that is needed in order to interact with the content, instructor, and other students.

1.15 LIMITATIONS

The fact that this study was conducted in a province which is predominantly rural did not give the researcher the opportunity to explore the support system in context other than rural. This may have limited the understanding of the researcher of the bigger picture of other dimensions of learner support. However, the study enabled the researcher to gain deeper insights into one context.

1.16 ORGANISATION OF THE RESEARCH REPORT

The research report of this study is organised in the following chapters.

Chapter 1 of the study comprises the background to the problem, the problem statement, and the objectives of the study, delimitations and limitations as well as the chapter layout of the study.

Chapter 2 examines literature on distance education, learner support with particular emphasis on the learner support and access challenges in distance education in general and Unisa specifically. The review attempted to bring together a range of issues considered to the research knowledge and perspectives in the area of learner support.

Chapter 3 is based on the research design and the methodology including the empirical study. A case is made for the selection of the positivist and interpretive paradigms with both the qualitative and quantitative approaches.

In chapter 4, the findings of the empirical studies (the focus group interview and the questionnaire) are presented.

Chapter 5 of the study dwells on the discussions which culminated in the development of the themes.

Chapter 6 examines three aspects which are: summary of the findings, conclusions and recommendations put forward on the area of future research, in order to build on the outcomes of this study.

1.17 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter dwelt on the overview of the study. The problem was stated and analysed. The aim and the objectives of the study were outlined. The purpose, assumptions and the significance of the study were clarified. Some of the main concepts that are relevant to the study were defined. The research design and methodology were explained. The ethical issues surrounding the study were addressed as well as the organisation of research report.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 2 of the study examines the literature, of which the primary purpose is to establish a theoretical basis for the study, which investigates the gaps to learner support services by Unisa's ABET students studying through distance education. The focus of the learner support is on Unisa. The literature review enabled the researcher to acquaint himself with what other scholars have done in the area of adult learning, distance education, learner support with particular emphasis on the gaps that exist in the provision of learner support services to the adult students. This enabled the researcher to deal with the topic in detail with the relevant knowledge.

The literature study also helped the researcher to grapple with the relevant issues under study and serve as input when it comes to the part on the analysis and interpretation of data.

2.2 ADULT LEARNING IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING – OVERVIEW

Adult learning has been in existence since time immemorial and has been known to be a field of practice since human beings began to learn, where tutors were used to help learners in their learning. According to Kahler, Morgan, Holmes and Bundy (1985), adult education activities have been practiced in the form of town meetings, lyceums (a term use to describe school for older children, either in France or French citizens living abroad), fairs, agricultural extension, college and university extension, and others. Pioneer research in adult education according to Kahler, et al., (1985:12) was done by Thorndike in 1928 in his book 'Adult Learning' which ushered in the beginning of education for matured people. Moore

(1990) notes that communication between teacher and student is crucial for the success of any distance education endeavour. He argues that the success of any distance education is based on the content of the dialogue between teacher and student and the effectiveness of the communication system in the educational process. It should be noted that adult students most often study through distance education because of the need for them to fend for themselves and for their families while trying to improve themselves academically.

There are various approaches that adult education researchers have suggested to educate adult learners. Some of the renowned authorities in the field are Paulo Frere and Knowles. Knowles used the concept andragogy to describe the teaching methods used to teach adult learners. This concept, according to him, involves the reorientation of adult educators from 'educating people' to 'helping them to learn'. Hartree (1984), quoted by Smith (2002) defined andragogy as the art and science of helping adults learn as against pedagogy as the science of teaching children. This concept/theory according to Smith (2002) was premised on five crucial assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners that are different from the assumptions about child learners on which pedagogy is premised. These are 1) self-concept; 2) experience; 3) readiness to learn; 4) orientation to learning; and 5) motivation to learn.

These assumptions about the adult learner are important for adult educators as the self-concept implies that adult learners are learners but unlike children who are not very much aware of themselves and circumstances that bring them to the learning environment, adult learners are aware of themselves, their situation and circumstances and therefore are said to be volunteer learners. Smith (2002) argues that Knowles who popularised the concept andragogy indicated that adult learning is premised on andragogy which has different features from pedagogy. Gravett (2010) supports this view by the following general characteristics of the adult learners:

- being adults by definition
- they bring a lot of wealth of knowledge in to the learning environment, and

- their readiness to learn by applying their learning to their societal roles and dealing with every day life's activities.

All learners, especially adult learners, come to the learning environment with a lot of prior learning and life experiences and therefore educators should take that into account and not treat them as empty vessels that are to be filled with knowledge and facts. Hayes (2006) shares a similar view that when compared to children, adult learners possess vast knowledge and experiences that were gained in formal and informal situations which they bring to their learning. It is true that adult learners are volunteer learners who are ready to learn on their own and possess a lot of life experiences which are brought into their learning, they need a lot of support to enable them to succeed in their learning just as children do, as their studies are constrained by a number of factors such as time, family and economic matters. The assumptions by Hartree, Gravett and Hayes which indirectly suggest that adult learners can do it on their own when studying through distance education are therefore not realistic.

Most adult learners normally pursue their studies through distance learning which has got its own challenges like combining work with studies, lack of facilities and infrastructure, time constraints, isolation, family and other socio-economic responsibilities, just to name a few. The unique circumstances of adult learners and their backgrounds as well as their needs call for proper support structures to be provided for them by institutions that offer distance education.

Smith (2002) notes that adult learners are self-directed as their self concept enables them to move away from dependency to independence and self-direction. Ipaye (2005) points out that most distance learners are adult learners. There are various life experiences that prompt adults to learn after the normal school going age. Qakisa-Makoe (2005) indicates that the average age of a student at the Unisa is 30 years. These students will most likely be family men and women and they are workers. These students mostly live in rural area where there may not be others studying the same programmes. Lowry (1989) argues that self-directed learning takes place in comparative isolation in secluded libraries while others

engage in more inter-personal communication with experts and peers for instance, than typically available conventional classroom education. She adds that adult educators have found that some adult learners are incapable of engaging in self-directed learning because they lack independence, confidence, or resources.

The issue that comes to the fore here is that the notion that adult learners are most at times independent, confident and self-directed to be able to engage in distance learning might not be the case in certain instances. Without proper support from institutions that offer distance education, a lot of their learners may not be able to realise the desired outcomes.

Quan-Baffour (2005) argues that logistical, learning, family/social and economic challenges take a lot of the time and efforts of adult learners, leaving them with limited time for their studies. These reasons are compelling for other support structures like face-to-face tutorials, peer support, in-text support, administrative support, etc. to be used to help adult learners who study through distance education. The views of Lowry (1989) and Quan-Baffour (2005) point to the difficult positions and challenges adult learners find themselves in as learners, workers, parents, etc.

Holmes and Abington-Cooper (2000) cited in Cooper (2009) intimate that by nature adult learning is voluntary and forms the basis of andragogy. Despite the general acceptance that adult learners who study are mostly volunteer learners, their circumstances and background may sometimes make them not to achieve. A lot of factors contribute to adult learners' challenges in learning which include the issue of loneliness and alienation from the needed support structures. Johnson (2005) defines alienation as the state or experience of being isolated from a group or activity to which one should belong or in which one should be involved as a contributory factor to poor learner achievement.

Johnson (2005) identifies four aspects of alienation as powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, and social isolation. Most adult learners experience these problems as they study on their own. When they encounter problems in their studies they are not able to help themselves because of distance between them and their colleagues and teachers. A lot of institutions that provide distance education in a way do not have the necessary support structures in place which is 'recipe' for learner attrition (Quan-Baffour, 2005). It is therefore, important for institutions such as Unisa which are mainly distance education providers to give the needed support to its learners who happen to be adult learners in most cases.

Adult learning is operationally defined in this study as "all activities that are intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles or self-perception define them as adult" (Merriam and Brockett, 1997:8). Since most adults have a lot of challenges and responsibilities, it is at times difficult to study through the formal contact learning system. Ipaye (2005) argues that most open and distance learning (ODL) students are adults who are well over the age of 20, most of probably working, having families and an additional dimension of studying part-time through the self instructional mode. Because of the busy lifestyles and challenges of adult learners, they have to study through distance education which is the focus of the next session. Belawati and Baggaley (2009) cited by (Heydenrych and Prinsloo, 2010:7) define ODL as 'a system that combines the methodology of distance education with the concepts of open and flexible learning'.

2.3 DISTANCE EDUCATION

A lot of people in South Africa could not access quality education due to the past policies of apartheid which offered inferior education to the majority of citizens. The United States Agency for International Development USAID (2003) notes that after the fall of apartheid South Africa in 1994, there emerged one of the most challenging issues for the new government to transform the education system from

one which provided an inferior education to non-Whites into one which could deliver quality for all.

Distance Education is one of the areas touted as a tool for addressing the past imbalances and to ensure that adults are equipped with skills, to contribute to nation building and also making them functional literates. Other programmes initiated by the government and other organisations according to the United States Agency for International Development (2003) include the concentration on improved capacity to develop and implement curricular; improved quality teaching through in-service education; improved management and governance of educational institutions and mitigating the impact of HIV/AIDS on the education sector. It adds that, as the post-apartheid educational system matures; greater emphasis has to be placed on the implementation of student-centered approach in schools and institutions of higher learning, concurrent with capacity building at teaching and administrative levels of the system. Achieving such a feat is daunting taking into account the sheer numbers of people who need to be educated and acquire skills that will enable them to participate in the economy of the country.

A lot of learners are opting to study through distance education in most countries including South Africa these days for diverse reasons and a lot of institutions are offering some form of their programmes through distance education. Connick (1997) points out that distance education has become one of the most powerful emerging trends in education. He adds that most countries have established distance education institutions in their school system.

Since a lot of the people who require the skills and basic education as well as those who have to improve upon their education happen to be adults, it is difficult to use the conventional schooling system to give them the skills and education they need. Connick (2005), Ipaye (2005) and Qakisa-Makoe (2005) all point out that most distance education learners are above twenty years of age which puts them into the classification of adults.

Distance education refers to learning experiences either formal or informal that is carried out at a distance. Education transactions are carried out through the use of different communication technologies and media that allow the students and their educators to interact. The main feature of distance education as the name suggests is the physical distance between the learner and the educator and the institution. Usun (2004) posits that the dominant feature of distance education is the physical and often temporal distance that separates the teacher and the learner. He adds that because distance education students are often placed in a unique situation in which neither teachers nor fellow students are physically present to clarify, discuss, or provide feedback, effective distance education requires a sound learner support system.

Meanwhile, there is increasing popularity in the use of open and distance learning across the world as an effective and cost effective way to provide education to large numbers of people that are comparable to what most of the traditional/conventional institutions provide. Perraton (2010) alludes that the establishment of the Open University of United Kingdom (OUUK) in 1969 and its performance has contributed to the recognition and legitimacy of ODL in the international sphere as there is the proof that the degrees of graduates produced from the institution were at par with those of the other conventional universities. According to Tait (2003) the establishment of the OUUK was accompanied by a wide variety of teaching and learning media as part of a wider and integrated learner support system. The term distance education and ODL have been used interchangeably but (Belawati and Baggaley, 2009; MacIntosh, 2005) cited in Heydenrych and Prinsloo (2010) point out that ODL is more broader than distance education as all ODL institutions can be classified as distance education institutions but not all distance education can be categorised as ODL institutions.

Heydenrych and Prinsloo (2010:7) refer to ODL as “a unique form of distance education, in which ‘openness, presents an *ideological* position affecting not only access and availability, but increasingly our assumptions regarding knowledge production and facilitation”. A very important aspect of ODL which is not

mentioned and emphasised in this excellent description of the concept is the aspect of *flexibility*.

Distance learning institutions' mandate is to provide distance education with all their activities geared towards distance education. To achieve this, Moore and Kearsley (1996) point out that it is necessary for distance education providing institutions to introduce artificial communication media that transport information and provide a channel for interaction between the two. Until quite recently, the main delivery mode had been the use of print and electronic technologies.

2.4 LEARNER SUPPORT

Learner support has been defined by interested groups in education in diverse ways. According to Wright (1991), learner support is the required student services that are essential to ensure the successful delivery of learning experience at a distance. Tait (1995) referred to learner support as a range of activities which complement the mass-produced study materials which dominate most well-known elements in open and distance learning. He isolated the elements of learner support as comprising:

- tutoring and teaching
- counselling and advising
- organisation of study centres
- interactive teaching through TV and radio

Brindley (2004) adds that learner support activities include services such as orientation, learning and study skills assistance, academic advising, and career and personal counselling as well as administrative activities such as admission and registration, library and information systems, infrastructural support for activities which include activities such as peer tutoring and alumni organisations. Tait (1995) cited in Brindley (2004) points out that the common elements in learner support include tutoring, whether face-to-face, by correspondence, telephone or electronically; the organisation of study centres; interactive teaching through TV and radio, and other activities. It should be noted that learner support comprises

all the interactive activities and systems that are put in place to support and facilitate the learning process.

Ufi/learndirect and Kaneo (2007) note learner support to include:

- Mentoring
- Tutoring
- Coaching and counselling
- Assessment, and
- Advice and guidance

They add that some of the methods to the categories of learner support identified above include:

- FAQs on intranet/access point for e-learning
- Email-based support
- Chat support (Instant Messenger)
- Phone support
- Virtual how-to sessions
- Online tutorials tutoring
- Coaching
- Mentoring
- Counselling

Unisa (2007) uses the term learner support to describe a range of services that are developed by an institution to enable it to assist students to meet their learning objectives; gain knowledge, expertise and skills to be successful, and complete their course or studies. The concept learner support in the Unisa context as an ODL institution is informed by current trends in distance education and international research, (Unisa, 2007). Brindley (1995), Saide (1995) and Lentell (2003) all point out that learner support is integral and critical for the delivery and success of any quality ODL system.

In the definitions given above, some common features about the concept of ODL appear in most of the different groups and individuals who have attempted to find a suitable definition for the concept. The common features include:

- the support and development of learning.
- dealing with emotions, relationships and the environments that support learning for individuals and groups.
- systemic which deals with helping students to relate to rules, procedures and systems of the institution in ways that support learning persistence (Tait, 2000).
- integration which looks at ensuring that the learner support services are integrated so that each activity or aspect of it supports system contributes to the overall aim of giving the learners good learning experiences that will ensure success at the end.

The purpose of learner support is to provide a warm, supportive atmosphere for learners which will help them to develop self confidence and in so doing help them to realise individual academic success and life goals by providing different variety of resources, services, and referrals (Ipaye, 2006). He points out that ODL, and distance learning institutions, often put more emphasis on the development of study material and different strategies of getting the content to their learners. Ipaye adds that institutions most often focus on the use of technology to try to bridge the geographical/physical distance or on the personnel to develop the courses or instructional methods for designing technology-based programmes. It can be argued that producing study materials through mass production as well as making technology available does not necessarily guarantee that the learner will be able to use them appropriately to ensure their success in the long run.

The different approaches to learner support are supposed to cater for the physical and geographical barriers that are experienced by students in most cases but there are other barriers and distances which are equally important that are not often taken care of by ODL institutions. Some of these distances and barriers go all the way to negate the efforts ODL institutions make in trying to support learners. Ipaye (2006) notes that there are other important “distances” that confront learners which include some socio-psychological factors that may hinder learning or result in learners dropping out of an ODL programme.

Some other challenges learners' face include difficulties in understanding study materials or what the technology is leading or asking them to do. Another challenge could be that a learner's feeling of marginalisation emanating from his/she not seeing the face of a teacher or hearing from him/her. Johnson (2005) for example, identified alienation as contributing to poor learner achievement. She defined alienation as the state of experience of being isolated from a group activity to which one should be involved. Some aspects of alienation were identified by Johnson (2005) as powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, and social isolation. Other barriers that may negatively impact on an ODL learner could be linguistic, including language of the study material and its reliability; culture, including the culture of reading and studying; motivation; inadequate skills or preparation; anxiety; time; and work or family constraints (Ipaye, 2005).

These barriers and challenges that are common to ODL learners are enough to discourage a learner from pursuing his/her studies or becoming de-motivated. There is therefore the need for a well designed learner support system to take care of any form of barrier or distance so that students can be on course and maintain the motivation they had in registering for the study or programme. Ipaye (2005) points out that learner support services do not only bridge the socio-psychological distance, but they also facilitate the personal development and the realisation of learning goals.

In effect, an effective learner support system has the potential to assist all ODL learners to achieve their study goals but for this to happen the system should be revived all the time to address any new challenges that crop up to ensure its sustainability.

Institutions that provide distance education have to identify the support needs of their learners for them to be able to use the available services to address those needs. Hayes (2006) argues that it is important that special support needs are identified as early as possible. She maintains that although a lot of institutions have systems in place to enable them to identify support needs, some of these needs are not picked up early enough to help the learners with their problems. Some of the support needs are classified under:

- induction
- tutorial and supporting academic work
- tutor, model and advocate
- study skills and time management
- support from peers and friends.

Hayes (2006) notes that induction is a process and not an event which covers a lot of activities ranging from general information that is available at reception by e-mail and telephone; additional learning support (ALS) which comprises all the extra support needed by a learner for him/her to achieve their primary learning goals. This may include numeracy and language, support for any disability or difficulty.

Counselling under induction may include assistance with emotional, practical or motivational problems at home, school or a combination of these (Hayes, 2006).

Some other issues pertaining to induction are in the areas of:

- examinations / assessment preparation
- financial advice and support – this may be provided in-course either for individuals or groups
- learner support funds – the institution at its discretion can help students concerning equipment, materials, travel, etc.
- pastoral support – pastoral support from tutors who can help learners or refer them to experts is important during induction
- study skills – learners can be support on note-taking, essay-writing, library and study centres, computer skills, etc.

There is the specific aspect of learner support in the area of tutorials and supporting academic work. Students in both contact and distance learning need some form of tutoring at one point in time during their studies. This issue deals with the relationship between the student and staff for them to accomplish their study goals. Hayes argues that this is the role that is fulfilled by another person, an outsider or a staff member who may do it officially or on voluntary basis.

McGiveney (1996) found out that staff-student interaction ensures retention rates as such a person has attributes like friendliness, availability and interest in the

student. Tutors tend to understand learners well and based on their personal experiences, are able to become mentors and role models for students. The extent to which ODL institutions ensure that these are part of their support programmes is not clear. A lot of Unisa's students do not have access to tutors and mentors for different reasons as the pressure from the government to avail tertiary education to many South Africans has not been matched with increasing resources. Lephhalala and Pienaar (2007) stated that the increasing enrolments at Unisa have not been accompanied by a corresponding increase in staff and support services. This situation might explain why Unisa as an institution is not able to provide the required number of tutors and counsellors in its support activities.

Study skills and time management are other learner support skills that students have to be supported in. This is most often taken for granted by most institutions that offer distance education. Hayes (2006) identifies some of the problems with respect to study skills and time management as procrastination, disorganization not prioritising one's studies, time management etc. There is the part of learner-support that has been referred to as affective which is equally important for the success or otherwise of a learner achieving his/her educational goals. Champney, Davey and Lawrence (2005) identified mentoring, study circles, group assignments and social events as being helpful emotionally and giving practical support to learners. Although family support has sometimes been found to undermine learners' efforts, to a greater extent families especially elder siblings have been found to be a source of learner support to their family members who study through distance education.

Learner support in distance education has been categorised by different commentators as involving two main components. Moore and Thompson (1997) in Clark (2003) distinguished between learner support as comprising support related to learning, which is crucial in all learning contexts, and learner support that is related to mediation, which characterises distance education activities in particular. They assert that resources that relate to the learning process are similar to those required by on-campus students which include information about the availability of and access to courses, interaction, learning materials, and library facilities.

The resources related to the mediation process according to Clark (2003) are important because of the distance between instructor and learners. She adds that some of these resources are made up of telecommunications and print medium to transfer information and facilitate interaction. It can be argued that learner support can be categorised as academic and non academic as indicated above under which all the specific activities fall as alluded to by Moore and Thompson (1997) and Clark (2003) above. Different learner support models have been identified by various experts and commentators in ODL. Some of these learner support models are discussed below.

Taking the discussions above into account, student support programmes can be classified as comprising 1) academic support programmes such as supplementary tutorial programmes (STP), supplementary instruction (SI), extended curriculum programmes (ECP), peer academic tutoring/mentoring and technical support; 2) emotional support programmes such as peer help emotional support and peer mentoring emotional support; 3) physical support programmes which is also referred to as peer education is educational programmes which are offered to assist students to be healthy until they finish their studies. This support according to Medley, Kennedy, O'Reilly and Sweat (2009) include interventions such as the sharing of HIV/AIDS information in small groups or one to one by peer matched, either demographically or through risk behaviour, to the target population; 4) socio-cultural support programmes to enable students to fit into the existing institutional culture assist them to be inline so that they can be accepted for them to achieve; and 5) financial support programmes.

The benefits of student support programmes include enhanced academic performance which assists students to clarify concepts, develop study and writing skills, provision of separate, safe space for addressing learning difficulties (Adam, 2006). Student support programmes also ensure that students gain access to institutions of higher learning and at the same time reduce the attrition rates and increase retention and throughput rates (Kirkham and Ringelstein, 2008). In addition, support programmes such as peer support creates a sense of community. Collaborative learning does not only improve academic performance, but it also improves students' self esteem. It should be noted that self-esteem for

example contributes immensely to student motivation which leads to enduring learning experiences.

2.5 MODELS OF LEARNER SUPPORT

As discussed in the preceding section, learner support is made up of different activities and interactive processes which are aimed at helping the student's learning processes from the time he/she contacts an institution with the intention of studying to the point of exit and even after his/her studies. Some of the activities include tutoring, counselling, teaching, advising, orientation, administrative services and peer tutoring as well as administrative support (Brindley, von Ossietzky and Paul, 2004). All these support activities Brindley, et al. (2004) maintain are embedded in a value system that gives students access to fair opportunity. Different models of learner support have been identified by experts in the field of learner support which include:

The industrial model – This involved the provision of material and access to students with the focus being on access and availability of learning opportunity to learners (Peter, 1983). This approach was appropriate in the past possibly during the industrial revolution but it did not take the individual needs into account which led to learner attrition as this approach was based on the wrong assumption that adult learners all the time have the relevant skills to plan their lives, careers and education and the setting of realistic goals (O' Donnell and Daniel, 1979). The weakness in this model made people to look for other models that addressed some of the weaknesses in the industrial model.

The interactive model – Sweet (1993) cited in Brindley, et al., (2004) advocated for a more interactive approach in learner support through the promotion of interaction between students and instructors through either mediation or face-to-face means rather than separate methods of advising and tutoring. This approach centred mostly on the interaction between the teacher/tutor and the learner but there are equally other forms of interaction that are needed by students like the interaction between themselves as well as between the institution and administrative staff which impact on their learning. Anderson (2003) took the

interactive model a step further by arguing that there is the need to evaluate all the types of interaction that are in place to support learners (learner-learner; learners-instructor; learner-content; learner-administration) and how all these contribute to the process of learning. The interactive approach or model addressed some of the weaknesses of the industrial model but it still had weaknesses as it left out some key aspects like the context within which the student learns as well as his ability to stay motivated, to persist and succeeding at the end of the day.

Tait (2000) proposed a model for learner support in ODL which he identified as the primary function for learner support which are the “**cognitive**”, “**affective**” and “**systemic**” aspects of learner support which have to work in an integrated manner to ensure effectiveness. He emphasises the importance of all the three component parts as essential for students’ success. Tait, however, argues that most ODL institutions focus more on the systemic component which includes access to administrative support processes and procedures for the institution to be on time whilst the cognitive component (guidance, counselling, assessment, coaching etc. and the affective characteristics (need to belong, to interact with each other, and being part of a community (Maslow, 1987; Stacey, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978) which result in students’ feeling at home, where they feel valued, and finding the learning process manageable are most often not given much attention like the systemic component of the learner support system (Tait, 2000). Dillon and Blacnchard (1991) cited in Usun (2004) identified four types of support systems that are similar to Tait’s model. They relate to:

- learner support and learner needs
- learner support and content
- learner support related to the institutional context, and
- learner support and technology

Tait’s model is all encompassing as it accommodates the learning processes, the context, and the administrative processes. What is not emphasised by Tait’s model specifically is the part on technology but it can be argued that this component can be accommodated in the administrative realm of the model. The changing learning environment in the new millennium has made available technologies which are good but the issue is the question of *access* to the technologies in a developing country such as South Africa.

McLoughlin and Marshall (2000) identified the role of learner support in ODL as helping students to become more independent, collaborative and effective learners and for administration systems to be designed in such a way that students are given the space for control and self-help. The Canadian Library Association (2000) supports this view of McLoughlin and Marshall for students to be independent and being able to help themselves by arguing that librarians for example, should go beyond accessing and retrieving information for students as a support activity to assisting them to becoming information literate where they will be able to among others navigate and assess the reliability, validity and usefulness of the information overload they come across and think critically about them.

Brindley, et al., (2004) sum up that any effective learner support system in ODL should have some of the following features:

- *responsiveness* – the system should differentiate between individuals and groups and their specific needs rather than most ODL institutions targeting the masses
- *interactive* – an effective learner support system should encourage and facilitate the interaction among and between students, lecturers, tutors, administrative staff and academic content
- *context specific* – the institutional goals and student needs are to be seriously considered when learner support is being designed and implemented
- *learner development* – learner support should aim at dealing with issues relating to matters within a course or programme as well as the development of students' skills as well as their personal development
- *openness to change* – any effective learner support system in an ODL environment should take into account the changing phenomena in population patterns, technologies, socio-economic, and political conditions
- *integration* – all aspects of learner support should involve inter-functional collaboration that ensures that the learners' interest and well-being are placed at the centre. This should include the cognitive, effective and systemic parts which if well coordinated will ensure that students succeed while the institution achieves its goals.

A range of activities have been identified as part of learner support which includes tutoring and teaching, counselling and advising and related services as well as other administrative services such as matters relating to admissions and registration (Brindley, et al., 2004). The major issue for most institutions is how institutions ensure that these services reach the learners and support their learning. Brindley, et al., (2004) point out that internet and ICT are good opportunities for teaching and assessing as a way of learner support but access remains a big problem in both rich and poor nations. It is acknowledged that most distance institutions have introduced internet based support systems but Brindley, et al., (2004) warn against producer-led mode delivery mode which to a large extent leads to exclusion for individuals and communities who are not able to access the support services because of issues that relate to affordability of computer and telephone line charges. The specific issues of learner support in the ODL context are examined with its associated challenges in the next section.

It should be noted that Moore's (1997) theory of transactional distance forms the basis of this study. The main factors he identified in his theory which is discussed in detail later in this chapter focuses on three factors namely, dialogue, structure and learner autonomy. The different perspectives discussed above all touch on the three factors in one way or the other. Tait's (1995) mentioned tutoring, counselling and advising which one can conveniently say are part of the dialogue in Tait's perspective on dialogue. Brindley, et al., (2004) and Ufi/learnerdirect and Kaneo (2007) all identify tutoring, coaching and counselling as part of learner support which deals with learner-instructor relations which is based on dialogue. Tait (2003) cognitive support fits into Moore concept of dialogue to a large extent.

Another important factor in Moore's concept of transactional distance is what he referred to as structure. Structure according to Fallon (2011) refers to the level of a course's rigidity or flexibility. Some of the elements of structure include course goals and objectives as prescribed, pedagogical models used in teaching the course, nature of assessment and the ability of the course to accommodate individual student needs (Fallon, 2011). In the Unisa context, the course structures and assessment processes are very rigid as they do not take the individual needs much into consideration. For example, a lot of students are not able to get their assignment feedback on time before they go to write their examinations because

of the semester system. In effect, there is a lot of structure in place in the Unisa system which creates transaction distance.

The last factor in Moore's classification of transactions between teachers and students is learner autonomy. As Fallon (2011) puts it, learner autonomy is contingent upon the two factors discussed earlier, that is, dialogue and structure. Fallon adds that learner autonomy is intimately tied in with a learner's sense of self-direction or self-determination, which is to a large extent, is affected by the level and quality of dialogue, the level of rigidity or flexibility inherent in the course design and delivery, and the "extent to which the learner exerts control over learning procedures. In the Unisa context, the issue of learner autonomy is most likely affected by the nature of dialogue and structure which in this case includes both learner-instructor interactions (cognitive), learner-content (structure) and what Chen (2001) refers to as learner-interface (systemic).

2.6 ACCESS CHALLENGES FOR LEARNERS IN THE ODL SYSTEM

Irrespective of a country's level of development, institutions offering distance learning have some form of barriers and access challenges for its learners. The problem is more pronounced in the developing economies that have serious economic and infrastructural challenges. Creed, Allsop, Miller and Morpeth (2005) point out that institutions that have been in ODL delivery such as the Open University of the United Kingdom (OUUK) have the resources and the experience in learner support but they still have problems in learner support in the area such as matching the resources they possess on material production and tutoring (learner support). In the developing world Bbuye (2006) argues that learner support in Uganda as a developing country impacts on the learner support systems of the institutions that are involved in it.

It can be argued that in most of the situations, institutions and countries' ability to offer support to their distance learners have budgetary and infrastructural constraints. Some of the general access problems and challenges are social and economic she maintains. Duhaney and Duhaney (2006) concur with the views of Bbuye above that the access and cost constraints faced by most developing

countries in the ODL system calls for blended education or technology integration. The path of ODL institutions are adopting is by trying to move in the direction of ICTs which is good but it is going to take a lot of time for institutions in the developing world to develop their infrastructure in remote areas to support their learners.

Some of the specific challenges and barriers to accessing learner support are discussed below. It should be noted that learner support challenges are directly related to most of the barriers and challenges experienced in accessing education through distance education. This argument is supported by Galusha (1998) who intimates that for over a century that distance education has been in existence and regardless of the medium used, programmes offered in distance education and the traditional systems have the same features as well as experience the same challenges. Institutions enrol learners from different cultural, economic and educational backgrounds but most of the services that are used to support them in their learning are general. Gujjar, et al., (2010) point out that there is the need for a paradigm shift in institutional support for learners which are based on institution production to customer-oriented service. They add that learners in a networked environment should use the participative, collaborative and situated approach which focuses on the networked community. This community may include connections between institution and learners, learners and learners, learners and teachers (tutors) and learners and resources.

Tones, Fraser, Elder and White (2009) are of the view that the backgrounds of mature-aged students from low socio-economic and families impacts on their academic success in a distance learning environment. In the South African and Unisa context, most of the ABET students happen to be people from the previously disadvantaged groups. Tones, et al., (2009) add that the Australian higher education system for example, considers people from low socio-economic backgrounds as equity groups as they face challenges which impact on their access, participation, retention and success in education when compared to students from medium socio-economic backgrounds.

It should be noted that all these have economic, cultural and social dimensions that can impact positively or negatively on learner support endeavours by

institutions and prevent learners from accessing support services offered by institutions. Gujjar, et al., (2010) note that the ability to connect the networked learning community which he calls “socially situated support” caters for both the educational and non-educational needs of learners. This support is what Tait (2003) refers to as the affective component of learner support. Most institutions are not able to offer this support which impacts on accessing learner support services.

Access to infrastructure is another major challenge that confronts ODL learners on day-to-day basis. Different infrastructure is needed which may include physical infrastructure such as buildings, roads, electricity and ICT just to name a few. In a networked learner support environment, Miller (1996) cited in Gujjar (2010) says ICT infrastructure enables learner support to be integrated in networked learning environment. Gujjar, et al., (2010), identified the three dimensions of infrastructure as:

- rules and processes that enable people to engage in tasks and activities
- accountability mechanisms which deal with self regulation
- facilitating structures through coordination and communication.

Another challenge in the learner support system relates to the anxiety and frustrations learners have to go through when they have to be part of a group where contributions and collaborations have to be made towards work and activities (Gujjar, et al., 2010). The ability to fully access learner support services in ODL which is used by most adults has to do with the fast changing technologies.

Besides the content learners have to grapple with, they are at the same time required to learn and master new skills to be able to adapt to fast changing technologies. In addition to that, the ability to locate and access the information resources online can be very tedious, frustrating and time-consuming for learners who are not conversant with ICT technology. Galusha (1998) points out that learner who reside outside towns and cities most especially in the developing countries do not have access to reliable ICT and postal infrastructure. If institutions provide learner support services but learners cannot access those services it

poses serious problems. This is the situation most ODL learners experience in the developing world including Unisa.

Organisational and infrastructural demands on ODL institutions impact on learner support endeavours in areas like recruiting and maintaining enough trained and qualified tutors at study centres. Creed, et al., (2005) point out that organisational and infrastructural demand can affect learners' access to learner support services. He noted that in Nigeria, the student dropout rate among ODL learners average between 27% and 39% which can partly be blamed on under resourced and over stretched learning centres that find it difficult to recruit and maintain enough qualified tutors at local study centres. Creed, et al., (2005) observed that getting qualified tutors from local communities pose a serious challenge to ODL institutions in the developing countries. In the case of Unisa, the size of the country as well as the way learners are sparsely dispersed makes it impossible to appoint enough tutors and counsellors as it is, in the case of the Open University of UK (OUUK) where a tutor is appointed for a group of 25 students. The resource constraints do not allow institutions to appoint individual counsellors in the developing countries to assist learners in their studies as required so that they receive the needed support and motivation to carry on with their studies.

Access to tutors and counsellors is a major challenge to effective learner support. Richardson, et al., (2003) cited in Brindley and Kell (2007) allude that evidence shows that academic support engagements of tutors correlated positively with learners' perception of academic quality and levels of their satisfaction. As has been explained Unisa and most other institutions in the developing world cannot afford to appoint many tutors and counsellors in this regard.

Lephalala and Pienaar (2007) identified other challenges which impact on access to learner support services as financial, material and emotional. At times people who are poor cannot afford to transport themselves to study centre and regional centres to access the available services. Another important barrier to accessing learner support relates to language difficulties. A lot of students from the developing nations use foreign languages to access support. Sometimes the language of instruction can be a second or third language which can impact on accessing learner support services. Creed, et al., (2005) draw attention to learners

from multilingual societies where the culture of reading and access to libraries are limited. South Africa falls within such a society where learners study in English and Afrikaans which happen to be third and second languages for most of the learners at the institutions of higher learning. Language barriers can thus pose serious barriers to some learners in dealing with study materials and accessing administrative support services.

Tones, et al., (2009) note that the two main barriers that prevent students' ability to access support services offered by institution are what they termed responsibility conflicts and adjustment to university life. Responsibility conflicts normally relate to work and family responsibilities. In the Unisa context, majority of the ABET students happen to be females who have to squeeze their studies around many other responsibilities. Adjusting to university life after breaks and studying mostly through the traditional contact route by most students becomes a major challenge for students in distance education. Tones, et al., (2009) add that adult learners find it difficult to cope with academic work after long breaks in their studies as gaps are noticed between their own expectations and the perceptions of their lecturers and institutions regarding their academic work.

In addition to the above, Lephalala and Pienaar (2007) found the following as impacting on access to learner support which contributes to success or failure:

- the open and uncontrolled student enrolment which has not been matched with increase resources
- the high student-lecturer ratios
- different competence levels of students
- limited interaction between students and lecturers and tutors.

The geographical distribution of learners across South Africa and beyond with students in remote rural areas, informal settlements and towns and cities pose serious learner support challenges for ODL Institutions. Sonnekus, et al., (2006) intimate that the large and diverse student body of Unisa, for example, impacts not only on the provision of the needed infrastructure for learner support activities in these areas but also the feel of exposure, availability of modern technology to provide the technical support learners need in a learner support system.

Learner support is operationally defined in this study as *comprising the entire academic and non-academic activities institutions use to support their learners in a learning environment that helps them to achieve their goals in education*. Some of the access challenges discussed above include institutional, economic, cultural, social and technological factors. All these factors impact on learners' ability to access the available learner support services ODL institutions are able to provide. Some of the notable and more pronounced challenges include finance; access to technology; support from teachers, other learners, family and friends; accessing administrative support from the institutions; and the insufficient physical infrastructure by ODL institutions. All the aspects of learner support can be discussed under Tait's (2003) model which is briefly discussed below.

2.7 TAIT'S INTEGRATED MODEL OF LEARNER SUPPORT

The three components of the model are what Tait (2003) called "cognitive", "affective" and "administrative" aspects of learner support. The specific component parts of the model are discussed below.

2.7.1 Cognitive or academic support

Academic support encompasses all the aspects of teaching and learning processes in a programme such as the inception, registration of qualifications, development of the curriculum, delivery, assessment and the recognition of the programme as well as addressing the issues pertaining to quality assurance all form part of the academic or cognitive aspects of academic support (Sonnekus, Louw and Wilson., 2006). At Unisa, Sonnekus, et al., (2006) identified the following activities that form part of specific aspects of academic support to learners: face-to-face tutor support' mentoring, peer support, workshops, telephonic discussions, group discussions and technological support. Institute of Curriculum and Learner Development (ICDL) deals with course design and development, inclusion of learner support in study material development, course content, delivery mode and assessment at the relevant National Qualification Framework level.

Tutorial Services, Group Discussions and Work–Integrated Learning (TSDL) – This department at Unisa is modelled along what SAIDE used to support South Africa learners who enrolled for distance studies at UK universities in the 1950s. At a minimal cost, 15 students more can request tutorial at learning centres that are linked to one of the regional centres. Services that are rendered to support learners at these centres through the TSDL include the clarification of module content by tutors, liaising with the Bureau for Career Counselling and Academic Development to help learners with specific problems associated with their studies, assisting with assignments and preparation for examinations.

Faculty staff – The faculty staff are responsible for the development of material, teaching and research in the content as well as the implementation in the ODL context in collaboration with ICDL all the other support systems such as the library, tutors, administration and the other departments that impact on the academic life of the learner through telephone/facsimile, e-mail, video-conferencing, tutorial letters and contact sessions.

2.7.2 Administrative/systemic support

Tait (2003) refers to systemic/administrative support as the process and administrative systems that are put in place to help students to manage rules and systems of the institution in a manner that support persistence. Okpo (2006) identifies some specific issues that deal with administrative issues as information and admission and registration matters, accessing information on students' progress, friendliness of administrative staff and conduction of and release of examination results. The importance of student services for higher education and most especially in the ODL environment cannot be taken for granted as it forms the basis for any successful system. Van Voorhis and Falkner (2004) posit that student support services in the form of orientation, registration, providing aid, advice, billing and collection of fees by the administrative system form the backbone of higher education. They add that the administrative element of the support system is the first point of call for students when they register for their studies and also serve as the last point of contact.

At Unisa, Sonnekus, et al., (2006) identifies some of the administrative services offered at the main campus and the regional centres as web-based enrolment, sending study material by post, duplicating the services offered at the main campus for tutorials to students, call centre for academic and administrative issues; myUnisa which is linked to Unisa's website that helps with the interaction with the stakeholders with specific standardised services which include – online discussions forums, announcements from Unisa and lecturers, calendar events, queries directed at lecturers and administrative departments, library books sent directly to learners, links to official study materials and other web-based sites, electronic submission of assignments and application of recognition for prior learning (RPL).

It can be summed up that the administrative/systemic service actually coordinates the other components of the learner support services to ensure that the purpose of learner support is achieved by ensuring that learners succeed and have an enduring experience in their learning most especially in an ODL environment. Quann and Associates (1979) cited in Van Voorhis and Falkner (2004) point out that irrespective of the delivery mode, “the paramount goal of the register’s office is to serve the students and faculty promptly, equitably and courteously”.

2.7.3 Affective support

Tait (2003) indicate that affective support relates to the emotions that support learning that leads to success. Dzakiria (2004) argues that student needs are to be taken seriously in a learning environment as it relates to the different requirements that require support and action. Such needs assist learners in the ODL and other learning environments to connect to their teachers, the course content, institution and other learners. This view point is shared by UFI/learnerdirect and Kaneo (2007:3) who argue that when e-learning and blended learning programmes fail and there are poor completion rates on the part of learners, it is often the result of factors like:

- learner isolation
- lack of personal feedback
- technical problems, and

- the lack of social interaction.

UFI/learnerdirect and Kaneo (2007) add that learning is a social activity which requires the creation of a social environment which encourages dialogue, collaboration, cooperation and interaction between learners and staff and between learners themselves. According to Tait (2004) the OUUK's founding vision of the concept of student support should be *“personal and individual, local, provide study centres the opportunity for social learning; include a residential element in the form of a one week summer school that enhanced ‘solidarity’; embedded teaching and support role in continuous assessment with the tutors; provide ‘continuity of concern’ throughout a student’s career”*.

Tait (2004) adds that the need of learners may include learners' vulnerabilities in terms of support skills, boosting and sustaining confidence i.e. recognition of affective support, the need for individual support and one person's counselling role throughout the student's time at an institution. Tait (2000) cited in Tait (2004) points out that learner support is premised on the broad understanding that the social and other responsibilities of adult learners in a learning environment requires a support system that relates to self-help and/or peer help which can ensure success and effectiveness. The other resources which the students have access to include family and friends Simpson (2002) cited in Tait (2004).

Although Tait (2003) and Moore (1990) identified the three components of learner support as different activities that have different focus, there is no way the whole system can operate effectively if one of the component parts of the support system does not function well in an ODL environment. This is the reason why an integrated system is advocated for by most ODL researchers for the purpose of learner support to be realised. Some examples of learner support activities by different institutions are discussed in the next section.

2.8 LEARNER SUPPORT IN THE INTERNATIONAL AND LOCAL CONTEXTS

The concept of learner support has been used in different countries by various institutions. The increasing popularity of distance education and open and distance education and the need for ensuring that learners succeed has prompted institutions to provide them with the needed support to ensure that they succeed. Some few examples of the learner support systems used internationally and in South Africa are examined below.

2.8.1 The Open University of United Kingdom (OUUK)

The Open University of United Kingdom was established in 1969. Learner support was made an integral part of their distance learning for adults by ensuring that learner support was integrated in their assessment; timeliness in teaching was observed as well as providing direct feedback to students as a key factor (Tait, 2004). Tait adds that in OUUK's first year of inception, it brought into its teaching learning materials and the integration of multi-media platform into its support systems which in those days included the print, TV, radio, face-to-face tutorials as well as some residential experience. Simpson and Gibbs (2004) identified some of the main features of OUUK as:

- 13 Regional centres
- 260 study/learning centres
- some form of residential experience offered for students
- all students have personal tutors where a tutor has 25 learners to support
- all students have personal counsellors
- supporting learners throughout their study with the institution which they refer to as 'continuity of concern'
- employs part-time tutors to teach by correspondence and assess and grade 50% of the work a student needs to finish course
- call centres are in place to deal with student queries
- has over 180000 learners with over100 awards.

2.8.2 The University of Maryland University College

According to Allen (2004) the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) in the US was founded in 1947 as a unit of the Maryland College Park but it became autonomous in 1972. Its mission focused on adult and part-time students. Allen (2004) intimates that UMUC has the following features:

- its mission devoted mainly to adult and part-time learners
- has about 91,000 learners, 3100 faculty worldwide
- courses delivered in the face-to-face format in addition to online tuition
- it is a comprehensive university that offers programmes from certificate to doctoral degrees
- 71% of its learners register online
- a comprehensive package of support services for both students and faculty including a 24 hours, 7 days a week library services
- a two way interactive mode that uses a two-way online video conferencing

2.8.3 The Nigerian Teacher Institute

According to Okpo (2006) the Nigerian Teacher Institute (NTI) was established in 1976 as the only single mode distance education which was state funded with the aim of training teachers to address serious teacher shortages in the country. The following are some of the features that characterise its activities concerning learner support:

- provision of courses for teacher development, upgrading as directed by the relevant curriculum using distance education technology
- established a modular programme to deal specifically with teacher upgrade in 1990
- uses continuous assessment leading to examinations
- enrolled 19658 students between 2000 and 2003
- learner support an integral part of offering to supplement the main medium which is print. The following are part of the Lerner support services, face-to-face contact sessions, tutoring, course materials, library services, enquiry and admission services, pre-registration counselling, record keeping, information management and other administrative systems

- decentralised support network at the head office, 6 zonal offices, offices at all the federal capitals and federal territories and study centres
- the support services cover cognitive, affective and systemic realms of learner support
- uses the industrial model of mass material production and management of support services with little individual support
- accessibility and cost factors hinder the optimal use of media such as telephones, television, radio, videoconferencing and the internet.

2.8.4 Walter Sisulu University (WSU)

The learner support programme at the Walter Sisulu University is located at the Centre for Learning and Teaching Development (CLTD) with the aim of applying new skills knowledge and attributes in developing the institution as a learning organization in the 21st century (Walter Sisulu University, 2006). Some of the characteristics WSU's learner support activities include:

- being a comprehensive university offering traditional university programmes as well as technologically career focused qualifications
- 4 campuses in the Eastern Cape (East London, Mthatha, Butterworth and Queenstown)
- has 23516 registered students of which 604 study through distance in 2007
- providing institutional and integrated academic support to teaching and learning
- the student academic support unit assists faculties in students recognition of prior learning, offer academic literacy courses, computer and information literacy, life skills, writing centres, and supplementary instructions
- design orientation programmes for all new students
- academic counselling for all students
- providing training for learners to manage peer-help, education and mentorship programmes
- set up peer study groups
- mediate where necessary, with academic and administrative sections to address students' problems
- provision of psychometric assessment

These are contained in the founding document for the Centre for Learning and Teaching Development as part of the institution's overall learner support strategy. How far these have been put to practice up till now is not clear.

2.8.5 Learner support in the Unisa context

The old University of South Africa has been in existence for over 100 years which was mainly correspondence in nature. Mbatha and Naidoo (2010:171) point out that Unisa was founded in 1873 as an examination body but it evolved to become a university college that offered education through correspondence. The University now prides itself as the only comprehensive dedicated ODL institution in South Africa (Unisa, 2008). According to Oothuizen, Leodolff and Hamman (2010), the new Unisa came to existence in 2004 through a merger between the old Unisa and Tecknikon South Africa and the distance education campus of Vista University (Vudec) to become the only dedicated public ODL provider in South Africa.

Concerns have been raised from various sectors about distance education in the country for some time. Oothuizen, et al., (2010) for example, cite the concerns raised by the Council for Higher Education about the quality of distance education in the Republic of South Africa. There is a lot of expectation from ODL providing institutions because of the low skills level in the country as well as the history of apartheid which provided inferior education to majority of the section of the population. The Higher Education Act, 101 (1997) identified some of the challenges in education as the need for redress, equity, quality, access and mass education.

The new Unisa in trying to address some of the issues concerning quality and open access as set up in its vision 2015 (Unisa, 2008). Among others the preamble in the Open Distance Learning Policy (2008) states that:

- *The 2015 Strategic Plan of Unisa dedicates itself to becoming the university in service of humanity*
- *Commits itself to advancing social justice with an emphasis on redress, equity and employment of previously disadvantaged groups in South Africa such as blacks, women, and people with disabilities, the rural and urban poor adults who missed out on opportunities to access higher education.*

As a response to opening access to education for all South Africans especially for the previously disadvantaged, the ODL approach is emphasised which according to Unisa (2008) permits adult learners to have wider choice and flexibility over when, what, where as well as the pace of their learning. For this to succeed there is the need for serious support systems and structures in place. The different support systems at Unisa have been discussed in detail in the previous sections.

Tait's model (2000) which identified learner support as comprising cognitive, effective and systemic realms is being used in this study as it takes all the major components of learner support into account. Unisa (2008) uses the term learner support as a generic term which includes different services developed by the institution to help learners to meet their learning needs that helps them to succeed in their studies. The specific support for students according to Unisa includes:

- tuition support which take the form of detailed, individualised and timely feedback to formative assessment; regional tutorials in the modes of (face-to-face, online, telematic etc.) that is accessible to students; remedial interventions such as responsible open admission programmes to help underprepared students to achieve success in order to decrease the distance between student and teacher;
- peer support in the form of institutionally arranged and supported peer self-help groups;
- in-text support in the form of well-designed well-integrated courseware that creates rich environments for active learning with sensitivity for context, different voices, etc. and promoting dialogue between teacher and student in order to decrease the distance between student and study materials;
- administrative support in the form of timely, accurate and accessible information from institution to students about all aspects of the learning process, from registration to graduation.

In the area of specific learner support issues, Oosthuizen, et al., (2010) identified the support from Unisa as:

- *making counselling services and advice during the period of study*

- *provision of learning materials – making study materials in the form of prescribed text books, specifically designed modules, tutorial letters etc. at the start of the year/semester*
- *discussion /tutorial classes – this includes teaching on assignments by tutors*
- *support facilities – this includes support in the form of infrastructure at study centres and support by peer groups, and*
- *administrative support – where administrative staff helps students to register and all other issues pertaining to their studies after registration.*

There are regional and service centres established across the country that bring support services closer to the students of Unisa. The Directorate of Institution Support and Services (2011) list the support services it offers at the regional centres as:

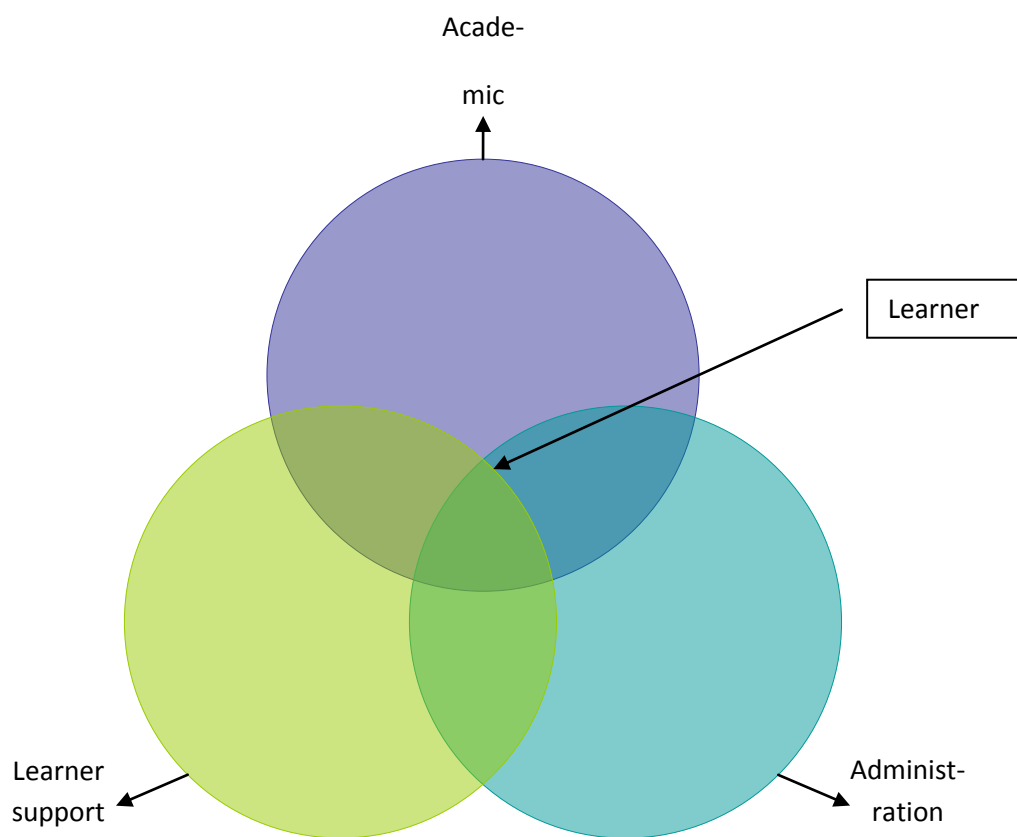
- weekly (sometimes fortnightly) face-to-face tutorials
- opportunity to meet fellow learners who have similar academic challenges to grapple with
- counselling services
- study space
- computer laboratories, and
- peer study groups

Any learner support facility provided by an ODL institution is important but the role of tuition and the tutor are seen as the most important aspect of learner support. Unisa (2007:4) cites Tiat's (2000) three-fold learner support functions: cognitive, affective and systemic which tutoring and the services the tutor provides fulfil. The tutor's academic role according to Lentill (2003), Nadeosa, (2000) and Ngegebule (1998) are to *“facilitate and guide the learning of students so that they gain knowledge, understanding of the content and acquire the necessary skills and competences to cope with their studies. To achieve this, tutors must develop and practice a multitude of skills and strategies”*.

It can be said then that the tuition provided by the tutor bridges the gap between the teacher and student on distance education and takes distance education close to the learning experiences of contact or face-to-face learners.

Unisa (2007) argues that any meaningful learner experience for students in an ODL system should have three systems which are well integrated. The three component parts are academic, administrative and learner support with the learner placed at the very centre. Figure 2.1 below illustrates Unisa's learner support system.

Figure 2.1 Learner support system



ODL Systems (adapted from Unisa, 2007)

Figure 2 above indicates that ODL systems are made up of academic aspect where the academic issues relating to the curriculum, faculty, etc are dealt with,

the administrative aspect which sees to the issues of registration and the related structures, the learner support systems and the student at the very heart of the system. Unisa points out that no matter how well designed, an ODL system designed either in the form of study package, print-based or through some other technology do not on their own provide a complete learning experience but just a learning resource. Any good and effective ODL system in effect has to have all the three component parts and most especially ensure that the support structure are accessible to the learner who is at the centre of the system.

Unisa has most of the learner support systems and programmes in place but the challenge of accessibility which this study tries to investigate is the core of the problem. The institution has regional centres across the country, provides tutorial classes, has excellent video conferencing facilities, etc. Wilson (2003) notes that Unisa introduced videoconferencing in 1990 which facilitates the use of different media that integrates electronically produced sound, photographs, texts, images of real objects, CD-based images, internet-based information, video and sound tapes.

In addition to that Unisa has the myUnisa portal which is a platform which according to Mbatha and Naidoo (2010) is a learning management system that facilitates academic collaboration and study related interaction. The extent to which majority of Unisa students, academic and administrative staff use this is not very clear but with majority of the students living in rural areas, the probability is that a lot of them including staff do not use the platform for its intended purposes. These are very good initiatives on the part of the institution but Nonyongo (2002) reported that Unisa:

- *Had low success in terms of completion and throughput rates*
- *Programmes are too much of a corresponding nature than a well functioning distance education institution*
- *Learner support is inadequate and this problem is aggravated by the lack of a coordinated network of learning centres.*

By all accounts, Unisa has not been able to take its learner support activities to benefit majority of learners who need it most in a significant way. It has been indicated that most of the support structures are in place but this have not

translated into increased student success and throughput rates. Lephalala and Pienaar (2007:2) for example, point out the increase intake of students at Unisa has not been accompanied by a corresponding increase in academic and administrative support structures. This view is shared by Pityana (2010) that only 55.75% of Unisa's students passed the 2009 end of year examinations. He added that 10% of the students who registered during the same period did sit for the examinations. He concluded that improving the success rate at the university will depend on the provision of support and guidance to drastically reduce the unacceptably high attrition rates between registration and examinations.

2.9 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Various approaches and theories have been used by various parties and researchers in dealing with learner support in the ODL and distance learning context. Some of the theoretical concepts that have been used in dealing with learner support include Paulo Freire's dialogic process of communication (1970), Holmberg's (1983) theory of didactic conversation, Moore's (1990) theory of transaction distance and Trumper's (2004) theory of dialogue.

Gorsky et al. (2004) point out that the key factor in a distance education instructional system is neither the learner, the instructor, the physical nor the temporal distance that separates them but rather *learning*. They add that learning is an individual endeavour which is mediated by intra-personal dialogue. Such a dialogue, it is assumed is made possible by physical and human resources. The theorists point out that some of the structural resources that can be used to facilitate intra-personal dialogue include all the available media of communication, instructors and fellow learners. The part on human resources deals with the inter-personal dialogue which is the learners and tutor/instructors who are part of the instructional dialogue.

Paulo Freire's (1970) theory of dialogical process of conversation is premised on the fact that for any communication to be effective, it should be in the form of a dialogue and be reciprocal (Mbatha and Naidoo, 2010). The emphasis of this theory is how individuals who have to develop themselves have to be active participants in their own development even if they have to be assisted by another person. It is therefore important for subjects to actively participate in the communication processes. The extent to which ODL institutions involve students in this dialogue in most of the developing world appears to be limited because of resource limitations. The point of departure here is that if the dialogical processes are effective then learning as will be effective as well.

Holmberg's (1983) theory of didactic conversation centres on the learner. He uses the formal education system in which the ideas of learners are expressed and the educators being there to explain, guide, correct or redirect those ideas. The theory of didactic conversation establishes a certain type of relationship between the educator and the learner which to a greater extent leads to learner motivation that can lead to success in the end. Holmberg (2003) later refined the term 'didactic' and simply referred to the concept of '*learning conversations*' which allows for a more liberal use of the term rather than the more authoritarian term 'didactic'. Holmberg's learning conversations and Freire's dialogical process of conversation appear to deal almost with the same issues which at the end of the day should lead to learning taking place.

As indicated earlier, the conceptual framework in this study is informed by Moore's concept of "*transactional distance*". Moore's (1990) concept of transactional distance comprises the distance which, according to him, exists in all educational relationships. This distance is determined by the amount of dialogue which occurs between the learner and the instructor, and the amount of structure which exists in the design of the course (Tait, 2003). He adds that greater transactional distance occurs when an educational programme has more structure and less student-teacher dialogue. He concludes that distance is not determined by geography but by the relationship between dialogue and structure. He suggests that one way by which a variety of transactions can occur is through the use of integrated

telecommunication system, thereby improving dialogue to minimise transactional distance. Unisa's tutorial system is part of the Unisa's support system.

I find Moore's theory of transaction distance to be relevant for this study because it encompasses most of the issues that address student learning which Holmberg and Freire addressed partially. The theory takes into account the expectations and experiences of students in distance learning. It takes the circumstances of the students into account by indicating that structures and dialogue might be in place in a distance learning environment but their effectiveness in helping the students to learn may not be effective. In the context of the Unisa student, quite a number of the students are from disadvantaged and marginalised communities where accessing the support services offered by the institution is difficult. For example, offering some compulsory modules purely on line where students from rural and disadvantaged communities do not have access to computers and the internet. Besides that, most of the tutorial classes are offered at regional centres and in towns and cities which far from where a lot of the students reside. This situation creates the transaction distance Moore refers to in his theory.

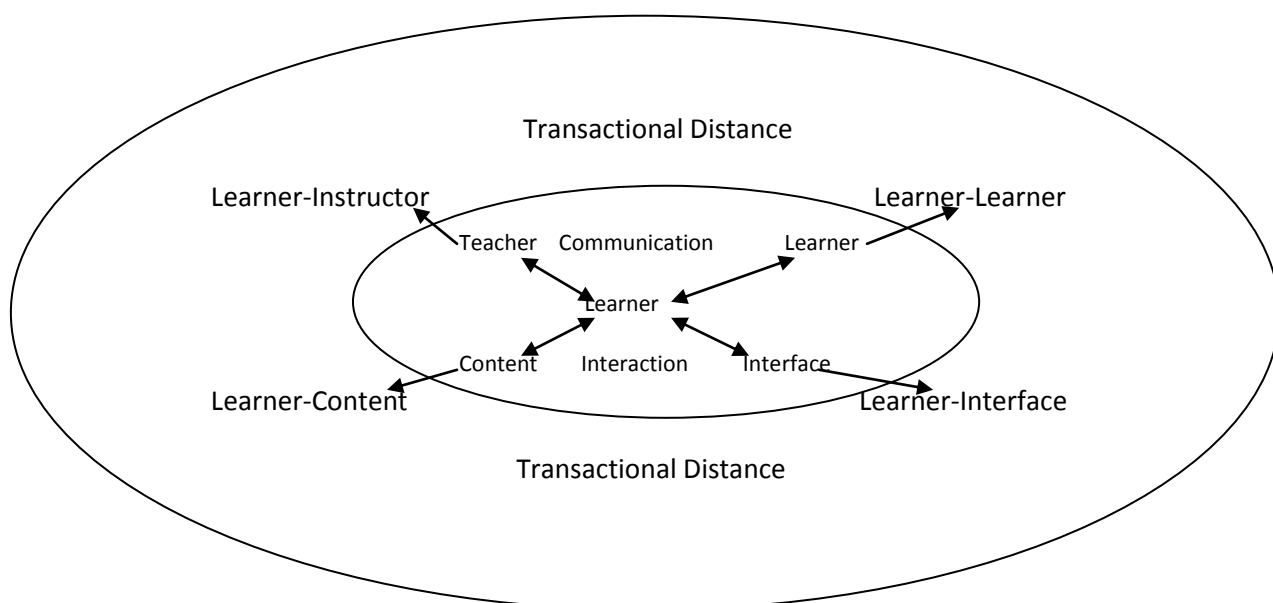
Chen (2001:459) identified four dimensions of transactional distances namely, instructor-learner, learner-learner, learner-content, and learner-interface. Moore (1989) cited in Chen (2001:460) refers to:

- Learner-instructor interaction as the interaction that gives motivation, feedback, and dialogue between the teacher/instructor and student.
- Learner-content interaction is the method, by which students obtain intellectual information from study material, and
- Learner-learner interaction involves the exchange of information, ideas and dialogue that occurs between students about the course.
- A fourth dimension of transactional distance which has become important in the modern era is what according to Hillman, Wills, and Gunawardena (1994) as cited Chen (2001:460) is learner-interface interaction. Chen describes learner-interface interaction as the interaction between learner

and technological medium in order to interact with content, instructor, and other learners.

Chen (2001) proposes model below to illustrate the four types of transactional distance in Figure 2.2 below.

Figure 2.2 Transactional distance and typology of interaction in distance learning environments.



(Source: Chen, 2001:462)

As Figure 2.2 above shows, educational transactions occur at all the facets of the educational environment where learners interact with teachers/lecturers/instructors, with fellow learners, with content, and interface. All the four dimensions if not well managed can create transactional distance and thereby negatively impact on the learning experiences of the learner. Chen (2001) points out that learner-instructor transactional distance has to do with the psychological or cognitive distance of understandings and communication that learners experience as they interact with their teacher/instructor. She referred to learner-content transactional distance to be the understandings learners experience as they go through the course materials and the degree to which the

course materials meet their learning needs and expectations. Learner-learner transactional distance refers to the psychological distance that learners experience as they interact with other learners. Learner-interface according to Chen is the degree of user friendliness or difficulty that learners experience when they use the delivery system.

Meanwhile, Fallon (2011) notes that Moore's theory of transactional distance posits that in the distance education context, separation between teacher and students can lead to communication gaps, psychological space of potential misunderstandings between the behaviours of instructors and that of learners and quoting Giossos, Koutsouba, and Lionarakis (2009), who added that :

“... the particularities of space and time pertaining to teacher and learner which characterise distance learning, create particular behavioural models for the teacher and the learner, psychological and communication distance between them and insufficient understanding of each other”.

The views of Chen (2001) and Giossos et al., (2011) Moore's transactional distance are similar as both viewpoints isolate and deal with psychological separation which can cause transactional distance. Giossos et, al.'s (2011) interpretation of Moore's structure to a large extent covers aspects of Chen's learner-content dimension as it deals with students' perceptions of the degree of rigidity or flexibility of a course. Not much however is mentioned by Chen (2001) on learner autonomy which Fallon (2011) puts a lot of emphasis on. Chen (2003) on the other hand added the learner-interface dimension of transaction distance which is a topical issue in learner support because of the changing technology in delivering distance education. The use of ICT in distance education and most especially for learner support allows for both the synchronous and asynchronous tools to be used in delivering content. The use of ICT to a large extent falls under what Chen (2001) referred to in her model under learner-interface. The use of both the synchronous and asynchronous tools as support infrastructure is important in the Unisa context which this study is all about because of the diverse nature of the students and programmes. Fallon (2011) avers that although distance learning allows for learner independence, flexibility, and choice in how, when, and where

they study, research indicates that that regular interaction is important and necessary for them to succeed in their distance learning endeavours.

The dimensions used by Chen (2001) to analyse Moore's (1997) theory of transactional distance from the point of view of Fallon (2011) are relevant for this study. As mentioned earlier on in this chapter, Chen's dimensions of transactional distances dwelt on learner-instructor interactions which has more to do with Moore's (1997) concept of dialogue, and Chen's learner-content transactional distance and learner-interface being more in line with Moore's (1997) concept of structure. It is assumed that increased dialogue between the learner and the instructor and less structure (learner-content) and improved learner-interface will lead to learner autonomy as a factor in bridging transactional distance as per Moore's (1997) suggestion.

The concept of transactional distance is applicable to the learner support system in the Unisa context as an institution as there appears to be some elements of transactional distance on the basis of the success of adult learners at the institution, the limited number regional service centres, poor transport and communication network coupled with the lack of access of many of the rural learners to computers and the internet. Understanding the elements of transactional distance that exist in the Unisa's learner support system will increase its transactional presence and thereby address the challenges the students face in accessing the support service the institution offers.

It should be noted that this study to a large extent focuses on Moore's (1997) concept of dialogue and Chen's learner-instructor and learner-interface dimensions regarding the concept of transactional distance.

Although all the four theories examined above, i.e. Gorsky, et al.'s (2004) theory of dialogue; Holmberg's (1983) and (2003) didactic and learning conversations; Freire's 1970 theory of dialogical conversation and Moore's (1990) theory of

transaction distance have their different focus, they all point to the importance of interaction between the important role players in the learner support endeavours in any ODL system. Gorsky, et al., (2004) have their emphasis on learning while taking note of the availability of educators and the media for any effective instructional dialogue to be effective. Holmberg's theory puts the learner at the centre with the support from the educator being important for his or her motivation which can help the outcomes of learning to be realised. Freire's transactional distance also focuses on the dialogue that is supposed to take place between the different role players in the learning process to bridge the physical and other distances between the learner and the educator while taking into account the important role of the learner in addressing his/her situation.

Moore's (1990, 1997) theory of transactional distance puts emphasis on the extent of communication or interaction that takes place between the learner and the educator, learner and other learners and learner and administration. Chen (2001) makes it very clear that distance is not geographical but rather a pedagogical phenomenon. The literature review has therefore brought to the fore the different components and dimensions to learner support by isolating the important issues surrounding teaching and learning in an ODL context and the technological medium that is needed in order for the interaction with the content, instructor and other students to be ensured.

2.10 CHAPTER SUMMARY

The chapter looked at the different definitions that have been given by different people for learner support as well as the different models of the concept. The different models include the industrial model Brindley, et al., (2004); the interactive model (Sweet, 1993) and Moore (1990) and Tait (2000) integrated model. Almost all the models discussed fit into the Tait's model which identified learner support to encompass the cognitive, affective and systemic parts which is used as the basis of this study. The specific access challenges learners and institutions face broadly fall under economic, social, cultural and institutional factors.

The ODL, which learner support is a major part of was also examined which shows clearly that any successful ODL system should have the student at the very heart of the system. Specific examples of learner support practices in different parts of both the developed and developing worlds were examined. The learner support programmes and activities at Unisa were discussed in detail but it appears that the system is not well coordinated and integrated, leading to students not being able to access the support activities fully. The specific factors that impact on access gaps will be confirmed in the data analysis and discussions that will follow in Chapters 4 and 5 of this study. The next chapter focuses on the research design and methodology.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the major objectives are to outline the methodology of this study and state the rationale behind the method used. The chapter also clarifies how the research was conducted as well as the strategies that were used in order to ensure the reliability and validity of the study. In addition to that, the chapter dwells on the procedures and methods that were employed to examine the research questions which are based on the problem statement and the stated objectives of the study. The procedures and methods are made up of the following: (1) sampling, (2) data collection and analysis, (3) profiling the respondents, (4) instrumentation (5) piloting, (6) validity and reliability testing. Leedy and Ormrod (2005:2) define research as a systematic process of collecting, analysing, and interpreting information (data) and its purpose is to help us to increase our understanding of the phenomenon we are concerned with.

3.2 RESEARCH ORIENTATION

How research is conducted may be viewed in terms of the research philosophy a researcher subscribes to which determines the strategy he/she may use and the instruments that have to be used in achieving the objectives of the study. A research philosophy is the belief about the manner in which data about a phenomenon should be gathered, analysed and used. There are two main comparative epistemologies which are normally used in research namely; positivism and interpretivism. The two philosophies are briefly discussed below.

Bryman and Bell (2011) note that positivism advocates for and applies the methods of natural sciences to the study of social reality and beyond. Levin (1988)

is of the view that reality is stable and can be observed and described from an objective viewpoint. The positivist paradigm allows a researcher to make predictions on the basis of an observed reality and their inter-relationships. Interpretivism on the other hand, is based on the assumption that it is only through the subjective interpretation of and the intervention in reality that reality can be understood. Qualitative research is the collection of in-depth, non-numerical data, traditionally collected face-to-face in an unstructured manner (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Qualitative research therefore is a non-positivist perspective, which is based on the premise that the world itself is made up of different individuals with different perspectives, and operates in different contexts. Krauss (2005) adds that epistemology is closely related to ontology and ontology methodology; as ontology involves the philosophy of reality, epistemology addresses how we come to know that reality while methodology identifies the particular practices used to attain knowledge of it.

This research follows both the positivist and interpretivist epistemologies. The ontological positions are therefore objectivism and interpretivism. In effect, the mixed method is used in this study. The reason for using both epistemologies in this research is to try to understand how the learner support services offered to the students are experienced from the students' perspective and also to determine the importance the students place on the support services as well as the access challenges they encounter in accessing the support services the university offers. The use of the positivist and interpretivist epistemologies in this study is justified by the fact that the researcher wanted to understand the adult learners and their experiences in accessing the learner support services that are offered by Unisa. This experience requires special insight which can be obtained better through qualitative study. On the other hand, assessing the extent of the learner support services deals with and needs gaps are best captured through the use of the quantitative approach.

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

A research design is a detailed framework or plan that helps to guide a researcher through the process, allowing a greater likelihood of achieving his/her objectives (Wilson, 2010). This involves the population, the choice of the setting, the sample size and procedures (Du Plooy, 2008). The research design for this study is a survey design which uses the mixed-method design as it combines elements of both the qualitative and quantitative approaches. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) note that researchers often combine elements of both the approaches in what is normally referred to as the mixed-method design. The use of multiple sources of data collection to support a particular hypotheses or theory is what is termed triangulation. Triangulation is the use of multiple sources of data collected with the hope of that they will all converge to support a particular hypothesis or theory (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005). Denzin (2006) adds that although a lot of studies utilise one method for studies, combining methods, an approach defined as triangulation can be a useful research option. Mason (2002) argues that the aim of triangulation is to “seek to corroborate one source and method with another ... [and to] enhance the quality of data”.

Plano-Clark, Huddleston-Casas, Churchill and Green (2008) identify four-design framework to guide the use of mixed methods research which include concurrent, exploratory, explanatory and embedded designs. Concurrent/triangulation design approach which is used by researchers compares quantitative and qualitative forms of evidence to corroborate results or identify discrepancies between data sources or use one form of evidence to expand on the results of the other (Plano-Clark et al., 2008). The use of the exploratory design as a mixed-methods design according to Plano-Clark et al., (2008) is best suited when there is little empirical knowledge about a particular research area (i.e. lack of a theoretical framework, instruments or variables). Explanatory design in mixed-method design on the other hand is used when a researcher requires qualitative data to expand on or explain initial quantitative findings (Morse, 1991). Citing Creswell and Plano-Clark (2007), Plano-Clark et al., (2008) note that researchers who use embedded design apply one type of data in a supportive role to the other method type. They add that one

of the characteristics of embedded design is that the overall study is guided by a traditional quantitative or qualitative methodology study (such as an experimental or case study) that frames the overall emphasis and direction of the study.

In this study the approach involves the mixing of the qualitative and methods of data collection and analysis.

Research design as already mentioned earlier are categorised into qualitative and quantitative designs. Wilson (2010) notes the divide as follows:

“word ‘qualitative’ implies an emphasis on the qualities and processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity or frequency. Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between research and what is studied, and situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasise the value-laden nature of enquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. In contrast, quantitative studies emphasise the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes”.

The mixed research design was used which involves the use of both the qualitative and quantitative methods in this study in order for the researcher to determine the access gaps to learner support services by adult learners studying at Unisa through distance education at Unisa.

A set of questionnaires and a focus group interview were used to solicit the views of the respondents on the challenges they face in accessing the learner support services Unisa offers. Bryman and Bell (2011:54) note that survey research comprises a cross-sectional design in relation to which data are collected predominantly by questionnaire or by structured interview on more than one case and at a single stage in time in order to collect quantitative or quantifiable data in connection with two or more variables, which are then examined to detect patterns of association. Denscombe (2012) avers that the purposes for using surveys in

research include the possibility of measuring some aspects of a social phenomenon or trend and gathering facts in order to test a theory.

Survey research allows the researcher to collect data about situations or views at one point in time through questionnaires or interviews. Survey research involves the use of self-administered questionnaires, telephonic interviews and face-to-face interviews to gather data on a topic or phenomenon which is of interest to a researcher (Lindsey and Beach, 2000). Quantitative analysis techniques are then employed to draw inferences from the data to establish relationships and make predictions. Another advantage of the survey design is that, it permits the researcher to study more variables at a time. In this study, a survey questionnaire comprising both closed and open end questions was used to gather data on the access challenges to learner support services experienced by Unisa's adult learners studying through distance education. The administration of the survey questionnaire was done from the 11th to 30th November in the North West Province.

Some of the weaknesses of the survey design include the possible bias in the selection of respondents, time and place, etc. It is difficult most especially when questionnaires are used to get insight into the phenomena and the processes that are being measured.

One of the disadvantages of using survey research which the questionnaire is a part of includes the low response rate from respondents. In addition to that the respondents are not able to express their own views; most especially when there are close ended questions. There can be issues the respondent would not have thought of and have no knowledge about but will answer the question anyway. This weakness was addressed through the pretesting of the questions through piloting.

The qualitative aspect of the study involved the use of one focus group interview which was conducted at one of regional offices of Unisa in one province. Focus groups consist of small groups of people who are brought together by a 'moderator' (the researcher) to explore attitudes and perceptions, feelings and ideas about a specific topic (Denscombe, 2012). In this study, the focus group interview comprised 10 students who were registered for Unisa's ABET certificate and diploma programmes in 2012 who go to the regional office for support services.

The focus group interview as an instrument for data collection has several advantages. A focus group interview allows participants to share their experiences and knowledge on the topic under discussion. The exploratory nature of this study made the use of a focus group interview appropriate in allowing the participants to express their views and feelings on the topic under discussion. In so doing, the researcher was able to go deeper in the access gaps to the learner support services the adult learners encounter as well as debating with the group members before arriving at a conclusion which captured the views of the group. Focus group interviews provide quick results as the responses are captured there and then for analysis. In addition to that the focus group interview unlike structured questionnaire for example, allows unanticipated issues which the researcher cannot foresee but important to be discussed.

Using the focus group interview as data collection tool has its own limitations also. In the first instance, it is not easy for the researcher to have control in a group interview when compared with individual interview as the group members can move in and out which can cause disruptions for the process. Sometimes the discussions between the group members result in irrelevant issues coming in and sidelining the focus of the topic. The researcher prepared himself for this in eventuality by redirecting the focus of the interview to the issues under discussion. Secondly, getting people to a particular spot at a specified time for a group interview can be problematic. The researcher arranged and picked the participants from designated spots to address this problem. Finally, some of the group members in a focus group interview try to dominate the discussions and impose

their ideas on the group. The researcher tactically requested such members to allow the other participants to express their views as well.

3.4 METHODOLOGY

This is a formal cross sectional study using a survey which is intended to find out the gaps that exist in accessing the learner support services by adult learners studying through distance education at Unisa in one province of South Africa. The descriptive method is applied in this study. Denscombe (2012) identifies the tools for data collection such as questionnaires, interviews, observation and documents. He adds that some research methods tend to be more suitable with certain strategies. For example, the use of a survey is often linked with the use of questionnaires as data collection method. In this study, as stated earlier, the questionnaire and focus group interview are the data collection techniques used.

3.4.1 The population and sample

Israel (2008) defines population as a set of all items that are being considered for measuring some characteristics. This is the group of cases the researcher can draw on according to Wilson (2010). In this study, the population also referred to as the “universe” to which answers to questions can be generalised in a study. The target population therefore for this study is all students at Unisa who registered for the ABET certificate and diploma programmes and residing in the province in question.

3.4.2 Sample

A sample is normally drawn from a target population. The particular entities they select comprise their sample, and the process of selecting them is called sampling (Leedy and, Ormrod, 2005). Wilson (2010) defines the sample frame as a list of the accessible population from which a researcher can draw a sample. Unisa’s ABET students are many but this study only focused on the students from one

province of South Africa. A sample frame of 419 students taking the ABET certificate and diploma programmes from the province was used for the study. This figure for all the registered students was obtained from the student affairs office at Unisa. The sample for the focus group interview was 10 students who were selected through the assistance of “key informants” (staff from the regional centre in the province that was selected for the study).

One regional centre in the North West Province of Unisa was selected as the sample site for the focus group interview as it is one of the three regional offices in the province in question. When the researcher contacted students who access support services from the three regional offices, students from the regional office in question were the ones who indicated their willingness to participate in the focus group interview.

3.4.3 Sampling procedure

Selecting a section of a sample frame or the entire population is what is referred to as sampling. Wilson (2010) points out that we use sampling to make inferences about a population or make generalizations with regard to existing theory. According to Wilson (2010), sampling techniques can be divided into two types which are:

- Probability or random sampling, and
- Non-probability or non-random sampling

Probability sampling ensures that every item in the population has equal chance of being part of the sample and has the greatest freedom from bias (Wilson, 2010). Non-probability sampling on the other hand mostly does not ensure that participants and cases have to be representative or random but a clear rationale has to be given for the inclusion of cases or individuals and not others. Sekaran (1992) cited in Dzansi (2004) points out that the choice of method and strategy is determined by the available time, resources and the extent of generalisability required.

The study used a stratified random sample of 150 ABET students out of the 419 registered from the selected province. Blumberg, et al., (2008) allude that the stratified random sampling technique allows populations to be segregated into several mutually exclusive sub-populations or strata. They add that the process by which stratified random sampling is used allows for the inclusion of elements from each of the segments. This technique is more efficient than simple random sampling as it allows for items to be selected from each sub group that may be proportionate to the size of the stratum in relation to the population (Wilson, 2010). In this study, the elements that are included in the sample are rural, urban and peri-urban students. They differ in areas like proximity to study centers, level of study (Diploma or Certificate), access to learner support services, economic and social status, attendance of contact lessons and tutorial classes, etc. If the simple random sampling technique is used, there is the likelihood of some of the groups could be over represented while others possibly not featuring at all.

Determining the sample size for research is a bit complex which depends on a number of factors. Wilson (2010) points out that the size of a sample is to a greater extent influenced by one's research philosophy. He argues that if one adopts a positivist stance, then there will be the need to generate large data that allows for the use of statistical analysis. Wilson (2010) concludes that one's choice of sample size depends on:

- the confidence one needs in the data, i.e. level of certainty that the characteristics of the data collected will represent the characteristics of the total population;
- the comparative sample size of earlier studies;
- the margin of error that can be tolerated i.e. the accuracy required for any estimates to be made from the sample;
- the type of analysis one is going to embark upon; and
- the size of the population from which the sample is being drawn.

Considering the guidelines above, a sample size of 150 is regarded as adequate in dealing with the research questions. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) suggest sample sizes for different population sizes. They allude that if the population is about 5000

units, the population size is irrelevant, and the sample size of 400 should be adequate. The sample frame for this study is 419 learners therefore 150 out of the 400 students is more than 30% of the sample frame. Out of the 150 questionnaires that were sent out, 125 were returned but 8 were not well completed and could therefore not be used.

The researcher wanted a representative sample of the ABET certificate and diploma students in the selected province. The purposive sampling technique was used to be able to have the views of and experiences of all the subgroups. The list of all the registered ABET students in 2012 was obtained which was fortunately grouped into their areas of residence. The researcher then categorised them into year of study or year groups and used the simple random sampling technique to select from each of the groups to obtain the total number of 150 required. The researcher then contacted them telephonically to solicit their participation in the study after the purpose of the study had been explained to them. The questionnaires were then mailed to the participants in self addressed envelopes.

Interviews are important for gaining insight into the experiences of the respondents on the phenomena that are being investigated. Bryman and Bell (2011) point out that “the aim of an interview is for the interviewer to elicit from the interviewee or respondent, all manner of information: interviewees’ own behaviour or that of others, attitudes, norms, beliefs, and values. To obtain rich information that is needed for this study, the researcher ensured that the site and the context were appropriate which in this case was the regional office of Unisa from the province in question where the students go for support services. The researcher used the semi-structured interview technique as it allows respondents to express their views without much restriction in a controlled manner. The focus group interview took place on 20 November 2012. There were ten group members made up of 7 females and 3 males.

The researcher made arrangements at the regional office where a board room was made available. The equipment which was a cell phone was made ready with the

interview guide as Table 3.1 below shows. The interview which lasted for about one hour was tape-recorded. The group was asked how they preferred to answer the questions which they agreed among themselves that they wanted to discuss among themselves first before one answered which the researcher accepted.

Table 3.1 Interview guide

Interview participants	Technique	Purpose of the interview	Number of interviews	Focus area of the Interview
10 distance learners from the one province of South Africa	Interviewees were purposively Selected	To gain insight into their distance learning experiences and the gaps that exist in accessing the learner support services Unisa offers	One focus group which last for about one hour	<p>What they understood by learner support.</p> <p>The purpose of learner support.</p> <p>If they use the support services.</p> <p>How learner support helps them in their studies.</p> <p>The support services they are aware of.</p> <p>The challenges they face in accessing the support services.</p> <p>If they have access to computers and the internet.</p> <p>Whether they use myUnisa as a support tool.</p> <p>How they think the support services can be improved.</p>

3.4.4 Instrument development and piloting

The researcher designed a set of questionnaire that were used to survey the biographical background information about the ABET students in part A. Parts B and C of the questionnaire focused on the students' experiences, judgments and perceptions on the importance and access to the different support services offered by Unisa in its distance education programmes. The second part of the questionnaire was a pre-existing questionnaire which was adapted by the researcher from Clark (2003) (See Appendix 2) after obtaining permission from her to use her instruments to survey the views of the ABET learners in the South African context. The original items in Part C comprised 48 items.

A focus group interview was developed to complement the questionnaire that was used in the study (See Appendix 1).

The researcher piloted the questionnaire after adjustments have been made to the original questionnaire which had been designed and used in the USA. Piloting refers to small-scale campaign, survey, investigation or test plant that is commissioned or established to check the conditions and operational details before full-scale launch. Wilson (2010) notes that pilot studies are carried out prior to the main survey which ensures that the main study is valid and reliable. The pilot study was conducted on 15th and 16th of December, 2011 in one of the district headquarters in the province in question. Ten students (four certificate and six diploma) were involved in the pilot study. The completion of each questionnaire took about twenty-five minutes. It was realized that the time was too long for the students as well as some of the questions being similar requiring almost the same information. Six items were added while 14 were deleted from the original items which enabled respondents to complete the questionnaire in about 18 minutes. Through piloting of the initial questionnaire, the researcher was able to clarify the instructions and questions which according to the participants were not clear. After the piloting, 40 items in Part C were found to be suitable for the study.

A four point scale required the respondents to indicate the extent to which they regarded the services as important and the extent to which they are able to access the support services from the university. The alternative responses ranged from (1) very important, (2) important, (3) important to a limited extent, (4) not important at all. On the part on accessibility the responses ranged between (1) very accessible, (2) accessible, (3) accessible to a limited extent, (4) not at all accessible.

3.4.5 Data collection

Three main tools of data collection used in collecting primary data were interviews, questionnaire and observation. Wilson (2010) points out that each of the tools use different methods to collect the data needed from respondents. The questionnaire is by far the most common tool used in data collection (Parente, 2000). It is a powerful tool in survey research which allows one to measure a person's thoughts, attitudes, opinions, experiences, likes and dislikes just to name a few. The questionnaire was administered to each of the respondents through the postal system for the identified students who were selected to be part of the survey.

In this study, the main instruments that were used are questionnaire and a focus group interview. Bryman and Bell (2011) define the questionnaire as a collection of questions that are administered to respondents. They add that one of its advantages is that it allows the respondents to complete the questions on their own. Questionnaires also allow more people to be reached at relatively lower cost. In addition to that, it is easier and quicker for respondents to answer the questions and for the researcher to enter the information on the questionnaire. Lindsay and Beach (2000) allude that the use of survey research makes it possible for the researcher to obtain data that can be analysed quantitatively.

Bryman and Bell (2011) describe the focus group interview as a group interview in which there are several participants (in addition to the moderator/facilitator); where there is emphasis in the questioning on a particular fairly tightly defined topic; and the emphasis is upon interaction within the group and the joint construction of

meaning. In this study, the purpose of the focus group interview was determined which was to get the views of the students on their experience of Unisa's learner support services and the challenges they face in accessing the services in an effort to complement the information from the questionnaire. The sample comprised 10 students who go to the selected regional office for support services. This group was selected on the recommendations of "key informant" based on reputational case selection strategy (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984, cited in Merriam, 1988).

One of the ABET tutors at the regional office, "the key informant", gave the researcher the contact details of 15 students who were prepared to be part of the group to be interviewed. Ten out of the 15 indicated that they were available on the date of the interview. The questions were adaptations from the questionnaire that had been piloted earlier. The data from the interview was transcribed the following 48 hours after the interview. The transcribed data was analysed for the themes that emerged from the interview in paper format by cutting the transcript into pieces for each quote and grouping of themes and piece together.

3.4.6 Data analysis

We use the data collected to answer the research questions and/ or help us in testing the hypotheses. The data collected is analyzed into information which is meaningful to the reader. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) posit that quantitative data analysis and interpretation are two separate steps in which numerical data are mathematically manipulated and statistically analyzed, then the outcomes of those analysis and manipulations being interpreted with respect to the initial research questions. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used in presenting data. From the biographical data and the four point Likert scale questionnaire, tables and percentages derived. The questionnaire schedule was coded and a data matrix created using the SPSS package which categorises variables according to their measurements.

Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics enables one to describe (and compare) variables numerically, (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007) and how certain measured characteristics appear to be “on the average” as well as the variability among different pieces of data (Leedy and Ormrod, 2002). Denscombe (2007) notes that quantitative data are well suited to measurable comparisons whereas qualitative data are more suitable for descriptions. The raw data was coded through the attribution of a number to a piece of data using Microsoft excel software that enabled the data to be analysed quantitatively. Arithmetic mean scores were used as there are different groups of students with different needs and views about their distance learning experiences and as well as different access challenges. Frequency tables and their distributions were also used to ascertain trends and the experiences of the students on their distance learning experiences and in general and learner support experiences in particular.

Inferential statistics

Inferential statistics deals with drawing conclusions and inferences about a population based on the sample data collected from that population (Wilson, 2010: xvi). The non-parametric analytic data analysis technique was used to perform the inferential analysis in this study. The reason for using the non-parametric technique is that the sample is randomly drawn from the population which is normally distributed. Chi-square test was employed for the inferential statistics. Denscombe (2007) points out that inferential statistics are most often used in quantitative data to check whether there is any association or link between two or more sets of data. He adds that one can also check to find out if there is any difference between two sets of data where one might have expected similarities. In effect, Denscombe (2007) avers that using inferential statistics from quantitative data enables us to move the state of presenting data descriptively, a position of looking for connections.

In this study, the Chi-square test was used to test the significance for the estimation of the probability that there is association between the students and their experiences of the support services in the areas of the importance they attach to the different support services and the accessibility of the services to them. Significant differences were found to exist between the students and their experiences of the support services offered by Unisa. The outcomes of the data analysis and the techniques used are reported in chapter four in this study. The focus group interviews as indicated earlier was tape-recorded and transcribed later. The transcription involved putting informal notes and comments on the words and comments from the interviewees on the transcript. Data sets from the different sources were collapsed and coded to identify themes.

3.4.7 Data handling and management

It is important for a researcher to ensure that data is collected for a research is managed in a responsible and ethical manner. Data management is defined by Business Directory.com (2010) as the administrative process by which the data required is acquired, validated, stored, and processed, and by which its accessibility, reliability, and timeliness is ensured to satisfy the needs of the data users. Steneck (2004) alludes that principal investigators in a research and his/her team should address issues related to data management, which include data ownership; data collection; data storage; data protection; data retention; data analysis; data sharing, and data reporting. The data that was collected for this study belongs to the researcher and it is solely for this academic purpose. The data that was collected is safely stored in a safe in my office in both electronic form and hard copy so that it can be revisited should the need arises.

The data mentioned above is stored to ensure that it is well protected to ensure that it does not fall into the wrong hands and also safe from damage. The data collection was conducted in a fair, lawful and ethical manner. The purpose of the data collection was made clear to the participants from the onset. The data was used for its intended purposes only. In addition to that, the researcher collected

data that was adequate, relevant and accurate for the study. These were ensured by seeking advice from experts in the field of study. The researcher made sure that the anonymity of participants was kept to the latter so that the information they gave could not be traced to them. Codes were used for the respondent to disguise their identity.

The data will be kept for three years by which it is hoped all the work on the study and any possible publications that may relate to the study would have been completed. After that, it will be destroyed. The data analysis was done with the help of a statistician which led to the findings and discussions. The data will not be shared with other researchers and institutions but the finding of the research has been made available in the form of a research report that is presented the University of Fort Hare and the University of South Africa. A summary of the findings will also be made to the students who took part in the research as participants.

3.4.8 Operationalisation of variables

According to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (1996) there is the need for concepts and variables to be operationalised to enable facts to be measured quantitatively. The variables identified that need to be operationalised are based on Moore's transactional distance. The specific variables that are measured in this study include the **learners' experiences** in studying through the ODL mode and the access gaps they experience in **accessing the learner support services** that are provided by Unisa. The choice of instruments to measure access to learner support and learners' ODL experiences may depend on factors such as credibility, reliability, validity, measurability and cost.

To ensure that the research and its outcomes are credible, the researcher ensured that the measuring instruments comply with what Cooper and Schindler (2001) cited in Dzansi (2004) referred to as "Good test". Good test according to them is

based on *validity* and *reliability*. To ensure optimum reliability and validity, Rao (2004) suggests that multiple items should be used to measure the key constructs.

Ensuring validity

When a researcher embarks upon a research project, selecting the proper design is important. Validity of a measuring instrument refers to the extent to which the instrument measures what it is intended to measure. Any valid study should represent the qualities of the larger population to which the final results are to be generalized. There are different forms of validity according to Blumberg, et al., (2008) but the main ones are external and internal validity. External validity according to them refers to the data's ability to be generalized across persons, settings and times. Internal validity which is being considered here is the ability of a research instrument to measure what it purports to measure i.e. does the instrument really measure what its designer claims it does? Some ways that are used to ensure internal validity are to ensure content validity, criterion-related validity and construct validity.

Ensuing criterion-related validity

Blumberg, et al., (2008) intimate that criterion-related validity reflects the success of measures used for prediction or estimation. Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2002) on the same note refer to criterion related-validity as the degree to which a measure is related to some other standard or criterion that is known to indicate the correct construct accurately. Blumberg, et al., (2008) indicate that one source suggests that any criterion measure must be judged in terms of four qualities which are:

1. Relevance;
2. Freedom from bias;
3. Reliability; and
4. Availability.

This was ensured in this study by using different variables that have been proven to assess the importance of learner support services to distance learners by Potter (1997) cited in Clark (2003) in Canada. A comprehensive review of the South African context led to some modification of the questionnaire.

Ensuring construct validity

Leedy and Ormrod (2005) define construct validity as the extent to which an instrument measures a characteristic that cannot be directly observed but must instead be inferred from patterns in people's behaviour. To ensure this, the concepts and variables were operationally defined. The researcher used questionnaire that had been tested in other studies elsewhere and was adapted to the South African context. After the questions had been refined, they were pretested using a pilot study in the research area. This led to the questions being reduced without leaving out or jeopardizing what was intended to be measured.

Ensuring content validity

Content validity according to Blumberg, et al., (2008) is the extent to which a measuring instrument (composite measuring scale) provides adequate coverage of the investigative questions guiding the study. This according to them can be done by one's own judgment as well the use of a panel of judges. The researcher used his own judgment after careful literature review on the work of experts in the area of distance education as well as consulting three experts in the area of learner support from Unisa and my supervisors examined the items to judge whether the items were adequate for measuring what they were supposed to measure. The experts and my supervisors independently concurred the questionnaire was valid and the questions not ambiguous. This ensured that most important aspects of learner support in distance education were covered by the research instruments used.

Reliability of instruments

Blumberg, et al., (2008) note that reliability means many things to many people but they argue that a measure is reliable to the degree to which it supplies consistent results. They note that reliability is a necessary contributor to validity but is not a sufficient condition for validity. Reliability is concerned with estimates of the degree to which a measurement is free of random or unstable error. Reliable instruments can be used in confidence that transient and situational factors are not interfering. Easterby-Smith, et al., (1996) point out that the main problem with validity in practice is that no one can be sure that the individual and other factors have not changed between occasions. Wilson (2010) points out that the following errors can pose potential risks to reliability:

- subject error;
- subject bias;
- time error;
- Observer error; and
- Observer bias.

Ensuring reliability in this research

Boti (1996) notes that reliability refers to the measure of consistency of an instrument. Meanwhile Dane (1990) argues that consistency does not necessarily guarantee truthfulness. This implies that the reliability of the questions does not guarantee that the answers given are the true reflection of the experiences and feeling of respondents. To minimise some of the errors which pose threats to the reliability in this study the researcher ensured that a research assistant who assisted in the focus group interviews was properly trained and given specific instructions in recording the interviews to minimise observer error. The questions for the interview were posed by the researcher himself. The researcher conducted

the one focus group interview with one assistant who captured the responses from the respondents without any interference to ensure observer bias.

The respondents were all adult learners studying through distance education with the Unisa who need various forms of support the university offers. The subjects here represent the population under investigation as their registration as Unisa students was confirmed from the Student Affairs Office. In the planning and designing of the questionnaire for this study, the researcher carefully studied other questionnaire that had been used for similar studies elsewhere and forwarded what he finally constructed to senior colleagues, his supervisors and experts at Unisa's Learner support Department for their inputs to ensure that the questionnaire was valid and reliable. To further ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, the researcher conducted a pilot study with a group of Unisa's ABET Students from one of the districts in the North West Province before the finalisation of the questionnaire. All the items that appeared to be ambiguous and not very clear were reconstructed before they questionnaire was finally distributed to the respondents.

3.4.9 Research quality

Boaz and Ashby (2003) note that quality research normally refers to the scientific processes that encompass all aspects of a study design; in particular, it pertains to judgment regarding the match between the methods and questions, selection of subjects, measurement outcomes, and protection against systematic bias, nonsystematic bias, and inferential error.

To ensure the quality of this research, research questions that could be investigated empirically were posed which enabled the outcome of the study to contribute to the body of knowledge in learner support in distance education. The questions that were posed were linked to the relevant theories in learner support in distance education such as Moore and Tait's theory of "transaction distance" (refer to literature in Chapter 2). The study's quality is based on the relevant literature on learner support in distance education.

The research design, methods, and procedures are discussed in a detailed and transparent manner to make sure that the approach to the research is balanced, independent and objective. Critical analyses of the discussions were made and conclusions and recommendations made.

3.4.10 Ethical considerations

Ethical issues in social research are becoming increasingly important of late as human beings are involved. McMillan and Schumacher (2001) are of the view that ethics deal with issues beliefs about what wrong, proper or improper, good or bad. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) note that in disciplines such as social sciences, education, criminology and similar areas of study, human subjects are involved which requires that ethical issues are closely looked at. They identify four main ethical considerations that have to be taken into account as: protection from harm, informed consent, right to privacy, and honesty with professional colleagues.

In conducting this study, the researcher ensured that in the planning and carrying out the study, the rights, interests and welfare of the participants were respected and protected at all times to ensure that no one was harmed in any way. The following specific measures were put in place regarding ethical issues:

- The researcher applied to the University of Fort Hare for ethical clearance where all the ethical requirements were met. A certificate of ethical clearance was also obtained from the University of South Africa whose students were involved in the study. (See appendix 4).
- The participants were informed of their right to take part in the research and they were told they could withdraw at any point of the research. An informed consent form was signed by all the participants.
- The interest of the participants was safe guarded by ensuring that the privacy of the participants was protected as their names were not required.

- Questions that could harm them psychologically were avoided at all cost as well as avoiding questions that could be intrusive and sensitive to their private lives.
- They were also assured that the research was going to be used for purely academic purposes and the summary of the results was going to be made available to them.
- In this study, the issue of conflict was managed in the best possible manner. The students who were identified to take part in the research were informed of the purpose of the study and of their right to opt either to participate in the study or not.
- Those who agreed to participate were assured that their identities and the information they provided was going to be kept anonymous.
- The collection of data was anonymous and confidential. No names were linked to the responses and the findings (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).

3.5 CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, the methods that were used in the study are explained. The research design looked at the sampling techniques, the data collection and analysis as well as ensuring the validity and reliability of the instruments used. The issues on validity, reliability as well as the ethical considerations were also discussed. Chapter 4, which is the next chapter will present the analysis of the data and bring out the findings.

CHAPTER 4

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the findings from the empirical study which is based on the questionnaires and the focus group interview as given by the respondents. On the basis of the data gathering techniques which were mainly a focus group interview and a questionnaire, the focus group interview which was based on open-ended questions were coded by grouping the responses to form the themes. Tables were also produced with explanations underneath to enable the reader to understand the statistics presented to establish the access to learner support challenges Unisa students face in their studies.

4.2 ANALYSIS OF THE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

To ensure consistency for the focus group interview, a focus group interview schedule was developed (see Appendix 2). As the focus group interview is based on open-ended questions, qualitative analysis was performed without using any qualitative analysis software. There were 10 participants in the interview who are coded here as P1; P2; P3; P4; P5; P6; P7; P8; P9; and P10. The code for the data set/themes are based on the interview questions which are coded as Q1; Q2; Q3; Q4; Q5; Q6; Q7; Q8; Q9; Q10; Q11; Q12 and Q13.

Students have their own understanding of learner support and their expectations of the support services a distance learning institution should provide. Participants were able to explain what learner support is and their expectation of it. Participants voiced their opinions on what they thought a learner support system should be, as P (1) stated:

It includes tutorials, tutors and library services and guidance and counseling

P (3) added to this:

And also to guide us on all the aspects of our studies by giving us support so that we can succeed in our studies.

The responses are quite in line with Tait (1995) who alludes that learner support comprises a range of activities which complement the usually mass produced study materials including tutoring and teaching, counseling and advising, organisation of study; interactive teaching through TV and radio and ICT. Ufi/learnerdirect and Kaneo (2007) add that learner support includes mentoring, tutoring, coaching and counseling, assessment, and advice and guidance. In effect, the students know exactly what learner support is and how it should possibly function. The students' ability to mention some of the main learner support activities implies that they know what learner support services entail.

Participants expressed the purpose of learner support in their views as helping them to achieve their learning outcomes and the provision of facilities for their learning. For example, P1 said:

It helps us as learners to achieve our expected learning outcomes.

P4 supported the view by the comment that:

The purpose is for the university to provide us with all that we need like computers, tutors, books and study materials. It is their responsibility.

Although the responses of the respondents are quite brief, they capture the purpose and aims of learner support services. This is in tandem with Cliath (2000) who proffered that the principal aim of learning support is to optimise the teaching and learning process in order to enable students with learning difficulties to achieve adequate levels of competencies in a learning area. He adds that this can be achieved in an efficient way through the implementation of institutional policies and approaches that target the needs of the lowest achieving learners. The ABET

students mostly fall within the PDI groups in addition to most of them living in poverty stricken rural areas. From the response of P4 above she is putting the whole responsibility on the shoulders of the institution. Distance learning requires that the institutions support their students in the best possible way but the students have to take responsibility for their own learning.

The participants indicated whether they use some of the support services Unisa offers. Participant P3 expressed the opinion of the group this way:

Yes we sometimes use some of the services like sending assignment 1, the internet, some tutorial classes and the computers.

The views of the respondents correspond with the findings from the quantitative survey in Table 4.6 which confirmed that most of students indicated that the support they normally go for at the regional centre mostly are for them to submit assignment 1. The other support services such as attending tutorial sessions, seeking guidance and counseling, etc. are in effect either not used or they are used to a very limited extent.

The participants explained how learner support helps them in their learning as making it easy for them to do their assignments and answering examination questions in the proper manner. For instance, P5 stated that:

It helps us and makes the assignments easy to understand and answer.

Participant P6 supported that by saying:

And also to be able to answer the examination questions with confidence.

The findings are in line with Claith (2000) who argues that the expected outcomes of learning-support programmes help in improving the learning of students as well as the application of independent learning strategies by the students which results in the commitment to, and involvement in their own learning, positive attitudes to school/institution and high levels of self esteem.

Learner support mostly in the form of face-to-face tutorials and mediation are very crucial for good learner experience in all learning environments. As the respondents indicated in their responses above, any effective support given to students to a large extent help them to achieve their educational outcomes which to most of them is to be able to answer questions in their assignments and examinations, and ultimately pass their examinations.

On whether they have access to computer and the internet, the participants said they are able to use the services but to a limited extent. To indicate that the services are available to a limited degree, P1's reaction was:

Sometimes

Participant P9 added that:

But it is a struggle at the centre. The computers are not enough and they are fully booked most of the time, yet we are expected to use them in our studies.

The problem of access to computers and the internet appears to be a major factor that affects learner support to the students to a great extent. This observation is in line with the views of Ufi/learnerdirect and Kaneo (2007) who point out that when e-learning and blended learning programmes fail and there are poor completion rates on the part of students, they are the results of factors such as technical and other problems.

Access to computers and the internet are very crucial for students in this age as Unisa itself is moving more towards online and e-learning. Students are expected to interact among themselves which can help them to deal with the issues relating to learner isolation and social interaction. Some of the technical problems here relate to access and use of technology through which the issues of transaction distance can be addressed.

The cost of accessing internet services using their cell phones appears to be a bit costly for the students as some of them are unemployed. The information that the students have to access from myUnisa and the internet can be a lot and accessing such information with a cell phone can be inconveniencing and costly as well. P1 said:

It depends on the information you need.

But P2 interjected when one of the participants said it is not very expensive that:

But it is money we sometimes do not have.

Some of the students indicated that they are able to use their phones to access the internet. This view is in tandem with Gujjar, et al., (2010) who argues that ICT infrastructure enables learner support to be integrated in a network learning environment. Taking into account that many of the students are unemployed or not working full-time, the issue of using their cell phones and the cost involved can be prohibitive for most of the students. The economic circumstances of the students could be a major factor in the students' inability to access the available support services that are offered by the institution.

The use of myUnisa as a support tool by students appears to be problematic although it is supposed to be the main student portal for contacting lecturers, the university and fellow students. The participants were of the view that myUnisa is not being used effectively as expected. P2 for example, said:

MyUnisa? Eische, iasokodisa (it is troublesome).

P10 on the other hand added:

For sending assignment 1.

P2 went further and expressed the opinion that:

We don't know how to use most of the functions. There are a lot of things on myUnisa which are very confusing. The staff there is also not very

helpful when we need assistance.

The responses above clearly show that the students use myUnisa in a very limited way although it is the main link between the students and Unisa. The students indicated clearly that they do not know how to use most of the tools and services on myUnisa. The facilities may be available as tools for learner support but if the students for one reason or the other cannot use them for their studies, they then become 'white elephants'.

The students were not happy at all at the guidance and counseling services that are offered to them at the regional centre. They indicated that the services there are very poor. This view was expressed by P2 that;

The guidance and counseling services in the regional office is very poor. When you come here and meet a person today he will tell you this but when you come the next time and meet another person on the same issue he will give a different story.

P7 added that:

It is not easy for us to be there all the time as the information they give us is not always right. They do not advise us well on how you on the sequence in which you gonna take your modules so that it be easy for us as learners to take our courses.

On the question of career guidance and counseling as well as pastoral care, the students were very emphatic on the lack of proper guidance and counseling at the regional office which is a very crucial component of learner support in general and in distance learning in particular. The need for proper induction and pastoral care is emphasised by Hayes (2006) who argues that financial advice and support, examination/assessment and preparation, pastoral support and study skills must be in place in all learner support programmes. The lack of proper guidance and counseling increases the transactional distance between an institution and its students which learner support is supposed to bridge.

Face-to-face support which includes orientation, group tutorials, study skills training, weekend tutorials and individual help from tutors are crucial for any distance education system. On tutorials, P1 said they are not advised well on the tutorials which despite of it not being adequate in the first place, the few that are offered mostly clash. Meanwhile, the crucial roles of tutors and tutorials have been noted by many learner support practitioners. For example, Holmberg (2003) points out that learners who have access to tutors and who engage with them tend to enjoy their learning because the conversations between learners and tutors lead to greater motivation and attainment of learning outcomes. This view is shared by Gatsha (2010) who avers that group tutorials provide a platform for distance education learners and tutors to interact, share ideas and for solutions to challenges they encounter in studies. This kind of interaction is vital as it has the highest perceived value amongst learners. It is therefore crucial for Unisa to take the issue around tutorials and tutors seriously.

The participants had their own suggestions on how the learner support services can be improved at the regional centre. The suggestions include staff development, extending the ICT infrastructure and turnaround time for assignments to enable them to use them for their studies. Participant P5 for example, stated that:

Unisa must improve its services. When we say they should improve their services, Unisa must train the staff on all their programmes. And they have to extend the computer lab as some of the students come in some know about computers whereas others do not have computer knowledge.

Participant P6 added:

And another one is our assignment. We have to get the feedback on our assignments, especially assignment 2 in time so that we can refer to them before we go and write the exams.

P2 further added to what P6 said that:

We have to get the assignments feedback on time so that we do not go and repeat the same mistakes we made in the assignments in the examinations.

The suggestions on the need for Unisa to improve its learner support services from the P5 clearly summed up the whole issue that Unisa must improve its services. The need for staff development featured throughout the focus group interview.

The lack of adequate mediated support was emphasised by P6 and P2 as the responses above indicate. The issue of late assignment feedback from the university is a major concern for the students. They are right in asking about the use of writing assignments if the feedback comes late, sometimes after they have already finished writing the examinations the assignments are to prepare them for.

4.2.1 Summary of findings

The findings of the focus group interview indicate that students are very aware of what learner support services are. They have expectations from Unisa which are not being met to a large extent, thereby, creating frustrations and tensions. Some of the specific challenges that were mentioned by the participants include inadequate facilities and infrastructure, inadequate face-to-face as well as mediated support systems and the element of human and administrative structure. Suggestions were made by the participants on how the support services can be improved.

4.3 ANALYSIS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

In answering the research questions, different aspects have been categorised and presented as tables and graphs to allow for the answers to the research questions.

The analysis of the questionnaires that were administered to the one hundred and seventeen (117) respondents is presented in the next section. The sections that follow deal with the demographic data and the responses regarding the ratings on the access to and importance of learner support services.

4.3.1 Demographics

Table 4.1 Age group of respondents

Age group	Frequency	Percentage
Under 21	17	14.5
21-30	29	24.8
31-40	43	36.8
41-50	27	23.1
51-60	1	0.9
Total	117	100.0

Table 4.1 shows that most of the students (36.8%) are aged between 31-40 years age bracket followed by those in the 21-30 age group. By all accounts, majority of the respondents fall into the adult learner category. Only 14.5% of the respondents fall below the 21 years age group.

Table 4.2 Gender of respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	41	35.0
Female	76	65.0
Total	117	100

Most of the responds (65%) are females whereas only 35% are males. Table 4.2 above indicates that more women are enrolled for adult learning which citing Aggrey (nd), Sampson (1969) alluded that if you educate a man you educate an individual but if you educate a woman you educate a nation. The findings also point to fewer men enrolling for adult learning which should be a concern for South Africa.

Table 4.3 Race of respondents

Ethnicity	Frequency	Percentage
Black	99	84.6
Coloured	14	12.0
Indian/Asian	2	1.7
White	2	1.7
Total	117	100.0

The overwhelming majority of the respondents (84.6%) are black followed by Coloureds (12%) and 1.7% for Whites and Indians respectively as Table 4.3 depicts. The trend from the findings point to more adults from the previously disadvantaged groups enrolling for higher qualifications which can improve their chances in participating in the economy of the country.

Table 4.4 Area of residence

Area of residence	Frequency	Percentage
Rural	44	37.6
Urban	37	31.6

Informal settlement	36	30.8
Total	117	100.0

The respondents who reside in the rural areas constitute 37.6% followed by those in urban settlements at 31.6% and the informal settlements 30.8% according to Table 4.4 above. The findings clearly show the people who need the services most (rural and informal settlements) may not be able to access the support services because of their places of residence.

Table 4.5 Distance from study centre

Distance	Frequency	Percentage
Under 20 kilometres	13	11.1
Between 21 and 50 kilometres	48	41.0
Between 51 and 100 kilometres	20	17.1
Between 100 and 200 kilometres	35	29.9
Over 200 kilometres	1	0.9
Total	117	100.0

Table 4.5 above shows that almost close to half of the respondents (47.9%) live beyond 50 kilometres from regional/study centre. Those who live between 21-50 kilometres are 41% of the respondents. This means that almost half of the participants live far away from the regional centre which could be a reason for them not being access the support services as expected.

Table 4.6 Services utilised

Services	Frequency	Percentage
Send assignments	75	64.1
Internet use	32	27.4
Tutorials	10	8.5
Total	117	100

The most popular service the students use at the study centre is sending assignments, most especially assignment 1 with 64.1% of the respondents in Table 4.6 indicating it as the most frequently used service followed by internet use (27.4%) and tutorials (8.5%).

Table 4.7 Year of study

Study year	Frequency	Percentage
ABET certificate	42	35.9
Year 1 diploma	43	36.8
Year 2 diploma	32	27.4
Total	117	100.0

Most of the respondents (36.8%) are in their second year, followed by the first year ABET certificate (35.9%) and 27.4% being final year diploma students as Table 4.7 shows. All students need support to enable them to succeed but those who are in their early stages of their tertiary education require the services most to enable them to adapt, most especially in the distance education environment.

Table 4.8 Employment status

Employment status	Frequency	Percentage
Fully employed	27	23.1
Employed part-time	31	25.6
Working from home	15	12.8
Unemployed	44	37.6
Total	117	100.0

As Table 4.8 above depicts, only 23.1% of the respondents indicated that they are full-time employed with 25.6% working part-time. The unemployed constitute 37.6% of all the respondents with those working from home, possibly in informal activities being 12.8%.

Majority of the respondents cited gaining employment as the main reasons for studying with Unisa. In effect, economic reasons when carefully analysed is assigned by most of the students for choosing the distance education mode through Unisa as the preferred method of studying.

Most of the respondents indicated that their most experienced mode of delivery in their studies through Unisa is through correspondence. This implies that the application of the ODL approach is not being well experienced by the students.

Majority of the respondents indicated that their most preferred method of study is the traditional classroom. This is understandable as they are used to the traditional classroom learning but circumstances force them to take the distance education route.

The next section will deal with the quantitative analysis of the learner support services offered by Unisa as far as service importance and accessibility are concerned.

4.4 ASSESSMENT OF LEARNER SUPPORT SERVICES

Part C of the questionnaire required students to rate the importance and accessibility of the support services offered by Unisa on a 4 point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very important/accessible) to 4 (not at all important/accessible). The average or mean scores were calculated for all the support services that were assessed in this part of the questionnaire. For the purposes of this study, a mean score of 1.0 to 1.5 represents a high degree of importance/accessibility. A mean score of 1.51 to 2.00 indicates medium importance/accessibility and a mean score of below 2.1 and above represents low level of importance/accessibility.

Needs gap analysis was performed in addition to the importance and accessibility ratings to determine the gap between the importance and accessibility ratios. A gap analysis according to Business Directory.com consists of (1) listing factors (such as attributes, competencies, performance levels) of the present situation (“what is”), (2) listing factors needed to achieve future objectives (“what should be”), and then (3) highlighting the gaps that exist and need to be filled. A need-gap score according to Ozoglu (2009) is calculated for each support service by subtracting the accessibility rating for each case from the importance rating and calculating the mean of the differences. For the purposes of this study, a need gap mean of 1.00 or higher represents a large gap, a need gap mean of 0.50 to 0.99 indicates a moderate needs gap, and a needs gap of 0.49 or less indicates a small needs gap. The need gap for the following learner support services, general information recruitment and enrollment; general assistance studies; materials; concerns; tutorials; technical; myUnisa; assignments; and other services are analysed below.

Table 4.9 General information on recruitment and enrollment

General information Recruit & Enrollment		Mean	N	Mean	N	Needs gap
a)	General information about Unisa programmes	1.67	117	2.17	117	-0.50
b)	Help with admission/application process	1.46	117	2.12	117	-0.66
c)	Advice with course registration	1.09	117	2.39	117	-1.31
d)	Orientation to the course media/delivery format	1.60	117	2.32	117	-0.73

e)	Assessment of prior learning/life experience	1.91	117	2.32	117	-0.40
f)	Personal counseling	1.09	117	3.10	117	-2.01
g)	Information about University policies and procedures	1.85	117	2.14	117	-0.28

Table 4.9 above shows that students regard all the information under general information on recruitment and enrollment important. The students indicated the advice with course registration and personal counseling as the areas with the greatest need with 1.09 mean scores. The needs gap of -2.01 for personal counseling shows the most dissatisfaction by students followed by advice with course registration at -1.31. From the Table, all the mean scores for accessibility are above 2.0 which imply that the services on general information on recruitment and enrollment are not very accessible.

Table 4.10 General assistance on studies

General Assistance Studies		Mean	N	Mean	N	Needs gap
h)	One point of contact at Unisa for general assistance	1.05	117	3.02	117	-1.97
i)	Information about academic programme requirements	1.69	117	2.21	117	-0.52
j)	Communication with lecturers/tutors	1.03	117	2.24	117	-1.21
k)	Communication with fellow course mates	1.06	117	1.96	117	-0.90
l)	A contact person in your local area to assist you with your educational needs	1.09	117	3.35	117	-2.26
m)	Help with self confidence	1.49	117	2.66	117	-1.17
n)	Communication on clear academic performance standards	1.39	117	2.38	117	-0.99

The most important issues under general assistance on studies as Table 4.10 above depicts are, a contact person in your local area to assist you with your educational needs, importance (1.09) mean score and accessibility 3.35 mean score and a needs gap of -2.26, followed by communication with lecturers/tutors with a mean score of 1.03 and on accessibility 3.02 and a need gap of -1.97. The third most important issue is on one point contact at Unisa for general assistance with a mean score for importance at 1.05 and accessibility 2.24 resulting in a need gap of -1.21. Apart from communication with fellow students which has a mean score of 1.96 which indicates medium accessibility, all the other items under accessibility recorded mean scores of over 2.00.

Table 4.11 Materials

Materials	Mean	N	Mean	N	Needs gap
o) Information about getting textbooks and study materials	1.18	117	2.07	117	-0.89
p) General orientation to library & other learning resources	1.28	117	2.37	117	-1.09

The need gaps for general orientation to library and other learning resources according to the respondents is higher under materials -1.09 with mean scores of 1.28 (medium importance) and 2.37 accessibility respectively in Table 4.11. The item information about getting textbooks and study materials also shows satisfaction among students with mean scores of 1.18 (importance) and 2.07 accessibility respectively. The combined importance and accessibility scores for both items show dissatisfaction as well.

Table 4.12 Concerns

Concerns	Mean	N	Mean	N	Needs gap
q) Information about how to address concerns	1.07	117	2.58	117	-1.51
r) Communication about Unisa events	1.83	117	2.61	117	-0.78

In Table 4.12 on addressing students' concerns, information about how to address students concern indicate mean scores of 1.07 (very important) and 2.58 (not very accessible) and a needs gap of -1.51 which is a concern. The need gap for communication about Unisa events has a medium need gap of -0.78 but information about addressing students' concerns (-1.51) indicates high levels of dissatisfaction.

Table 4.13 Financials

Financial	Mean	N	Mean	N	Needs gap
s) Financial assistance	1.14	117	3.85	117	-2.71
t) Information about billing and fee payments	1.85	117	2.27	117	-0.43

Services regarding financial assistance to students as shown in Table 4.13, there is a great need of financial information and financial assistance from Unisa by

students as the importance mean score is 1.14 and accessibility 3.85 (very inaccessible), thereby creating a need gap of -2.71. The need gap on information about billing and fee payment indicate little need gap of -0.43 which suggest that the university possible is a bit more efficient on billing and enforcing the payment of fees.

Table 4.14 Tutorials

Tutorials		Mean	N	Mean	N	Needs gap
u)	Information about tutorials	1.07	117	2.17	117	-1.10
v)	Access to tutorial centres	1.04	117	2.62	117	-1.57
w)	Ability to attend tutorials	1.04	117	2.91	117	-1.86

As Table 4.14 depicts the needs gap for all the three items under tutorials are very high. The highest need gap under tutorials is the ability to attend tutorials -1.86 with mean scores of 1.04 (very important) and 2.91 (accessibility) respectively, followed by access to tutorial centres with a need gap of -1.57 and information about tutorials (-1.10) needs gap. Face-to-face support which includes orientation, group tutorials, study skills training, weekend tutorials and individual help from tutors are crucial for any distance education system. For example Holmberg (2003) points out that learners who have access to tutors and who engage with them tend to enjoy their learning because the conversations between learners and tutors lead to greater motivation and attainment of learning outcomes. This view is shared by Gatsha (2010) who avers that group tutorials provide a platform for distance education learners and tutors to interact, share ideas and for solutions to challenges they encounter in their studies. This kind of interaction is vital as it has the highest perceived value amongst learners. It is therefore crucial for Unisa to take the issue around tutorials and tutors seriously.

Table 4.15 Technical services

Technical		Mean	N	Mean	N	Needs gap
x)	Computer access	1.06	117	2.55	117	-1.49
y)	Internet access	1.05	117	2.53	117	-1.48

The needs gap on technical services as Table 4.15 above depicts is very high with needs gap of -1.49 and -1.48 for computer access and internet access respectively. The responses on the mean scores for the two items under technical services indicate that students rank this service as very important. The mean scores for the two items under accessibility are all above 2.00. This information should be of great concern to Unisa as it is moving towards internet-based delivery mode.

Table 4.16 MyUnisa

MyUnisa	Mean	N	Mean	N	Needs gap
z) Awareness of myUnisa	1.04	117	2.36	117	-1.32
aa) Use of myUnisa for study purposes	1.03	117	2.95	117	-1.91

In Table 4.16, the use of myUnisa as a support tool for study and information by students indicate there is a high needs gap as the satisfaction about the service is not encouraging. The mean score for importance on the use of myUnisa for study purposes stands at 1.03 (very important) and not very accessible at 2.95, thereby creating a need gap of -1.91. On the awareness of myUnisa as a support tool, the mean score for importance is 1.04 and accessibility -1.32 and a need gap of -1.32. These high needs gap warrants investigation as myUnisa is the main student portal for assessing most of the services between the university and the students and among the students themselves.

Table 4.17 Assignments

Assignments	Mean	N	Mean	N	Need gap
bb) Relevance of assignments to your studies	1.04	117	1.87	117	-0.83
cc) Usefulness of assignment feedback	1.04	117	1.85	117	-0.81
dd) Turnaround time for assessed work	1.04	117	2.28	117	-1.24
ee) Attendance of discussion classes	1.12	117	2.82	117	-1.70
ff) Attendance of videoconferencing	1.13	117	2.83	117	-1.70

Table 4.17 above on assignments clearly indicates high levels of dissatisfaction among the respondents on issues relating to assignments. The mean scores for all

the items on importance range between 1.04 and 1.13 whilst the mean scores for the items for accessibility range between 1.87 and 2.83 for accessibility. The three items under assignments with the highest needs gap were attending discussion classes, attending video conferencing and turnaround time for assessed work. It should be noted that since Unisa is an ODL institution where students are taught mainly through assignments, there is the need to find the reasons for this situation well.

Table 4.18 Other services

Other Services	Mean	N	Mean	N	Needs gap
gg) Access to regional service centres	1.14	117	2.56	117	-1.43
hh) Facilities for individual learning at regional centres	1.13	117	2.74	117	-1.62
ii) Facilities for group discussions at regional centres	1.21	117	2.78	117	-1.56
jj) Ability to collect materials from regional centre	1.23	117	2.26	117	-1.03
kk) Availability of library facilities at regional centres	1.18	117	2.62	117	-1.44
ll) Availability of computer facilities at regional centres	1.15	117	2.69	117	-1.55
mm) Access to computer and internet facilities at regional centres	1.08	117	2.67	117	-1.59
nn) Availability of tutors at regional and other centres	1.06	117	2.67	117	-1.61

In Table 4.18 on other services the mean scores for all the items under importance range between 1.06 and 1.23, which implies that students place high value/importance on the services mentioned above. The accessibility scores on the other hand range between 2.62 and 2.78. The items with the highest needs gap being the availability of tutors at regional and other centres (-1.61) and access to computer and internet facilities at regional centres (-1.59). Unisa's move towards e-learning and ICT facilitated teaching and learning, it is worth assessing what can be done here.

Table 4.19 Chi-square test for service importance and accessibility

Type of service/Assessment	Importance/Accessibility		
	X ²	df	p value
a) General information about Unisa programmes	7.926	3	0.048
b) Help with admission/application process	20.901	3	0.000
c) Advice with course registration	8.256	3	0.041
d) Orientation to the course media/delivery format	36.975	6	0.000
e) Assessment of prior learning/life experience	34.604	9	0.000
f) Personal counseling	10.696	6	0.098
g) Information about University policies and procedures	65.025	9	0.000
h) One point of contact at Unisa for general assistance	1.867	3	0.600
i) Information about academic programme requirements	69.813	9	0.000
j) Communication with lecturers/tutors	23.395	6	0.001
k) Communication with fellow course mates	17.415	6	0.008
l) A contact person in your local area to assist you with your educational needs	78.956	9	0.000
m) Help with self confidence	15.812	6	0.015
n) Communication on clear academic performance standards	30.914	6	0.000
o) Information about getting textbooks and study materials	20.323	3	0.000
p) General orientation to library & other learning resources	17.275	6	0.008
q) Information about how to address concerns	2.556	3	0.465
r) Communication about Unisa events	17.507	6	0.008
s) Financial assistance	36.968	4	0.000
t) Information about billing and fee payments	7.316	6	0.293
u) Information about tutorials	6.807	3	0.078
v) Access to tutorial centres	3.230	3	0.358
w) Ability to attend tutorials	5.743	3	0.125
x) Computer access	15.850	6	0.015
y) Internet access	13.874	6	0.031

z) Awareness of myUnisa	5.996	6	0.424
aa) Use of myUnisa for study purposes	8.689	3	0.034
bb) Relevance of assignments to your studies	1.490	6	0.960
cc) Usefulness of assignment feedback	1.062	6	0.983
dd) Turnaround time for assessed work	29.262	6	0.000
ee) Attendance of discussion classes	6.684	6	0.351
ff) Attendance of videoconferencing	7.152	9	0.621
gg) Access to regional service centres	18.455	6	0.005
hh) Facilities for individual learning at regional centres	4.126	6	0.660
ii) Facilities for group discussions at regional centres	5.681	6	0.460
jj) Ability to collect materials from regional centre	46.885	9	0.000
kk) Availability of library facilities at regional centres	14.164	13	0.003
ll) Availability of computer facilities at regional centres	11.529	3	0.009
mm) Access to computer and internet facilities at regional centres	6.476	3	0.091
nn) Availability of tutors at regional and other centres	7.183	3	0.066

As Table 4.19 above indicates, there are significant differences in the responses of the students on the type of services and how they rate them as important to their studies and the extent to which the services are accessible to them. The differences in the assessment of the services could also be due to the diverse composition of the respondents regarding variables such as age, gender, employment status, level of studies, area of residence, etc. The p values of the chi-square tests on types of services and how important and accessible they are to the students are less than 0.05 level of significance, which means that there are significant differences between the respondents on their rating of the learner support services offered by the institution.

The p value of the chi-square test for general information about Unisa programmes is 0.048, which is less than the 0.05 level of significance. This implies that the respondents differ on their views on how they rate the importance of this

service and its accessibility to them. The reason could be economic as well as other social factors and the diverse background of the ABET students.

On help with admission/application process, the test of significance yielded a p value of 0.000 which is far below the 0.05 level of significance. This indicates that the respondents' experience of this service differs. It is possible that the respondents who live in urban areas and close to regional centres and possibly those who have access to internet are able to access this service than their rural counterparts.

On advice with course registration, the p value of the chi-square test is 0.041 which is equally less than the 0.05 significance level. This implies that the respondents differ on how they experience this service. The possible reason could be their proximity to regional centres and access to internet services.

The p value of the chi-square test on orientation to the course media/delivery format is 0.000 which is again far below the 0.05 level of significance. The respondents differ on how important and accessible they view this service. Various socio-economic factors such as the area of residence and employment status could be factors in this observed difference.

The chi-square test of significance on assessment of prior learning/life experiences shows a p value of 0.000, which is less than the 0.05 level of significance. This means that the respondents differ on how they rate the importance of this service and how accessible it is to them. This is not surprising as the backgrounds of the students are quite diverse.

On personal counseling, the p value of the significant test is 0.098 which is higher than the 0.05 level of significance. This implies that there are no significant differences between the respondents and how they rate the service and how

accessible they experience it. The reason for this result is not clear and may warrant further investigation.

The significant test on information about university policies and procedures indicate a p value of 0.000 which is also far below the 0.05 significance level. This implies that the respondents differ on how they experience this service. As to why there are such differences is surprising as this information is made available to all the students. It could be that some of them for whatever reason do not take the trouble to familiarise themselves with them.

On one point contact at Unisa for general assistance, no significant differences were found between the respondents as the p value of the chi-square test is 0.60 which is far above the 0.05 level of significance. It is possible that most of the respondents experience this service in the same manner, either good or bad.

The significant test on information about academic programme requirements resulted in a p value of 0.000 which is far below the 0.05 level of significance. By implication there are significant differences between the respondents on how important and accessible they experience this service. Some of the students possibly make the effort to enquire about this while the others possibly do not.

The p value of chi-square test for communication with tutors/lecturers is 0.001, which is far less than the 0.05 level of significance. By implication, there are significant differences between the respondents on their experiences on this service. This situation is not very surprising as the students who live in urban areas close to study centres are able to access tutorial classes and meet tutors as well. The rural students and those from the informal settlements might not be able to do so for economic and other reasons.

On communication with fellow students, the p value of the significant test is 0.008 which is less than the 0.05 level of significance. This means that significant differences exist between the students on how they rate the importance of the service and how accessible it is to them. It is possible that the students who are able to attend tutorial classes at study centre and those who have access to the internet will be able to contact fellow students than those in the rural areas.

The chi-square test for significance on a contact person in your local area to assist you with your educational needs has a p value of 0.000, which is less than the 0.05 significance level. By implication, the students have different experiences for this service. It is possible that people in urban centres could have access to such people far easier than those who reside in rural areas and informal settlements.

The significant test for help with self confidence indicates a p value of 0.015 which is below the 0.05 level of significance. This implies that there are significant differences between the respondents and how they rate the service and its accessibility to them. Again the students have diverse backgrounds as some are school leavers and some are matured adults who have wide working and life experiences.

On communication on clear academic performance, the p value of the chi-square test is 0.000, which is below the 0.05 level of significance. This indicates that there are significant differences on how the students rate the importance and accessibility of the service. It is possible that some of the students do not understand the requirements well or the university is not reaching some of the students on the issue.

The chi-square test on the information about getting text books and study materials indicates a p value of 0.000 which is far less than the 0.05 significance level. By implication, there are significant differences among the respondents on how they experience this service. Again, the reason could be mainly where the

students reside as those in urban areas are able to go to the regional centre to make follow ups as against those who stay far from the centre.

On general orientation to library and other learning resources, the significant test indicates a p value of 0.008, which is below the 0.05 significance level. There are therefore significant differences between the respondents and their views on this service. Again the students' area of residence and access to ICT services could play a role in this observation.

The test of significance on information about how to address concerns indicates a p value of 0.465 which is far above the 0.05 level of significance. This means that the respondents differ on their experiences on the importance and access to this service. Again, this could be that this service is either generally good or bad for most of the students.

The p value of the chi-square test on communication about Unisa events is 0.008 which is less than the 0.05 significance level. This means that the students rate this service differently on its importance and accessibility. The students again differ on their interests as they are from different backgrounds.

On financial assistance, the p value of the test of significance is 0.000 which is far less than the 0.05 level of significance. By implication, there are significant differences amongst the respondents and the importance they place on the financial matters concerning their studies and how this service is accessible to them. This picture indicates that there are significant differences between the students on their experience of the service. This is not surprising as the financial needs of the students differ as some are working while others are unemployed.

The chi-square test for information on about billing and fee payments is 0.293 which is more than the 0.05 significant level. In effect there are no significant differences between the respondents and how they experience this service. It is

possible that the university is able to enforce the payment of fees and billing effectively.

The significant test for information about tutorials indicates a p value of 0.78 which is far above the 0.05 level of significance. This means that there are no significant differences between the respondents on the importance they attach to this service as well as how this is accessible to them. There are quite a number of students who have problems with computer and internet services as Tables 4.15 and 4.16 indicate. There is information provided on this service in the My Studies @ Unisa brochure however.

The p value of the chi-square test for access to tutorial centres is 0.358 which is above the 0.05 level of significance. This means that there are no significant differences between the students and how they experience and access this service. There are some of the students who stay closer to the centre and will definitely have easy access to the centre as against the students from far places in the rural areas who may not be able to afford to attend tutorial classes at the centre.

The test of significance for computer access and internet indicate the p values of 0.15 and 0.031 respectively which are less than the 0.05 significant level. These imply that there are significant differences between the respondents and the importance they attach to these support services as well as their accessibility. Some of the students possibly the ones in urban areas and those who are able to afford will definitely have these services as against the poor and rural students.

The p value of the chi-square test for awareness of myUnisa is 0.424 which is far higher than the 0.05 significant level. This means that there are no significant differences between the respondents on the importance they attach to myUnisa as a support tool and its accessibility to them. The younger students who use ICT in

the urban areas are more likely to be more aware of the service than the old rural students.

On the use of myUnisa for study purposes, the p value of the chi-square test is 0.034 which is less than the 0.05 level of significance. This means that there are no significant differences between the respondents and their experience on the service's importance and accessibility. This picture is consistent with the information in Table 4.6 which indicates that students have limited use of myUnisa, mostly for sending multiple choice assignments as the focus group interview also confirms.

The chi-square test for the relevance of assignments to your study and usefulness of assignment feedback were 0.960 and 0.983 respectively which are very high above the 0.05 level of significance. This means that students differ on the importance they attach to these services and their accessibility. The responses could be that some see the assignments and the feedback as very important for their studies but the focus group interview clearly indicates that some of the students are very unhappy with the delays and the quality of the feedback from assignments. In addition to that, Table 4.22 indicates high needs gap on these issues.

The significant test for turnaround time for assessed work indicates a p value of 0.000 which is far less than the 0.05 level of significance. This implies that there are significant differences between the students on how they rate the importance of assessed work and the availability of the service to their studies. Assignments are the most widely used method of teaching in the Unisa context but students may view them differently.

On the attendance of discussion classes and videoconferencing, the p values of the chi-square tests are 0.351 and 0.621 respectively. These are more than the 0.05 significant levels of significance. By implication, there are no significant

differences between the students on how the respondents rate the importance and accessibility of the two services. All the students possibly see the importance of the services as high and the services not very accessible as Table 4.22 indicates. The needs gap are quite high for the two services.

The significant test for access to regional service centres has a p value of 0.005 which is far less than the 0.05 level of significance. This means that there are significant differences between the respondents on how they rate the importance of this service and its accessibility. The differences may be due to some of the students in the urban areas staying closer to the centre which give them easy access to the centre as against those who live in rural areas that are very far from the centre.

The chi-square tests for facilities for individual learning at regional centres and facilities for group discussions at regional centres are 0.660 and 0.460 respectively which are more than the 0.05 level of significance. This means that there are no significant differences between the students on their experiences on the two services. It is possible that all the students want to have these facilities at the centres even if they are unable to have them.

The significant tests for ability to collect materials from the regional centre, availability of library facilities at the regional centre and availability of computers at the centre have p values of 0.000; 0.003 and 0.009 respectively. These imply that there are significant differences between the students on the importance they attach to these services and their accessibility. There are some of the students who may have access to the facilities in their homes or at the regional centres and in towns as against poor rural students who may not have access to these services.

The chi-square test for availability of tutors at regional and other centres is 0.066 which is higher than the 0.05 significant level. This indicates that there are

significant differences between the respondents on their experiences on this service. This situation is not surprising as some of the students who are able to attend tutorials will definitely have access to tutors and the facilities at the regional centres as against those who stay far away from the centre and cannot attend tutorials..

4.5 CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter 4 focused on the findings on the empirical studies which indicate that the students rate all the services as important but the services for various reasons are not very accessible to them. From the focus group interview, the respondents confirmed the existences of some of the learner support services which they were able to describe in detail. They however, indicated that for one reason or the other, they are not able to access most of the support services fully although they place high value or importance on those services as far as their studies are concerned. The discussions follow in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This study uses Moore's (1997) theory of transactional distance as the basis for accessing the access gaps to Unisa's learner support services by its adult learners studying through distance education. On the basis of the theory, themes were developed from literature and the empirical studies to answer the research question in the study. The purpose of the study was to investigate the gaps adult learners experience in accessing the learner support services Unisa provides to its students. The study used Unisa's students who are studying for the ABET certificate and diploma qualifications in the Department of Adult Education and Youth Development. The study was both quantitative and qualitative in nature which utilised a focus group interview and a set of questionnaire to investigate the access challenges to the learner support services that are offered by Unisa. The findings from the empirical study were reported in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 focuses on the discussion of the findings.

The research questions investigated in the study were:

How do adult distance education students access the learner support services at Unisa?

Sub-questions

1. What are the main student support structures in place to support adult learners pursuing distance learning at Unisa?
2. Where does face-to-face tutorial fit in the whole student support system of Unisa?

3. What challenges do the adult learners face in accessing the student support services offered by Unisa?
4. What are the implications for developing an integrated learner support system?

5.2 DISCUSSIONS

The discussions are summarised in four themes for the study after taking into account the literature survey and the empirical study above. The four themes are the *transactional distance/presence, conflict/tension, experience of distance education and delivery modes at Unisa and staff development.*

5.2.1 Transactional distance/presence

Transactional presence deals with the way distance learners are afforded the support services they need such as the face-to-face and mediated programmes that enable them to perform and realise their academic goals. Shin (2003) cited by Gatsha (2010) defines transactional presence as the degree to which learners sense the availability and connectedness with an ODL institution and its staff, learning centre coordinators, tutors, peer learners and significant others. In the ODL context, the important role of tutors, faculty, administrative and other resources are key to students' success. The availability of such resources has the potential of enabling learning transactions that satisfy learners' academic needs. In the Unisa context, there appears to be a paradox concerning transactional presence as far as the Unisa students who participated in the study are concerned.

Unisa has policies such as the Tutorial, Learner Support, Unisa Service Charter and Vision 2015 policy documents as well as the Directorate of Learner Support and regional centres in the provinces where students are supposed to receive support services. The focus group interview clearly shows the level of dissatisfaction among the respondents with the support services. Besides that, the

quantitative data indicated the importance the students attach to the support services as well as the low levels of their accessibility. The service needs gap for almost all the support services from Tables 4.14 to 4.23 indicate wide gaps which point to high levels of dissatisfaction among the students. In effect, the transactional presence of Unisa to its students is very low. Meanwhile, the British Institute for Learning and Development cited in SAIDE (2008) points out that any proper learner support system should take into account the following three factors:

- learning mediation which deals with course and learning materials
- a social environment that emerges as a dialogue and interaction between learners and staff, and between learners themselves, and
- an administrative framework that is needed to support the management and dissemination of information to and from students.

The focus group interview and the quantitative data analysis as indicated earlier all point to the fact that Unisa's staff at the regional centre and the tutorial services as well as some of the mediated services such as assignment feedbacks are not up to the expectations of the students. Gorsky (2005) points out that the extent of transactional distance in distance education programmes is a function of three key variables named "structure", "dialogue", and "learner autonomy". Citing Moore (1993), Gorsky (2005) avers that "the greater the structure and the lower the dialogue in a programme the more autonomy the learner has to exercise". Such a scenario decreases transactional presence and increases transactional.

The use of Chen's (2001) model in dealing with the dimensions of transactional distance clearly shows that the learner-instructor dimension in the Unisa system creates communication gaps which lead to psychological space that causes possible misunderstanding between instructors and students. Of all teaching and learning behaviours, interaction is fundamental to the educational transaction and the effectiveness of distance educational programmes (Chen, 2001).

Evidence in this study shows that, there appears to be more structure in place in the Unisa context and less dialogue which is creating transaction distance rather than the needed transactional presence.

5.2.2 Conflict/tension

Three issues are isolated for discussion under Theme 2 which is on conflict. Conflict/tension situations arise when there is disagreement between parties on issues, approaches, resources, etc. In the Unisa ODL context and on the basis of literature and the empirical studies the following conflict situations arise:

- traditional modes of delivery and the need to catch up with technology and globalisation
- opening access and right to education and Unisa's capacity to give the needed support to most of the students who are scattered across South Africa and beyond, and
- Unisa's policy pronouncements and reality on learner support.

Most of the institutions that have been offering education through distance started with correspondence including the University of South Africa. The evolution to what is now referred to as ODL requires innovative approaches and technologies. Globalisation and competition across the world has forced institutions to be on board or be left behind. Although Unisa has done well to be on board towards the ODL approach, for one reason or the other, a lot of the students and the support staff appear not to be on board as the technologies are in place may be not enough but there is also limited use of the technologies that are necessary for any effective application in the ODL context. For example, the respondents indicated that the internet and computer facilities at the Mafikeng Regional Centre are limited as well as them not being familiar with the use of the technologies at the centre to support their learning. This scenario is collaborated by Table 4.12 which indicates that the main distance education delivery mode the students' experience is the very old correspondence at 92.3% followed by video/TV broadcast at 5.1% and the rest at 0.1%.

The tension situation as indicated above on students' perception about the delivery systems is quite in line with Chen's (2001) dimension of learner-interface transactional distance and Tait's (2003) systemic support system in learner support. As Chen (2001) points out, the learner-interface transactional distance relates to the degree of user friendliness/difficulty that learners perceive when they use the delivery systems. Some of the items which address the learner-interface according to Chen (2001) include delivery systems such as searching resources on the internet, uploading assignments, using chat rooms etc. The respondents in this study clearly indicated that the learner-interface dimension is not working well.

Meanwhile SAIDE (2008) points out that a number of institutions across the world are now using mobile technologies such as handheld PCs, PDAs, mobile phones, iPods etc. as very convenient and suitable for the purpose of learner support in a developing country such as South Africa. It is imperative for distance education providers to adapt to changes in the needs of their students and other interested groups in society. The need to adapt to change by institutions implies that there should be changes in the nature of student support as well.

On Unisa's policy pronouncements and reality on learner support, as indicated above in the policies such as the Tuition, Learner Support and Vision 2015 all show, there are clear policy directions on the ODL policy of Unisa which learner support is one of its central features. For example, Unisa's Vision 2015 document states in part that Unisa "must ensure adequate staffing levels to allow defensible staff-to-student ratios, and proper support to our students". It adds that the establishment of leading edge information and communication technology architecture is vital for the institution to have a competitive edge and sustainability. Unisa (2008) among its principles in the Open Distance Learning Policy document states that Unisa is a comprehensive open distance learning institution will:

- increase the participation of students and access to post-registration student support services, and
- encourage and support temporarily inactive students, monitor retention and throughput and implement the necessary interventions for improvement.

The focus group interview and the quantitative data all point to the fact that there are serious gaps in the provision of support services to students as well as the access the students have to the support services offered by Unisa. The ODL approach requires open access, flexibility as well as an effective learner support system but learner support as Lephalala and Pienaar (2007) point out, Unisa's increase in student numbers have not been accompanied with the increase in personnel and other support services. The students' expectations and Unisa's policy directions on learner support appear not to be up to the required standards thereby creating the "conflict" situation that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

5.2.3 Students' experiences of distance education and delivery mode at Unisa

The learner support services that are on offer at Unisa and their effectiveness can be assessed through students' experiences regarding their ability to access the services and how they help them in their distance education to realise their educational goals. Majority of the respondents indicated that their preferred method of study is the traditional classroom method. By implication, most of the students are forced by circumstances to take the distance education route. In addition to that, 92.3% of the respondents cited their experience of delivery mode at Unisa as through correspondence although the institution prides itself as a leading ODL Institution.

Croft, Dalton and Grant (2010) point out that; different factors contribute to students learning experience. Such experiences they add differ according to the individual circumstances of each student, including: their learning style; personal situation; ICT skills, confidence and attitude (Webster and Hackley, 1997) and familiarity (Mason and Bacsich, 1998); background knowledge; motivation; effectiveness of teaching; communication with staff and between students; time to study; access to ICT support; and group working encounters (Alexander, 2001).

In the Unisa context, the students have very diverse backgrounds ranging from school leavers to matured adult learners. Their circumstances equally differ in the economic situations, social backgrounds as well as the areas of residence. As the respondents indicated in the focus group interview, the guidance and counseling support they receive is not enough whilst the availability of ICT infrastructure is not up to their expectations. Besides that, the students indicated that their ICT knowledge is very limited which makes it difficult to access some of the support services on the internet, especially the use of myUnisa. The inferential statistics collaborate the outcomes of the focus group interview which show that there is high needs gap in accessing the support services Unisa offers to its students.

The experiences as narrated by the respondents in the focus group interview and the questionnaire indicate that there is less dialogue or interaction in the Moore's (1997) sense and Chen's (2001) learner-instructor dimension which leads to transactional distance and bad learning experiences in any learning situation, most especially in the ODL context.

5.2.4 Staff development

The problem of staff's inability or unwillingness to help featured prominently in the focus group interview. In the focus group interview, the students indicated that the staff most often gives them wrong information and they indicated that the guidance and counseling at the regional office is poor. They indicated further that the staff at the computer laboratory is not able to help or are very impatient with them when they need assistance especially on the use of the computers and myUnisa. In addition to that, the students indicated that a number of the study modules do not have tutors. The inferential statistics also indicated high needs gap in almost all the learner support services the university offers in the areas of importance and accessibility.

Meanwhile, learner supports in all its forms have been noted to be crucial for students' success in all learning situations, especially in the ODL mode. Talbot (2007) cited by Croft, et al., (2010) argues that the use of personal tutors, online/telephone assistance, work place mentors, peer learning, group induction

sessions, study skills workshops and access to local libraries have been found to be helpful in dealing with student isolation and success in learning. The services mentioned above all depend on the availability and quality of the staff. Chen's (2001) of the dimensions of transactional distance (learner-instructor; learner-content; and learner-interface) all depend on the availability and quality of the support the staff offers to students. This view is in line with Tait's (2003) model which identifies the three components' of learner support system as comprising (cognitive, administrative/systemic and affective) support. The provision of all the three components depends on the quality of the staff which can be effected through staff development.

The need for staff development in learner support is emphasised by Roberts (2004) who argues that institutions are to ensure that:

- tutors are selected and trained for their role of mediating learning from course materials. This training should place particular emphasis on equipping tutors to analyse and assist learners with language and learning difficulties
- adequate administrative and professional support is provided to tutors
- administrative staff is trained to be helpful in a constructive way, and
- learners are provided with technical support for each educational technology.

The problem of learners' inability to access the support services offered by Unisa adequately is a paradox because although there is the possibility that the facilities are not adequate for students, the students also indicated that they are not able to use some of the ICT-based services. There is therefore the need to train all the staff involved in learner support to enable them to assist the students adequately.

5.3 SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

The four key findings that came out of the study are:

- the transactional distance/presence that exists in the offering of distance education and the learner support that is supposed to be offered by Unisa to its students,
- the conflict/tension situation that has been created by what distance education is, Unisa's policy on learner support and students expectations,
- the students' experiences of distance education and delivery modes at Unisa, and
- the issue of staff development to be able to implement the learner support services as intended to enable students to access the support services that are on offer.

Most of the students at Unisa and the ABET diploma and certificate students are adult learners from disadvantaged communities. The apartheid history of South Africa and the socio-economic conditions of most of Unisa's students makes it impossible for them to study through the traditional contact/full-time mode. Meanwhile, studying through distance has its own challenges which learner support is supposed to bridge. This study affirms that Moore's (1993) concept of *transactional distance/presence* exists in Unisa's practice of the ODL model as most of the students indicated that they are not getting the needed support for them to be able to achieve their educational goals. The needs gap on accessibility to almost all the support services is very high. Literature on learner support clearly suggests that effective learner support bridges the transactional distance between an institution and its students where there is less structure and increased conversation between an institution and its students. When this happens students get motivated and become independent learners where they are able to take control of their learner to achieve their goals.

Distance learners often face daunting challenges which put them at a disadvantage when compared to those who study full-time. Some of the challenges they face include social problems (family, isolation, poverty, location etc); economic (unemployment, access to resources etc.); logistics (transportation; human, financial, physical resources etc) and students' expectations as against Unisa's policy position on learner support. The student expectations and what Unisa is able to offer create *conflict/tension* situation as it appears that the high expectations are not being met for various reasons. The situation has led to the high levels of dissatisfaction among the students as the empirical studies show. The students continue to place high value/importance on the support services which implies that students strongly believe that effective learner support can assist them in their studies. The experience of the students in distance education and its delivery mode at Unisa clearly shows that the system is failing many of the students. In both the focus group interview and the inferential statistics, the students confirmed that they are not able to access most of the support services although Unisa continues to make efforts to provide for the services. This suggests that there is more structure and less dialogue/conversation between Unisa and its students when it comes to learner support services.

There may be logistic challenges concerning facilities and infrastructure on the part of Unisa in the provision of learner support services but the issue of staff development features prominently in the students' inability to access the available services adequately. The role of academic staff, tutors, counselors, and the administrative/support staff is crucial for any effective learner support system to function well. The students are very emphatic on the shortage of staff for tutorials and the inability or unwillingness of the administrative staff in helping them to access adequate support services. Besides that, the students on their own also confirmed that some of them cannot access some of the services because they do not have the skills to use the services.

5.4 CONCLUSION

The main findings from the study are grouped under the four themes namely: transactional distance/presence, conflict/tension, students' experience of distance education and delivery modes at Unisa, and staff development. The themes clearly reflect the experiences of the ABET students in accessing support services the Unisa offers and the challenges they face in accessing the support services. Moore's theory of transaction distance is applied in the study to explain the importance of learner support to students in any distance learning situation. There appears to be more structure and less dialogue/conversation between Unisa and its students which is making it difficult for students to benefit from the support services that are on offer. Meanwhile, students clearly articulated the importance they attach to learner support in their studies. In the final conclusions, implications and recommendations that came out of the study and areas for further research are suggested.

CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER SUMMARIES, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the study was to investigate the gaps that exist in accessing learner support services by Unisa's adult learners studying at a distance. The study used Unisa's students who are studying for the ABET certificate and diploma qualifications in the Department of Adult Education and Youth Development. The study was both quantitative and qualitative in nature which utilized a focus group interview and a questionnaire to investigate the access challenges to the learner support services that are offered by Unisa. The findings from the empirical study were reported in Chapter 4. In this final chapter, an overview of the study, the conclusions and recommendations for further research are presented. On the basis of the findings, an integrated learner support model is suggested.

6.2 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

The study investigated the access gaps to learner support services to Unisa's adult learners studying through distance education to understand the experiences of the students so that recommendations can be made to Unisa and other ODL institutions for them to find integrated ways in which learner support services can be provided to students. The four themes that emerged from the findings are *transactional distance/presence* of the institution (Unisa) comprising lecturers, tutors, administrative and the facilities and resources that are needed by an ODL Institution in providing distance education to students. *Conflict/tension* situation refers to student expectations of the support services they are to receive from the institution to enable them to achieve their educational goals as against the policy position of Unisa on learner support and what the institution is able to offer in

practice. The *students' experience of distance education and learner support at Unisa* deals with the access challenges they face in accessing the support services on offer, and *staff development* focuses on the problem of the ODL support staff's inability or unwillingness to deal with students' needs which calls for staff development.

Chapter 1 of the study dealt with the research problem which outlined the researcher's concern about students' inability to access the support services which Unisa offers its distance learners in general but particularly the rural learners who need the services the most. Research questions were formulated to be investigated for answers. The chapter briefly outlined the research design and the methodology that were to be used to investigate the problem. The research methodology dealt with the issues on the research participants, ensuring the validity and reliability as well as ethical issues. The delimitations of the study and the demarcation of the study were also provided in this chapter.

In Chapter 2, an overview of the literature on adult education in the ODL system was examined including the need for and types of learner support systems in both the local and international contexts. The challenges and barriers students in the ODL system in general face and Unisa's students in particular were critically examined. Moore (1993) and Tait's (2003) theory of transactional distance was used as the theoretical base of the study.

The research design and methodology was presented in Chapter 3. The main research epistemologies; the positivist and the interpretivist paradigms were briefly explained and the choice of the mixed method for this study was justified. The ontological position for the study was also clearly identified. The use of the qualitative data collection method enabled the researcher to fully understand the experiences of the students on the access challenges they face in accessing the support services Unisa offers. The use of the quantitative data collection methods allowed the researcher to make inferences on the extent to which students at Unisa are able to access the support services as well as determining the needs

gap. Chapter 4 of the study focused on the presentation and analysis of the data that was collected. The discussions followed in chapter 5 which culminated in the selection of four themes as follows: *transactional distance/presence; conflict/tension, students' experience of distance education and staff development.*

The main findings of the study indicate that Unisa has all the three components of (Moore, 1993; and Tait's) model learner support which are: cognitive/academic; administrative; and affective support services in place but it appears they are either inadequate or not functioning as expected. Face-to-face tutorials are important part of Unisa's learner support system but the high needs gap for the tutorial services point to the fact that the students are not able to use the facility adequately. The high needs gap for all the learner support services as Tables 4.9 to 4.18 indicate that there are serious problems for students in accessing the services. The challenges the students face in accessing the support services include economic constraints, social factors, physical barriers, transactional distance on the part of Unisa in the form of academic, affective and administrative problems.

In chapter 6 the final chapter, the summaries, conclusions and recommendations and a suggested learner support model are presented.

6.3 CONCLUSIONS BASED ON THE LITERATURE

The literature indicates that teaching adults which is normally referred to as andragogy is different from teaching children (pedagogy) (Smith, 2002). Kangai, Rupande and Rugonye (2011) point out that it is important to understand the characteristics of learners to be able to serve them well. Some of these characteristics are based on age, gender, number of children, dependants, level of education, marital status, employment, distance between residence and distance education institution and social status (Kangai, et al., 2011). Tables 4.1 to 4.10 in

Chapter 4 identify some of these characteristics which are consistent with Unisa's adult learners.

This study found that most of the respondents fit into the category of adult learners as majority of the respondents are over 21 years of age (Refer to Table 4.2). Despite the fact that they are regarded as matured people who take responsibility for their learning, they are equally over burdened with multiple responsibilities which call for support for them to succeed in their studies. The findings from the study clearly indicate that a Moore and Tait's model of transaction distance exists between Unisa and its students as far as learner support is concerned. This calls for an integrated learner support system at Unisa to address their challenges.

6.4 CONCLUSIONS BASED ON THE EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

In the empirical study all the four research questions were examined and on the basis of the focus group interview and the quantitative data analysis which was based on the Chi-square tests, the following conclusions are drawn:

Conclusion on research question 1

What are the main student support structures in place to support adult learners pursuing distance education at Unisa?

Both the focus group interview and the quantitative data clearly indicate that the learner support model of Tait (2000) which comprise the cognitive, affective and administrative/systemic support systems are in place at Unisa which is used for the mediated and face-to-face support. The students indicated in the focus group interview that services such as using the ICT infrastructure, sending assignments, tutorial classes and some guidance services exist at the regional centre although they are not up to their expectations. The chi-square tests for Tables 4.9 to 4.19 found out that most of learner support services exist at Unisa but the p values of the chi-square tests on the importance and accessibility were mostly less than

0.05 level of significance which means that there are significant differences between the students on importance and accessibility to the learner support services at the university. It is important for the support structures at Unisa to be integrated as most of the facilities and support systems are in place.

Conclusion on research question 2

Where does the face-to-face tutorial fit in the whole student support services offered by the university?

There are tutorial classes as the respondents indicated but they indicated that many of the modules do not have tutors for one reason or the other. The responses from the focus group interview again clearly indicate that students place high premium on face-to-face tutorials. Table 4.14 indicated that students place high value on the tutorial services as support part of the support structure. Documents such as the Tutorial Hand book, Unisa's Open Distance Learning Policy, Unisa's 2015 Strategic Plan and the Transformation Charter all mention the crucial role of tutorials as part of the broader learner support system. In effect, tutorials are central to the whole learner support structure at Unisa. There are face-to-face tutorials in the Unisa system but they appear are exceptions rather than the rule.

Conclusion on research question 3

To what extent are adult learners at Unisa able to access the support services offered by the university?

The students indicated in the focus group interview that they are able to access some of the support services such as tutorials, ICT infrastructure and assignment feedbacks although to a very limited extent. They were however not happy that they are not able to access most of the services as expected for various reasons. The quantitative data analysis as Tables 4.9 to 4.18 show, the needs gap on the accessibility to almost all the support services were very high which means the

students are not able to access most of the services as expected for one reason or the other.

Conclusion on research question 4

What challenges do the adult learners face in accessing the student support services offered by Unisa?

The students cited economic challenges, logistical problems, social problems and the lack of skills on their part and on the part of support staff as some of the challenges they face in accessing the support services. Lephalala and Pienaar (2007) collaborate the findings on how financial, material and emotional factors negatively impact on students' ability to transport themselves to study and regional centres to access learner support services. The variety of approaches and models of the learner support services at Unisa do not necessarily talk to each other.

6.5 POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study aimed at finding out the challenges Unisa's adult learners studying through distance education face in accessing the learner support services offered by the institution. On the basis of the findings and discussions from the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Most of the services for supporting students are in place at Unisa but the students are to a large extent not able to access them. It is recommended that systems are put into place to monitor and continuously evaluate the effectiveness of the support services in learner achievement learning experiences.
2. It came out clearly that the facilities for ICT infrastructure including access to internet are major challenges to students. It is recommended that Unisa increases its computer laboratories at the regional centre to enable more students to use the facilities at a time.
3. The awareness and use of myUnisa as a study tool among the respondents is very low as a result of students not having the computer skills to use the

services. It is recommended that a compulsory semester course on introduction to basic computing and myUnisa be made part of all courses for new students at Unisa with practical skills conducted for them to ensure that they are familiar with the use of computers and myUnisa.

4. It is acknowledged that the cost of internet in South Africa is very high which makes it difficult for the poor students to access it in most cases. It is recommended that Unisa uses its position as one of the leading clients with the Post Office which falls under Telkom to get a deal at affordable rates for its students. The other Internet Service Providers (ISP) should be invited to compete for the huge business opportunity that Unisa offers for internet services.
5. The issue of poor administrative support featured prominently during the focus group interview where students complained that the administrative staff in the regional office is not well trained to deal with students' queries. There is therefore the need for intensive training for all the administrative staff to equip them in dealing with student queries especially in counseling on courses and procedures.
6. It came out that a lot of students are not able to attend tutorial classes and have no access to tutors in their local areas to assist them in their studies when the need arises. It is recommended that Unisa identifies, train and appoint qualified people in the districts as tutors and academic counselors. More tutorial centres should be opened in the districts so that students will not have to travel long distances to attend tutorials. The criteria for establishing tutorial classes should also be relaxed so that more students can attend.
7. Late assignment feedback is a major problem that the students face. It is recommended that the assessment plans be made in such a way that all assignment dates should be at least five weeks before examination for a module. Systems should be put in place to track the movement of all assignments.
8. There is the apparent push on the part of Unisa to go online in most of the courses and programmes that are on offer. Most of the issues surrounding access to and the use of ICT among most of the rural students have not been sorted out. It is therefore recommended that those who have access to ICT infrastructure and can afford it should be allowed to go on while the

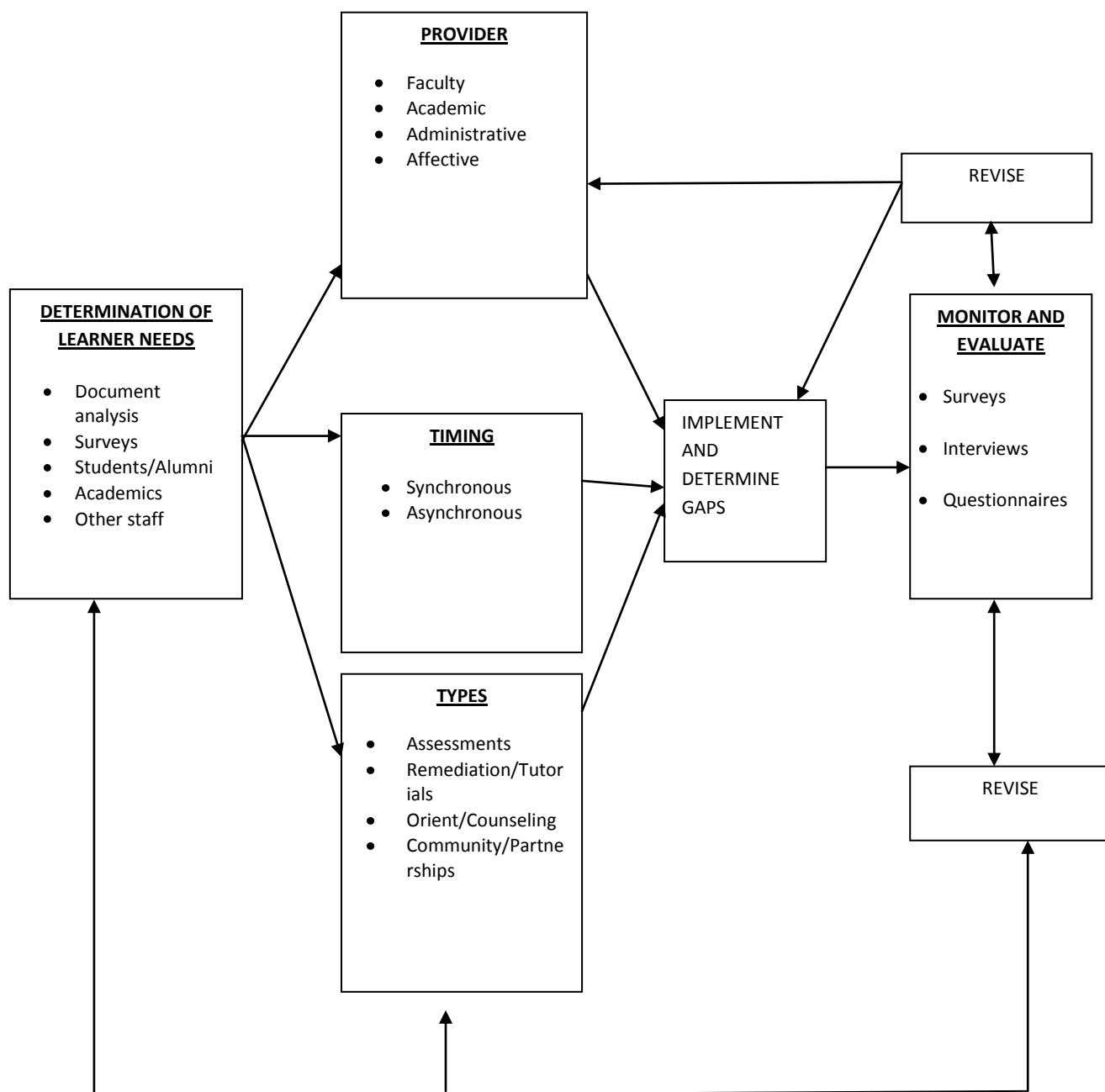
rural students who do not have access to or cannot afford it should be allowed to continue to use the other methods. In effect blended teaching and learning methods should be applied by Unisa to accommodate the needs of its diverse students.

6.6 A FRAMEWORK FOR AN INTEGRATED LEARNER SUPPORT SYSTEM

The implications of the fragmentation of the various models of learner support systems afforded this study an opportunity to provide a framework for the development of an integrated learner support system.

Various models of learner support systems were discussed in detail in Chapter 2 of this study. The Unisa model is to a large extent based on Tait's model which comprises the academic/cognitive support, systemic/administrative support and affective support. The learner/student is placed at the centre of any effective support system. A conceptual model is suggested for learner support service which is an adaptation from Mactagues (2003:352).

Figure 6.1 A framework of learner support services



Adapted from Mactagues (2003:352)

The model learner support model in Figure 6.1 above indicates that any effective support system of institutions must first put the needs of the students at the centre where the needs are determined on the basis of research. The institution depicted here as the provider is informed by the outcomes of the research and put systems in place to address the needs. The needs are met through the academic, affective

and administrative structures in the institution through integrated support methods such as remediation, tutorials, orientation and counseling, web-based support systems among others.

Any effective learner support system should take time considerations into account as support to students should be when the support services are needed either at the same time or at different times. When the systems are in place as the framework suggests, and is implemented and the gaps determined through research, monitoring and evaluation which is fed back into the system for continuous improvement to give the students enduring learning experiences.

6.7 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In the first place, further research is recommended to find out how Unisa can form partnerships with NGOs, district education offices and local municipalities and libraries on how they can complement each other through the use of their expertise and facilities in supporting adult learners in their studies.

Secondly, it is further recommended to Unisa to investigate how it can assist its learners to get cheap and reliable computers, tablets and cheap internet services for its students.

Thirdly, further research is needed to determine why the students do not use the learner support services to a large extent and why Unisa is not able to get the services to the students.

Finally, further research can be conducted to determine how the transactional distance in learner-learner (affective support) and learner-content (structure) can be bridged to reduce the transactional distance that exists in those dimensions as this study is limited to the pedagogical and the learner-interface dimensions.

6.8 CHAPTER SUMMARY

The final chapter on how distance education students studying through distance education focused on the discussions from the findings from the empirical research and literature review. The study found out that there are a lot of support systems that Unisa has in place to support its students but there is the evidence that the programmes are not reaching many of the learners as they are not able to access the service because of economic and logistical reasons. Some of the access barriers were identified and recommendations on how the services can be improved are made in the recommendations. The study used Moore's theory of transactional distance which is premised on the fact that transactional distance is a pedagogical and not a geographical phenomenon which can be bridged through a technological medium called an interface. The lack of or inability of Unisa to effectively apply this interface adequately is the possible cause of the access gaps adult students studying through distance education experience.

Finally, a learner support model is suggested for Unisa and other distance education providers at the end of the study.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

Focus group interview schedule

In your opinion what is a learner support system?

What in your view is the purpose of a learner support system?

Do you use any of the support services the university offers?

How does learner support help you with your learning?

What are the components of Unisa's learner support system you are aware of?

Which of the support systems do you use?

Are you able to access most of the LS on offer at Unisa?

Do you have access to computers and the internet?

Do you use myUnisa as a support tool in your studies?

Which functions do you use in myUnisa?

What problems do you encounter in accessing the support services Unisa offers?

What do you suggest should be done to enable learners to access the support services the university offers?

APPENDIX 2: LEARNER SUPPORT QUESTIONNAIRE

PART A: Biographical information

1. Age : a) Under 21 b) 21-30 c) 31- 40 d) 41-50 e) 51-60 f) 60+

2. Gender: a) Male b) Female

3. Race: a) Black b) Coloured c) Indian/Asian d) White

4. Area of residence: a) Rural b) urban c) Informal settlement

5. How far is your place of residence from a regional centre? a) under 20 kilometres b) between 21 and 50 kilometres c) between 51 and 100 kilometres d) between 101 and 200 kilometres e) over 200 kilometres

6. Do you go to a regional centre to seek support for your studies a) Yes b) No

7. If no, Why? Explain briefly.....

8. If yes could you list the services you normally go for?.....

9. At what level are you studying currently? a) ABET certificate b) ABET diploma 1 c) ABET diploma 2

10. Which of the following statements best describe your employment situation? a) employed full-time b) employed part-time c) working at home d) not currently employed.

PART B: Your distance learning experience

11. What are your reasons for studying with Unisa through distance?
_____ to gain employment _____ to advance my career _____
_____ for personal fulfillment _____ to improve upon my qualification
_____ Other (please specify).....

12. What distance education delivery mode have you experienced from your studies at Unisa?

- Video (Video tape or T.V. broadcast) Correspondence study
 Computer/online Two-way interactive television (video conferencing)
 Other (please specify).....

13. If you have ever studied through the traditional on-campus and distance methods, what is your preference?

- I prefer the traditional classroom method
 I prefer the distance education method
 I have no preference
 Other (please specify).....

PART C: Your support needs

In your opinion, how important are the following support services for you as a distance education student? In your experience as a distance learner at Unisa, how accessible are the following services from Unisa)? For each of the support services, please use "X" under importance and accessibility from the number, 1-4, that best describes your perceptions/experience.)

Type of service/Assessment	Importance				Accessibility			
	1 Very	2	3	4 none	1 Very	2	3	4 none
a) General information about Unisa programmes								
b) Help with admission/application process								
c) Advice with course registration								
d) Orientation to the course media/delivery format								
e) Assessment of prior learning/life experience								
f) Personal counseling								
g) Information about University policies and procedures								
h) One point of contact at Unisa for general assistance								
i) Information about academic programme requirements								
j) Communication with lecturers/tutors								
k) Communication with fellow course mates								
l) A contact person in your local area to assist you with your educational needs								
m) Help with self confidence								
n) Communication on clear academic performance standards								
o) Information about getting textbooks and study materials								
p) General orientation to library & other learning resources								
q) Information about how to address concerns								
r) Communication about Unisa events								
s) Financial assistance								
t) Information about billing and fee payments								
u) Information about tutorials								
v) Access to tutorial centres								
w) Ability to attend tutorials								
x) Computer access								
y) Internet access								
z) Awareness of myUnisa								
aa) Use of myUnisa for study purposes								
bb) Relevance of assignments to your studies								
cc) Usefulness of assignment feedback								

Type of service/Assessment	Importance				Accessibility			
dd) Turnaround time for assessed work								
ee) Attendance of discussion classes								
ff) Attendance of videoconferencing								
gg) Access to regional service centres								
hh) Facilities for individual learning at regional centres								
ii) Facilities for group discussions at regional centres								
ii) Ability to collect materials from regional centre								
jj) Availability of library facilities at regional centres								
kk) Availability of computer facilities at regional centres								
ll) Access to computer and internet facilities at regional centres								
mm) Availability of tutors at regional and other centres								

APPENDIX 3: TRANSCRIPT OF FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

RESEARCH INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT ON ACCESS CHALLENGES TO LEARNERSUPPORT AT UNISA: A FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW WITH 10 ABET STUDENTS.

Date of interview: 20 November 2012

Audio length: 30 minutes

START OF TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWER: Welcome and how are you?

INTERVIEWEES: We are fine, thank you

INTERVIEWER: What in your opinion is a learner support system?

INTERVIEWEE (P1): It includes tutorials, tutors and library services

INTERVIEWER: What is the purpose of learner support in your view?

INTERVIEWEE (P1): It helps us as learners to achieve our expected learning outcomes.

INTERVIEWER: Do you use any of the support services the University offers?

INTERVIEWEE (P3): Yes we sometimes use some of the services like sending assignment 1, the internet, some tutorial classes and the computers.

INTERVIEWER: Do you use myUnisa as a support service?

INTERVIEWER (P7): myUnisa?

INTERVIEWER: Yes myUnisa

INTERVIEWEE (P7): Ah! Not much. We do not know how to use it.

INTERVIEWER: How does learner support help you in your learning?

INTERVIEWEEEE (P4): Learner support helping us?

INRERVIEWER: Yes, how does it help you in your learning? Okay, go on.

INTERVIEWEE (P5): It helps us and makes the assignments easy to understand and answer.

INTERVIEWEE (P6): And also to be able to answer the questions in the examination with confidence.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have access to computer and the internet?

INTERVIEWEE (P9): Computers and the internet?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, computers and the internet at the centre here.

INTERVIEWEE (P1): Sometimes

INTERVIEWER: What of your homes?

INTERVIEWEE (P10): We do not have but we use our phones

INTERVIEWER: How costly is it to use your phones for accessing the internet?

INTERVIEWEE (P1): It depends on the information you need.

INTERVIEWEE (P4): Not so costly

INTERVIEWEE (P2): But it is money we sometimes we do not have.

INTERVIEWER: Do you use myUnisa as a support tool for your studies

INTERVIEWEE (P2): myUnisa? Eische, *iasokodisa* (it is troublesome)

INTERVIEWEE (P10): For sending assignment 1.

INTERVIEWER: Why only assignment 1? There are many other tools on myUnisa.

INTERVIEWEE (P8): We do not know them

INTERVIEWER: What is your experience of career guidance for your studies?

INTERVIEWEE (P2): Career guidance in the Mafikeng region is very poor. When you come here and meet a person today he will tell you this but when you come the next time and meet another person on the same issue he will give a different story.

INTERVIEWEE (P3): On computer and internet, when we need help the staff are very much impatient with us.

INTERVIEWEE (P4): And there ate computer shortages for the students

ALL INTERVIEWEES: Yes that is the case

INTERVIEWEE (P1): On tutorials, the tutorials clash as the modules let's say 1511, 1512, 1513 etc. are offered at the same time and some of us have registered for all these modules.

INTERVIEWEE (P4): If you register they say you have to get how many people? 17?

INTERVIEWEE (P9): 15

INTERVIEWEE (P1): Yes

INTERVIEWEE (P7): It is not easy for us to be there all the time as the information they give us is not always right. They do not advise us well on how you on the sequence in which you gonna take your modules so that it be easy for us as learners to take our courses.

INTERVIEWER: What do you suggest should be done by the University to enable the students to access the support services the University offers?

INTERVIEWEE: (P5): Unisa must improve its services. When we say they should improve their services, Unisa must train the staff on all their programmes. And they have to extend the computer lab as some of the students come in some know about computers whereas others do not have computer knowledge.

INTERVIEWEE (P6): And another one is our assignment. We have to get the feedback on our assignments, especially assignment 2 in time so that we can refer to them before we go and write the exams.

INTERVIEWEE (P2): We have to get the assignments feedback on time so that we do not go and repeat the same mistakes we made in the assignments in the examinations.

INTERVIEWEE (P10): And the library please



Research Ethics Clearance Certificate

This is to certify that the application for ethical clearance submitted by

Mr A Arko-Achemfuor (Staff No. 90132785)

for a study entitled

**Exploring support and access challenges faced by Unisa's
adult learners studying through distance education**

has met the ethical requirements as specified by the University of South Africa
College of Education Research Ethics Committee. This certificate is valid for two
years from the date of issue.

Prof CS le Roux
CEDU REC (Chairperson)
lrouxcs@unisa.ac.za

16 November 2012

Reference number: 2012 NOV/ 90132785/CSLR



University of Fort Hare
Together in Excellence

ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

Certificate Reference Number: VAN01 1SARK01

Project title: **Exploring support and access challenges faced by Unisa's distance learners.**

Nature of Project: Masters

Principal Researcher: Akwasi Arko-Achemfuor

Supervisor: Ms M Van der Walt

Co-supervisor:

On behalf of the University of Fort Hare's Research Ethics Committee (UREC) I hereby give ethical approval in respect of the undertakings contained in the above-mentioned project and research instrument(s). Should any other instruments be used, these require separate authorization. The Researcher may therefore commence with the research as from the date of this certificate, using the reference number indicated above.

Please note that the UREC must be informed immediately of

- Any material change in the conditions or undertakings mentioned in the document
- Any material breaches of ethical undertakings or events that impact upon the ethical conduct of the research

The Principal Research must report to the UREC in the prescribed format, where applicable, annually, and at the end of the project, in respect of ethical compliance.

The UREC retains the right to

- Withdraw or amend this Ethical Clearance Certificate if
 - Any unethical principal or practices are revealed or suspected
 - Relevant information has been withheld or misrepresented
 - Regulatory changes of whatsoever nature so require
 - The conditions contained in the Certificate have not been adhered to
- Request access to any information or data at any time during the course or after completion of the project.

The Ethics Committee wished you well in your research.

Yours sincerely



Professor Gideon de Wet
Dean of Research

08 February 2013