PERCEPTIONS OF STAFF AND STUDENTS CONCERNING SUPPORT OFFERED TO STUDENTS IN THE MA (SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR STUDIES IN HIV/AIDS) AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

by

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DECLARATION

I, Marie Matee (student no: 35846917), declare that **PERCEPTIONS OF STAFF AND STUDENTS CONCERNING SUPPORT OFFERED TO STUDENTS IN THE MA (SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR STUDIES IN HIV/AIDS) AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA** is my own work and that all the sources have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references, and that this work has not been submitted before for any other degree at any other institution.

_____   <u>30 NOVEMBER 2011</u>

SIGNATURE   **DATE**

(MS M MATEE)

SUMMARY

The MA Social Behaviour Studies in HIV and AIDS as a postgraduate degree requires students to work and conduct research independently. The purpose of the study was to gauge the perceptions, attitudes and experiences of second year students and key personnel concerning student support. A mixed methods research design was used. It was found that students and staff regarded support in a positive light, although concerns about insufficient resources were expressed. Students expressed needs for specific academic and research support. Staff tended to romanticise the reasons for students enrolling for the degree. Possible conflicting expectations of the degree and the amount and type of support offered were found between the staff and the students and also among various staff members.

KEYWORDS: Perceptions, Students, Student support, MA, Social Behaviour Studies in HIV and AIDS, Postgraduate

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
COD	Chair of the Department
DoE	Department of Education
DoHE	Department of Higher Education and Training
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
HEAIDS	Higher Education HIV and AIDS Programme
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HESA	Higher Education South Africa
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
M & D	Master's and Doctoral
MA	Master's degree
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
ODL	Open Distance Learning
SADTU	South African Democratic Teachers' Union
SWOT	Strength, Weakness, Opportunity and Threats
Unisa	University of South Africa
USBAH	Unit for Social Behaviour Studies in HIV/AIDS and Health
VCT	Voluntary Counselling and Testing
VUDEC	Vista University of Distance Education

CHAPTER 1: SITUATING THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

1.   INTRODUCTION

This study tests the perceptions of staff and students concerning support offered by the Unit for Social and Behaviour Studies in HIV and AIDS (USBAH) in the Department of Sociology at the University of South Africa (Unisa) to Master's degree (MA) students. Unisa is an institution of higher education that offers tertiary education through open and distance learning. As perceptions concerning student support at USBAH have never been researched before, there was a pressing need to do so in order to gain insights into the needs of postgraduate students.

It was anticipated that the findings and recommendations of the study would be employed to enhance the plans of the department to deliver postgraduate-level candidates that could make a marked contribution in the field of HIV and AIDS both on the African continent and internationally.

The mainstay of data-collection for this study was face-to-face interviews with key informants and emailed questionnaires to MA students in the second year of their enrolment. In the next section, a brief overview is given of the MA Programme in the Social Behaviour Studies of HIV and AIDS at Unisa.

1.1.   BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

In 1998 the Sociology Department at the Vista University of Distance Education (Vudec) proposed the development of a diploma qualification in HIV and AIDS management in the workplace and the establishment of community projects related to the qualification (Steyn 2005:3). After this initiative, a wider interest in a learning programme in social studies and HIV and AIDS developed in the university. In 1999 a proposal was submitted to the university's management for the development of a postgraduate qualification in Social Behavioural Studies and HIV and AIDS (Steyn 2005:3).

Roets (2008) mentions that USBAH was established in 2001 to oversee the offering of two postgraduate qualifications in the social behaviour studies in HIV and AIDS; namely, a BA (Honours) and MA Social Behaviour Studies in HIV and AIDS. The purpose of the MA degree programme was to provide students with the skills and knowledge necessary to understand and cope with social behavioural aspects of HIV and AIDS. This, in turn, was seen as making a contribution to alleviating the socioeconomic burden of HIV and AIDS.

In March 2001, the then Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, announced the National Plan for Higher Education. One of the proposals in the plan was that Vudec would be incorporated into Unisa on 1 January 2004 (Steyn 2005:4). The incorporation of Vudec implied that all departments at Vudec would be incorporated into their corresponding departments at Unisa and Vudec courses would be phased out. In 2011, USBAH was dissolved as part of Unisa's restructuring of bureaus and institutes, but the degrees were integrated as part of the postgraduate offerings of the Department of Sociology. This is the fifth year that this qualification is being offered.

1.2   RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

The minister of education, Naledi Pandor, outlined priority activities to be undertaken to boost the contributions of the South African higher education sub-sector to the national AIDS response (Department of Education 9 March 2007). Professor Barney Pityana, former vice-chancellor of Unisa, was present at the launch of the Higher Education HIV and AIDS Programme (HEAIDS). He summed up the purpose of HEAIDS as follows:

> The programme is as much about community as it is about development. In the face of HIV/AIDS, we need to create a higher education community that enables students to avoid HIV infection and, if they are HIV-positive, to live positively, supported by the best available treatment. It is also crucial that we understand the epidemic's impact on nation-building: the country needs not only skills but also a healthy and

highly educated citizenry that is able to carry us forward, as a nation, to a better future*.

This is a visionary view of the contribution that can be made by tertiary institutions to impact on the HIV/AIDS pandemic. However, distance education *per se* has certain barriers to deal with. For example, since 1994, policy makers for higher education have expressed great concern about the quality of distance education. These concerns include the low through-put rates of students, the high dropout rates and the lack of additional tutorial and other forms of student support strategies to assist students with their studies (NCHE 1996).

Unisa articulates in "*Unisa 2015: An Agenda for Transformation"* (Unisa 2008b) its vision for the role of student support services as a critical component of the teaching and learning design in the university. It is against this background that the Vision and Mission statements of Unisa make references to the commitment to addressing the *"*needs of the diverse learner profiles by offering relevant learner support, facilitated by an appropriate information and communication technology". Unisa's Tuition Policy (2005) indicates that the university is student-centred; therefore, it provides students with appropriate support in an environment that is suitable for active learning.

It should be noted that since 2009, Unisa has seen a number of iterations of ODL implementation. In particular, 2010 to 2011 saw major developments in Unisa's institutional thinking and practice regarding student support. These later developments are not reflected in this study, as the data collection occurred in 2008 when these plans were not yet in existence. The developments since 2009 are articulated in the *Policy for Open and Distance Learning* (Unisa 2008a) and the *Curriculum Policy* (Unisa 2010b). It is given sharper definition in the work of the *ODL Task Team on Student Support* that defined student support (see Minnaar 2011) at Unisa and developed a conceptual model for student support along with an implementation plan for the model. These models and plans were approved by Senate in 2010 and 2011 (Unisa ODL Communication and Task Team Reports 2012). Whereas

they speak to the importance of student support for the institution, these seminal documents are not included in the dissertation as data collection occurred prior to these developments.

According to Nonyongo and Ngengebule (1998:11), distance education is widely regarded as a crucial mechanism for opening learning opportunities and thus widening access to education and training in South Africa. Student support services play an important role in reducing the difficulties experienced by students in studying through distance learning. In particular, student support services may assist in reducing the isolation of students, help facilitate effective learning, increase success rates and improve the overall quality of distance education (Angelino, Williams & Natvig 2007; Clarkson & Brook 2005; Morgan & Tam 1999).

At the time of the study, the researcher was a postgraduate academic assistant employed as a fixed-term employee in the Department of Sociology. The researcher's duties at that time included providing support to students and coordinating various activities that are directly and indirectly related to tuition and research guidance at the postgraduate level.

1.3   PROBLEM STATEMENT

The problem statement for this study centres on the questions: How do MA students in the second year of enrolment perceive and experience the assistance offered by student support? How, in turn, does the staff responsible for support regard the role of student support?

Since the inception of the MA Programme, the support services have not been researched. Owing to the topical nature of the programme (the social behavioural aspects of HIV and AIDS) and the market-relatedness of the skills imparted in the programme, the number of applications and the number of enrolments have increased each year since its inception.

The central problem statement of this dissertation is thus: **What are the**

perceptions of staff and students concerning support offered at the MA level?

1.4 PURPOSES OF THE STUDY

The purposes of the study were to gain insight into
- the understanding of the students and key staff members on the role of student support
- the extent to which students relied on the student-support services
- whether students and key staff members perceived these services as enhancing, hampering or unrelated to their success in the degree programme

1.5 AIMS OF THE STUDY

- To keep on improving student support at the postgraduate level
- To contribute to the existing body of knowledge about student support
- To describe how students and staff perceive and experience student support
- To describe typical student support encounters
- To identify problems in student support

1.6 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In this study the following research objectives have been identified:

- To uncover second-year MA students' and staff members' experiences of and attitudes to the student support services rendered
- To discover students' expressed needs for support in the degree programme
- To recommend enhancements to the student support services based on the first-hand experiences of the beneficiaries and facilitators of these services

1.7   RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The questions are based on substantial experience and theoretical knowledge of student support and distance learning that the researcher acquired over years of working in USBAH.

The data-gathering for this study was guided by the following research questions:

- What are the experiences of students and key staff members of student support?
- What are the attitudes of students and key staff members towards services rendered by student support?
- Are the needs of the students adequately addressed through the student support services?
- Are there needs, problems and issues experienced by students that have not been anticipated and captured by the services rendered by student support?
- How can student support to MA students be enhanced?
- What are the challenges of rendering student support to students?

1.8   THE CHOSEN RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researcher's choice of a transformative, mixed methods approach in this study of student support is a deliberate act aimed at refuting the declaration that only one type of approach– that is either a quantitative approach or a qualitative research– can fully reveal the nuanced meanings of student support. It is the researcher's contention that denying the value of a mixed methods approach not only constitutes a deep disservice to the discipline of sociology but is indeed, unpersuasive, thanks to the weight of evidence that such an approach is a valid form of enquiry in the sociological analysis of education (Johnson & Christensen 2012; Kolb & Kolb 2005; Teddlie &

Tashakkori. 2009; Onwuegbuzie & Leech 2004). Moreover, the theoretical underpinnings of transformative stances in this dissertation enabled the researcher to at least engage with many important issues normally raised in efforts to gain sociological leverage on the dynamics of modern tertiary education. It is her intent to show in chapters two and four of this dissertation how such insights are developed in some analytical detail in this study.

A mixed research design comprising qualitative and quantitative approaches was used. This was used in order to present a rich picture of typical student experiences. Data obtained from personal interviews with key informants and through confidential self-administered questionnaires to students were augmented by interrogating literature, communiqués about open and distance learning practice and policy at Unisa and minutes of meetings.

All of the MA students in the second year of enrolment were asked to complete a self-administered questionnaire. Prior to the collection of data, informed consent was obtained from each student individually. The questionnaires were emailed and posted at the beginning of April 2008 and the last batch of completed questionnaires was gathered at the end of May 2008. The respondents were asked to complete questionnaires either online or in writing and email them back to the researcher. The importance of their participation and informed consent was explained to them.

The questionnaires included closed and open-ended questions. The open-ended items were meant to allow the respondents to give more details on the problems faced and to make suggestions for improving the provision of student support services. In addition, four key informants were interviewed using an interview schedule. The methodological details of the study are revisited extensively in chapter 3 of this dissertation.

1.9   OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

Operational definitions for a few key terms are given below.

1.9.1 Perceptions

In this study, perceptions refer to opinions formed through socio-cognitive processing of facts, attitudes and beliefs about a phenomenon (in this case that phenomenon is student support within a particular degree programme). Perceptions thus in this sense refer to beliefs or opinions, based on "how things seem". As such, human perception is subject to biases, such as "expectation effects" (Jones 1990: 82 & 84) and "confirmatory hypothesis testing" (Taylor, Peplau & Sears 2000: 56-57), which leads human actors to reject or ignore information that challenges their expectations. These biases also lead actors to selectively seek out information that confirms their expectations. Such expectations are in turn influenced in large part by experience and the influence of other social factors that produce particular socially shared and socially expected meanings. As such, opinions are referred to in sociology as frames, schemas, perspectives, and thought styles (Friedman 2011).

1.9.2 Student support

As mentioned under sub-heading 1.2, seminal documents detailing changes and greater nuances in the definition of student support at Unisa became available from 2010 onwards and were not included in the dissertation since the researcher's data collection occurred prior to these developments. Current students of support as an institution-wide concern for Unisa are referred to the documents referenced in sub-heading 1.2. Further discussion of these later developments is given in the next chapter.

The obvious way to start thinking about student support is to think about students and potential students; that means to think about who are they and what they need (Simpson 2002:10). In this study the notion "student support" refers to the supportive and advisory functions offered by the academic assistant staff in the department. The staff members involved in support take telephone calls and respond to enquiries and requests by students and try to help them in tasks such as registration and obtaining study material. The staff

members attend to student enquiries using the following means of communication: telephone, mail and the internet. After registration, support staff members coordinate the logistics of contact sessions. The students are invited to attend orientation and contact sessions at the main Unisa campus in Muckleneuk, Pretoria.

The following support services are rendered on a continuous basis to students:

- Coordinating the communication between students and course facilitators
- Connecting students with other academic and administrative units
- Coordinating the distribution of submissions (such as assignments, proposals and draft dissertation chapters) and recording the marks and feedback as well as being responsible for the quality control of the mark capturing
- Responding to student enquiries within reasonable turnaround times (this is regarded as within three days)
- Assisting in research capacity building
- Assisting in accessing resources

1.9.3 Students

A student is any person registered with the university for any form of study.

1.9.4 Master's degree

This is an academic degree higher than a bachelor's degree but lower than a doctoral degree.

1.9.5 HIV

This is the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, the virus that causes AIDS (WHO 2007:8).

1.9.6 AIDS

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (Van Dyk 2005:3).

1.9.7 MA Social Behaviour Studies in HIV and AIDS

The qualification is designed in an integrated and interactive modular format. In order to complete the qualification, it is expected that each student conduct a study on which a dissertation of limited scope in the field of HIV and AIDS is produced (Unisa 2010a:145-146)

1.10 CHAPTERS OF THE DISSERTATION

In **chapter one** an introduction and background to the study, rationale of the study, problem statement, purpose of the study, aims of the study, research objectives, research questions, research methodology and operational definitions are given.

Chapter two is devoted to a literature review and a brief overview of relevant theoretical ideas appropriate to the study.

In **chapter three** the researcher presents the research methodology.

Chapter four is devoted to the results and discussion of results.

In **chapter five** the researcher provides a summary of findings, recommendations and conclusions. The strengths and limitations of the study are discussed in this final chapter.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   INTRODUCTION

In order to locate this study in terms of other studies on student support and in terms of the relevant theoretical perspectives, literature from a wide range of international and national academic journals, internet publications and other sources was consulted. This chapter is organised in the following way. The introduction is followed by definitions of student support, a description of the range of services provided to students enrolled in the MA Social Behaviour Studies in HIV/AIDS and a description of the functions of staff in terms of student support. This is followed by a contemplation of the reasons for a need for postgraduate student support and a description of student support offered to postgraduate students in the context of Unisa's Open Distance Learning (ODL) policy.

The specific support model offered by the unit is discussed and some of the unique challenges faced by students enrolled in the MA Social Behaviour Studies in HIV/AIDS students are provided. This is followed by a critical reflection of Unisa's ODL model of tuition. The chapter concludes with the theoretical framework that supports the study.

2.2   DEFINITIONS OF STUDENT SUPPORT[1]

Student support is defined in the "Draft Report on Integrated Learner Support" (Unisa 1997) as *"the entire range of methods and strategies employed in the presentation and delivery of courses aimed at assisting and enabling learners to comprehend fully, assimilate and master skills and knowledge needed to achieve success in their studies"*. The researcher's operational definition of

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[1] As mentioned under sub-heading 1.2 in Chapter 1, seminal documents detailing changes and greater nuances in the definition of student support at Unisa became available from 2010 onwards and are referred to in the discussion here. However, these full definitions could not inform the dissertation since the researcher's data collection occurred prior to these developments. Current students of support as an institution-wide concern for Unisa are referred to the documents referenced here and under sub-heading 1.2 of the previous chapter.

student support, gleaned from this definition is that it is the activity of providing a service to a particular group or person (in this case students registered for MA Social Behaviour Studies in HIV/AIDS at Unisa).

The *Policy for Open and Distance Learning* (Unisa 2008a) defines student support as:

> "A generic term that is applied to a range of services that is developed by UNISA to assist students to meet their learning objectives and to gain the knowledge and skills to be successful in their studies. Student support includes:
>
> - tuition support in the form of detailed, individualised and timely feedback to formative assessment; regional tutorials in a medium (face-to-face, online, telematics etc.) that is accessible to students; remedial interventions such as responsible open admission programmes to help underprepared students 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 creating rich environments for active learning with a 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."

This definition is given greater nuance in the *Curriculum Policy* (Unisa 2010b) in the definition of student-centeredness as: *"the principle of systematically recognising students' world-views and lived experiences as well as prior learning in the development of curricula that will allow students to reach their learning objectives and aspirations."*

Prinsloo (2010a:7) clarify student support as an institutional concern that *"emphasises offering integrated, coherent, holistic and were possible and*

appropriate, customized student support focused on three distinct phases of the student walk namely at entering higher education, in teaching and learning and exiting higher education". Prinsloo (2010a:7) states that the framework for student support at Unisa encompasses *"three types of student support namely academic (cognitive), affective (pastoral) and administrative support."* Moreover the conceptual model for student support at Unisa rests on the principles of

a) Student-centeredness
b) Efficiency and affordability
c) Forming part of formalised, planned actions and informal, spontaneous responses to student needs
d) Integration of support "*into the main learning experience from curriculum planning, the planning of formative and summative assessment, the offering of tutorial and counselling services and the use of technologies*"
e) Responsiveness to offering appropriate, customized support
f) Tailored to needs at three distinct periods, namely entrance into higher education, learning and exit (Prinsloo 2010a:8).

2.3 SERVICES PROVIDED TO STUDENTS ENROLLED IN THE MA SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR STUDIES IN HIV/AIDS

The services rendered to students entail duties such as providing general guidance and consultation by responding to students' queries via telephone, personal interviews, letters and the MyUnisa online environment. It also includes reporting major concerns to line managers such as the chair of the department (COD), the master's and doctoral coordinator and the programme convener. Thus active monitoring and gauging the perceptions on the progress of students on a regular basis is one of the priorities of student support.

"Student support" is a generic term that is applied to a range of services that is developed by Unisa to assist students to meet their learning objectives and to gain the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in their studies

(Unisa 2008a:2).The specific student support offered to MA Social Behaviour Studies in HIV/AIDS students includes the following:

At the MA level

1. An orientation contact session that takes place after registration in each academic year. This five-day workshop is hosted in Pretoria and it brings together the senior students, office bearers in the faculty, lecturers and library personnel to empower the candidates with crucial skills in order to be successful in their studies.

2. Another contact session in September each year at which students have one-on-one consultations with their appointed supervisors. Two academic assistants are responsible for the logistical arrangements for this and the previously mentioned contact session. The two activities are coordinated and facilitated by academics in the Department of Sociology. Evaluation forms are distributed on the last day so that students can evaluate the overall efficacy of the workshop. Assessment of quality in postgraduate education is critical to the success of master's and doctoral students (Maslen 2010).

3. Tuition support in the form of detailed, individualised and timely feedback on formative assessments. This is administered by academics supported by two academic assistants.

4. Regional visits in the form of face-to-face contact sessions during which academics and student support staff are able to meet students and assist with their academic progress. Online support is offered using the MyUnisa online environment which is accessible to students and enables them to access relevant information regarding their studies. Telephone and emails as tools for communicating with students are important to track student progress and to offer interventions.

5. Administrative support in the form of channelling timely, accurate and accessible information from the institution to its students. This

administrative support informs students about all aspects of the learning process from registration to graduation.

There seems to be, at face-value at least, a good match between these functions and the general definition of student support as offered under sub-heading 2.2 of this chapter. In the following section, insights from literature on what the staff functions in student support can entail are given.

2.4   THE FUNCTIONS OF STAFF IN TERMS OF STUDENT SUPPORT

The delivery of student support falls into two broad categories. The first is academic or tutorial support which deals with supporting students with the cognitive, intellectual and knowledge issues of specific courses or set of courses (Simpson 2002:6). Academic support consists of defining the course territory, explaining concepts, exploring the course, providing feedback on assessments, developing the competencies applicable to the degree requirements and monitoring progress. The second category of student support delivery is non-academic or counselling support and entails the support of students in the affective and organisational aspects of their studies.

Non-academic support consists of advising students by providing information, exploring problems and suggesting directions for addressing problems (Simpson 2002:5). It also includes assessment through which feedback is given to the student on non-academic aptitudes and skills (Simpson 2002). In this regard, the student support staff, for example, offer suggestions on how to listen and effectively communicate with dissertation supervisors. Non–academic support also includes rendering emotional support to students and encouraging them not to give up on their studies or to abandon the degree. Simpson (2002) argues that non-academic support means promoting change in the institution that will benefit students.

When Simpson's (2002) insights on the possible range of functions that staff can undertake in student support are compared with the documented range of

functions as described under sub-heading 2.3 above, it is evident that non-academic support is not overtly listed as the role of the support staff. However, these functions are performed by the staff on almost a daily basis.

2.5   WHY IS THERE A NEED FOR STUDENT SUPPORT FOR POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS?

Many postgraduate students do not complete their degrees because of problems stemming from personality factors, motivational factors, feelings of isolation, family demands and financial problems (Burnett 1999). According to Unisa's ODL Policy (Unisa 2008a:06), "*student support takes into consideration the diverse needs of students as well as the level of study*". Prinsloo (2010a:10) states that *"open distance learning (ODL) necessitates a specific understanding of student support as integral to effective teaching and learning design and delivery as well as integrated and coordinated institutional strategies and interventions."*

As Wheeler (2009:475) points out, attrition rates and the problem of social isolation are acute in distance education. Moreover, he states that

> emotional support is arguably the most vital support for learning in online environments, as distance learning is generally devoid of face-to-face support, and students often have problems understanding course information….This deficit can lead to frustration, anxiety and other negative emotional responses*. (Wheeler 2009:482)

Thus support is needed for postgraduate students so that they can, *inter alia* be reassured that feedback and critique from lecturers are not personal attacks but guidance intended to challenge them. Such emotional support can encourage postgraduate students when they are feeling depressed to develop strategies that will help them return to their studies until the completion of the degree.

According to Johnson (2000: 129), higher education is now changing to a new

world of professional development, lifelong learning, and knowledge- and problem-based learning. Consequently, postgraduate students tend to consider their studies with a focus on career and personal development rather than on the love of learning (Johnson 2000). Furthermore, Johnson (2000) argues that employers are also influential in demanding that higher education deliver candidates able to apply their competencies in the workplace.

2.6 STUDENT SUPPORT IN THE CONTEXT OF UNISA'S TUITION POLICY

Student support is crucial for teaching, learning and research in the context of ODL for postgraduate students (Unisa 2005). Unisa's Tuition Policy (2005) indicates that the university is student-centred; therefore, it provides students with appropriate support in an environment that is suitable for active learning.

2.7 THE SUPPORT MODEL UTILISED BY THE UNIT

The MA Social Behaviour Studies in HIV and AIDS degree deals with issues that need careful consideration by students from diverse backgrounds and from different countries. Postgraduate level degrees require students to work and conduct research independently. There is a need for guidance from the institution, college, department, supervisors and student support for ensuring quality relevant and effective throughput of the students by providing the following comprehensive student support.

As the degree is coursework based, assignments are the main assessments for this degree. Students must submit and pass two or three assignments per module. They are encouraged to consult library resources, discuss the work with fellow students or tutors and do independent research when writing their assignments. The lecturers involved comment constructively on the submitted work.

The role of the academic assistant in this regard is to receive the assignments from the assignment department. Each academic assistant has his or her own

modules assigned to him or her. The assignments received are recorded and distributed to the lecturer responsible for marking; marking grids are attached to each assignment. The academic assistant receives the marked assignment and records the marks and comments.

Photocopies of the front page and the comments of the marker are kept on file. This is done for quality assurance and also as evidence in the event of student queries. Academic assistants help students to understand what is expected of them in the assignments, the instructions for the proper technical care of the assignments and how to interpret the comments of the markers.

Tait (2003:04) argues that early interventions when students fail to deliver acceptable work on time can contribute to the reduction of dropouts. Since 2004, 34% of all students who have enrolled for this degree have abandoned the course before meeting all of the requirements for the degree. The reasons offered for this are lack of funding and workplace demands. The researcher plays a role in offering support to students who call whenever they feel demoralised by encouraging them not to abandon the degree. In addition dropout is contained by establishment of communication between the researcher and academics involved in the degree. In this regard the researcher is responsible for tracking the progress of each student by means of telephone, email, mail and consultations with students who visit the unit.

2.8   SOME OF THE CONSTRAINTS FACED BY STUDENTS IN THE MA SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR STUDIES IN HIV/AIDS

Students who enrol for the MA Social Behaviour Studies in HIV and AIDS come from various African countries, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Zimbabwe, Zambia, Swaziland and Mozambique. The ages of the students range from 25 to 45 years which means that most of the students are adult learners. Some of the students struggle to express themselves clearly in English. However, with the support offered at Unisa in the form of academic writing classes and online mentors, these students are able to graduate.

A stated requirement for admission to this degree is that the student must be computer literate. However, some of the students do not have regular access to computers. As the degree is a coursework programme, funding in the form of bursaries is not offered to these students and leads to students discontinuing the degree because of financial constraints.

2.9   REFLECTIONS ON STUDENT SUPPORT IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Tait (2003:1) states that correspondence education began in England in 1844 with Isaac Pitman's shorthand course, which was delivered by correspondence. He argues that the crucial dimension of Pitman's system was that Pitman corrected students' work and returned it to them. There were some other parallel developments that were taking place in Germany at that time. According to Tait (2003), well-functioning railway and postal systems in Europe facilitated the provision of an integrated system for the delivery of learning materials and feedback to students.

In 1946 South Africa saw the establishment of the world's first exclusively distance teaching university, the University of South Africa (Unisa) based in Pretoria (Tait 2003:2). Unisa recruited large numbers of students during the apartheid period as it was a university not classified by the ethnic or racial groups it was allowed to teach. Tait (2003) argues that Unisa offered the opportunity to large numbers of black students excluded from educational opportunities and political rights.

Tait (2003) and Nonyongo (2002:128) state that there were three major weaknesses in the Unisa system after 1994. First, it was characterised by poor success rates in terms of completion and student throughput rates. Second, it relied heavily on correspondence-dominant programmes instead of incorporating other media as was the case with other well-functioning distance education programmes. Third, it had inadequate student support which was exacerbated by the lack of a coordinated regional network of learning centres.

According to Williams, Paprock and Covington (1999:2), "*the term distance learning and or distance education refers to the teaching and learning arrangement in which the student and teacher are separated by geographical space and time*". Yates and Bradley (2000:7) also define distance education as an educational process through which learning takes place when the teacher and learner are removed in space or time from each other. Unisa's ODL Policy (2008a:1) defines distance education as a set of methods for teaching diverse students situated at different places. They are separated from the learning institution, their lecturers as well as their peers.

Unisa's adoption of an open distance learning delivery model is supported by its vision, to dedicate "*itself to becoming an African university in service of humanity*". The five-year review of Unisa (Unisa 2009) briefly explains that, given Unisa's capacity, resources and reach, its role on the continent and internationally has gained tremendous prominence. Fuelling this has been the number of strategic partnerships and collaborations concluded by the university. During this time Unisa has gained recognition by the South African government and higher education providers in Africa as an institution capable of playing a key role in social upliftment and development (Unisa 2009).

The Higher Education Act, 101 (1997) and the Education White Paper 3, (Department of Education 1997) set out South Africa's challenges in higher education to attain redress, equity, quality and improved access. This means that student support programmes have become critical to achieve increased graduate throughput and output. The study was informed in part by published concerns about the low throughput rate of postgraduate students (Visser & Subotzky 2007). Since 2004, 34% of all students who have enrolled for the MA degree In Social Behaviour Studies in HIV/AIDS have dropped out of the degree before meeting all of the requirements. Roberts (2004:12) sums up what student support in Unisa as an ODL institution means by saying:

> The challenge to especially the new institution (Unisa) is to move swiftly,
> purposefully and productively to embrace the concept of learner support,

put in place an implementation infrastructure and to develop into a successful, developing institution. Although learner support funding is made difficult because of financial constraints faced by institutions, it can be argued that effective learner support is likely to lower the dropout rate and increase the pass rate. It would therefore be logical for institutions to allocate more of their finances to learner support.

Prinsloo (2010a:5) writes that the proposal for 2011 onwards is that student support at Unisa should be provided by a range of stakeholders offering academic, affective and administrative support. This should include specific support such as face-to-face tutorials, video and satellite broadcasting and counselling where needed. Prinsloo (2010a:5) acknowledges the role of financial and resource constraints by suggesting that whereas most types of the institutional student support are offered free-of-charge to all students, more expensive interventions such as face-to-face tutorials imply some costs to students. Moreover Prinsloo (2010a:5) suggests that the new proposed student support model should be phased in as four stages, namely:

- Firstly, the quality and efficacy of current student support initiatives should be improved;
- Secondly, technologically-enhanced student support services should be piloted (such as E-Tutors and/or E-Mentors);
- Thirdly, the design and implementation of interactive self-assessment tools should be established
- Fourthly a range of technologies should be utilised to communicate with students.

Prinsloo (2010a:5) concludes that this proposal "not the final word on student support at Unisa but are specifically aimed at reaching the up-to-now unreached students from 2011-2013."

2.10   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS THAT UNDERPIN THE STUDY

The researcher drew on different theories to frame and guide the study; namely, Paulo Freire's empowerment education theory (1994), aspects of

Vygotsky's social development theory, transformative learning theory (1986) and Taylor's call for a new theory of student motivation in ODL institutions (1998). The sensitising concepts and tenets of each of these theories that were used in this study are discussed below.

2.10.1 Empowerment education theory

Of importance to this study is Freire's (1994:28) notion that the teacher/lecturer-student relationship is a meeting of two social actors in a subject-to-subject encounter in which mutual knowledge creation takes place. Demmitt and Oldenski (1999:328) describe Freire's pedagogy as empowering "*the oppressed by entering into the experience of oppression and assisting the oppressed in transforming oppressors through reflection and action*". Of further importance here is Freire's idea that the mutual creation of knowledge occurs through dialogue directed at mutually-agreed upon targets with a shared belief in the capacity of learning to change lives (Wallerstein & Bernstein 1988). Thus, there is an inherent belief that the disempowered are already knowledgeable about the sources of their oppression and how to overcome it.

Working from a Freireian perspective, it is argued that empowerment in any context is meaningful only when it is linked to change (Buysse & Wesley 1996:236). People become empowered by gaining access to information and resources and organising and translating knowledge into action. To extend this principle to the notion of student support thus implies that such activities should be planned to address specific issues that require change. Moreover, it implies that the students are not the passive recipients of support but active voices in the processes of empowerment via support. In this regard, Wallerstein and Weinger (1992) state that education for empowerment implies participatory learning based on real-life experiences. Such participation becomes empowering when individuals gain control of their personal lives and contribute to change in their communities. This is achieved along three stages; namely, (1) active learning (2) dialogue and (3) actions (Wallerstein & Weinger 1992).

The active learning stage encompasses listening, being listened to and planning. In the dialogue stage, students need to engage with lecturers and peers and in the actions stage students do follow-up activities (Wallerstein & Weinger 1992). Thus, regarding students as partners is crucial as it facilitates tuition based on the needs of students. Even if students cannot fully participate in study material/tuition media planning, their inputs are nonetheless essential. This can be gauged through needs assessment surveys or interviews (Wallerstein & Weinger 1992). In this sense, this study is a first step to "listen" to the perceptions of the student and staff concerning student support offered to the MA students in the Social Behaviour Studies in HIV and AIDS. The researcher thus maintains that these ideas underpinned her approach to the study and her analysis of the findings.

Empowering and participatory dialogue takes place when the educator listens attentively to students and creates a relationship of trust. This stage is successful when students are no longer docile listeners, but instead become co-creators of teaching and learning dialogues (Freire 2002).The third stage is comprised of what Freire (2002) describes as students empowering themselves by taking responsibility for their own learning, by increasing their understanding of their communities and by comprehending how they are affected by policies and structural factors. This should culminate in actions that are tried out, interrogated for successes and failures and the development of a critical understanding of what the next action steps should be (Wallerstein & Weinger 1992). The question items posed to the students aimed at gauging how they came to enrol for the degree, their current levels of participation in the field of HIV and AIDS and their expectations and aspirations in this regard.

When considering Freire's key notions of personal power, one has to consider what is needed to increase personal power in a teaching-and-learning context. In this regard Sarmiento, Laschinger and Iwasis (2004:136) state that personal power is derived from access to three resources; namely, access to support, information and resources. Thus, support for students includes *inter alia* support in the form of feedback and guidance received from the lecturers

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and support staff. "Information" refers to the content or subject matter delivered via the curriculum and the tutorial matter and media that emerge from the content. "Resources" refers to material and media used or required to impart, receive and exchange information. Question items in the questionnaire for the students and in the interview schedule for staff aimed at exploring perceptions regarding access to support, information and resources.

At the level or organisational empowerment it can be argued that Unisa needs its institutional management, council, senate and educators to implement programmes and activities. Strategies such as open lectures and consultations can be used to improve dialogue (Skelton cited in Buysse & Wesley 1996: 237). In this regard, institutional thinking about student support as an empowering action is reflected in this dissertation with the clear *proviso* that many nuanced development towards redress of support for 2011 to 2013 only occurred in the institution after the main data collection for this study took place. It is the researcher's contention that these later developments reflect the spirit of support as empowerment as discussed here and therefore do not invalidate the study or its findings.

2.10.2 Aspects of Vygotsky's social development theory

The researcher's conceptualisation of this study was influenced by aspects of Vygotsky's social development theory (1981; 1986). Although his work is often used to help understand the development of social understanding in children, some aspects can be useful when applied to teaching and learning in a higher education context. The reason for this is that his theory focuses on the role of social interaction in learning and on the idea that collaborative, purposeful transformation is the key tenet of empowered teaching-learning. The researcher found particularly useful the insights that many institutions of learning traditionally adhere to a transmission or instructional model in which a teacher/lecturer "transmits" information to students. Vygotsky argues for a learning context that demands that students play an active role in learning. This makes learning a reciprocal experience for the students and teacher/lecturer. These insights are reflected in Unisa's conceptualisation of

student support and student-centeredness as discussed earlier on in this chapter.

Moreover, Vygotsky's (1986) insistence that learning is socially situated is important in order to regard teaching and learning as more than intrapersonal or interpersonal processes. Lecturers, staff and students are influenced by the social and cultural realities that exist in their environments. This insight is clearly reflected in the application in this study of the ABCD+ matrix as showcased in Chapter 4.

Vygotsky's (1981) socio-cognitive theory combines the intra- and interpersonal aspects by suggesting that learning originates in and evolves through social interactions. Learning thus takes place among people, and then within the learner/student (Vygotsky 1981). To navigate among these learning processes, individuals employ certain tools such as text and non-text based tutorial and research matter, web resources, own and other people's experiences and asking questions (Agee & Smith 2011). The researcher regards the use of student support as one of the socio-cognitive tools that students can use.

2.10.3 Transformative learning theory

Notions central to the theory of transformative learning as developed by Mezirow (1991; 2000) were useful to frame the study owing to the emphasis placed on the role of meaning and critical reflection in the learning process. As Cranton and Wright (2008:3334) explain, transformative learning is

> a process by which individuals engage in critical self-reflection that results in a deep shift in perspective toward a more open, permeable, and better justified way of seeing themselves and the world around them… Transformative learning theory is based on the idea that we construct personal meaning from our experiences and validate that meaning through discussion with others. Our experiences are filtered through our meaning perspectives or habits of mind. We can only see the world through our own eyes, and our way of seeing includes

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distortions, prejudices, stereotypes, and unquestioned belief systems. Transformative learning happens when we encounter an event that calls into question what we believe and we revise our perspective. At times, this can be a dramatic event, but most often it is a more gradual, cumulative process.

In this study, the researcher also considered the application of transformative learning by Taylor (1998:53-54) who identifies three ways to promote transformative learning; namely:

1. the creation of learning conditions that promote a sense of safety, openness, and trust
2. the development and employment of effective instructional methods that support a student-centred approach, promote student autonomy, participation and collaboration
3. the development of learning activities that encourage the exploration of alternative perspectives and critical reflection

Whereas these three aspects of transformative learning were not directly assessed in this study, they influenced the way in which the researcher approached the study and the interpretation of the results. In particular, the perceptions of students and staff were gauged and interrogated for the way in which these three aspects of transformative learning were reflected in these perceptions (if at all).

2.10.4 Simpson's contribution to understanding the motivation of students in ODL institutions

Simpson (2008) provocatively calls for a new theory of student support in distance learning, based on recent findings in the fields of learning and motivational psychology. He (Simpson 2008) argues that current theories seem to be based on two approaches; namely,

1. identifying weaknesses in students and suggesting ways in which these can be addressed via remedial action

2. advising students on how to develop learning skills via counselling or dialogue

Simpson (2008:160) further states that these approaches are problematic as remedial interventions to address weaknesses not only tend to have only short-term success but are also unable to sustain better achievement in the long run. In fact, he regards remedial approaches as barriers placed in front of already disadvantaged students. Moreover, interventions focused on learning skills development may suffer from unclear definitions of what "good" learning skills actually entail. In other words, students who are already performing well may be regarded as possessing good learning skills.

Following from this, Simpson (2008:161) observes that distance educators often pay lip service to student participation, but allow little space for a full recognition of negative feelings and experiences such as anxiety, hopelessness, boredom, disappointment and anger. Moreover, students may feel that distance learning support material is written with the perfect student in mind – an independent, fully technologically competent student.

Another important insight highlighted by Simpson (2008:167) is that institutional cultures can exist in which staff predominantly exhibit or adhere to a "survivalist's" stance and regard student success and perseverance as a matter of "survival of the fittest". On the other hand, a "supportist" institutional culture can encourage the belief that students can be assisted through increased support efforts. Of even greater concern than the intrapersonal-versus-interpersonal emphasis on student motivation is the very real possibility that an institutional culture may be dominated by ambivalent attitudes by the support staff resulting in what Johnson and Simpson (2006 as quoted in Simpson 2008:167) refer to as a situation in which "*the biggest barrier to student retention is the institution itself*".

Simpson (2008:168) argues for a proactive, motivational-support approach that encompasses

- an emphasis on individual student needs rather than a generic approach
- interactive engagement between students and support staff
- motivation

Lentell (2006) adds to the debate by questioning how the development of study materials and course delivery in an ODL environment can be informed by the needs of students. Important barriers in this regard are the mass of students, a drive to increase open access and the demands of cost-effectiveness. Via the efforts of Unisa's Bureau of Learning Development, ODL is individualised and staff members are encouraged to recognise the particular needs of students as individuals.

2.11 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, literature on the definitions of student support, a description of the range of services provided to students enrolled in the programme and a description of the functions of staff in terms of student support were reviewed The researcher addressed the problem of the necessity for postgraduate student support. A description of student support offered to postgraduate students in the context of Unisa's ODL policy was explored. The specific support model offered by the unit was also discussed as well as some of the unique challenges faced by students enrolled in the MA Social Behaviour Studies in HIV/AIDS followed by a critical reflection of Unisa's ODL model. The researcher drew on different theories to frame and guide the study.

In the next chapter the researcher outlines her chosen research approach.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1   INTRODUCTION

In this chapter the researcher describes the research design used in the study. Emphasis is on the chosen research approach, sampling strategies, instruments developed and used to generate the data, data generation strategies, and access negotiation. The ethical considerations adhered to in the study are considered. Issues of validity, reliability and trustworthiness of the data, data analysis and inference processes are described.

3.2   THE CHOSEN APPROACH AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Hesse-Biber (2010:456) declares that "*methodology provides the theoretical perspective that links a research problem with a particular method or methods.*" It is the researcher's intention in this chapter to demonstrate that her choice of an approach followed this notion of methodology so that a mixed methods research design was favoured based on the empowerment-based and transformative theoretical underpinnings of the study.

Sweetman, Badiee and Creswell (2010) define mixed methods research as the collection, analysis and integration of quantitative and qualitative data into a single study. Mertens (2003 cited in Sweetman *et al* 2010) draws attention to mixed methods research within the transformative framework as aimed at knowledge construction that can help people to improve society. The researcher wanted the goal of her study to be more than knowledge production; she wanted to include the possibility of making a difference in respect of student support.

This study can also be construed as research undertaken by a practitioner (in this case a junior academic and student support provider) in a professional context where knowledge production is directed at addressing a specific

problem identified in the workplace (in this case the problem of student support). The goal of the study was to gauge perceptions of support offered to students in the MA degree from the vantage point of support recipients (the students) and those offering the support (key role players). Given this goal, a mixed methods approach was called for. Mixed methods research designs comprise qualitative and quantitative strategies to gauge a rich, complex impression of social phenomena. Bergman (2010:172) argues that: "*mixed methods research is eminently suited for exploring variations in the construction of meaning of concepts in relation to how respondents, for instance, make sense of their experiences or report on attitudes in interviews or questionnaires, respectively.*"

According to Tashakkori and Creswell (2007:04) mixed method research is defined as research in which a researcher collects and analyses data using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Mixed methods research provides comprehensive evidence for studying a research problem. Denzin (2010:419) even ventures that "*the mixed-multiple emergent-methods discourse is bold, innovative, energizing, and disruptive*" and declares "*who can quarrel with an emergent multimethod sequential or simultaneous triangulation design that works out of an empowerment, critical theory paradigm*?"

Collins Onwuegbuzie and Jiao (2007:282) warn that, in order to achieve interpretative consistency, mixed methods researchers must consolidate their quantitative and qualitative data into a framework. The researcher did this by employing the ABCD+ matrix as showcased in Chapter 4 of this dissertation. Collins *et al* (2007: 286) also warn that when small samples are used in both the quantitative and qualitative phases of a mixed methods study, and when a probability sample was not used in the quantitative phase, the researchers should not make use of statistical generalisation as this would not be justified by the sampling choices made. In this regard, the researcher provides only descriptive tables in Chapter 4 and avoided inferential statistics and hypothesis testing. Thus the researcher steered clear of any claims to statistical generalisations.

Following Mertens (2010: 470), the researcher chose a design compatible with a transformative stance that "*provides one framework that allows researchers to consciously situate their work as a response to the inequities in society with a goal of enhancing social justice.*" Mertens (2003:144) articulates a transformative mixed method approach as being focused on four major steps; namely,

1. building trust
2. choosing an appropriate theoretical framework
3. asking balanced questions
4. generating data that will lead to transformative answers

Issues of trust between the researcher, participants and respondents are discussed in this chapter. In the previous chapter, key notions in transformative and emancipatory theoretical frameworks were discussed. The construction of data-generating instruments, intended for asking balanced questions and generating transformative answers to the research questions, is discussed in this and the last chapter of the dissertation.

The specific mixed method research design employed in this study is a sequential transformative design (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutman and Hanson 2003:182). This type of research design typically encompasses two distinct data collection phases with one following the other. Although either a qualitative or a quantitative method may be used first, the researcher chose to begin with quantitative data collection, followed by qualitative face-to-face interviews.

The results of the two phases are typically integrated during the interpretation phase. What makes a sequential transformative design unique, according to Creswell *et al* (2003:182-183) is that it

> Definitely has a theoretical perspective present to guide the study. The
> aim of this theoretical perspective, whether it be a conceptual framework,
> a specific ideology, or advocacy, is more important in guiding the study

than the use of methods alone … By using two phases, a sequential transformative researcher may be able to give voice to diverse perspectives, to better advocate for participants, or to better understand a phenomenon or process that is changing as a result of being studied.

The transformative theoretical perspective as articulated in the second chapter of this dissertation guided the data-generation and data-interpretation.

Denscombe (2008:272) identifies five reasons for social researchers using mixed methods research; namely, that it is used to

1. advance data accuracy
2. generate a comprehensive account of the problem studied through the combination of complementary data sources
3. avoid bias that might be present in single-method approaches
4. build on the analysis by using contrasting data and methods
5. develop a sampling strategy

In this study, a mixed methods strategy was followed to achieve the first three reasons mentioned by Denscombe (2008); namely, to enhance accuracy, generate a comprehensive account and avoid the bias inherent in a single-method strategy.

3.3   SAMPLING STRATEGIES FOR THE STUDY

In developing sampling strategies for the study, the researcher consulted the typologies developed by Collins, Onwuegbuzie and Jiao (2006) and Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2007) for sampling in mixed methods research designs. In this regard, critical case sampling, defined by Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2007: 285) as "*choosing settings, groups, and/or individuals based on specific characteristic(s) because their inclusion provides the researcher with compelling insight about a phenomenon of interest*" was chosen for the quantitative phase of the study. For the qualitative phase of the study, the researcher employed the intensity sampling strategy described by Collins *et al* (2006:84) as "*choosing settings, groups and/or individuals because their*

experiences relative to the phenomena of interest are viewed as intense but not extreme".

Each of these strategies is described in greater detail below.

3.3.1 Sampling strategies for the quantitative phase of the study

A critical case sampling strategy was chosen for the quantitative phase. Christensen and Johnson (1941:237) describe critical case sampling as a strategy to be used when the researcher wants to select cases that she believes to be particularly important cases. Teddlie and Yu (2007:84) state: *"The dichotomy between probability and purposive becomes a continuum when MM sampling is added as a third type of sampling strategy technique."* Collins *et al* (2007) recognise the use of critical case sampling as a type of mixed methods sampling that falls under the general rubric of purposive sampling. Collins *et al* (2007:278) also explain and showcase what they label a "Design 4" mixed method research design that uses multilevel samples for the quantitative and qualitative components of the study. Such a strategy is also showcased in the study by Schrum, Skeele and Grant (2002-2003) in which they used a case study approach to evaluate the integration of technology in a college curriculum. For the quantitative component Schrum *et al* (2002-2003) used purposive sampling to select faculty and students to complete questionnaires. In the qualitative component, they again used purposive samples to select faculty members, technology project directors, and university administrators to participate in focus group discussions.

The researcher asked the MA students who met the inclusion criteria to participate in the study. This was done to include individuals conforming to specific inclusion criteria and that possess rich data on the phenomenon of student support. Instead of using all the MA students ever enrolled, the researcher thus chose to recruit volunteer respondents from the universe of 34 MA students registered for the 2008 academic year and entering the second year of their enrolment for the degree. During a contact session

designed for these students, the researcher was given a slot to inform the students about the study.

From the data at her disposal, the researcher was able to design a table consisting of student numbers, surnames and initials, email addresses and telephone numbers. An invitation letter and an informed consent form were posted or emailed to all 34 students, the planned sample for the proposal number. The eventually realised sample size was 14 completed questionnaires returned by 14 students and 13 completed questionnaires that were usable. This represents a 41% sample realisation. The researcher opted for emailed questionnaires instead of postal questionnaires because De Vaus (2002:130) warns that mailed surveys offer slow and poor returns because of the costs involved and time needed for the respondents to complete the questionnaires.

The researcher strived to enlarge her usable sample size by sending out three reminders to potential student respondents. However, as none of these efforts were successful, the 14 cases were analysed **of which only 13 questionnaires were usable**. At this stage it should be pointed out that small sample studies are common in investigations of postgraduate student matters; for example, Agee and Smith (2011) use data gathered from 15 students in their analysis of doctoral students' use of online discussions and Crossouard (2008) includes data from only 11 doctoral students in her study of the role of online peer discussions in students' identity constructions at the doctoral level.

3.3.2 Sampling strategies for the qualitative phase of the study

Sandelowski (1995:179) states that an efficient sample size in a qualitative study is dependent on the amount, depth and richness of the data the researcher wants to gather. Following the intensity sampling strategy as described by Collins *et al* (2006:84), the researcher purposely recruited the chair of the department (COD), the master's and doctoral (M & D) coordinator, the programme convener and one support member working closely with the researcher in offering student support to MA students as research participants

in the qualitative phase of the study. They were deliberately chosen for this study because they were fully involved in the MA degree. To further clarify the reasons for including these individuals, their roles and functions are described below.

The COD oversees the strategic management of the degree and interacts directly with the M & D coordinator and the programme convener. The COD thus is knowledgeable about the implementation and development of the MA degree. In addition, the COD is the line manager for staff that acts as supervisors and lecturers in the degree. The M & D Coordinator, the Programme Convener and student support staff member are well placed to provide insights on the characteristics, use of support, strengths and limitations related to support services rendered to students. These participants' vast teaching experience in respect of postgraduate students means that they are data-rich individuals able to express their experiences of student support.

3.4   INSTRUMENTATION

This section describes the development of the research instruments, in particular the development of the interview schedule for the key informant interviews and the development of the semi-structured, self-administered questionnaire for the quantitative survey.

3.4.1 Development of the questionnaire for the quantitative phase of the study

The questionnaire was developed based on the literature review. The researcher submitted the first draft of the questionnaire to the supervisor for comments. The comments were incorporated and resulted in a final questionnaire. The questionnaire was revised twice before it was finally approved by the supervisor. The researcher felt that the structured self-administered questionnaire was clear. The questionnaire was written in English because this is the language of teaching in the MA programme.

An informed consent form was also developed and attached to the questionnaires. The consent form indicated the purpose of this study and observed the following ethical principles:

- The respondents' participation was voluntary and each respondent had the right to withdraw at any point, for any reason, and without prejudice
- Only the researcher had access to the raw data and actual names would not appear on the questionnaire

The questionnaire included closed and open-ended questions. The open-ended items were meant to allow the respondents to provide more details on the problems faced and to make suggestions for improving the provision of student support services.

The questionnaire consisted of five sections, biographical characteristics, knowledge questions, attitudes, needs for student support and strengths and weaknesses that relate to the study's objectives. The questions were based on substantial experience and theoretical knowledge of student support in the degree programme by the researcher.

In particular, the following matters were covered in the questionnaires:

SECTION 1: **Biographical data of the students**: The researcher wanted to establish the background characteristics of the respondents in terms of gender, age, marital status, race, home language, and employment status, place of origin and country of birth and information that might be of relevance in this study.

SECTION 2: **Respondents' knowledge questions**: In this section the researcher sought to obtain the respondents' knowledge of the degree programme in Social and Behaviour Studies in HIV/AIDS and the reasons that prompted them to apply for this degree. The researcher also asked questions pertaining to the respondents' knowledge of HIV and AIDS.

Questions about the reasons why the students enrol for this degree programme is pivotal to the assessment of student support. This is because there could potentially be a mismatch between students' perceptions of what the degree entails and their actual experiences. For example, some applicants might think that a coursework degree is 'easier' and offers greater support than the dissertation-only degree or that it is a counselling course or professional degree and therefore less demanding in terms of academic requirements for the dissertation complement. Similarly the staff holds certain expectations for the reasons why students enrol for the degree that may influence the way they regard student support and how much and what kinds of support need to be provided. It is the mismatch between expectations of the degree and the actual requirements of it that causes the greatest needs for student support. If self-directed and intrinsically motivated students are the expected norm, but many students lack these traits, staff who expect that the students who enroll for this MA will have such traits because they are 'joining the fight against HIV/AIDS' would similarly become frustrated and this would affect student support. It can be argued that staff members' and students' expectations of independent study at the MA level can, upon investigation, show a mismatch between (a) student expectations and the realities of university study and (b) staff members' and students' expectations. This mismatch is crucially important in student attrition and drop-out (see Allan & Dory 2001; De Valero 2001; Collins & Millard 2012; Gardner 2008; Golde & Dore 2001; Kolb & Kolb 2005; Lovitts 2001; Portnoi 2009; Venter & Van Heerden 2001).

Questions testing respondents' knowledge about HIV and AIDS were included in the quantitative phase for the students as well as in the qualitative interview schedule with the staff. Although these questions have at face value little relevance for student support, they do have relevance for student support in the USBAH unit. The reason is that the degree requires students to have rudimentary yet up-to-date knowledge of HIV and AIDS when they enter the degree. None of the formal coursework modules teaches the basic facts about HIV and AIDS and thus students are warned in tutorial letters and at the contact sessions (which are arranged by the student support staff) that they

should familiarise themselves of these basic facts. However, there is no way to actually enforce this requirement and the idea was that the student support staff would be asked to 'fill the gap' should students indicate that they lack the basic facts about HIV and AIDS. The same questions were then asked of the staff in order to see whether needs existed in that area.

SECTION 3: **Respondents' attitude questions**: The researcher wanted to obtain information of the respondents' attitudes towards student support; whether the support offered was sufficient; perceptions of resources available to student support; the quality and quantity of student support and the level of satisfaction with student support.

SECTION 4: **Respondents' needs for student support**: In this section, the researcher sought to gain a better understanding of respondents' strengths, limitations and weaknesses as MA students in the programme, and also to obtain respondents' knowledge of the main function of student support and respondents' use of student support.

SECTION 5: **Strengths and weaknesses of student support**: The researcher wanted to find out whether students regard the use of support as essential in order to pass. The researcher also wanted to gauge the types of support required and perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the student support offered. Finally, the questionnaire elicited suggestions about improvements in support.

3.4.2 Development of the interview schedule for the key informant interviews

Typically, an interview schedule contains a detailed set of questions and probes (Maykut & Morehouse 1994:83) to be used in a less-structured qualitative interview. The researcher developed an interview schedule to guide her interviews based on the review of literature and a careful consideration of the objectives of the study. In this regard, the interview schedule comprised background characteristics of the research participants

and questions related to knowledge, attitudes and awareness; use of support, and perceived strengths and limitations of support services rendered. The interview schedule was written in English as all of the key informants had a high level of education.

3.5   DATA GENERATION STRATEGIES

Since a sequential transformative research design was used, (Creswell, Plano, Clark, Gutmann & Hanson 2003:178), the researcher followed two different data-generation strategies. Each of these is discussed in greater detail below.

3.5.1   Context and process of data gathering for the quantitative survey

The questionnaires were emailed at the beginning of April 2008. Rubin and Babbie (2010:117) point out that the main advantage of using email is that it is quick and inexpensive. The respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire either online or as a word-processed document and to email it to the researcher.

As the study proceeded, the researcher monitored the arrival of the post from MA students. The researcher re-sent questionnaires to students with another appeal to submit. It is a known disadvantage of postal questionnaires that it might result in a low response rate (Adams & Brace 2006:35). Each completed questionnaire and signed informed consent form received was put in a file for safekeeping. Completed questionnaires were returned by only 14 of the 34 students, resulting in a 41% response rate.

The researcher notified potential respondents telephonically that the questionnaires would be sent to their email addresses. Even after a third appeal to submit, the researcher did not receive any further completed questionnaires.

3.5.2 The face-to-face interviews

The face-to-face interviews were approached as structured conversations based on a prearranged set of questions (Babbie 2001:249). The interview sessions took place in the Department of Sociology's seminar room in July 2008.

Prior to data collection, the researcher reflected on her ascribed characteristics and the manner in which they differed from those of her interviewees. As a postgraduate academic assistant who reported directly to the interviewees, the researcher was aware of the asymmetry in the status between her and her interviewees. In this regard House and Howe (1999:36) state that the transformative paradigm regards social arrangements as interest-, value- and power-laden. However, tensions were overcome by the researcher informing her interviewees of the goals of her study in advance, in creating a professional atmosphere and by holding mock interviews with a fellow postgraduate academic assistant beforehand to test and improve her interview skills.

The face-to-face interviews were conducted on a dyadic basis – that is – using one interviewer and one participant (Freeman 2010:37). Interviews were scheduled over several days and per appointment to suit the schedules of the interviewees. All interviews were tape-recorded and notes were taken as back-up.

The researcher commenced each interview by greeting her interviewees and thanking them for taking part in the study. Each interview took about an hour. All interviews were conducted in English, but interviewees were also allowed to express themselves in their home languages as the researcher is able to understand Tswana, South Sotho, isiZulu, Afrikaans and isiXhosa.

3.6 ACCESS NEGOTIATION AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The researcher did not encounter any difficulties with accessing her units of observation (which were the thirty-four students for the quantitative phase and the four staff members for the qualitative phase) as she had a known and familiar role as a postgraduate academic assistant employed as a fixed-term employee in the Department of Sociology's Unit for Social and Behaviour Studies.

In considering the ethical implications of her study, the researcher tried to remain true to the notion of transformative inquiry as a critical examination of underlying belief systems with the purpose of furthering human rights and social justice (Mertens 2003:135). In particular, provision of tangible support to students was regarded by the researcher as an undeniable human right and the exercise of those rights as being in the interest of social justice. The axiological assumption (that is, the study of the nature of ethical and moral behaviour of the transformative paradigm is that advancing social justice forms the basis for the ethical execution of a research study (Mertens 2003). Whereas the study's contribution to social justice and transformation is considered in the last chapter of this dissertation, the main procedural considerations that guided the data-generation and data-analysis steps followed in this study are discussed below.

3.6.1 Informed consent

The researcher provided accurate information to her respondents (quantitative phase) and research participants (qualitative phase) regarding the purpose of the study and what participation entailed.

3.6.2 Voluntary participation

The respondents and research participants were made aware that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any

stage of the study, for any reason and without any prejudice. No incentives were offered for participation.

3.6.3 Confidentiality

In the qualitative phase, interviews were conducted in a private room. As far as the quantitative phase was concerned, all completed questionnaires were treated as highly confidential material. The researcher was the only person who had access to the raw data (that is the tape-recorded interviews, the transcriptions, signed informed consent forms and completed questionnaires). Complete anonymity could not be offered to the respondents and research participants in this study, as the respondents were identified as the MA-students who were in the second year of their enrolment for their degrees in 2008. Moreover, the four key informants for the face-to-face interviews were known office bearers in the department and their statements could be linked to their positions. However, these individuals were aware of this fact and consented to having their verbatim responses included in the study. The possibility of bias because of this has to be taken into account in the interpretation of the findings.

The completed questionnaires and informed consent were kept in a safe and secured place at the researcher's place of work. They were kept in a file sorted according to the arrival dates and no one had access to the raw data except the researcher. The researcher planned to dispose of the raw data five years after the degree has been conferred.

3.7 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE DATA-GATHERING FOR THE QUALITATIVE PART OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Holloway (1997:160) states that "*trustworthiness is the truth value and authenticity of research*". During the face-to-face interviews with key informants, the researcher strove to uncover thick descriptions through probing, taking down observational notes on the research participants' reactions and by tape-recording the interviews. Great care was taken to allow

the research participants to express themselves freely. The transcriptions of the data collected from the key informants by means of tape recording were submitted to the supervisor for verification.

Mertens (2003:141) states that the transformative paradigm regards objectivity as providing a balanced view by bias reduction because of deliberate and adequate representation of diverse groups. Mertens (2003:141) further emphasises

> the importance of an interactive link between the researcher and the participants, with sensitivity given to the impact of social and historical factors in the relationship between the researcher and the participants as well as the impact of those variables on the construction of knowledge.

Following such guidelines, the researcher tested perceptions of support offered to students from the vantage points of the students and the staff. In this matter, the researcher was interactively linked to the research participants in her role as a support staff member. Moreover, because the researcher had been involved in the degree programme right from its inception, she was intimately familiar with the social and historical factors that shaped the programme and the production of knowledge in that programme.

3.8 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY OF THE QUANTITATIVE PART OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Consistency was assured by designing a questionnaire that could be completed by the students independently from the researcher but the same question items were posed to all respondents. Respondents that were credible units of analysis were selected as they possessed the knowledge as recipients of support.

3.9   DATA ANALYSIS

In a mixed methods research design, data integration becomes central to data analysis (Creswell *et al* 2007:187). The researcher took the stated objectives of the study as clues for the data analysis strategies.

3.9.1   Data analysis strategies for the quantitative phase

The completed questionnaires were checked by the researcher. A coding list was developed for the open-ended questions, the completed questionnaires were coded, and the codes captured by the end of September 2009.   All completed questionnaires were coded and entered in the Statistical Programme for Social Scientists (SPSS 18) data analysis system and tabulated by the researcher for report writing.

3.9.2   Data analysis strategies for the qualitative phase

The researcher personally transcribed each of the qualitative interviews verbatim. She then checked the transcriptions by listening to the tape recordings again. The back-up notes and observational notes made by the researcher were also added to the transcribed interviews. The researcher coded and analysed the narrations.

3.10   THE INFERENCE PROCESS: **SYNTHESISING THE DATA**

The research is guided by a theoretical perspective as discussed in chapter 2 to synthesise the data.

3.11   SUMMARY

In this chapter the researcher described the research methodology used in the study. The reasons for taking certain decisions were given, followed by the description of the instruments and techniques for data gathering and the

strategy for data analysis. The researcher compiled the requirements for correct ethical procedures. In the next chapter the researcher presents and discusses the findings of the study.

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

4.1   INTRODUCTION

In this chapter the researcher presents and discusses the findings from the data generated. A mixed methods research design was used, inspired by the empowerment-based theoretical underpinnings of the study. For the quantitative phase of the study, data were generated via semi-structured questionnaires distributed to respondents.

The findings for the first phase are discussed in the following sequence. First, the biographical characteristics of the fourteen respondents are described in terms of gender, age, marital status, race, language, employment status, type of work, job title, country of birth, country and town where the respondents are currently residing and, finally, whether the respondent resides in an urban or rural area. Second, responses to knowledge questions are given. These include, among other things, how respondents first learnt about the programme; whether the respondents thought that UNISA was the only university that offered this programme; the main reason for the respondents applying for the degree; perceptions of the difference between HIV and AIDS; whether respondents participated in HIV/AIDS programmes/projects and type of participation; knowledge of how HIV is transmitted and the perceptions of the main driver of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Third, the respondents' attitudes towards student support; their perceptions of aspects of student support and their rating of student support are given.

The fourth section discusses the respondents' perceived needs for student support, for example, perceptions of their own strengths as MA students; perceptions of their own weaknesses as MA students; views on what the functions of student support should be; how often respondents make use of student support and examples of recent support asked for, and their views on the main duties of student support in the unit. The fifth and final section in the

presentation of the results from the quantitative phase is a discussion of the respondents' views on the strengths and weaknesses of the student support offered by the unit. Respondents' views on whether student support is essential to succeed in the degree; reasons for such views; their perceptions of other types of support that are required and a SWOT analysis are given in this section.

4.2   BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESPONDENTS

The first section of the questionnaire aimed at obtaining information on the biographical characteristics of the respondents. In this section, findings on gender, age groups, marital status, race, home language, current employment status, career choices, country of birth, country of residence and type of area in which the respondents reside are presented.

4.2.1   Gender

Figure 4.1 (below) shows that for this particular group, there were more female (eight or 61,5%) than male (five or 38,5%) respondents. This corresponds with the gender breakdown of the enrolled students for this degree programme. However, the researcher has observed that the sex ratios change from intake to intake. Thus one cannot deduce that the degree is favoured by either female or male students. In the academic year of 2008, 34 students were in the second year of enrolment in the MA Social Behaviour Studies in HIV/AIDS. The actual gender breakdown of the group was 14 males and 20 females.

However, perceptions of support may be influenced by gender; for example, Anderson and Haddad (2005) in their study of learning in an online environment find that female students tend to develop greater social interdependence than their male counterparts. Thus it may be that female students hold a different view on asking for and receiving support than male students.

Figure 4.1 Respondents disaggregated by gender (N=13)

Male 38%

Female 62%
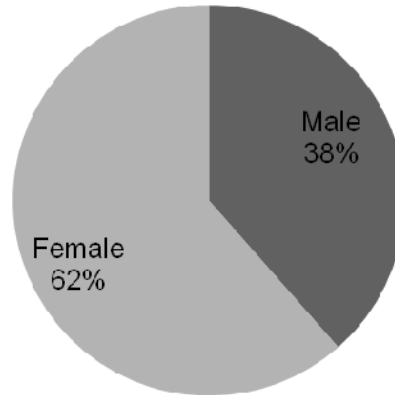
4.2.2 Age groups

Table 4.1 (below) shows that in terms of age group, the respondents ranged in age from 31 to 59 years. This is to be expected as master's level students at an ODL institution usually are individuals in the higher, mature age groups. As indicated in Table 4.1, the mean age of the group was 43,1 years.

Table 4.1 Age groups of the respondents		
	Frequency	**%**
30-39 years	3	23,1
40-49 years	7	53,8
50-59 years	3	23,1
Total	13	100,0
Mean age		43,1 years

4.2.3 Marital status

Figure 4.2 (below) shows that more than two thirds of the respondents (nine or 69%) were married, whereas two respondents were single, one was divorced and one was a widower. Most of the respondents thus had responsibilities towards a spouse and/or children that placed additional demands on their time.

Figure 4.2 Respondents diaggregated by marital status (N=13)
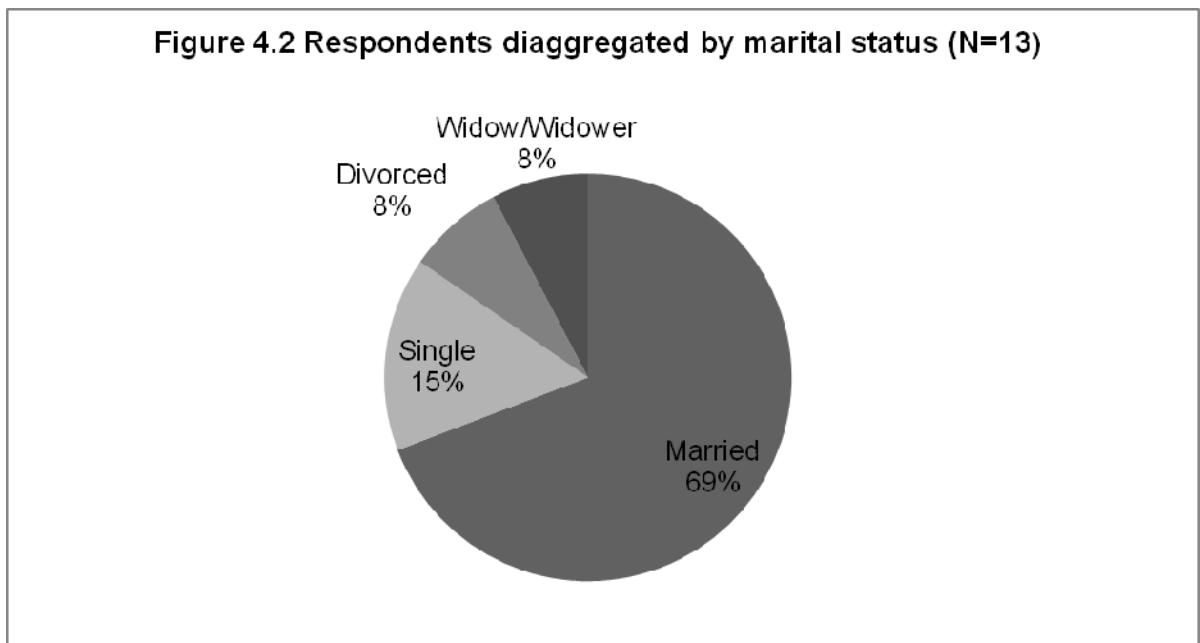
4.2.4 Race

Figure 4.3 (below) shows that the majority (eleven or 84,6%) of the student respondents were black and that only one was coloured and one was Asian. There were no white students in this group.

Figure 4.3 Respondents disaggregated by race (N=13)

Coloured
8%

Asian
8%

Black
84%
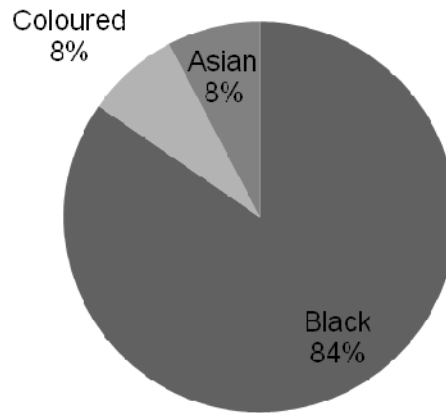
4.2.5 Home language

English, Zulu and Sesotho were the languages most frequently spoken at respondents' homes as shown in Figure 4.4 (below). English is the only language medium used for tuition in this programme.

The diverse languages spoken by the respondents and by the support staff is an important strength in a university that strives to build knowledge on the African continent. Moreover, students are encouraged to conduct their research in vernacular languages (for example, when interviewing respondents) to encourage contextual data-gathering about HIV and AIDS on the African continent. However, for the purposes of dissertation writing, translating into and the use of academic English are required. This required socialisation into the oral and written practices of the academic dissertation as a discourse community (see Duff 2010) presents an additional layer of methodological and skills-related competencies with which these students have to cope. As will be demonstrated further on in this first section of this

chapter, concerns about academic writing emerged as pertinent issues in the respondents' views on support needs.

Figure 4.4 Respondents disaggregated by home language (N=13)
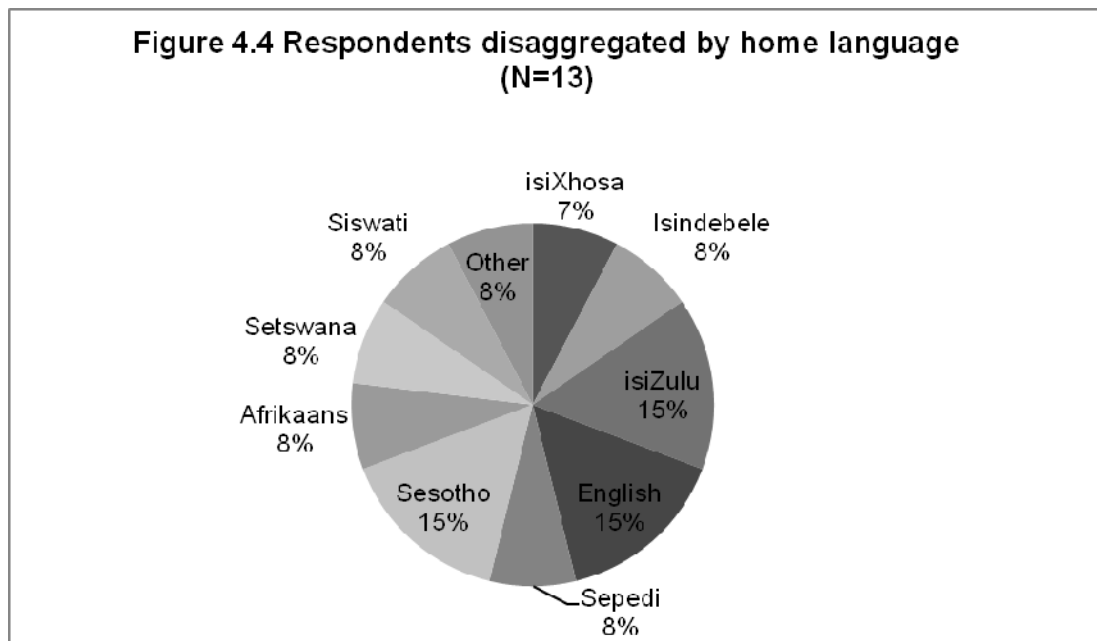
4.2.6 Current employment status

Eleven respondents were employed at the time of the data-gathering and two were unemployed. Figure 4.5 (below) indicates that 62% of the respondents were employed in either the public sector or at a non-governmental organisation (NGO). Only two were employed in the private sector and one was self-employed. The employment status and sector of the students tend to influence their selection of topics for the dissertation component of their studies, as the research orientation followed in the programme favours problem-related or problem-solving empirical research.

Figure 4.5 Respondents disaggregated by current employment status (N=13)

Self-employed 8%
Unemployed 15%
NGO 31%
Public Sector 31%
Private Sector 15%
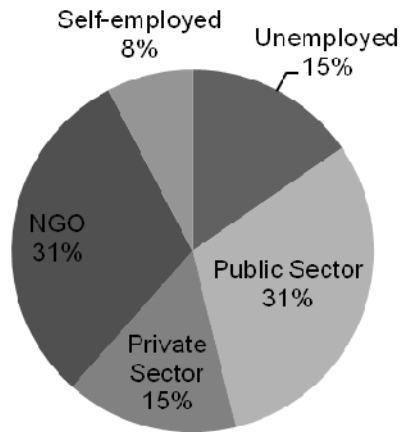
4.2.7 Career choices

The majority of the respondents were working students and according to Figure 4.6 (below), many (37%) were managers or educators (18%).

Figure 4.6 Employed respondents disaggregated by their career choices (N=11)

Researcher 9%
Pastor 9%
Counsellor 9%
Regional Programmer 9%
Educator 18%
Play Therapist 9%
Manager 37%
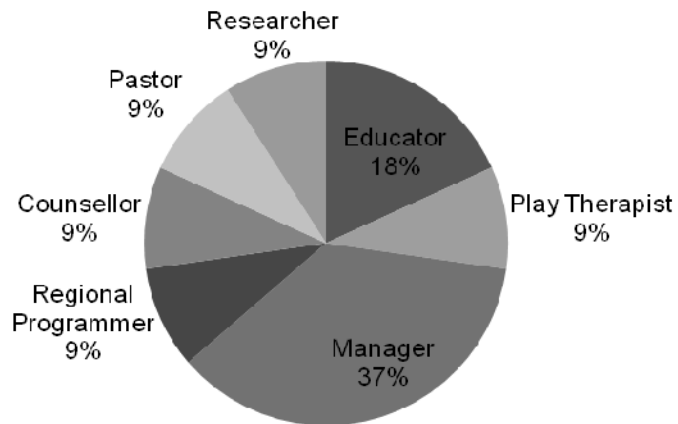
4.2.8 Country of birth

As shown in Figure 4.7 (below), most (10) of the respondents were born in South Africa. One was born in the DRC, one was from Zimbabwe and one from Indonesia.

Figure 4.7 Respondents disaggregated by their country of birth (N=13)
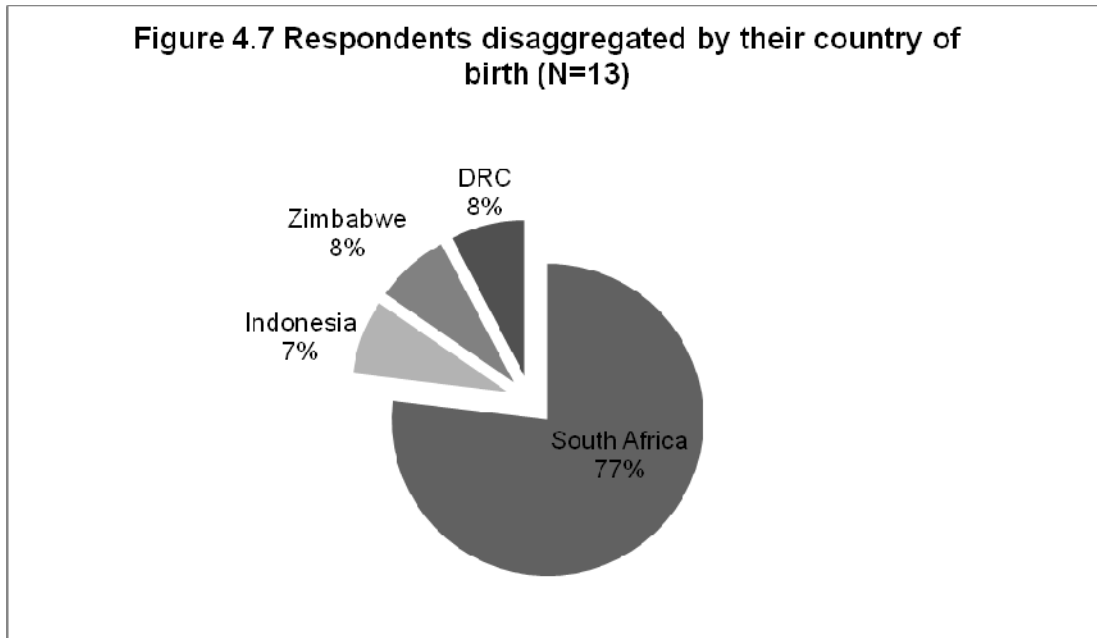
4.2.9 Current country of residence

In comparing the country of birth with the country of residence for the thirteen respondents, it seems that only one foreign-born student; namely, the one from the DRC resided in South Africa. This breakdown is shown in Figure 4.8 (below).

Figure 4.8 Respondents disaggregated by their current country of residence (N=13)
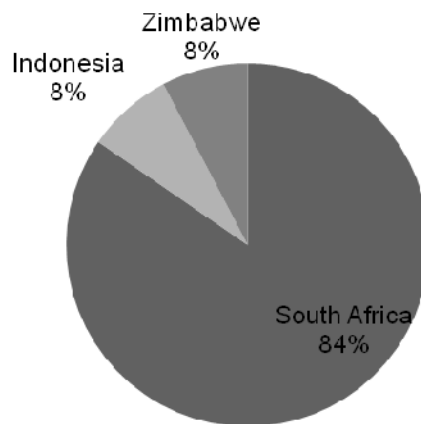
4.2.10 Type of area in which respondents resided

Although it has already been established that the majority (eleven) of the respondents resided in South Africa, not all of them lived in urban areas. Figure 4.9 (below) shows that at the time of data-gathering, most of the respondents resided in an urban area (ten or 77%) as compared to the three (or 23%) that resided in rural areas. Although the actual residential towns or cities for the thirteen respondents are not shown here for reasons of confidentiality, only four were in the greater Gauteng region. Thus, the students were not near the main campus of UNISA and relied on access through personal visits, email and telephone conversations.

Figure 4.9 Respondents disaggregated by the type of area in which they reside (N=13)

Rural
23%

Urban
77%
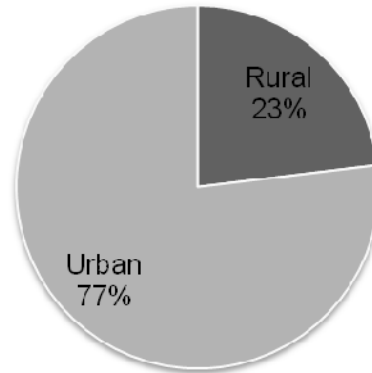
4.3 RESPONDENTS' KNOWLEDGE OF THE PROGRAMME, REASONS FOR APPLYING, KNOWLEDGE OF HIV AND AIDS AND EXPOSURE TO HIV AND AIDS PROGRAMMES

This section discusses data related to the respondents' knowledge. In the questionnaire, the researcher aimed to assess the manner in which the students found out about the programme; whether they thought that UNISA was the only university that offers this programme; the main reason for the respondents applying for the degree; their perceptions of the difference between HIV and AIDS; whether they participated in HIV/AIDS programmes/projects and the type of participation; knowledge of the ways in which HIV is transmitted and the perceptions of the main driver of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

4.3.1 The manner in which respondents first learnt about the programme

Some recruitment of students was done via the university's marketing structures, but the MA degree attracted large numbers of students from its

inception. Figure 4.10 (below) shows that ten (77%) learnt about the degree programme from a UNISA brochure; one (7%) became aware of it through discussions with friends and two respondents indicated that they read about the programme in the printed media. It thus seems that word-of-mouth advertising for the programme only occurred in one case and that passive advertorial via brochures and the printed media led to the recruitment of students for most of the thirteen cases.

Figure 4.10 Respondents' first knowledge of the programme (N=13)
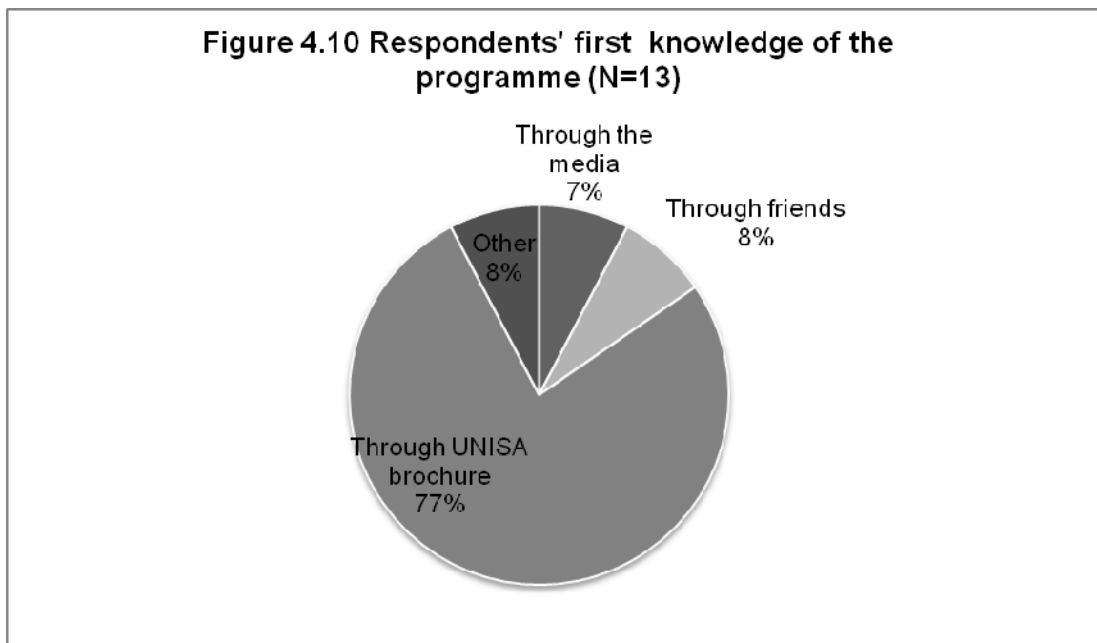
In addition, all of the respondents indicated that they used the UNISA calendar extensively as a source of information when preparing their applications. It thus seems that the documentation prepared by UNISA in-house to inform prospective students of its offerings and to assist those who wish to apply are indispensable. At the same time, however, while printed media such as brochures and the calendar are useful for informing students about the course requirements, admission rules and regulations, they cannot address all the support needs that postgraduate students who do not all have easy access to the campus, might need.

4.3.2 The respondents' thoughts on whether UNISA is the only university that offers this programme

Table 4.2 (below) shows that only three of the respondents were under the impression that a degree programme of this nature was offered by UNISA only, whereas six (46%) of the respondents did not know and four (30,8%) of the respondents indicated that they knew that other institutions besides UNISA offered a similar programme

Table 4.2 Respondents' views on whether UNISA is the only university that offers this programme		
	Frequency	**%**
Yes	3	23,1
No	4	30,8
Don't know	6	46,2
Total	13	100.0

4.3.3 Main reason for the respondents' applying for the degree

Respondents were asked to indicate their main reason for choosing to enrol for the degree. As shown in Table 4.3 (below), career considerations featured strongly in the respondents' decision to enrol (for example, three quoted career reasons, two wanted to specialise in behaviour change and one wanted to further his or her skills in monitoring and evaluation). Three respondents regarded HIV and AIDS as special areas of interest, and two quoted altruistic reasons such as supporting their church or contributing to solutions for the problems created by HIV and AIDS. Only one student was unable to provide a reason for enrolling for this degree.

The prominence of instrumental motivations behind enrolment; namely, for career-related reasons, is to be expected for mature students who are able to select from a wide number of master's level offerings at UNISA. However,

these were not the main reason for at least six of the respondents. It is the researcher's contention that insight into the motivation behind the enrolments is useful for both the students and their supervisors as this could suggest a trajectory of expectations related to the achievement of outcomes and goals in the study.

Table 4.3 Main reasons for the respondents applying for the degree		
	Frequency	%
This degree is a stepping stone in my career/ To obtain a promotion/career progression/career consolidation	3	23,1
This is my pet subject	3	23,1
I wanted to specialise in behaviour change	2	15,4
No reason given	1	7,7
I wished to gain expertise in HIV/AIDS	1	7,7
I wanted to support my church	1	7,7
I wanted to contribute to solutions for problems created by HIV/AIDS	1	7,7
Because of my interest in monitoring and evaluation	1	7,7
Total	13	100,0

4.3.4 Knowledge and perceptions of HIV and AIDS

The questionnaire included an item measuring the students' perceptions of the difference between HIV and AIDS as the researcher wished to know the degree of knowledge on these issues possessed by the students when they first enter the degree. As shown in Table 4.4 (below), all of the thirteen respondents were able to give acceptable responses by indicating that HIV is a virus, whereas AIDS is an illness syndrome and that HIV-infection leads to the more serious stage of the disease which is full-blown AIDS. The researcher can thus conclude that all of the respondents were knowledgeable about the difference between HIV and AIDS. This is not to assume that some students' knowledge of various aspects relating to HIV and AIDS could not still be improved or that choosing to enrol for the MA-degree is not a self-selection

process – in other words, persons with extreme denialist notions of the link between HIV and AIDS may not have chosen to enrol for this degree programme.

Table 4.4 Perceptions of the difference between HIV and AIDS		
	Frequency	**%**
One is a virus; the other a syndrome	3	23,1
HIV is the cause of AIDS	9	69,2
AIDS is more serious than HIV	1	7,7
Total	13	100,0

The respondents were also asked to answer "yes", "no", or "don't know" to various statements on how HIV is transmitted. As shown in Figure 4.11 (below), all of the respondents knew that HIV is transmitted via unprotected sex with an infected partner and from an infected mother to her child (either before or during birth or whilst breastfeeding). The other statement that received a high proportion of affirmative answers was unsafe blood transfusions, indicated by ten (76,9%) of the respondents as a transmission route for HIV-infection. Statements with alarmingly large "do not know" responses were transmission via mosquito bites (nine or 69,2% did not know), via touching someone who is infected (nine or 69,2%) and via sharing eating utensils with an HIV-infected person (nine or 69,2%). The researcher thus concludes that the knowledge of the thirteen respondents was inadequate and surprisingly so for persons with their level of exposure to HIV and AIDS programmes. Although on paper the coordinator of the degree recommends that students should participate in HIV and AIDS activities in their communities and workplaces, this cannot be enforced.

Figure 4.11 Knowledge of the ways in which HIV is transmitted (N=13)
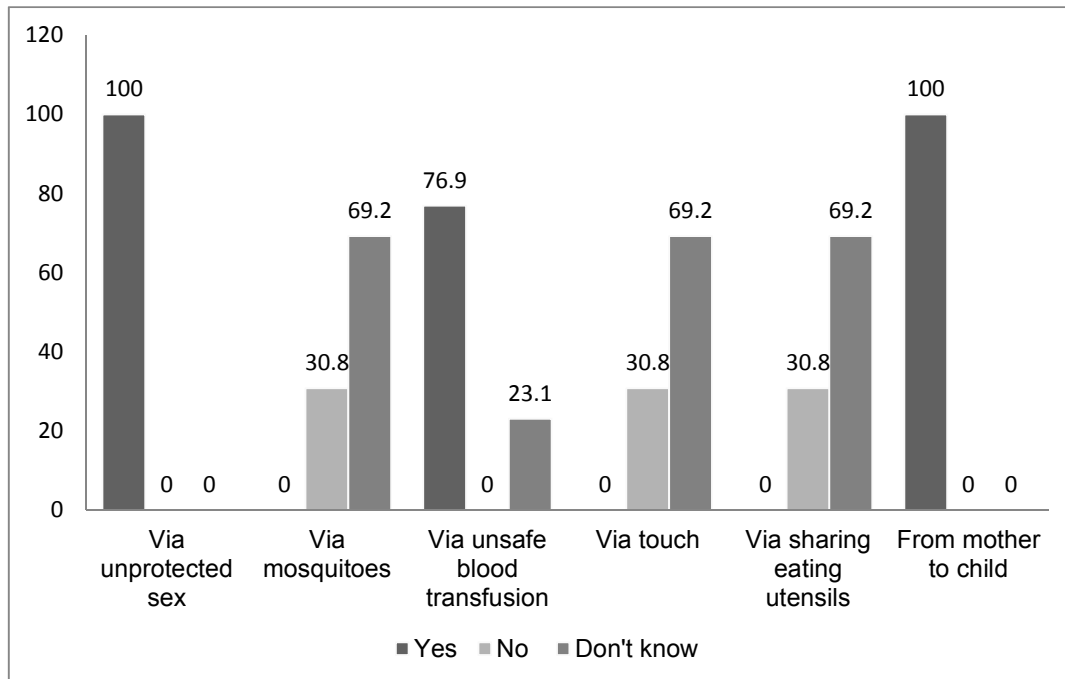
Students were also asked to indicate what they regarded as the main drivers of the HIV and AIDS epidemic. As shown in Figure 4.12 (below), the majority of the thirteen respondents named socio-economic concerns as the major drivers of the HIV and AIDS epidemic (eight or 62% said that poverty coupled with gender inequality and ignorance about the disease and a further one or 7% indicated socio-economic factors). Thus whereas nine of the thirteen respondents identified macro-level factors, four respondents regarded proximate, behavioural level variables such as non-use of condoms, needle-sharing, multiple partners and stigma as the main drivers of the epidemic. The group thus represented researchers with different vantage points on where the problems and solutions for HIV and AIDS could be sought.

Figure 4.12 Views on the main drivers of the HIV/AIDS epidemic (N=13)

- Multiple sexual partners 8%
- Socio-economic factors 7%
- Lack of knowledge, lack of condom use and sharing needles 8%
- Stigma 8%
- Not using condoms 8%
- Poverty, gender inequality and ignorance 62%
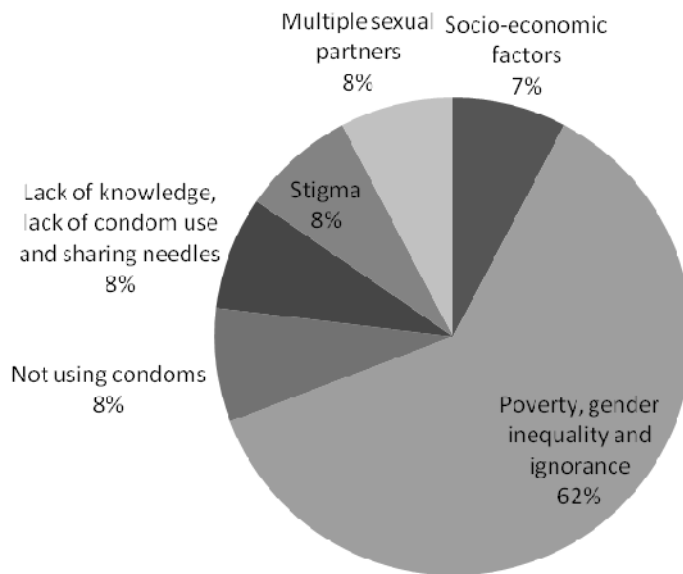
4.3.5 Exposure to HIV/AIDS programme/projects

Beyond a rudimentary knowledge of the difference between HIV and AIDS, the researcher needed to establish whether the students actively participated in HIV and AIDS programmes. Exposure to such activities (either in the workplace or as a volunteer in church-based or community-based initiatives) is encouraged for students applying for the degree, but is not a prerequisite. As shown in Table 4.5 (below), only two of the respondents did not participate in any HIV/AIDS-related programmes or projects at the time of data-gathering. Among the eleven respondents who indicated that they did participate, four were peer counsellors; two developed VCT guidelines for their workplaces; two assisted NGOs with grant applications; one was involved in a safe-house project for children and one implemented an HIV/AIDS workplace programme. It can thus be deduced that most of the respondents enjoyed a relatively high level of engagement with planned HIV and AIDS activities.

Table 4.5 Respondents' participation in HIV/AIDS programmes/projects and type of participation		
Do you participate?	**Frequency**	**%**
Yes	11	84,6
No	2	15,4
Total	13	100,0
Type of participation (N=11)		
Peer counsellor	4	36,3
Developing VCT guidelines	2	18,2
Working with grants to NGOs	2	18,2
Safe house project for children	1	9,1
Workshop facilitator	1	9,1
Programme implementer	1	9,1
Total	11	100,0

4.4   RESPONDENTS' EXPERIENCES AND VIEWS ON STUDENT SUPPORT

In this section the data on the respondents' experiences and views on student support offered to second-year MA students by the Department of Sociology's Unit for Social Behaviour Studies in HIV and AIDS is discussed. Figure 4.13 shows results for attitude scales that measure reactions to various statements about student support and participation in the degree programme. In terms of the statement that being part of the degree programme is enjoyable, twelve respondents returned positive statements with seven (53,8%) strongly agreeing with the statement and five (38,5%) agreeing. Only one student disagreed with the statement that he or she enjoyed being part of the programme.

In reaction to the statement that sufficient support is provided, eleven of the thirteen respondents marked the "strongly agree" (two or 15,4%) and "agree"

(nine or 69,2%) answer options. Only two students disagreed with the statement and felt that the support was insufficient.

The statement that the unit lacked resources was supported by nine respondents (three or 23% strongly agreed and six or 46,2% agreed). Only one student strongly disagreed with this and three (or 23.1%) indicated that they did not know whether the unit lacked resources.

In reaction to the statement that the unit deploys its support equitably to all students, five respondents agreed (one agreed strongly and four or 30,8% agreed). Two students disagreed with this statement; two strongly disagreed and four (or 30,8%) could not give an answer to this statement. It is disconcerting that four respondents (30.8%) felt that the support was not provided in an even-handed fashion.

The statement about personal rating of satisfaction with the support rendered proportionally favourable responses with two (15,4%) strongly agreeing and nine (69,2%) agreeing that they were satisfied. Only two students disagreed.

The statement about staff reluctance to assist students yielded two strongly agree and one agree responses with the majority of the respondents disagreeing (five or 38,5%) or strongly disagreeing (again five or 38,5%) with the statement.

Figure 4.13 Perceptions of aspects of student support (N=13)
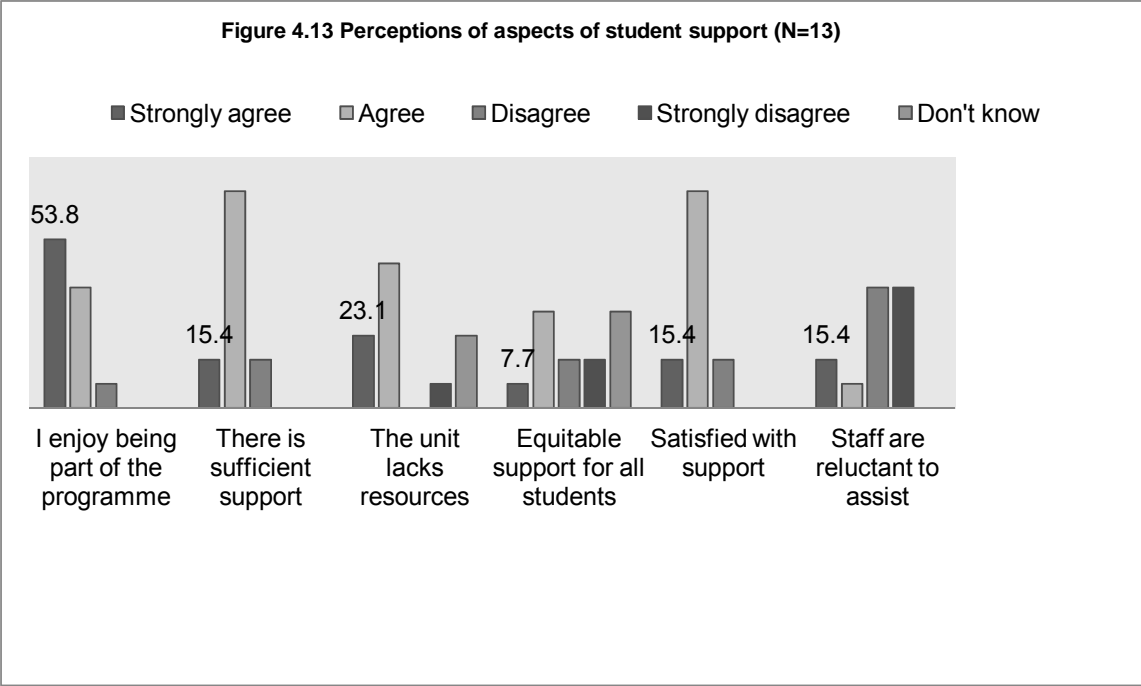
It thus seems that the thirteen students were mostly happy with the support they received, although some concern was noted regarding the resources of the unit and the equitable service rendered to all students.

In response to the request to rate the student support, (see Figure 4.14 below), nine respondents gave positive ratings with one (7,7%) rating the support as excellent and eight (61,5%) rating the support as good. Three students (23,1%) rated the support as adequate and only one (7.7%) rated the support as poor.

Figure 4.14 Rating of student support (N=13)

Excellent 8%
Poor 8%
Adequate 23%
Good 62%
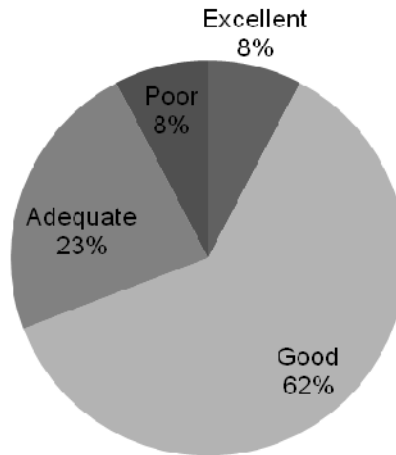
4.5 RESPONDENTS' PERCEIVED NEEDS IN TERMS OF STUDENT SUPPORT

In this section the researcher discusses the respondents' expressed needs for student support; their views on their own strengths and weaknesses as MA students; their views on the ideal functions of student support; the frequency with which students make use of support and examples of recent support asked for.

4.5.1 Perceptions of own strengths and weaknesses as MA students

As shown in Table 4.6 (below), three (23,1%) students named literature review skills three (23,1%) skills in the coursework section of the degree and three (23,1%) solid commitment to their studies as their major strengths. Other strengths mentioned were argumentative skills, sufficient time for study, sound understanding of assignments, and patience. It thus seems that many of the students who opt for this MA degree programme may anticipate that they w require skills in reviewing literature and in answering objectively stated assignment questions. These skills are usually developed at the BA Hons

level of study. This might imply that some students chose this degree programme instead of a full dissertation MA programme as they might have underestimated the level of independent research skills required to be successful. As independence in researching an autonomously defined research question gains prominence only after most students have completed the coursework part of the degree, the students' expectations of the degree, the skills required to be successful and of the support they are entitled to may have been unrealistic.

It is furthermore interesting to note that inherent characteristics such as patience and commitment were regarded as keys to success at the MA level. When linked to the usual operation of student support as experienced by the researcher, this becomes even more interesting as one of her key tasks over the years was to offer emotional support to those students who faltered in their commitment and were close to dropping out of the degree.

Table 4.6 Perceptions of own strengths as an MA student (N=13)		
	Frequency	**%**
I am strong in conducting a literature review	3	23,1
I do well in the coursework modules	3	23,1
My commitment is sound	3	23,1
I have good argumentative skills	1	7,7
I have sufficient spare time to study	1	7,7
In the coursework, I have a sound understanding of what the assignments require	1	7,7
I am very patient	1	7,7
Total	13	100,0

Table 4.7, which shows the results of the students' listing of their major weaknesses, reveals that five students (38,5%) expressed concerns about their abilities in academic English writing and three (23,1%) noted time management concerns. Among the other weaknesses mentioned, two related

to academic concerns (one noted a lack of skills concerning proposal writing; one noted problems in locating information that was relevant); one to lack of contact with other students and two related to personal-level flaws (one mentioned forgetfulness and one severe time constraints). The academic writing concerns were thus prominent. It is a matter of concern as it is a key skill for success at the postgraduate level. It is also possible that the students may assume that the skills they lack (writing, proposal writing, information seeking, time management and focus) can be developed over the course of the degree programme or with support from the unit.

Table 4.7 Perceptions of own weaknesses as an MA student (N=13)		
	Frequency	**%**
I have problems with English/academic writing	5	38,5
I tend not to adhere to due dates	3	23,1
I struggle with proposal writing	1	7,7
I have no contact with other students	1	7,7
I am forgetful	1	7,7
I have severe time constraints	1	7,7
I struggle with finding relevant information	1	7,7
Total	13	100,0

4.5.2 Respondents' views on the functions of ideal student support

One of the items in the questionnaire asked the respondents to list as many functions as possible which they regarded as part of student support. The results are shown in Table 4.8 (below). Seven respondents (53,9%) mentioned that student support should find sources and make sources available to students. This important function is supported by the UNISA library services. Personal librarians train students in the use of the library's vast electronic data bases and related resources. During the orientation week, students are offered training in these methods at the library. It is surprising to find that so many of the respondents regarded this as a function that should ideally be performed by student support. Moreover, access to sources is

directed by various copyright issues, which means that the individual user should access the material via the correct channels and that staff may not, for example, send electronic or other copies of articles, books or chapters to students.

Other functions mentioned are encouragement of students (two or 15,4%); provision of discussion forums (two or 15,4%); research support or proposal writing support (two or 15,4%); assistance in improving students' academic writing skills (one or 7,7%); logistical support (one or 7,7%); answering enquiries (one or 7,7%) and provision of guidelines on how to answer assignment questions (one or 7,7%). In terms of the functions of student support as experienced by the researcher, functions such as encouragement, discussion forums, logistical support and answering enquiries are routinely offered. However, tasks such as research support, academic writing support and support in the preparation of proposals fall outside the ambit of student support.

Table 4.8 Views on the functions of ideal student support (N=13)*		
	Frequency	%
Make sources available/help students find sources	7	53,9
Motivate/encourage students	2	15,4
Run discussion forums	2	15,4
Offer research support/to help them write proposals	2	15,4
Improve students' academic writing skills	1	7,7
Provide logistical support	1	7,7
Answer student enquiries	1	7,7
Provide guidelines on the correct way to answer assignment questions in the coursework part	1	7,7
Total number of respondents	13	*

* Percentages will not summate to 100% as respondents were asked to give more than one answer.

Figure 4.15 Views on the main duties of student support in the unit (N=13)

Contact classes
8%

Academic
support
31%

Communication/
workshops/assign
ment admin
61%
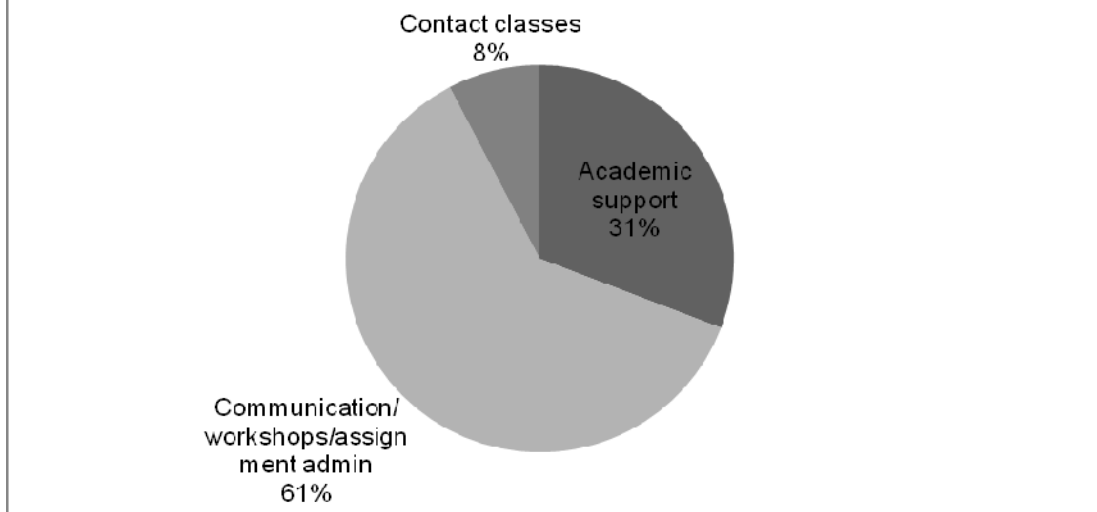
The respondents were also asked to indicate what, in their views, the main duties of student support were. As shown in Figure 4.15 (above), eight (61,5%) of the respondents indicated that support staff should communicate with students, assist at workshops and administrate assignment submissions and marking. Four (30,8%) students regarded academic support and one (7,7%) the arranging of contact classes as the main functions of the support staff. When the results as shown in Figure 4.15 and Table 4.8 (above) are compared, it seems that the students' expectations of what support staff should do exceed the functions that they are perceived to be doing. That is, students expect the support staff to concentrate more intently on academic skills development and less on administrative functions.

4.5.3 The frequency with which respondents make use of student support and examples of recent support asked for

Respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they made use of student support during an academic year. As indicated in Table 4.9 (below) only two students indicated that they have never used support in the academic year,

whereas eleven used support of which one (7,7%) used it very often, four (30,8%) used support regularly and six (46,2%) used it irregularly.

Table 4.9 The frequency with which respondents make use of student support and examples of recent support asked for		
How often do you use support? (N-13)	**Frequency**	**%**
Very often	1	7,7
Regularly	4	30,8
Irregularly	6	46,2
Never	2	15,4
Total	13	100,0
Example of support recently required (N=11)		
I asked about assignment marks	5	45,4
I experienced delays/problems in registration	3	27,3
I failed my proposal and did not understand why	1	9,1
I cannot get hold of Mr Roets	1	9,1
I did not receive my tutorial matter	1	9,1
Total	11	100,0

Also shown in Table 4.9 is a breakdown of examples of support requested by the eleven respondents who indicated that they used support services. Among these, five (45,4%) enquired about assignment marks in the coursework part of the degree; three (27,3%) asked for assistance in registration processes and the others asked for support in administrative matters (one to reach the programme convenor and one to receive tutorial matter). Only one student asked for academic support in terms of assistance in interpreting feedback on a failed assignment. Again, this should be contrasted with the respondents' expressed needs for support which has been found to exceed the narrower logistical support required in administrative matters.

4.6 RESPONDENTS' VIEWS ON THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE SUPPORT OFFERED

In this final section that reports on the quantitative findings of the first phase, the researcher discusses the respondents' views on the strengths and weaknesses of student support offered by the unit. Respondents' views on whether student support is essential to succeed in the degree; reasons for respondents' views; respondents' views on other types of support that are required; respondents' views on the strengths and weaknesses of student support, and suggestions for improvements in student support are discussed.

4.6.1 Respondents' views on whether student support is essential to succeed in the degree

Most of the respondents felt that support is essential for students to be successful in the degree (see Figure 4.16 below). Only two students felt that support was probably not needed to ensure a pass mark in the degree programme. The reasons for their perceptions are shown in Table 4.10 (below). It reveals that four (36,3%) of the students who regarded support as essential to pass in the degree felt so because the support they received prevented them from abandoning the degree programme. Three students commented on the high quality of support that is given.

Figure 4.16 Views on whether student support is essential to succeed in the degree (N=13)
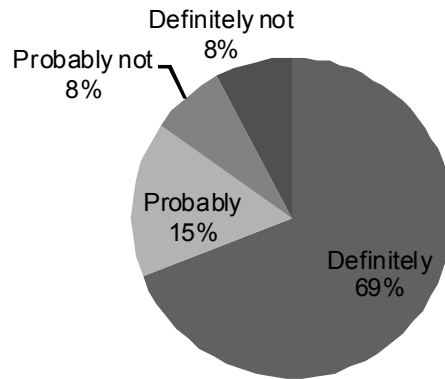
Table 4.10 Reasons for views as shown in Figure 4.16		
Those who thought that support is essential (N=11)	**Frequency**	**%**
I wanted to give up when I failed	4	36,3
High quality support is given	3	27,3
In KZN there is no support	1	9,1
I feel unsure about whether assignment criteria are met	1	9,1
Keeps me abreast of expectations	1	9,1
the support is people-orientated	1	9,1
Total	11	100,0
Those who thought that support was not essential (N=2)		
This should be Unisa's duty and not only USBAH's	2	-

The two students, who felt that support was not essential to help students succeed in the degree, indicated that they regarded support to ensure successful completion of the degree as a task of the university and not as a support function of the unit.

4.6.2 Respondents' views on other types of support required in order for students to be successful in the degree programme

Respondents were encouraged to indicate other types of support that were needed to assist students to meet all the requirements of the degree programme successfully. As shown in Table 4.11 (below) six students (46,2%) felt that a full-time tutor would enhance performance in the degree programme. This should be seen in conjunction with the findings that indicated that the respondents needed support beyond logistical or administrative concerns. Three students (23,1%) required more guidelines and information; financial support, more seminars, books, research support, computers and computer software were also mentioned. If one examines the full range of items of support that students need as listed in Table 4.11, it should be clear that most of the respondents are not independent, confident research students ready to embark on autonomous research.

Table 4.11 Views on other types of support required (N=13)		
	Frequency	**%**
Tutor/ mentor	6	46,2
More information/updates/more guidelines	3	23,1
Financial support to students	2	15,4
More workshops/seminars	2	15,4
More books	2	15,4
Support for proposal writing/research support	2	15,4
Provision of part-time jobs or internships	2	15,4
Ready availability of computers, internet and software/SPSS training	2	15,4
Visas and currency	1	7,7
Granting of extension on due dates	1	7,7
Newsletter	1	7,7
Radio broadcast	1	7,7
Total number of respondents	13	*

* Percentages will not summate to 100% as respondents were asked to give more than one answer

4.6.3 Respondents' views on the strengths and weaknesses of student support

Respondents were asked to list as many strengths of student support as possible. As indicated in Table 4.12, eight students (61,5%) mentioned that the current involvement of the support staff in helping to arrange training workshops was a strength. Five respondents (38,5%) indicated strong care and commitment shown by the staff in their support of students. Three respondents (23,1%) mentioned sound communication skills and three (23,1%) responsiveness to telephone calls as strengths.

Table 4.12 Views on the strengths of student support (N=13)		
	Frequency	**%**
Involvement in current academic support and training workshops	8	61,5
Commitment to students/care/supportive attitudes	5	38,5
Good communication; telephonic skills	3	23,1
Responsiveness to student enquiries/speedy responses	3	23,1
Library support	2	15,4
Friendliness	1	7,7
Organisation of study sessions	1	7,7
Availability at all times	1	7,7
Resubmission policy	1	7,7
Total number of respondents	13	*

* Percentages will not summate to 100% as respondents were asked to give more than one answer

Table 4.13 (below) shows the responses concerning the weaknesses of the support offered by the unit. Three (23,1%) students mentioned that the support has no apparent weaknesses. Four respondents (30,8%) mentioned that response times were too slow – this is in direct opposition to the three respondents who listed timely responses as a strength of the support functions. It is interesting to note that nine students (69,2%) mentioned issues that clearly fall outside the ambit of student support; namely, the lack of financial support or employment opportunities (three); poor access to tutorial matter or the internet (four); not enough contact sessions (one) and an inability to assist foreign students (one) as weaknesses related to student support. Moreover, most of these matters (such as frequent contact sessions, financial support, employing students, addressing the unique needs of foreign students) are usually less accessible in ODL institutions as compared to contact campuses that can offer more frequent contact sessions and student employment opportunities.

Table 4.13 Views on the weaknesses of student support (N=13)		
	Frequency	**%**
Lengthy response period	4	30,8
No weaknesses	3	23,1
No financial support /employment opportunities for students	3	23,1
Lack of practical feedback	2	15,4
Delay in delivery of materials/CD	2	15,4
Not enough personnel	1	7,7
No internet	1	7,7
Not enough books	1	7,7
Not enough contact sessions	1	7,7
No assistance for foreign students	1	7,7
Total	13	*

* Percentages will not summate to 100% as respondents were asked to give more than one answer

4.6.4 Respondents' suggestions for improvements in student support

Respondents were asked to indicate as many suggestions as possible for improvements in the support offered to students via the unit. As shown in Table 4.14 (below), three students did not offer any suggestions. Three (23,1%) suggested that more staff should be appointed to assist with student support. Two respondents (15,4%) suggested that prescribed and recommended sources should be made available to students. Whereas the inclusion of a prescribed book in the tutorial package of students is an option used with great success in some courses, this is less feasible at the master's level in which a greater range of in-depth reading is required. Other suggestions, such as mentoring, tutoring, abandoning the coursework section of the degree programme, developing newsletters and having a more active involvement in online discussions again point to academic support needs that at the time of the data-gathering fell outside the prescribed functions of the support staff.

Table 4.14 Suggestions for improvements in student support (N=13)	Frequency	%
No suggestions	3	23,1
More staff	3	23,1
Prescribed and recommended sources should be readily available to students	2	15,4
A mentor required at KZN	1	7,7
Focus on proposal, dissertation and coursework should be abandoned	1	7,7
More active discussion forums	1	7,7
Newsletters	1	7,7
Full-time tutoring	1	7,7
Total	13	100,0

4.7 A SYNTHESIS OF THE FINDINGS OF THE QUANTITATIVE PHASE

The quantitative phase of this study yielded insights into how the MA students as recipients of student support understood the nature of the support that they experienced and expected. The transformative-empowerment orientation that formed the basis of this study dictated that student performance in the degree programme be viewed as more than a mere function of ability, effort and motivation as micro- or agent-level attributes that can be shaped to effect good pass rates. Instead, the orientation meant that student experiences and expectations of support were seen as formed by the psychological, social and infrastructural resources in dynamic interaction with the individual-level attributes of students. Rizzuto, LeDoux and Hatala (2009:175-6) point out that research pays little attention "t*o the social and infrastructural factors that shape performance in academic settings*" as "*much of academic performance literature has focused on student ability and motivation.*" Rizzuto *et al* (2009: 176) regard social networks that develop via interactions with students and peer support staff as an overlooked "*third educational resource*".

In order for the quantitative phase to inform the qualitative phase, the researcher drew on Teddlie and Tashakkori's (2009: 246) ABC+ matrix to summarise the findings. The matrix considers attitudinal, behavioural, cognitive and contextual factors that make up the relationship environment in education. If one applies the matrix to the findings as discussed above, the following summary is possible:

- **Attitudinal factors related to students' experiences and expectations of student support**: The above findings showed that the thirteen respondents generally regarded student support in a positive light (demonstrating appreciation, respect and trust), although their expectations were that support of an academic and research nature should feature more prominently
- **Behavioural factors related to students' experiences and expectations of student support**: Only two of the thirteen

respondents never used student support. Thus the respondents felt comfortable in making use of support. These respondents identified emotional support (to avoid dropout from the programme) as a major issue. Students seeking and acknowledging emotional support in the postgraduate programme implies a consideration of the educational journey as more than the mere acquisition of demonstrable skills

- **Cognitive factors related to students' experiences and expectations of student support**: The study found that the respondents could differentiate between the strengths and weaknesses of support and realised that support is not a substitute for own effort, time management and skills development. At the same time, however, students' constructions of support (both as a lived experience and as an ideal) included dimensions of assistance, coaching, collaboration, counselling, guidance, socialisation, support, teaching, and tutoring

- **Contextual factors related to students' experiences and expectations of student support**: The above findings seem to suggest that students purposefully chose a coursework-based master's degree expecting that it would transcend the traditional boundaries of supervisor-student-only academic interactions. Institutional barriers were identified such as the need for more staff and resources and the lack of concerted, sustained funding and university-based employment opportunities for students in the programme.

Overall, the findings of the first phase connote the idea that student support at the postgraduate level in an ODL environment requires a broad, deep and lasting commitment to the welfare of the student as a whole person. It includes diligence and sacrifice to transform and empower students to such an effect that they move forward in their academic trajectory and do not drop out without achieving their goals. In the next section, the researcher discusses the findings from the qualitative phase of the study in which the perceptions, attitudes and experiences of key personnel in student support are gauged. At the end of that section, the ABC+ matrix is revisited to compare and contrast the views of students (support recipients) and staff (support facilitators).

4.8 RESULTS OF THE FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEWS WITH KEY INFORMANTS

The quantitative phase informed the qualitative phase as key areas of concern pointed out in the first phase were followed up in the face-to-face qualitative interviews with the key staff members directly involved in student support. The results of this phase are discussed below and in the following sequence. First, background on key informants is provided with special attention to problems of anonymity and confidentiality. This is followed by a discussion of their understanding of HIV and AIDS and the influence thereof on the higher education sector of South Africa. In the third section, the perceptions of the key informants of the MA degree programme are given. The fourth section deals with the perceptions of the key informants regarding student support.

4.8.1 Background of the key informants

The researcher interviewed four key informants who were directly involved with the programme, ranging from the chair of the department, the programme convener, a senior lecturer and a staff member in the Unit for Social Behaviour Studies in HIV/AIDS. The four key informants were deliberately chosen for the study because of their expertise and experience in the Department of Sociology and the unit. At that stage in the development of the programme, not many other staff members were directly involved with the MA students. As the programme developed over the years, and under the leadership of various chairs of departments and postgraduate coordinators, more administrative staff, online mentors, editors and contract supervisors gradually became involved. However, at the time of data-gathering, the four key informants constituted the mainstay of student support in the degree programme. As with the quantitative phase, the researcher thus could not find more persons to interview or gather data from.

The researcher attempted to keep the true identities of these informants confidential in the presentation of the findings below by referring to them as

Interviewee number 1, 2, 3 and 4. In addition, identifying remarks are not shown in the quoted data vignettes. The researcher did not include all of the pauses in the interviewees' comments, but transcribed the words verbatim – thus language, grammatical and linguistic quirks on the part of the speakers were retained.

4.8.2 Key informants' views on HIV and AIDS and the influence thereof on the higher education sector of South Africa

In this section, two related sub-themes emerged. The first sub-theme was that of the interviewees' general observations on HIV and AIDS and the second sub-theme was views expressed about the influence of HIV and AIDS on the higher education section.

Since the first phase showed that MA students enter the programme with imperfect knowledge of the transmission of HIV despite (for many of them) workplace exposure to such knowledge, the researcher asked the informants to discuss their own understanding of HIV and AIDS. All four interviewees were able to give an accurate account of HIV and its relation to AIDS, for example:

> Um, I know that HIV and AIDS are two different ... eh ... eh ... stages. HIV is the first stage whereby a person is diagnosed with symptoms that are related to AIDS. Eh ... eh ... AIDS should be the final stage of the disease. [Interviewee No 2]

> My understanding of HIV is that it is a virus that attacks human immune system. HIV infection has got various stages in which the CD4 cells of the body are attacked. [Interviewee No 1]

> HIV is the Human Immunodeficiency Virus and it attacks the human immune system and eventually it leads to a condition called AIDS, which is Acquired Immune Deficiency ... oh ... syndrome ... eh ... eh ... Once an immune system is affected one

is then susceptible to opportunistic infections and eventually if you are not treated with antiretrovirals you are probably going to die from opportunistic infections due to a weak immune system. [Interviewee No 4]

As far as the interviewees' understanding of the impact of HIV and AIDS on the higher education sector of South Africa is concerned, different views emerged. For example, two interviewees connected the age group of students at higher education institutions (HEIs) with the demographically defined vulnerable groups by saying:

Since the institutions do have students, the students tend to be infected with the disease as they study during their ... eh ... eh ... education. Chances of them succeeding or getting their qualifications are slim if they do get infected with HIV. [Interviewee No 2]

Students might be affected directly because they are themselves ill or because a family member or a partner is ill. [Interviewee No 4]

Three interviewees gave a more encompassing view of the impact of HIV and AIDS by reporting:

I think HIV impacts on us as human beings either by being infected with HIV or being affected by AIDS through a family member or somebody close to us having HIV or living with HIV. So that is one thing – it affects us all. In the Human Sciences we can – through our research – tell people, give them messages on how to address vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. Thus in higher education institutions we also have a commitment to do research about this on how to alleviate the burden. [Interviewee No 1]

Staff can also be infected directly and affected indirectly. Then they either fall ill themselves which will then impact the tuition of

the institution and the support services of UNISA – or when family members fall ill when they are absent from work or under stress because of that and similarly with students. [Interviewee No 4]

Staff that are busy losing the skills here at UNISA – I am aware of quite a number of staff that are living with HIV and openly – some of them are living in secrecy and ... eh ... eh ... one is worried because some of them are in the last stage. I am aware that some of them who have died – we lost the skills and experiences they carry. [Interviewee No 3]

The researcher followed up this discussion with probes as to what the South African Department of Education (DoE) and the Department of Higher Education (DoHE) can do to address the impact of HIV and AIDS on HEIs. In this matter, senior staff interviewees tended to view this as beyond the scope of their responsibility; for example, one responded:

I don't really know, I am not really aware of any ... um eh ja ... I am sure there are but I'm not aware of any ... you'll know more about the policies or actions from the side of the Department of Education. [Interviewee No 4]

Two interviewees felt that the Department of Education did as much as it could, yet linked their responses to education offered at schools instead of connecting the decision-making at the level of the DoE directly to HEIs, for example:

I must say I'm now satisfied with the way the Department of Education is handling the whole issue of HIV and AIDS because now there is a course at the high school level on life skills. And some of the students that are registered in our degree are teachers involved in educating high school and secondary school learners. [Interviewee No 2]

The Department of Education has a national policy ... mh ... mh ... of 1997, national framework, it is very outdated and in many ways very clumsy – because what happens – the schools just took it and put it as their own policy and they don't realise it is a national policy. National policy is their executive framework, that people has to use to customise and adjust it to their needs ... Department of Education develops some guidelines for educators to help learners living with HIV and gives support to educators themselves living with HIV. Then ... eh ... also they do life skills programmes that is running for schools. To some extent it's working but not successful – not really having an impact because some of the people who are in this programme are not well trained, specifically around the field of HIV and AIDS. [Interviewee No 3]

In this regard it is important to note that the education in life skills offered at South African schools cannot be regarded as a panacea for the health education needs of students enrolled at South African HEIs. Not only do many of the students come from elsewhere in Africa, but many students (especially those enrolled for postgraduate degrees) are in older age groups and would thus have missed the educational efforts about HIV and AIDS offered at school level. Despite further probing, the researcher could not elicit further responses on this question, suggesting that the knowledge of and exposure to policy affecting HEIs among key staff in this degree programme was less than satisfactory. The interviewees did not and could not comment on what the students knew about HIV and AIDS. The unspoken assumption was that the students entered the programme because they already held adequate knowledge of HIV and AIDS. Moreover, an assessment of what students and staff think, feel and know about HIV/AIDS seems to be an important starting point in this programme. The interface between such divergent claims of knowledge and perceptions can be the creative space in which new knowledge can be forged – but only when space is created for such exchanges. In this regard McWhinney and Markos (2003: 16) comment:

An education that is transformative redirects and reenergizes those who pause to reflect on what their lives have been and take on new purposes

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and perspectives. *The transformation begins when a person withdraws from the world of established goals to unlearn, reorient, and choose a fresh path.*

However, one interviewee was able to comment spontaneously on a direct link between the policy initiatives at the DoE and the mandate of HEIs by saying:

> That policy (*referring to the Gazette of 1997*) is just a guideline on how to deal with vulnerability, how to teach children who are not yet infected to remain so, to remain safe and how to deal with different things that relates to the pandemic. Higher learning institutions re-interpreted that policy for its own context ... eh ... so in that sense Department of Education supports whatever is happening, it gives a broad guidelines but we must work from it further. I think the policy is fairly available because one can access it through the internet. It is usually sent to institutions. But I think most of our institutions are also under stress to deal with many other social issues. Schools, for example, are under pressure to improve matric pass rates. Institutions like UNISA are under pressure to retain students and to have better throughput rates. Eh ... so it amounts of one of many different issues, that they have to deal with. So it's not always prioritised …The Department of Education needs to follow up and ask its institutions how far they've gone with their own mainstreaming. I think the institution must do so (*referring to mainstreaming*) either through their personnel that are involved in research and teaching about HIV and AIDS or by encouraging its senior students to do research on HIV/AIDS as a biomedical problem or a cross-cutting social problem. There are many different disciplines that can look at the impacts of HIV/AIDS, for example, at what we can do about orphans and vulnerable children. So I think we must mainstream an understanding of HIV and AIDS into our degrees. [Interviewee No 1]

One interviewee took the further probing from the researcher on this matter as indicative of her (that is the interviewer's) inadequate understanding of the efforts of the DoE/DoHE and the mandate of HEIs. Instead of presenting an own opinion, the interviewee made an effort to demonstrate an above-average, privileged exposure to "special" or "insider" information:

> I have fresh things to say and relevant news for you. We have now just signed the national policy of Higher Education. I think it might be very much interesting for you to look at the policy, because there is a big issue about curriculum development and learner support – hoping to create a safe working and study environment for students, and it's quite a big thing because we are the third group in the world that has done such a national policy framework for Higher Education. So it's clear that Department of Education is doing something, starting from SADTU indicating that 12% of teachers are living with HIV and we don't know exactly how many learners – we are concerned because we can see dropouts. So in essence practically we can say that the Department of Education is really trying to do something but I think the biggest challenge it is not strong enough collaboration for the Department of Education and other Departments to bring about a more comprehensive approach. [Interviewee No 3]

An interesting observation in this regard is that this "privileged" and important information referred to in this part of the interview about the policy efforts and signed undertakings with the DoHE were never shared with other staff members or students after the interviews. From an emancipatory vantage point, such exclusivity in the possession of knowledge is not desirable when the goal of education is to develop the abilities of learners to assess alternative truth claims and to participate fully and freely in critical reflection. Here, a comment by Scatamburlo (1997:56) that if transformation is overlooked as the goal of education, students or learners are mere functionaries of discourse or "*entities which float aimlessly in a sea of ever-proliferating signifiers*" seems apt.

4.8.3   Perceptions of the key informants of the MA degree programme

Within this general theme, the following sub-themes emerged: general impressions of the MA degree programme, narrations of the history of the programme and ideas about the reasons why students register for the degree. Although the sub-themes did not emerge in this chronological order in the interviews, the researcher organised them as such in this chapter for purposes of analysis and discussion.

4.8.3.1   Interviewees' general impressions of the MA degree

The quantitative phase found that the students regarded the degree as instrumental in developing saleable skills that would assist them in their career development. Some of the students underestimated the amount of independent research skills that was required to be successful. The researcher thus asked the key informants to report their views on the MA degree programme. Again, the senior staff tended to respond to the question by stating their responsibilities (and control over the degree programme), but with prompting, they were able to articulate the merit of the programme in preparing graduates with skills in the field of HIV and AIDS. For example:

> I'm ultimately responsible … for all the academic offerings of the unit ... em ... so ultimately all changes to the curriculum must go through my office … (*after prompting*), So I think it is very important to train people ... um ... and I think in this respect it might be very important to train practitioners … em … em … but informed practitioners … who can approach the problem from a scientific point … em … em … and this is I think why there's a lot of emphasis on dissertations …So, I think the programme teaches very important skills and knowledge that is useful to students and it does it in a cooperative, supported environment and that I also think is very good. [Interviewee No 4]

And:

This is kind of my study – to develop policy frameworks for the private sector who wants to see a student they can call AIDS-competent. AIDS-competent means that a student must have the personal skills to cope with HIV and AIDS whether they are infected or not, it doesn't matter – they must learn how to deal with it … We teach students to design policies and programmes. They learn how to use theory to inform them when they design policies and programmes … It helps students to do indicators, so in that sense the degree is very important and students who have finished may not all pitch in that level, but the good thing is that they learn, is that they have that broader understanding [Interviewee No 3]

Another interviewee saw the MA programme as a natural progression of the BA Hons degree, but also added:

Definitely yes it is important because HIV is all over the world so we need to educate as many people as we can, being the students, being employees; being anyone … Everyone has got a right to information so that we can deal with the disease. [Interviewee No 2]

This is an interesting contribution, if juxtaposed with the earlier observation that the key personnel were uninformed about the knowledge needs about HIV and AIDS of the students entering the degree. As it is assumed that the students already have sufficient knowledge, and as the programme is crowded with coursework and research tasks that move beyond basic knowledge of HIV and AIDS, an important area is overlooked. A key interviewee who became involved in the degree programme years after its inception commented:

First of all my view of the programme is that I think it is much needed. I think it addresses the burden of the disease from social perspectives … I can see how students in different context make

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contributions with their findings … So it's a practice-oriented research programme ... I also found that students are exposed in the coursework to skills that are needed out there and the way that I can validate that opinion is by looking at the different advertisements that one finds out there asking for people with skills in programme evaluation, monitoring and evaluation, writing reports and interpreting reports ... understanding HIV/AIDS statistics … dealing with funding organisations. Those are all the skills that come up in such advertisements. If we could find a cure tomorrow, then those skills are still transferable into other kinds of social problems. [Interviewee No 1]

Again, the problem of some students not having correct knowledge of the transmission of HIV is overlooked in this response. Overall, the key informants believed that the programme was necessary and important as part of Unisa's mandate to create knowledge in the service of humanity. But, without critical reflection on these matters, the risk emerges of what Freire (1996:84) regards as stemming from an ideology that misunderstands human emancipation when he says:

We therefore don't have to continue to propose a pedagogy of the oppressed that unveils the reasons behind the facts or that provokes the oppressed to take up critical knowledge and transformative action. We no longer need a pedagogy that questions technical training or is indispensable to the development of a professional comprehension of how and why society functions. What we need to do now, according to this astute ideology, is focus on production without any preoccupation about what we are producing, who it benefits, or who it hurts.

4.8.3.2 Narrations of the history of the programme

Some of the narration about the MA programme inevitably led to the interviewees' own interpretation of the history of its deployment and of their roles in that history. This was not a theme that the researcher wanted to devote time on, as this was beyond the scope of her study. However, it soon

emerged as a sub-theme that stood central to some of the thinking and talking about the MA degree programme. From the researcher's own journal entries following the interviews, this framing of responses gradually emerged as an important insight gleaned from the qualitative phase; namely, that the ways in which the staff understood, experienced and spoke about the degree and the place of student support in it were highly related to their own sense of personal identities. For example:

> And then in 1999 we literally started to develop a framework for Honours and MA and I was the main driving force behind the degree and obviously supported by many people around the implementation … Department of Psychology, Department of Consumer Sciences, the private sector and NGOs …I should do the overall management of the degree. I link with all the processes of the university. …. I think that what we have been successful until now. It was only because of the merger in 2004 that we handed over the degrees to the new UNISA and that it needed a programme management structure and support structure … When I went around and spoke to many academics sharing with them what we have been doing, a lot of them were amazed what we can have a qualification and they were very impressed and asked to come back and come to share with them how we do it. I really think it is a very important qualification for academic benchmarking especially for UNISA, but sometimes I feel UNISA doesn't capitalise on it. It is an important degree because it has a particular focus. [Interviewee No 3]

> 2004 then we started with MA … because the students *(in the Honours degree)* would normally ask if there is another level for their degree … [Interviewee No 2]

> I was asked to help with the dissertation side of things and gradually also became involved in the coursework – to make it more supportive of the dissertation. I was also involved in that

rewriting of the material, eh ... so I see myself now as part of the
team. [Interviewee No 1]

These recollections of the development of the degree should be seen as
discourses about teaching and learning embedded in specific power relations
and ideologies – moreover, they speak of particular conceptions of power,
identity, agency, emotional practices and resistance. It is obvious – especially
from the first quoted vignette above – that the interviewee took great personal
pride in the development of the programme. At the same time, the researcher,
in the second chapter of this dissertation, explored the ideas of Lentell (2006)
about the development of tuition materials and courses as having to be
informed in large part by the needs of students. Moreover the "Framework for
the implementation of a team approach to curriculum and learning
development at Unisa" (Unisa 2006) states that in designing a curriculum take
into account

- the specific disciplines
- the higher education landscape
- legislation impacting on teaching, learning and assessment paradigms,
  quality assurance and professional requirements
- learning theory
- and the profile of the target student population.

Three factors emerged from the above three quotations: pride in the history of
a learning programme; an understanding of students' needs for further study
trajectories beyond the honours levels and a sense of being gradually drawn
into a team that can take the programme development further. All three
factors are constructive starting points for the further development of the
programme, but should be augmented by a clear understanding of the
learning needs of the students. These matters are best addressed by Unisa's
Bureau of Learning Development in collaboration with students and staff. In
this regard, the "*Framework for the implementation of a team approach to
curriculum and learning development at Unisa*" (Unisa 2006) sets out
important principles that encapsulate a team approach that tries to incorporate

different role players in the development of tuition material and programmes. Prinsloo (2010b) points out that "*all curriculum and course development will be done according to good ODL practice as detailed in the framework*".

4.8.4 Ideas about the reasons for student registration for the degree

To further explore the theme of perceptions of the degree programme, the researcher asked the interviewees what in their views motivated students to enrol for this degree programme. In this regard, the responses ranged from views that prospective students regard HIV and AIDS as more than a biomedical issue, to insights gauged from the students' actual application letters. In this regard, the interviewees responded:

> What I see from students' motivational letters (*these are letters in which students put forth reasons why they should be considered for entrance into the degree. They are submitted along with their applications*) is that it's often very personal … closely personal reasons that prompted them to apply for this programme. Or awareness of the impacts of HIV/AIDS on their own communities. Some of them are living with HIV – they are quite open about it in motivational letters. Some has a family member or loved one who is either infected or affected. Many of them work in quite senior positions already and multi-national organisations such as Save the Children, UNICEF, UNAIDS or are in some way related to those organisations, working for projects that are funded by them. These students feel that they need the skills and that this programme can give it to them. I don't think it's just hot topic … bandwagon type … a matter of everybody just wanting to do it because HIV/AIDS is a hot topic. It's actually much deeper than that. People feel the impact on them and see it in their own communities and the motivational letters speak to that. [Interviewee No 1]

> The main one is that most of the students are personally affected by HIV/AIDS. You hear when we are talking in orientation (*this*

refers to contact sessions offered as orientations for first entrants at the beginning of the academic year). You ask people: "Why did you apply for the degree?" People share with you that they've lost family members; that they themselves are living with HIV or they work directly in a work area where they are dealing with people living with HIV. So I would say up to 80% of students are really affected. Part of it is also that some people who want to change careers. We hear this often from educators that they would like to see this degree as an option to get out of education or health care professions because they cannot cope. Other students feel that there are not enough job opportunities … that this is the opportunity to start their own NGO to do something in the community, to make a difference. I can see people who want to do this degree to change careers get more satisfied in their lives because some of the work they are doing is not rewarding – they want something that will really change the picture. The third group of people are those who do this for their personal career path, if I talk career path that this degree will help them to go to the next level in the job. [Interviewee No 3]

From the above quoted data vignettes, it seems that some staff members may be sensitive to criticisms that the degree programme is popular merely because HIV/AIDS is a topical matter. One interviewee mentioned that prospective students regard the degree programme as emphasising counselling skills. It is possible that some students regard this as an extension of an honours-level psychology course:

Um ... I'll give you an example of people working in the medical field, they need to know more about the degree of HIV and AIDS, so that they can help patients in hospitals, in the clinics. They can be able to give counselling, they should be able to give treatment to assist in any way they can as medical practitioners. In school, the teachers also need to educate the children more about the disease and it needs to be given in a simple way so that children can understand. [Interviewee No 2]

Another interviewee mentioned that prospective students are drawn to the degree programme precisely because it offers a social vantage point from which to study and understand HIV and AIDS as a social problem:

> That is an interesting question, because of the variety of applications we get, we know that we get people from all over the spectrum, all over Africa from many different disciplines or a number of discipline ... um ... we get people from health perspective ... um ... in which case I think it's easy to understand. I think it is often in the clinical environment that people realise that there is a social component, and that this disease with present technology is not going to be defeated simply through medication. So you have to combine whatever medication we have with the social element. We find that is the most difficult to change because, we have to change behaviour and behaviour change is very complicated. So I think people from clinical environment understand there is this problem and also people from social work perspective, educationists, it is the national problem that confronts the wide continent and the world problem the confronts us in so many different levels. Students feel it will make them marketable. [Interviewee No 4]

None of the key informants referred to the research emphasis of the degree programme as attracting students to enrol. As this also matches the findings in the quantitative phase; namely, that most students underestimate the research skills and work involved in the degree programme, the researcher found this to be significant in informing both the students' and the staff's approaches to the degree programme. One interviewee, however, made mention of how challenging the degree programme can be and that students may not always realise that upon registration:

> I think that many students are very passive and do not realise how much the master's programme actually depend on their own strengths and their own character. It's actually a character-assessing exercise. When you leave with the master's degree, you

can show a potential employer that you are somebody who can overcome challenges on your own and that you have the strength of character and the reserves of emotional strengths to deal with the discouraging aspects of doing such a degree. [Interviewee No 4]

And:

But some of them (*students*) do not want to take these opportunities and they persevere and they get angry with us and in the end we know we did offer all these things for them. [Interviewee No 3]

The above quotations are interesting in two important ways. First, they offer some insight into a realisation that some students struggle to remain motivated to complete the degree; yet the two interviewees regard this as determined chiefly by intrapersonal inadequacies (such as being innately "very passive" or refusing to take up the support on offer). In this regard, the contrast between supportivist institutional cultures and survivalist institutional cultures were highlighted in chapter two. Second, the interviewees reveal hidden, but partially-articulated views that interpersonal support is less important than intrapersonal traits of perseverance. The researcher thus cautiously wants to argue that the views of the senior staff tend towards the survivalist stance.

A further interesting point that emerges when juxtaposing the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study is that as shown in Table 4.3 which depicts the students' reasons for enrolment, few students emphasised a need to make a difference in their communities as the reasons for applying. It is thus possible that the staff over-sentimentalise the students' reasons for applying for the degree by ascribing too much deterministic status to altruistic motives. This could be partially motivated by the staff's own sensitivity about a possible critique that the degree is a bandwagon-exercise that exploits concerns about HIV and AIDS.

Traulsen and Bissell (2004) suggest that a structural functionalist view of caring professions regards them as set on sustaining societal values and on an altruistic commitment to community welfare via the application of specialised, yet objectivist knowledge. Little room is left for more parochial motivations such as specialisation in the profession for one's own career goals. It would thus seem that the key informants displayed this structural functionalist conception of the degree and its role in preparing students to deal with HIV and AIDS. Some of this idealised understanding of student motivations is informed by the staff's access to the motivational letters which students are required to write as part of the application process in which they have to compete with other students. A possible mismatch between perceptions of the reasons for students entering a degree programme between the staff and the students could lead to frustrations on both sides.

4.8.5 Perceptions of the key informants of student support

The interviewees narrated their perceptions of student support from their own vantage points. The narrations are organised in this section according to the following sub-themes that emerged from the analysis: general views on student support; the nature of student support; views (or the lack of views) on support as empowering students; perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of student support and finally suggestions for improvements in student support.

4.8.5.1 General views on student support

At this juncture, the researcher wishes to point out that according to Unisa's ODL Policy (2008a:2), student support is a generic term that is applied to a range of services that are developed by Unisa to assist students to meet their learning objectives and to gain the necessary knowledge and skills to be successful in their studies. Sarmiento *et al* (2004:136) state that the structure of personal power is derived from three resources; namely, access to support, information and resources.

Three interviewees mentioned all three resources as part of student support and also connected support to the idea of a trajectory that begins with the student's first entry into the university and ends in graduation. These interviewees told the researcher:

> Student support means being able to give support to the students from the registration period until the end of their qualification. What I'm saying is, we take them from registration after they've been admitted to the degree. We help them with their studies and give them the information, resources and support that they need. They know that they are welcome to come and ask and will be given support, not only in their studies but also in their personal lives. [Interviewee No 2]

> I think it is a hands-on ... eh ... it is not purely academic support … it is really a totality of support we give … So learner support for me in total … is a holistic development process … for the student to get support but is also to mobilise the students to actually take support in many ways because it is a two-way relationship because we can offer so much ... [Interviewee No 3]

> Well, that comes back to support for the emotional and cognitive (*needs of the students*) so, I think support means both. [Interviewee No 4]

It is helpful to revisit two theoretical notions as described in the second chapter here. Freire (1994:28) states that central to the practice of education is the teacher/lecturer-student relationship, conceptualised as the meeting of two social actors in a subject-to-subject encounter. Vygotsky's social development theory offers light on the notion that many institutions of learning have for many years adhered to a transmission or instructional model in which a teacher or lecturer "transmits" information to students. In contrast, Vygotsky's theory promotes learning contexts in which students play an active role in learning. Learning, therefore, becomes a reciprocal experience for the

students and teacher/lecturer. One key interviewee's perception of student support demonstrated a similar insight:

> The way I understand student support, is that it becomes an extension of Open Distance Learning and that creates encounters in which the student and the lecturer can meet on a level plain. What I mean is that when a student cannot find the lecturer immediately, he or she can first go to student support and receive help with administrative or technical problems immediately. Eh ... and then lecturing staff can deal with the substantive things … Support also works the other way round, where the lecturers need support from people who are also students and perhaps understand a student's point of view a little bit better … to look around materials and the way we teach and to evaluate our offerings … to see whether we are still addressing the students at their level … I found that student support has become a yardstick for what the students think or feel about the programme [Interviewee No 1]

4.8.5.2   The nature of student support

To try to get at these perceptions, the researcher prompted the interviewees following the general question about the nature of student support with sub-questions about the best modes of support delivery. In this regard, all of the interviewees mentioned ODL practices such as the workshops, online discussion forums, official and non-official tutorial support material, telephone calls and face-to-face lectures.   For example, Interviewee No 3 mentioned:

> I think what makes the degree very important is the mode that we teach in. That is the mixed mode approach that we do successfully ... eh ... face-to-face contact sessions ... eh ... we are getting most students especially those in Sub-Saharan areas and we have 60% of students who come for contact sessions

And:

We have an orientation workshop soon after registration that will normally last for a week. Just to introduce them to the degree, tell the students about the degree, what is expected from them and how to go about getting information and resources. Then during the year, we have contact sessions and we interact with them over the telephone or in person …The lecturers will want to see as to how far they are in their work and if they have encountered any problems in their assignments or the understanding of the degree itself. And the lecturers also go for group visits to the regional offices and have contact session there with the students in different areas of the country. [Interviewee No 2]

This, however, opened the door for some of the interviewees to question the need for the amount of support given, for example:

Well there is the general the study material that is obviously being offered and there are the CD ROMs … um ... um … there is a huge amount of information that is potentially available to students. Every month when I see the telephone bill, I see that there are enormous amounts of phone calls and incidentally I wonder what these phone calls are all about. But anyway, this is now the time for you to ask me questions, but I actually want to ask you: Why so many phone calls? But we can do that after just after the interview. [Interviewee No 4]

Also:

We should place more emphasis on just leading our students because ultimately ... um ... we have only so much capacity and it is essential that we spend our capacity on students who have the best chance of succeeding. [Interviewee No 4]

And, from another interviewee:

I think there is danger of too much contact and then some students can start relying too much on the contact and they remain dependent. I think that the orientation week and perhaps other one workshop later on in the year is fine. I am a little bit worried about students who say they want to obtain certificates for attendance because I think that the misunderstanding of what the goals of the workshop are. The workshop is the extension of the learning encounter between the tutorial matter and the students and it's not a way to accrue a lot of paper that one can put on a CV. [Interviewee No 1]

The concerns for "too much support" (in terms of its strain on available resources and in terms of inhibiting independence) also encompassed a fear about the unspoken emotional boundaries that exist in the student-staff relationships. For example, Interviewee No 2 confessed:

Sometimes I must say we do get too attached to the students during academic year … and even after they received their qualifications. (*smile*) and you know ... sometimes we become so proud when we realise that students graduated from our degree. (*Laugh*)

This quotation reveals two important issues. First, it shows the challenges that the interviewee experiences in dealing with emotional attachments to students – attachments that inevitably arise from the close relationships forged via student support. Second, it reveals identification with success in the degree programme as an extension of the group's success. The researcher regards these two issues as important insights as they speak to the invisible emotional labour that occurs in the intersections between academic teaching by staff and learning by students. Moreover, they point to needs of belonging to a group that has a particular focus and successful track record.

Another interviewee mentioned that student support is less about conducting workshops or enabling two-way communication and more about the support staff acting as an essential intermediary between academic staff and students:

It means having you there to be a little bit of a buffer between us as academics and the students, because you articulate to us what the student say, and you can articulate what we say to students. [Interviewee No 3]

In sharp contrast to this view of a buffer between students and academic staff, another interviewee regarded support functions as a conduit for students' input into the teaching. This interviewee also linked student support to the idea of peer mentoring by saying:

I think that by introducing students to the people (*implying here the support staff*) who are not only involved in offering the degree, but who are also students like them … also doing the same thing … it helps create a social network of people working with their peers in the same situation. By including peers, students and lecturers, student support becomes an important component in the teaching. [Interviewee No 4]

4.8.5.3 Views (or the lack of views) on support regarding empowering students and/or staff

The researcher wanted to explore the responses of the interviewees for insight clues into empowerment as meaningful only when linked to change (Buysee & Wesley 1996:236). Only two interviewees provided such insights:

I think we are giving students the chance to embark on their own personal journey and growth in the degree ... that we encourage them to change, sometimes indirectly or directly, in the way that we talk to them or in the way that you talk to them specifically from the point that you are a support staff. Student support also becomes a shaping process, shaping a student to become a leader and ... eh ... eh ... you sitting in a position of student support you are a role model to students. [Interviewee No 3]

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I benefit from getting to know the students. In that way you don't have a lot of faceless students … we don't just have a student number and a name … you can now put a face to that name. You get to understand the student often … And once you get to know the student and get to understand personalities, it becomes different for you. Your interaction with the student is enriched because you understand who they are and how they interact. I got to know some of the students. And some students, I think, have created lasting friendships with staff and peers ... eh ... it's not the same with all of them ... eh ... I think students and staff have developed a new understanding that it is often the small things that the people do in much localised areas that make the difference. [Interviewee No 1]

However, these singular references to some of the aspects of transformative learning (changing habits of the mind, perspectives and mindsets – see Mezirow 2003) must be seen in the broader context of the above-mentioned findings. These findings show that fears about the undue popularity of the degree, poor insight into students' knowledge needs of HIV and AIDS, jealous guarding of "privileged" knowledge as the domain of the staff in charge and over-sentimentalised notions of the reasons for student enrolment are potentially important barriers to inclusive, open, reflective teaching and learning.

4.8.5.4 Typical encounters with students that highlighted the need for support

To further test these ideas in the interviews, the researcher asked the informants to describe typical scenarios or encounters with MA students in which the issue of support played a major role. For one of the interviewees, the response turned into a musing on the challenges facing the students in the research part of the degree, for example:

Dissertation *(writing)* is a big challenge because it is like a mountain to climb. You know this thing about Sisyphus? He was too proud and the gods sentenced him, and said that he would spend the rest of his life rolling this big rock to the top of that mountain. The next morning when he wakes up, it is at the bottom again. This was his punishment anyway he had to go back every morning ... *(laughter)* ... start afresh and roll that rock up the mountain, and that is so with master's students. There are so many things. When you think you have now reached something – reached the next level – you have to realise actually you have to start afresh. This just when you thought that the small problems are lying over there and that the big problems are behind you. You realise that the big problems are still in front of you and that is so discouraging. Having to overcome those obstacles every day – it can easily destroy one's self-confidence, one's sort of willingness to continue. It can be very depressing and also when so much of the feedback is negative – which inevitably it is at the start. *(laughter, then in a very loud voice continues)* **Yes, one has to improve, you see**. One should look sometimes that a supervisor does not become too personal or attack the person. I think it is also important to consider the student's side. We all go through this; this is part of the initiation process of doing a postgraduate qualification. [Interviewee No 4]

The above narration shows subtle views on prejudicial thinking about poor resilience on the part of the students and insensitive feedback on the part of the supervisors. These factors probably culminate in ambiguous expectations of what the staff, students and student support efforts can bring to the table in order to improve throughput and success.

The quoted data vignette, with its reference to Greek mythology and its emphasis on "one should improve" brings the words of Gail Okawa (2002:508) to mind:

introspection and critical reflection on the professional culture by others may cause us to consider what is 'uninviting' ... perhaps

manifested most subtly and insidiously by forms of colour-blindness, an assumption of sameness as a norm, a presumption of shared values and perspectives. Toni Morrison, in *Playing in the Dark*, identifies "the habit of ignoring race" as being "understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture" (9-10). This in a culture that in many ways represents academic hegemony through language, that requires assimilation, linguistic and rhetorical, if not racial and cultural, and that privileges particular discourses to ensure that assimilation. Clearly, those who chart their way through this pipeline and the territory beyond must do so through some perilous waters.

In sharp contrast to this, two other interviewees narrated their recollections of typical support encounters by emphasising the issue of whole-person needs, for example:

I liaise between the students and the different boards of the university, the stakeholders of the boards. So I need to know exactly what the problem is that the student is encountering and then I must be able to refer the student to the right person. The student support that we give also concerns personal lives – not only their academic studies. I'll give you an example of maybe let's say a student has personal problems, I can always refer him or her to people that we know will be able to help, like the psychologists in the institution. Um, but as I said, the workload is just too much. [Interviewee No 2]

And:

Learner support also provides a huge referral structure of support around the institution within and also outside – the NGOs and government departments that we refer students to. And we even work indirectly with the students' employers ... I think the success of our learner support is that we treat every student differently. We do not know of all the challenges that the students face, because they are part of a mass. [Interviewee No 3]

The concern that the types of support that students usually ask for puts an extraordinary amount of strain of the available resources also resonated in the response by Interviewee No 1:

> I think the large numbers and the type of students and seriousness with which they approach the field make it very necessarily that there is hands-on support. I know some people see this as spoiling the students. I don't see it like that. I think the type of student who enrolled with this programme is a different kind of an individual and they are passionate people. Some come from activist backgrounds and they need that kind of interaction with people. The typical student encounter tells you that they require more support but not in a sense that they need to be helped through the degree, rather they need help to get socialised into a very large and impersonal institution.

4.8.5.5 Perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of student support

The key informants were asked to list the strengths and weaknesses of the student support system. The quantitative phase found that the students regarded support as preventing them from abandoning the degree programme. The students also regarded the support as of a high quality and as showing the staff's commitment. The personnel mentioned two strengths; namely, personal contact that transcended the distance for students and a whole-person approach, for example:

> Oh, you see – what I see as the strengths – well I think definitely the personal contact which is ... em ... there is a lot of that. [Interviewee No 4]

> We are involved with the students in so many ways … They have some of the same sentiments that we have. So that is also why we have so many students who come to us, and I think also we are

giving students their own personal journey of growth in the degree through student support. [Interviewee No 3]

The strength is that student support has this important socialising role and that if student support can deal with technical and administrative problems, then lecturing staff are left free to do other things … What I also find as huge strength, is that support staff get to know the student personally and I can talk to them if something doesn't make sense for me concerning a particular student. Say for instance a student usually gives me good work and suddenly I see the standard dropping – then I can talk to support staff. They can immediately give me the student's contact details … Also some students don't want to go with their problems to the lecturer and first talk to the support staff and I find that also valuable. [Interviewee No 1]

Whereas the students mentioned weaknesses such as slow response times and lack of resources, the personnel mentioned four important weaknesses. These were the challenges presented by the sheer numbers of students, the limited communication channels available to reach students quickly, and fears that the university management failed to recognise the uniqueness of the student support offered. The following quotations offer evidence for these points:

I think the weakness is that we are somewhat overwhelmed by the numbers and that it is really very challenging to provide a good service to students when we deal with so many students. Ultimately there is this relationship between the supervisor and the student – it is like a mentorship relationship and it is very time-consuming if done properly … very, very time consuming and ... um ... you know. [Interviewee No 4]

The main problem is that the need for support has become too great to cope with. It's a lot of work and the support personnel also

struggles as they tend to be students themselves busy with their own studies. [Interviewee No 1]

The major weakness I must say relates to communication. If you want to give information or notify students about orientation or contact sessions or anything else that they should be notified of – then our current channels of communication is limited. We normally use telephone calls or send letters, faxes or emails, but these present problems when students changed addresses and failed to notify us. [Interviewee No 2]

I think we have championed the theme of learner support. We have also included referrals, encouragement and motivation into it. I think that these are big things that are not always acknowledged. That is why I said there needs to be a further layer to learner support in the form of tutors. Not everybody understands that I am a very strategic thinker. I come to realise that you have to confront management with the fact that you cannot run this degree without the kind of learner support that we do. But we also need to move learner support to another level. [Interviewee No 3]

4.8.5.6 Suggestions for improvements in student support

As suggested earlier in the chapter, the students proposed the appointment of more staff and easier access to prescribed literature as important improvements. The interviewees expressed a range of suggestions, from streamlining support by cutting out duplication in key functions in order to address budget concerns to extending the support to an all-encompassing, grandiose undertaking. For example:

I think if there is one thing we can try to do better it is try and make use of the formal university structures for study material which means that our capacity to go and make photocopies for workshops is obviously limited *(by budget constraints)*. Now I know this is a major job but it would be nice if we could find a way

for students to access that information easier ... on the other hand it's something that students must learn that they must also process huge amounts of information because this is something that is a skill and also essential. [Interviewee No 4]

I would like to see it improved. Not necessarily the services that we already provide, but the capacity. We can appoint tutors and enhance more regional support to students ... We can improve by strengthening the network that we have inside the institution. I am talking about external supervisors and I am talking about other services in UNISA – to encourage them to be part of us. We can have a close relationship with the academic literacy programme and refer students to them. I would like to see in the future that we also look after foreign students. It's really a soft spot for me because I would love them to study in French. We can also improve by providing financial support to students and I'm really trying to work hard to find some bursaries. But we can easily remove ourselves financially from the department, because it is a constraint at this stage that we depend so much on the department for capacity. We need to lift the visibility of the degree to a level that it is nationally or globally recognised. [Interviewee No 3]

Two interviewees suggested that the current system of support should merely be augmented by careful planning and said:

Well, I don't see the challenges as being so severe, that these cannot be resolved by proper planning. Students should be informed of the demands of the dissertation and be assisted to plan accordingly. Then we must plan the tasks of the support team in advance and try to stick to it. Because the student numbers are so huge, the moment you start messing with the planning, everything kinds of impacts and this creates more problems. Planning, planning, and planning. [Interviewee No 1]

Um, what students need most of the time is a word of encouragement. We thus need to plan on how, when and what to

communicate with and to them. So when they feel stuck, they can let us know so that we can assist them and they can progress in their studies. [Interviewee No 2]

4.9   A SYNTHESIS OF THE FINDINGS OF THE QUALITATIVE PHASE

The qualitative phase of this study yielded insights into how key staff members as providers and facilitators of student support understood the nature of the support that they gave. As mentioned before, the transformative-empowerment orientation that formed the basis of this study demanded an analysis of social and infrastructural factors and of social networks as important educational resources. Moreover, the use of Teddlie and Tashakkori's (2009:246) ABC+ matrix enabled the researcher to consider attitudinal, behavioural, cognitive and contextual factors. The application of the matrix to the findings as discussed above makes the following summary possible:

- **Attitudinal factors related to personnel's experiences and expectations of student support**: The above findings showed that the key informants generally held positive views on student support, although their expectations were that the support would drain limited resources (on the one hand) or act as a vehicle to draw greater attention to the degree and its staff (on the other hand)
- **Behavioural factors related to personnel's experiences and expectations of student support**: The key informants had different roles to play in student support. This, as well as their personal expectations of student support, influenced their behaviour. They narrated their roles in relation to typical encounters with students, thus reflecting on both their interpretations of their roles and their expected behaviour. Some saw their roles as being that of accounting for (and of possibly curbing) the use of resources, whereas others saw their roles as embracing support for the student as a whole person with different levels of needs

- **Cognitive factors related to personnel's experiences and expectations of student support**: The study found that the interviewees could differentiate between the strengths and weaknesses of support. Personal attention was the main strength, whereas lack of suitable channels for quick communication, the large student numbers and lack of overt recognition were narrated as important weaknesses

- **Contextual factors related to personnel's experiences and expectations of student support**: The above findings seem to suggest that staff held romanticised notions about the reasons for students' choice of the degree. Institutional barriers were identified, such as the need for more (and more varied) channels for quick communication, a lack of resources and conflicting expectations about further (and independent) growth of the degree programme.

Overall, the finding of the second phase concurs with the finding of the first phase that student support at the postgraduate level in an ODL environment requires a broad, deep, and lasting commitment to the welfare of the student as a whole person. However, it suggests that important institutional, interpersonal, intrapersonal and resource constraints make the full realisation of such support difficult.

4.10 CONCLUSION

The findings showed that the MA (Social Behaviour Studies in HIV/AIDS) students and staff tended to regard support in a positive light. In the next chapter, conclusions will be drawn based on three objectives as stated in chapter 1.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1   INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the study was to gauge the perceptions of second year MA students' and relevant personnel members' experiences of and attitudes to student support. A mixed methods research design comprising qualitative and quantitative approaches was used. In the section below, the main objectives of the study are listed and the findings are indicated. This is followed by a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the study and recommendations stemming from the findings.

5.2   OBJECTIVE 1: UNCOVERING EXPERIENCES OF AND ATTITUDES TO STUDENT SUPPORT

The findings showed that the students regarded support in a positive light and regarded it as sufficient. Only two students felt that the support was insufficient. Students felt that there were not enough resources for support, but four respondents felt that the support was not given in an even-handed fashion. Nine respondents gave positive ratings to the support offered with only one rating the support as poor.

Staff viewed support as a trajectory that begins with the student's first entry into the university and ends in graduation. They regarded ODL practices such as workshops, online discussion forums, official and non-official tutorial support material, telephone calls and face-to-face lectures as key features of support. Some concerns about "too much support" were uncovered as well as concerns about the resources required to offer it on a long-term basis to large numbers of students. Only two interviewees provided insights into empowerment as meaningful only when it is linked to change.

5.3 OBJECTIVE 2: DISCOVERING EXPRESSED NEEDS FOR SUPPORT IN THE DEGREE PROGRAMME

Students named literature review skills, skills in the coursework section of the degree and solid commitment to their studies as their major strengths. Inherent characteristics such as patience and commitment were regarded as keys to success at the MA level. Students' listing of their major weaknesses included concerns about their abilities in academic writing and poor time management. Only two students indicated that they had never used support during the academic year, whereas eleven used support. An important finding was that the students' expressed needs for support exceeded that of narrow logistical support in administrative matters. It seemed that their expressed support needs included needs for academic and research support.

Staff tended to romanticise the reasons for students enrolling for the degree. They regarded support as vital in reducing the distance for students, but expressed concerns about capacity and resources as well as about a lack of recognition by management of the importance of support.

5.4 OBJECTIVE 3: RECOMMENDING IMPROVEMENTS TO THE STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

Six students (46,2%) felt that a full-time tutor would enhance performance in the degree programme. The respondents suggested that they needed support beyond logistical or administrative concerns, such as financial support, more seminars, books, financial and research support. Suggestions for improvements included
- the appointment of more staff
- greater access to prescribed and recommended sources
- full-time mentoring and tutoring
- abandoning the coursework section of the degree programme
- developing newsletters and

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- having a more active involvement in online discussions in the MyUnisa environment.

Staff suggested
- streamlining support by cutting out duplication in key functions
- extending the support to an all-encompassing, grandiose undertaking
- strengthening the current system of support via careful planning.

By employing Teddlie and Tashakkori's (2009:246) ABC+ matrix, the researcher was able to uncover that there might be possible conflicting expectations of the degree and the amount and type of support offered as part of the degree programme not only between the staff and the students, but also among various staff members.

5.5   STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE STUDY

The researcher found the chosen transformative framework instrumental in gaining a better understanding of student support. The employment of a mixed methods research design enabled the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods. She was able to find answers to all her stated objectives.

Important weaknesses were the small sample sizes and the dilemma faced by the researcher in evaluating a programme of which she herself is a part. Small samples have been used in other informative studies of postgraduate student matters, such as by Agee and Smith (2011) and Crossouard (2008). However, these two weaknesses have an important link that will be explored below.

As far as the researcher's dual role of researcher and staff member in student support is concerned, she was acutely aware of the potential ethical and moral issues at stake. Ferguson, Yonge and Myrick (2004) speak of a fiduciary relationship between teaching staff and students where the former occupies a more powerful position and is entrusted to protect the best interests of the latter. Ferguson *et al* (2004) argue that such a relationship is

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central to learning situations and that trust is a key element of this relationship. Mindful of this, and of not treating students as a captive audience for research, the researcher remained true to the rules of informed consent and voluntary participation in the study. This led to a small sample for the students.

As far as interviews with key staff members were concerned, the researcher relied on following the ethical principles of respect for the dignity of the person and beneficence during the interviews; the careful transcription of the interviews; the coding of data and the extraction of vignettes to illustrate the findings. References to people by name and other personal information were not included in the quoted data vignettes. In her personal research diary, the researcher noted her feeling that each of the interviews with colleagues was difficult, yet insightful, open, honest and heartfelt. In this regard, Wolcott (1999:145-146) warns that "*it is easy to find ourselves 'using' our informants even when we try desperately not to do so*", but at the same time that "*it is perhaps more unsettling to realize how informants use us.*" The use of the quantitative phase to juxtapose and inform the qualitative phase as well as the use of Teddlie and Tashakkori's (2009: 246) ABC+ matrix, assisted greatly in keeping the analysis on track.

5.6   RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STUDENT SUPPORT

It is recommended that the researcher provide a debriefing session to key staff members about the key findings of the study. Issues such as the reasons for students enrolling for the degree; their expectations of student support and possible conflicting expectations among staff about the independent growth of the degree programme versus a sober look at available resources, should be critically discussed so as to find the best way forward. In this regard, valuable support can be given by the DCLD staff of Unisa as they also share a passion for student-centred tuition and learning. The unique needs of postgraduate students should become a central discussion point at departmental meetings and a postgraduate student support coordinator should be appointed.

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5.7   RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Student support should be a theme of ongoing research in the form of monitoring and evaluation at UNISA and in the department of Sociology. The researcher hopes that the findings and recommendations of the study will be used as a baseline for further planning for the department in this regard.

5.8   CONCLUSION

In this chapter the researcher presented a summary of findings according to the objectives of the study mentioned in chapter 1, discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the study and offered recommendations stemming from the findings for student support and for further research.

Unisa's Tuition Policy (2005) indicates that the university is student-centred; therefore, it provides students with appropriate support in an environment that is suitable for active learning. Roberts (2004: 12) suggests that UNISA faces a challenge to "*move swiftly, purposefully and productively to embrace the concept of learner support*". Prinsloo (2010a:10) suggests that "*Unisa can truly be proud of how student support has evolved over the years. The success of many students can be ascribed to the passion, commitment and care of a range of departments and individuals at Unisa. Student support at Unisa in its current state is the result of the hard work, passion, vision and commitment of a number of individuals who often worked against all odds.*" Whereas these documents and authors suggest that student support is vitally important for student success and for achieving sound pass and throughput rates, Mark Foo reminds us that "*empowering other people*" is part of realising our common humanity, because "*We are all in this life together, and helping others achieve their goals can get our own on track*".

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APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT LETTER FOR RESPONDENTS

STUDENT SUPPORT OFFERED TO STUDENTS IN THE MA (SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR STUDIES IN HIV/AIDS)

Dear 2nd year MA student

This is an invitation to participate in a study which will take place from 1 April 2008 to 1 May 2008. All I am asking is a few minutes of your time to answer a few simple questions. This letter outlines the purposes of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant.

The purposes of this study are to:

1. Test second-year MA students' experiences of and attitudes to the services rendered by student support in the Department of Sociology's Unit for Social and Behaviour Studies in HIV and AIDS
2. Gain insight into the needs of students for student support

The methods to be used to collect information for this study are explained below. From this information, I will write a report about student support.

I plan to email you a questionnaire by the beginning of April this year and gather completed questionnaires until the end of May 2008.

You are encouraged to ask any questions at any time about the nature of the study and the methods that I am using. Your suggestions and concerns are important to me; please contact me at any time at the telephone number listed below. Students who attended the orientation week in the last week of February have already indicated that they are willing to participate in this very important study.

My final report on this data will be submitted as a dissertation of limited scope for my degree. In addition, I will make a summary report available to all the research participants. I guarantee that the following conditions will be met:

1. Your real name will not be used at any point of information collection, or in the final write up of the data.
2. The completed questionnaires will be treated as highly confidential materials. Only I as the researcher will have access to the raw data. Your name will not appear on the questionnaire.
3. Your participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any point of the study, for any reason, and without any prejudice, and the information collected and records and reports written will be turned over to you.
4. You will receive a copy of the final report before it is handed in, so that you have the opportunity to suggest changes to the researcher, if necessary.

Your participation is crucially important to help us to continue improving the way we serve senior students in this programme.

Will you be willing to complete a questionnaire for this study? Yes		No	
Do you wish to receive a questionnaire via	Email	Snail mail	

I agree to the terms

Respondent _____ Date _____

Marie Matee

Academic Support: Department of Sociology

UNISA

Tel (012) 4296587   International +27 12 429 6587

Email:Mateem@unisa.ac.za

APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRE

STUDENT SUPPORT OFFERED TO STUDENTS IN THE MA (SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR STUDIES IN HIV/AIDS)

Thank you for taking a few minutes to complete this questionnaire. My name is Marie Matee. I am an MA Social Behaviour Studies in HIV/AIDS student at the University of South Africa. I am currently working on the dissertation of limited scope for my degree.

This questionnaire contains questions related to knowledge, attitudes, awareness, use of support and strengths and limitations of services rendered by student support. The purpose is to help us gain insight into the needs of students for student support.

Your answers are *confidential* and I do not need to know your name. Giving *honest information* will help me write a report about student support.

If you need to contact me, you can find me at:

Telephone number 012 4296720 or 012 4296587

Fax 012 429 6491

Email: Mateem@unisa.ac.za

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Please try to answer all the questions.
2. Encircle the code that best applies to your answer. If you answer the questionnaire electronically, please type an "x" next to the code that best applies to your answer.
3. Some questions will require you to write or type an answer in the space provided.

SECTION 1. BIOGRAPHICAL CHARACTERISTICS			
1	Gender	Male	1
		Female	2

		Age in years		
2	How old are you?			
3	Marital status	Married	1	
		Single	2	
		Divorced	3	
		Widow/widower	4	
		Other (specify).	5	
4	Race	Black	1	
		Coloured	2	
		White	3	
		Asian	4	
		Other (please specify)	5	
5	Which language do you speak most frequently at home?	IsiXhosa	1	
		Isindebele	2	
		IsiZulu	3	
		English	4	
		Sepedi	5	
		Sesotho	6	
		Afrikaans	7	
		Setswana	8	
		Siswati	9	
		Tshivenda	10	
		Hindi/Gujarat/Tamil/Urdu	11	
		Other (please specify)	12	
		Yes		1
				2

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6	Are you employed?	No	
		Public sector	1
		Private sector	2
		NGO	3
7	Where do you work?	Self-employed	4
		Job Title: …………………………………	
8	What is your job title?	Country of birth……………………………	
9	Please indicate your country of birth	Country……………………………	
10.1	Where do you currently reside? Please indicate country, town/city and type of area	Town/City/Area name…………..	
		Rural	1
10.2	Town/City currently reside	Urban	2
10.3	Type of area		

SECTION 2: KNOWLEDGE QUESTIONS		
11.	How did you first get to know about the Social Behaviour Studies in HIV/AIDS Programme?	
	Through the media	1
	Through friends	2
	Through the UNISA brochure	3
	Through a relative	4
	Other (please specify).	5
12.	Is the University of South Africa the only institution that offers a Social Behaviour Studies in HIV/AIDS programme?	
	Yes	1
	No	2
	I do not know	3
13.	What prompted you to apply for this course? I applied for this course because: _____ _____ _____ _____	
14.	What is the difference (if any) between HIV and AIDS? The difference is: _____ _____ _____ _____	
15a.	Are you active in workplace- or community-based HIV and AIDS programmes?	
	Yes	1
	No	2
15b.	Briefly describe your contribution to workplace- or community-based HIV and AIDS programmes.	

	My contribution is:		
	_____ _____ _____ _____		
16.	How is HIV transmitted?	YES	NO
	Through sexual intercourse	1	2
	Through mosquito bites	1	2
	Through blood transfusion	1	2
	By touching an HIV-infected person	1	2
	By sharing an eating utensil with an HIV-infected person	1	2
	Through an infected mother to her baby	1	2
17.	What, in your own opinion, are the main factors driving the HIV and AIDS pandemic? The main factors are: : _____ _____ _____		

SECTION 3: ATTITUDES	
18. I enjoy being a 2^(nd) year MA Social Behaviour Studies in HIV and AIDS student	

18.	I enjoy being a 2nd year MA Social Behaviour Studies in HIV and AIDS student	
	Strongly agree	1
	Agree	2
	Disagree	3
	Strongly disagree	4
19.	I would rate the student support offered by the Department of Sociology's Unit for Social Behaviour Studies in HIV and AIDS as:	
	Excellent	1
	Good	2
	Adequate	3
	Poor	4
20.	I believe there is sufficient support for students in the Unit.	
	Strongly agree	1
	Agree	2
	Disagree	3

		Strongly disagree	4
21.	The Unit lacks enough (human and financial) resources for the smooth running of the programme		
		Strongly agree	1
		Agree	2
		Disagree	3
		Strongly disagree	4
		Don't know/Cannot judge	5
22.a	The Unit offers equitable (the same in quantity and quality) support for all students in all academic activities.		
		Strongly agree	1
		Agree	2
		Disagree	3
		Strongly disagree	4
		Don't know/Cannot judge	5
		Same quantity	1
22.b		Same quality	2
23.	I am satisfied with the support provided by the Unit to 2nd year students		
		Strongly agree	1
		Agree	2
		Disagree	3
		Strongly disagree	4
24.	The staff of the Unit are always reluctant to assist students in their daily enquiries		
		Strongly agree	1
		Agree	2
		Disagree	3
		Strongly disagree	4
SECTION 4. NEEDS FOR STUDENT SUPPORT			
25.	What are YOUR OWN strengths and limitations as a master's student in the programme?		
	My main strengths are:		

	My main weaknesses are:
26.	What in your opinion should the main functions of student support be?

27.	How often do you use the Unit's support system to assist you in your studies?	
	Very often (almost daily)	1
	Regularly often (not daily, but more often than monthly)	2
	Irregularly (only when I have a serious issue)	3
	Never	4
28.	Please describe in your own words the last time (that is the most recent incident) in which you made use of student support. Tell us why you used student support, what your problem or enquiry was and how it was resolved.	

29.	List names of support activities provided by the Department of Sociology's Unit of Social Behaviour Studies in HIV and AIDS. _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____

SECTION 5. STRENTGHS AND WEAKNESSES		
30.	Do you regard the use of support provided by the Unit as essential to pass the requirements of the degree?	
	Yes, most definitely	1
	Yes, probably	2
	No, probably not	3
	No, definitely not	4
	Don't know	5
31.	Please give your MAIN reason for your response to Question 30 _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____	
32.	What other types of support do you require? Please list THREE in order of priority starting with the most important one. 1. _____ _____ 2. _____ _____ 3. _____ _____	
33.	List THREE strengths of the student support offered by the Unit. Please list them in	

	order of priority starting with the most important one.
	1.
	2.
	3.
34.	List THREE weaknesses of the student support offered by the Unit. Please list them in order of priority starting with the most important one.
	1.
	2.
	3.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION

APPENDIX C: EXAMPLE OF AN INFORMED CONSENT LETTER FOR KEY INFORMANTS

Dear XXX

I kindly invite you to participate as a key informant interviewee in my study entitled "Student support offered to students in the MA (Social Behaviour Studies in HIV/AIDS).

The purpose of this study is to gauge 2nd year MA students' experiences of and attitudes to the services rendered by student support in the Department of Sociology's Unit for Social Behaviour Studies in HIV and AIDS at the University of South Africa (UNISA). The study is intended to gain insight into the needs of students for student support.

The main question guiding this study is: How do MA students in the second year of enrolment perceive and experience the assistance offered by student support in the Department of Sociology's Unit for Social and Behaviour Studies in HIV/AIDS? My operational definition of support is: An activity of providing a service to a particular group or person. Your participation in this study is crucially important to help us continue improving the way we serve senior students in this programme.

I guarantee that the following conditions will be met:
- This is a master-level study conducted by me
- The information provided will be used for the purpose of the study which is under the supervision of the University of South Africa
- Your participation in this research is voluntary
- Only I as the researcher will have access to the raw data
- As you were deliberately chosen for this part of the study because you are the XXXX for the programme, this interview will be tape-recorded.
- It will be my responsibility to transcribe the discussion and no one else will have access to the recording. I intend to use verbatim transcriptions and to use quotations to illustrate my conclusions and findings
- You are kindly requested to treat our discussion as confidential
- The discussion will take 30 minutes

- I can make my transcription of our discussion available to you if so asked.

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time about the nature of the study and the methods that I am using. Your suggestions and concerns are important to me; please contact me at any time at the telephone number and email address listed below. Your participation and support will be highly appreciated. Please complete the questions below and return the letter to me via email. I shall contact you in person after receipt of your reply to set a date and time for our interview.

Will you be willing to be interviewed as a key informant for this study?   Yes_____ No____

Do you grant permission to be quoted directly?   Yes____   No_____

Key informant _____   Date_____

Yours faithfully

Marie Matee

Tel: 078 826 6021

Fax: 012 429 6491

E-mail: Mateem@unisa.ac.za

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to take part in this study.

1. Briefly explain your understanding of HIV and AIDS.

2. How do HIV and AIDS affect institutions of higher learning?

3. What is your opinion of the way in which the Department of Education/Higher Education is dealing with HIV and AIDS?

4. Please describe your main contribution to the implementation and development of MA Social Behaviour Studies in HIV/AIDS Programme in the Department of Sociology.

5. What are your views concerning the MA Social behaviour Studies in HIV/AIDS programme?
Probe: Do you think that the MA Social Behaviour Studies in HIV/AIDS programme is important in the fight against the HIV and AIDS epidemic?

6. What in your opinion are the main factors that prompted the students to apply for this course?

7. Are you aware of any other institution of higher learning in South Africa that offers a Social Behaviour Studies in HIV/AIDS programme? If any, please tell me more about them.

8. What in your opinion is student support?

9. What in your opinion should be the main function of student support?

10. What are the current support activities that are provided by the Department of Sociology's Unit for Social Behaviour Studies in HIV/AIDS?

11. In what way has this programme affected the relationship between you and the students?

12. Tell me about a typical student support encounter that you witnessed or were part of recently.

13. What do you think are the main strengths and weaknesses of the student support offered by the unit?

14. What in your own opinion can be done to improve student support?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR CO-OPERATION.