

**LEARNER SUPPORT IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING CONTEXT:  
A CASE STUDY OF ABET PROGRAMMES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH  
AFRICA**

By

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for  
the degree of

**Doctor of Education**

in the subject

**Curriculum Studies**

at the

University of South Africa

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November 2012

## ABSTRACT

The recent global growth and popularity of open and distance learning (ODL) has been attributed to its advantages, such as flexibility for students who wish to study while working. Moreover, ODL is an effective tool in extending participation to students from less privileged social groups who are unreachable due to geographic location or cannot access higher education due to diverse factors, such as financial constraints or domestic arrangements. In the light of this, this study investigated learner support in the Department of Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) at the University of South Africa (Unisa), the largest, dedicated ODL institution in South Africa. A review of literature identified the Community of Inquiry model proposed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2001) as useful in this context and I used it as a conceptual framework for the empirical inquiry that I undertook.

A mixed method approach comprising two consecutive phases was employed to investigate the research questions. A self-designed questionnaire was used to gather quantitative data from a random sample of 400 students registered for the ABET Diploma module (Phase One) followed by face to face interviews with selected lecturers and students (Phase Two). The scope of the study was limited to ABET lecturers, ABET diploma students and to selected Unisa learner support systems, such as myUnisa which includes a web-based discussion forum.

The findings of the inquiry were presented and discussed under three main headings: the findings of Phase One, the findings of Phase Two and a summary in which the findings of the two phases were integrated where appropriate. The themes that emerged from the questionnaire and the interviews demonstrate clearly that learner support in the ABET Department is crucial in ensuring learner success. Interlinking themes are as follows: the context of the students, levels of computer literacy, accessibility of Unisa learner support systems, student motivation and time management. Many ABET students live in remote areas of the country and have little or no access to internet facilities. However, the majority of students agreed that they would like to interact more with other students through myUnisa in future. Lecturers and students agreed that myUnisa was a vital tool in teaching the students online; yet both students and lecturers still regarded contact discussion classes as the most important form of learner support. The findings suggested that the distance between the

university and the student still has to be reduced more to ensure that student support reaches all students equitably.

Furthermore the results of the study confirm the findings of similar research regarding student support to ODL students which indicates that, in spite of limitations, learner support in ODL has the potential to improve the success rate of students. The study corroborated related research that ODL institutions have a responsibility to continue exploring strategies to reduce the workload of academics and offer them continuous training and support so that they are able to fulfil the roles required for the effective design and implementation of learner support systems.

## **KEY WORDS**

Open Distance Learning (ODL)

University of South Africa (Unisa)

Learner Support

Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET)

Information Communication Technologies (ICT)

Group discussion classes

Tutor system

Online learning

**Student no: 7643284**

**DECLARATION**

I declare that **LEARNER SUPPORT IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING CONTEXT: A CASE STUDY OF ABET PROGRAMMES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA** is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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SIGNATURE

Mr PG Baloyi

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DATE

**DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my father, the late Mr Ngwana Risimati Jack Baloyi for always encouraging me to work very hard and to pursue a doctoral degree study.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I acknowledge with gratitude the following people, without whose valuable contribution my study would never have been possible.

- My supervisor Dr PL Mabunda, for her positive encouragement and expert guidance.
- My Co-Supervisor Prof ME Makoe for her valuable contribution.
- My dear Mother, Mamaila for her motherly love and support, my brothers and sisters.
- My wife Makhanani and children.
- Mr A Masenge from the Bureau for Market Research who assisted me with quantitative data analysis.
- Prof M van Wyk who assisted with the quantitative interpretation of the data.
- The University of South Africa for assisting me with funds during my study period.
- My colleagues at the ABET department and the College of Education at UNISA
- The students who provided valuable data.
- Prof Elearnor Lemmer for assisting with the editing of the thesis.

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**ACRONYMS**

ABET	Adult Basic Education and Training
BMR	Bureau for Market Research
CEDU	College of Education
CHS	College of Human Sciences
COL	Commonwealth of Learning
CD	Compact Disc
CHE	Council on Higher Education
DoE	Department of Education
DVD	Digital Video Disc
DE	Distance Education
FTE	Further Teacher Education
HDABE	Higher Diploma in Adult Basic Education
ICT	Information Communication Technology
LS	Learner Support
ODL	Open and Distance Learning
ODEL	Open Distance and Elearning
OL	Open Learning
STLC	Senate Tuition and Learner Support
SMS	Short Message Service
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
UNISA	University of South Africa

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

#### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

The concept of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is very broad and can be defined in various ways. Hence it is important to point out that there is no single all-embracing definition. Freeman (2004:6) defines ODL as an amalgamation of two approaches which focus on expanding access to learning. Moon, Leach and Stevens (2005:218) define ODL as the open learning approaches, which, when combined with distance education methodologies, are often referred to collectively as open and distance learning. According to Commonwealth of Learning (2000) ODL is: “correspondence, home study, independent learning ... flexible learning or distributed learning.” In the ODL philosophy and practice, ODL represents approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners (UNESCO, 2002: 7). Common elements on which many authors agree in their definition are the combination of Distance Education (DE) and Open Learning, access and separation between the lecturer and the learner.

In generally, the goal of ODL is to widen participation and to overcome geographical, social and economic barriers (Kelly & Mills, 2007:149). The Ministry of Education in South Africa has identified ODL as a system that should extend educational opportunities and provide access to individuals who do not have the opportunity to study fulltime. The White Paper 3 - the National Plan for higher education (DoE, 2001a) advocates an increase in the general participation rate in public higher education in South Africa, with the aim of facilitating lifelong learning, developing the skills base of the country and redressing historical inequities in the provision of education. Other policies and reports promulgated to make ODL a reality are the DoE (1996); CHE (2002/2004) and NCHE Report (1996). Badat (2004) adds that through ODL access is presented to people who would not have the opportunity to study fulltime because of work commitments, personal and social circumstances, geographical distance or poor quality or inadequate prior learning experiences. The South African Government aims to broaden the participation rate in higher education even in remote rural areas. In ODL contexts lecturer and learner are at a distance from each other. Consequently



learners experience isolation due to separation from their institution, lecturers and fellow students (Rumble 2000:1). ODL has been successful in increasing the number of students but unsuccessful in obtaining satisfactory throughput rates. Part of the reason is that students are isolated from their teachers and some students are unprepared for higher education studies.

Unisa has been identified by the Ministry of Education as an ODL institution that should help in widening participation. A brief introduction to Unisa is presented in the next chapter. However, the other ODL institutions are faced with a number of challenges including drop-out, student support etc. Makina (2008:1) suggests that although ODL has been acclaimed for providing access to higher education for students previously denied this privilege, this formal admission has not been matched with adequate learner support strategies to ensure success.

The students in ODL often feel isolated as they are studying on their own. Boyle et al. (2010:122) state there can be particularly acute issues in the distance learning environment where students often report feelings of isolation, little sense of connection and belonging and are challenged to maintain engagement in and motivation for learning.

Perraton (2000) argue that ODL institutions have high drop-out and low pass rates. Yet, according to Daniel et al. (2009:24), ODL is an effective way of reaching out to large student numbers. Against this background, this study investigated Unisa ODL system with specific reference to the provision of learner support and an ABET programme.

One of the critical components in ODL is learner support. Learner support has frequently been identified as particularly important for student success in ODL. According to Simpson (2002), Tait (2000) and Thorpe (2002), learner support is a broad term referring to the services provided to distance learners so that they can overcome barriers to learning and complete their studies successfully.

Learner support is defined in different ways in the distance and online learning literature (Brindley, Walti & Zawacki-Richter 2004). It might cover learning materials, teaching and tutoring and non-academic elements, administrative aspects, guidance and counselling. In this study learner support refers to all kinds of services including face to face teaching during group discussions or tutoring. Dzakiria (2005:95) and Kelly and Mills (2007:149) add that learner support has frequently been identified by open learning institutions as being of

particular importance for student success in ODL. All these scholars are of the view that learner support is learner-centred and crucial for learner success in ODL.

In 2008 Unisa introduced an ODL policy which changed the focus of tuition to include technology and multimedia interaction. In responding to the global call, Unisa uses various technologies to reach out to its students and provide them with opportunities to learn through the various technologies. However, a number of challenges face Unisa lecturers and students in using the learner support systems to reach out students. Anderson (2008) and Aluko et al. (2011) argue that ICT can enhance traditional learner support systems.

According to Chen and Chen (2008:12), it is well recognised that distance education through technology has the potential to provide access at reasonable cost through sharing the quality education resources developed and used in the major cities.

The study investigates the provision of learner support in the Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) programme at a specific university, the University of South Africa (Unisa). Extensive literature has been reviewed on the development of ODL as a mode of higher education provision, the characteristics of ODL, the rationale for ODL provision, the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in ODL, learner support in ODL and the state of ABET in the South African and Unisa contexts.

The ABET department provides a range and mix of learner support services. The learner support systems available in ABET are group discussions, tutorials, workshops, myUnisa, practical work in ABET centres, telephone support, feedback on assignments, study groups etc. The ODL model entails a student-centred approach that is based on integrated systems and engaged learning. The technologies, such as telephone, multimedia CDs and DVDs, video and audio conferencing, SMSs, cell phones, e-mail and discussion forums via myUnisa have been proposed to offer new possibilities for supporting learning at Unisa. Unisa has regional centres throughout the provinces. However the ABET students are mostly in rural areas. They have to travel to cities and towns in order to access learner support services.

These and other views presented in this thesis influenced the researcher to conduct the study.

## **1.2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY**

This study is a descriptive and interpretive case study of learner support in the specific ODL context for the ABET programme. The two theories that have a significant influence on adult teaching and learning are those espoused by Malcolm Knowles and Paulo Freire. Knowles conceptualised the notion of andragogy and Freire, learner-centredness. The Community of Inquiry (CoI) model, originally proposed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) served as an additional conceptual framework for the study. The theoretical foundation of this framework is based upon the work of John Dewey (1938). At its core, Dewey (1933) viewed inquiry as a practical endeavour. The framework has been adopted and adapted by researchers worldwide and used to inform research and practice online and blended learning (Swan and Ice 2010). What makes blended learning particularly effective is its ability to facilitate a CoI. The researcher used this model as a guide for the empirical study and categorised the quantitative and qualitative questions under teaching, social and cognitive presences.

## **1.3 THE PROBLEM STATEMENT**

According to Rumble (2000) Distance Education institutions have been instrumental in developing support services that will assist their students to perform. The focus on providing student support services was driven by the need to address the high drop-out rates that were associated with correspondence education. The number of students in the department has dropped since the institute became an academic department. One of the major challenges facing distance education institutions is to provide support for “isolated students who are left to fend for themselves (Bridley and Paul 2004: 40). The distance education students are separated from the lecturers. The distance between the students and the institution is a worrying factor. The effects of such isolation on distance learners can inhibit any possibility for engagement with teachers, study material and peers (Simpson 2002). The literature reviewed has shown that such isolation of distance students can be broken by proper provision of student support (Ibid.).

Moore (2012:167) ideally believed all students should receive some sort of orientation when they enter a program. This too will reduce the need for individual counselling later. It is particularly important to inform people of the time demands that accompany distance learning and to encourage them to think about how they will fit this in with their interests and

obligations. According to Anderson (2008) understanding of students is a prerequisite for knowledge, their learning environment, and their cultural attributes are starting points in the development of the student-centred support services.

In South African context since 1994, the various government policy papers have outlined a number of strategies to redress the imbalances created by the apartheid system. According to Council of Higher Education (CHE) (2004) one of these strategies was to improve access for poorer students to institutions of higher learning. According to the 1995 National Commission Distance Education report, distance education institutions have not been successful in enabling learners to perform to their maximum potential. This is a challenge to ABET students. Glennie and Bialobrzaska (2006) emphasise that in correspondence education, distance education students receive study material-sometimes only a wrap – around to a textbook which they must purchase separately, and their next engagement with the institution is when they sit for the examination.

The National Council of Higher Education Report (NCHER) (1996) has cited distance education as a critical player in redressing the imbalances of the past by removing barriers to access and success. The Ministry of Education in South Africa reported: “These dropout rates are unacceptable and they represent a huge wastage of resources, both human and financial ... and are likely to be an impediment in achieving the economic development goals of the Government (DoE 2001:21).

Badat (2005:202) warns that, “Unless serious attended attention is paid to the quality of distance education provision programs, equality of opportunity and outcomes of historically disadvantaged students will be compromised as students graduate with underdeveloped knowledge, competencies and skills. This present challenges ABET students in the department as the majority of them come from the rural provinces of South Africa.

To provide support to its students, Unisa has built learning centres in the provinces of South Africa. However the majority of the ABET students are in rural areas and they struggle to access the resources of student support provided to them by the university. The ABET department is concerned about addressing the inequalities that exist especially in rural areas. Therefore it is imperative to make learning in the department student-centred.

According to Qakisa-Makoe (2005:44) learners, like everybody else, need support as they go through life, especially when going through the big challenge of attending a university. The purpose of the student support is to guide and support the students to succeed in their studies. The university education seems to be a challenge to diverse ABET students who mainly come from rural areas. They come from rural areas where there are poor teaching and learning resources. The 2001 National Plan for Higher Education states that higher education institutions must increase access to previously disadvantaged people in order to redress past inequalities.

The ABET students come from mainly rural provinces of the Eastern Cape and Limpopo province. Unisa seems to be to be the only ODL institution in South Africa which caters mainly for students who come from rural areas. Qakisa-Makoe (2005:43) says most of Unisa's African students come from homes where they are first generation learners in higher education and they are expected to learn complete new material independently and to adjust to new ways of learning in a distance learning environment.

Based on this, this is the problem the researcher wants to address in this study. The importance of learner support in ODL is crucial and many scholars reviewed above argue that it has a role to play in increasing the success rate of the students. The relative low pass rate and dropout is a cause for concern for Unisa. The enrolment for ABET students has dropped in recent years. Although there are best practices globally at Unisa learner support strategies and multiple challenges face the students and lecturers regarding learner support. Unisa uses technology to reach out to its students who are in urban and rural areas. However, problems face students and lecturers in using technology for teaching and learning. This prompted the researcher to explore the perceptions, views, opinions, and attitude of the ABET students on the use of learner support structures. The learner support structures at Unisa depend on Information Communication Technology (ICT), tutorial classes and group discussion classes. The main research question identified in this study project is formulated as follows:

**What is the nature of learner support in ABET programme?** To address the research question, it is imperative to answer the following sub questions:

- What are the common theories and approaches to learner support in ODL context?

- What are the common barriers which impede the use of online technologies for learner support and learning?
- What are the attitudes and experiences of Unisa ABET students and lecturers on learner support?
- What recommendations can be made for the improvement of learner support at UNISA in general and for ABET students in particular?

#### **1.4 AIM AND OBJECTIVES**

The main aim of the study was to investigate how ODL systems at the University of South Africa provide for learner support. Objectives of the study are as follows:

- To investigate common theories and approaches to learner support in ODL context as presented in the literature.
- To explore ABET lecturers and students' attitudes and experiences at Unisa in the use of learner support strategies and to investigate challenges.
- To identify common barriers which impede the use of online technologies for learner support and learning.
- To offer recommendations for the improvement of learner support for Unisa students in general and for ABET students in particular.

#### **1.5 THE RESEARCHER'S POSITION**

The researcher completed his studies at Unisa while teaching at primary and secondary schools in Limpopo Province. Other relevant work experience includes positions held by the researcher as a tutor in Teacher Education at the University of the North-West and currently as a lecturer working in the ABET department, UNISA. Thus the researcher has had personal experience of ODL instruction and its related challenges as a student and as a lecturer.

#### **1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

In the light of the background given above, the study is significant for the following reasons. The literature reviewed indicates that ODL focuses on removing barriers to access to higher

education, particularly with regard to students who live in disadvantaged and rural areas where learner support is central to student success (Badat 2005; Thorpe 2001; Dzakira 2005; Kelly and Mills 2007). The study was informed by ways of learner support through e-learning in general and makes suggestions for the appropriate use of ICT for providing learner support to ODL in all departments at UNISA.

## **1.7 AN OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH DESIGN**

The research project follows a case study design. The case study approach is not a method as such, but a research strategy in which the researcher aims to study one case in depth (Burton & Bartlett 2009: 63). Yin (2003) defines a case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon. The case study approach is especially useful in situations where contextually conditions of the event being studied are critical and where the researcher has no control over the events as they unfold. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) see the primary defining features of a case study as being “multiplicity of perspectives where are rooted in a specific context. The researcher used quantitative and qualitative research methods to investigate the experiences of Unisa students who are registered for the Higher Diploma in Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET). The study is a qualitative design but the researcher also used quantitative to deepen his understanding of the phenomenon by using more data collection strategies. No hypothesis was formulated for the study. The research project was both explorative and descriptive and aimed at exploring strategies for the aim of improving support for students in ODL.

O’ Leary (2004:159) claims that the quantitative method refers to the research design, which is structured, predetermined, formal and specific questions are rigid once empirical investigations start. It uses experiential techniques and research methods that generally include questionnaires. On the other hand qualitative methods gather in-depth and elaborate information from a small personally sampled group of people. The two methods were used to support each other.

In phase one (the quantitative component) comprised a survey of students’ opinions and the challenges faced by them. The researcher carried out a random sample of 400 students (n= 400) from a total number of 1 808 students enrolled in the Higher Diploma in Adult Basic Education and Training. Due to financial and time constraints, it was not possible for the

researcher to include the entire population enrolled for the course. The sample was representative of the following racial groups: African, Coloured, Indians and White students. A standardised questionnaire was mailed to the respondents and this comprised mainly of closed questions with a limited number of open-ended questions. This questionnaire covered a wide range of topics on learner support. Advantages of the questionnaire were that it could be mailed to students and that standardised questions were easily quantifiable.

In phase two (the qualitative component), the researcher used purposive sampling. The sample comprised fifteen ABET students and ten lecturers teaching in the ABET department at UNISA. McMillan and Schumacher (2006:319) explain purposeful sampling as the strategy of selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Thus, in this study the researcher sought participants who were judged as being able to answer the issues raised by the research question. Gorard (2001:10) points out that the purpose of sampling in qualitative research is to use a relatively small number of cases to find out about a much larger number of issues. In semi-structured interviews the researcher spoke to the participants face-to-face according to an open-ended interview guide.

### **1.7.1 Data analysis**

The data from the completed questionnaires were analysed by the researcher with the help of the statistician from the Bureau of Market Research, UNISA. The SPSS statistical package was used to analyse data captured from questionnaire responses. Analysis undertaken included frequency tables, means calculations, graphs and the Cronbach Alpha. According to Punch (2003:64) a description analysis of all the main variables is done by focussing on distribution statements. Tables were used to present the results.

The researcher recorded, transcribed and analysed the in-depth interviews. At the end of the interviews the audio tapes were transcribed and the data examined for key issues raised by participants in response to each topic. From the key issues, patterns were noted and data were categorised and discussed accordingly. Qualitative data from the interviews which correspond with the survey were integrated. Patterns emerging from the data were noted and findings were interpreted.



## **1.7.2 Reliability and validity**

The scale reliability and Cronbach Alpha coefficients validating the internal consistency reliability of the six constructs investigated on different teaching presences and learner support in ODL were performed. The reliability coefficient of the various presences and support of the constructs was above .8 which indicated that the questionnaire tool was highly reliable. Lastly, the findings from the data collected were compared and integrated to achieve the aim of the study.

## **1.8 DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS**

Key terms used in the study were defined in this section. Full discussion of these terms is included in the literature study (Chapters 2 and 3).

### **1.8.1 Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET)**

The Department of Education released the Adult Basic Education and Training Act (ABET), Number 52 of 2000 on 15 December, 2000. The Act seeks to regulate adult basic education and training; to provide for the establishment, governance and funding of public adult learning centres (PALCs); to provide for the registration of private adult learning centres; to provide for quality assurance and quality promotion in adult basic education and training; to provide for transitional arrangements; and to provide for matters connected therewith (Government Gazette No. 21881, Act No. 52, 2000 Adult Basic Education and Training Act, 2000) (Ibid.).

Adult Basic Education and Training is the general conceptual foundation towards lifelong learning and development, comprising knowledge, skills and attitudes required for social, economic and political participation and transformation applicable to a range of contexts. ABET is flexible, developmental and targeted at the specific needs of particular audiences and, ideally provides access to nationally recognized certificates. The policy is itself shaped by broader education policy represented in the White Paper of 1995, the National Education Policy Act of 1996 and the South African Qualifications Act of 1995. The department has through its Adult Education and Training (AET) Directorate engaged in a number of activities to build up an ABET system that enables ABET provision based upon principles and practices

of equity, redress, development, reconstruction, access, integration, partnerships, sustainable use of resources, a flexible curriculum, outcomes based standards of attainment, the recognition of prior learning and cost effectiveness (Ibid.).

ABET implies more than just literacy. It is intended to serve a range of social, economic and developmental roles and it is also viewed as fundamental to bring about the dignity and self-esteem of the learner (Ibid.).

### **1.8.2 Open Learning**

Open Learning is an approach that provides learning in a flexible manner, organised around the geographical, social and time constraints of the learner rather than an institution (Bates 1995: 27). Open Learning has primarily been described as a goal, or educational policy, the provision of learning, in a flexible manner, built around the geographical, social and time constraints of individual learners, rather than those of educational institutions (Siddiqui 2004:170).

Perraton (2000), Mhlanga (2008:11) and UNISA (2008) argue that the heart of Open Learning is enhancement of educational access and achievement through the removal of all unnecessary barriers to learning. It also entails an approach to learning that is learner-centred, rather than teacher or content-centred, and geared to meet the idiosyncratic needs and preference of individual learners.

### **1.8.3 Open and Distance Learning**

Sonnekus, Louw and Wilson (2006:46) and Seletse (2002:87) define ODL as implying a shift from content to learner. However, Freeman (2004:6) defines ODL as an amalgamation of two approaches which focus on expanding access to learning. Unesco (2002:7) states in ODL philosophy and practice that the terms represent approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from constraints of time and place and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners.

Unisa defines ODL as a multidimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, educational and communicative distance between student and institution,

student and academics, student and courseware and student and peers. ODL focuses on removing barriers to access learning, flexibility of learning provision, student-centredness, supporting students and constructing learning programmes with the expectation that student can succeed (Unisa 2008:2).

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) (2000) maintains that there is no one definition of ODL. Rather, there are many approaches to defining the term. Most definitions, however, pay attention to the following characteristics: a way of providing learning opportunities characterised by the separation of teacher and learner in time or place, or both time and place, and learning that is certified in some way by an institution or agency. The use of a variety of media is employed, including print and electronic two-way communications that allow learners and tutors to interact, the possibility of occasional face-to-face meetings and a separated division of labour in the production and delivery of courses.

Moon, Leach and Stevens (2005: 218) define ODL as the open learning approach, which when combined with distance-education methodologies, is often referred to collectively as open and distance learning. Waghid (2005), Perraton (2000:7) and Ramanujan (2002:53) are of the opinion that ODL often makes use of several different media. Students may learn through print, broadcasts, the internet, through occasional meetings with tutors and with other students, cassette recordings, computer-based materials, computer interaction, video conferencing and face to face learning. The term ODL has become an internationally preferred label of innovative, non-traditional modes of delivery whose defining purpose is to overcome barriers to access (Ibid.).

#### **1.8.4 Learner support**

Learner support is a broad concept and can be viewed from the different angles. Garrison and Brynton (1987), Tait (1995) and Thorpe (1998 in Lee 2003:182) define learner support as rather a broad concept and its definition has varied from one researcher to another. Some consider resources and interactivity as critical in defining learner support whereas others put more emphasis on individualisation or customisation of services.

Thorpe (2001:3) says learner support is the area within transformations in the nature and the scale of activities made feasible by on line teaching, generating widespread change in

pedagogics and learning communities and access institutions as a whole in ODL. Thorpe defines learner support as the means through which individuals are able to make use of institution provision (Thorpe 2002:106). Learner support has developed as a technical term for a particular set of practices, which have been developed within ODL, and it is this technical meaning that this study is concerned with. The everyday meaning of support, particularly the idea that all aspects of ODL should facilitate learning and the learner's well-being, is still relevant but not the study's primary concern.

Unisa (2008) defines the term learner support as the range of activities which complement the mass production materials which make up the most well-known elements in ODL. Printed course units, television and radio programmes and computer programmes, which replace the lecture as a means of delivery, and offer so much both in terms of social and geographical access and in terms of cost-effectiveness, support students in central ways. However, Unisa highlights that student support is a generic term that is applied to a range of services that are developed to assist students to meet their learning objectives and to gain the knowledge and skills to be successful in their studies.

## **1.9 SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

The study is limited to learner support, ODL and ABET students specifically. The researcher is looking at Unisa which is the only single mode institution for distance learners in South Africa and not the contact higher institutions. The study investigated the common theories and approaches of distance education, ODL, the common barriers which impede the use of online technologies for learner support and learning.

## **1.10 LIMITATION OF THE STUDY**

The scope of the study is limited to ABET lecturers, ABET diploma students and to selected learner support systems and structures. It is a doctoral study which took three to four years and could not cover all ODL learner support systems, strategies, theories. The researcher could not explore all the related literature review of the study due to time constraints. This study is mainly qualitative although quantitative was used as well to contextualise the study. Some researchers argue that there is a tension between qualitative and quantitative researchers. This was taken into consideration when the investigation was conducted. The researcher overcame

the expertise of combining quantitative and qualitative research by getting assistance from the Unisa Bureau for Market Research services. The analysis and interpretations were done by the researcher and with the help of statisticians from the Unisa College of Education.

## **1.11 ORGANISATION OF THE STUDY**

This chapter provides a background of learner support in ODL context at the Unisa ABET department. The study was positioned within the context of ODL in learner support globally, South African context, Unisa context and the ABET department. The problem statement was discussed and questions and aims of the study stated. The research design and the methodology were briefly explained and justified to achieve the aim of the study.

Chapter 2 focused on international literature of ODL, Learner Support and ABET. I explained the history and development of DE, rationale for ODL provision, development of DE and ODL in selected countries, ODL and ABET in African context and Unisa, and trends and challenges of learner support systems in ODL.

Chapter 3 discussed ODL and online theories underpinning the study.

Chapter 4 lays down the research methods and design, choice of methodology, justification for using mixed method, data collection, interviews, and data analysis, reliability and validity and ethical issues in research.

In Chapter 5 the findings of the study were presented and discussed. The qualitative data were analysed according to qualitative strategies and the emergent issues and patterns were discussed. The findings of phase one which correspond with those in phase two are integrated.

In this concluding chapter 6 I summarise the literature study, findings of the study, recommend the learner support practices based on the analyses and offered suggestions for areas of further study in learner support in ODL context for the ABET department.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **THE DEVELOPMENT OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING**

#### **2.1 BACKGROUND TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION**

According to Heydenrich and Prinsloo (2010:5) the history of Distance Education (DE) has been documented and researched in the past. Although ODL is discussed in the same breath as Distance Education, according to Belawati and Baggaley (2009), not all DE institutions embrace ODL, whereas all ODL institutions are also regarded as DE institutions. Pityana (2008) and Wilson 2002 refers to Wedermeyer, who is considered to be the father of American distance education. Institutionalised DE has existed for a century and in Europe it also commenced via correspondence courses. Pityana (2008:2) supports the above claim. The beginning of modern correspondence education can be traced to 1728, when an advertisement in the Boston Gazette was placed by Caleb Phillips, teacher of a new method of shorthand, seeking students for weekly lessons by correspondence. Isaac Pitman also taught shorthand in Great Britain via the correspondence method in 1840. The development of the postal service in the 19<sup>th</sup> century led to the growth of commercial correspondence colleges with a nationwide reach.

Waghid (2001:132) holds that DE, like any other concept, has a distinct meaning grounded in a historical framework. Therefore it is important to probe the historical context of DE in order to understand the concept of ODL fully from different perspectives. Shwing-wai (in Reddy and Julika 2002: 659) has discussed the concept of DE from a theological point of view. Theologians maintain that the seeds of receiving and delivering instruction (or teaching and learning) by the distance mode were sown through two major events: Moses received a set of instructions through two tables of stones from God at Mount Sinai; the epistles (sacred letters) of Paul sent to early Christian churches represent the early use of the correspondence mode to educate people en mass.

Peters developed the theory in 1960s and published in 1968. Peters sees distance education as the industrialisation. Both the industry and distance education have a division of labour to ensure smooth operation. Unisa has many departments which function as a whole. Peters in Bernath and Vidal (2007:429), regards distance education as an industrialised type of teaching and learning. He has shown that it is characterised by rationalising, division of work between

several cooperating people, mechanising, planning, organisation, production, line work, mass production etc. The theory of industrialisation has been widely discussed by the distance education students. The theory also goes deeper into discussing learner support systems and structures, for example, how technology is used in distance education. Peters talks of the postal system as one of technologies that was used to reach students in terms of student support.

Peters in Bernath and Vidal (2007:434) stresses that “Distance education is a product of the industrialisation of society. Only industrial man was able and willing to study at a distance, in the same way as post-industrial man is able to and willing to study in online learning.”

The participants have identified that there is a problem of interaction between the student to student and student to teachers due to distance. The student support to ensure student success has been identified by the participants as crucial in distance education. This is a challenge which has to be tackled collectively by the stakeholders in institutions.

Moore’s theory of Transactional Distance was conceived by teaching adult students. The theory tries to understand distance education in the framework of student support. According to Moore the programme has more dialogue or less dialogue, not either or, or the other. Moore in Simonson, Schlosser and Hanson (1999) indicated that there is a need to describe and define the field of distance education, to discriminate between its various components, and to identify the critical elements of the various forms of learning and teaching. Moore looks at the two variables in educational programs, the extent of learner autonomy and the distance between teacher and learner. Moore and Kearsley (2005:223) in Bernath and Vidal (2007:429) regard transactional distance as the generally descriptive feature of distance education, on the basis of which distance education function. It is the gap of understanding and communication between the teachers and learners caused by geographic distance that must be bridged through distinctive procedures in instructional design and facilitation of interaction. The conversation between the students and lecturers, student to student will lead to students’ success. The students will be motivated to study and pass better in their studies. The technology was always used to reach the students. The theories in research assist to tell what has not been told in research.

Keegan (1995) reaffirms the continued need for a theory of distance education by stating that a firmly based theory of distance education is one that can provide the touchstone against which financial education and social can be made with confidence. Keegan classified theories of distance education into three groups, theories of independence and autonomy, theories of industrialisation of teaching, and theories of interaction and communication. A fourth category seeks to explain distance education through a synthesis of existing theories of communication and diffusion as well as philosophies of education.

Keegan (1995) suggests that electronically linking instructor and students at various locations creates a virtual classroom. He goes on to say “The theoretical analyses of virtual education, however, have not yet been addressed by the literature.

“Is virtual education (interactive, live televised instruction a subset of distance education or to be regarded as a separate field of education endeavour (Keegan 1995:18).”

Most DE students are adults who have the autonomy to make choices. In some countries, including South Africa, DE institutions register young students who need support at all times. DE is used often used at primary levels of education, partially in sparsely populated areas, in conjunction with intensive tutoring by a family member. Most DE learners are experienced adults who are highly motivated and self-directed.

The recent global growth and popularity of distance learning are attributed to its advantages that include flexibility with respect to enabling learners to combine education and training with full-time employment and family responsibilities. The challenges of DE have implications for student and learner support. Students from rural areas are hampered from participating actively in their teaching and learning activities (Ibid.).

The literature review above discussed the definition of DE from different perspectives. Most institutions globally have combined DE methodologies and Open Learning theories to become ODL institutions. In some instances DE and ODL have been discussed interchangeably because they share certain commonalities.



## 2.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Perraton (2000), UNESCO (2002), Mhlanga (2008), and Unisa (2008) identify the following as some of the characteristics of ODL. ODL is aimed at developing the educational capacity of the individual for responsible citizenship and hastening development in developing countries. With the world population approaching six billion, it is impossible to provide education from only one location. DE is a vehicle for human and other resource development and is fast becoming the traditional form of education. The concept of ODL includes open access, flexible delivery of instruction, learner-centred approaches to course design and delivery, mediated two-way communication, multi-channel learning, multimedia, open learning, lifelong learning and experiential learning. The goal of ODL is to reach all those who would not have any other opportunity for education.

Badat (2005), Aguti and Fraser (2005) and Perraton (2000:19) state that the reasons for using DE are varied. Firstly, it has been used to reach students in geographically challenging areas. In some high population countries, such as China and Pakistan, distance programmes have played an essential role in providing teacher education on a huge scale. In many Latin American countries DE has been used widely to support curriculum reform and teacher upgrading. Teacher education by distance is being used to redress inequalities in teaching qualifications in post-colonial countries, such as Namibia, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Uganda as a tool for the reconstruction of the teaching corps. In other countries it is being used to reach marginalised communities. DE has been used both as an emergency solution to a temporary problem, responding to demands for a sudden expansion of the teaching force and as part of a continuing programme of teacher education upgrading. Its attraction to the planner as a technique of mass education lies partly in its capacity to reach large numbers, without taking them away from the classroom, and partly as a means of raising school quality (Perraton 2000:8).

Distance education focuses on the pedagogy, andragogy, technology and instructional systems design that aim to deliver education to students who are not physically 'on site'. In distance education, learners are separated from the instructional base or teacher, either by space or time, for a significant portion of their learning (Unesco 2000)

Perraton (2000:1) says ODL has grown because of its perceived advantages. Throughout the

world, many institutions are beginning to use ODL as it has vast advantages. One does not necessarily have to leave one's work place to pursue education and many people are enrolling at such institutions. One can obtain a certificate, diploma, a degree or any qualification for that matter through ODL. ODL is flexible: people who have got jobs can study in their own time, in the own homes, without being removed from their work for long periods. ODL fees are cheaper when compared with those of contact institutions.

### **2.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY IN ODL**

The use of distance education and ICT has the potential to distribute opportunities for learning more widely and equitably across the teaching force. They can also improve the quality and variety of the resources and support available to teachers, opening up new avenues to professional development, changes in knowledge, skills, attitudes and the mindset of teachers and head-teachers (Robinson 2008:10)

The students are aware of the impact technology has as a tool for achieving instructional goals (Ringstaff & Kelley 2002). While there is an increased interest in the integration of technology in learning and teaching, very little remains known about how the use of ICTs is changing students' approaches to learning (Rumble 2000). Perraton (2000:11) says technology has spurred the development of ODL. Students can learn from computers, where technology is used essentially as a tutor and this serves to increase students' basic skills and knowledge. They can also learn by means of computers, where technology is used as a tool that can be applied to a variety of goals in the learning process and can serve as a resource to help develop higher-order thinking, creativity and research skills (Ringstaff & Kelley 2002). ICT used in distance education systems includes mail, telephone, face to face sessions, radio, television, audio and videocassettes, compact discs, emails and other computer conventions and tele-conferencing systems.

Gulati (2008:1) believes learning using technologies has become a global phenomenon. The technology is seen as a tool that potentially allows individuals to overcome the constraints of traditional elitist spaces and gain unlimited access to learning. It is widely suggested that online technologies can help address uses of educational equity and social exclusion and open up democratic and accessible educational opportunities.

According to Robinson and Latchem (2003) modern developments of innovative technologies have provided new possibilities to teaching professions, but at the same time have placed more demands on teachers to learn how to use those new technologies in their teaching.

Jung (2005:94) maintains that a variety of ICTs can facilitate not only delivery of instruction, but also the learning process itself. Moreover ICT can promote international collaboration and networking in education and professional development. There is a range of ICT options, from videoconferencing through multimedia delivery to web sites, which can be used to meet the challenges teachers face. In fact there has been increasing evidence that ICT may be able to provide more flexible and effective ways for lifelong professional development of teachers.

According to Gulati (2008: 4), the University of South Africa became the first to offer single-mode, distance education in 1946. Arguably, the aims of distance education in developing countries are different from those of developed countries. In developed countries moves to widen participation and lifelong learning for non-traditional learners are closely linked to the development of a string knowledge economy. In contrast developing countries' motives for distance learning are to provide basic and literacy education to large numbers of poor people (Zhang 2005)

Gulati (2008:9) argues that a review of 150 distance education programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa has concluded that traditional paper-based means of distance learning continues to be more reliable, sustainable and widely used than online and web-based methods of learning. Advances in e-learning in developing countries have been reported and several determinants may influence e-learning success in these countries.

Robinson (2008:11) contends that the opportunity to learn to use ICT has been seen by rural teachers as a big step-up in achieving equity with teachers in more advanced areas of China. Many saw it as an indication that they were joining the modern world. The teachers used ICT to develop new curriculums, to get guidance and support in putting it into practice, for communication, cooperation and conscious inquiry in to their lessons, to develop new skills in using technology, to develop new teaching approaches, to create a humanistic learning environment, to share resources, to exchange experience and to develop together.

As noted by Gulati (2008:1), new communication technologies, particularly the internet, appear to offer exciting possibilities for overcoming geographical access and cost barriers to learning, such as poverty, lack of social and educational infrastructure and cultural issues that restrict educational progress in developing countries. Research indicates that ICT can change the way teachers teach and that it is especially useful in supporting more student-centred approaches to instruction and in developing the higher order skills and promoting collaborative activities (Haddad 2003). Recognising the importance of ICT in teaching and learning, most countries in the world have provided ICT teacher training in a variety of forms and degrees.

Even though many teachers report that they have had inadequate training to prepare themselves to use technology effectively in teaching and learning, there have been several efforts around the world in which countries are effectively using technology to train teachers to use technology as tools for enhancing teaching and learning (Jung 2005:95), another possibility with the use of ICT in teacher training is that it connects teachers to a larger international teaching community. Best practices in using ICT in teaching and learning and successful pedagogies are now being shared among teachers worldwide. Another advantage is that ICT connects teachers to the large international teaching community. Best practices in using ICT in teaching and learning and successful pedagogies are now being shared among teachers scattered around the world.

## **2.4 WIDENING PARTICIPATION**

Widening participation is discussed according to the activities that are aimed at bringing in and supporting groups of people who are identified as underprivileged for higher education. In doing so, it takes into account the diverse needs of people in different sectors of the economy, as well as different racial, gender and age cohorts who participate in higher education (Badat 2005: 186-187; Unisa 2008 : 3).

The introduction of ODL has been generally understood as a response to the new challenges of increased and diverse demands on supportive learning made on the educational sector and as one of the strategies through which higher education institutions can manage to substantially open access. More higher education institutions therefore are extending their

delivery modes to include ODL to address the problem of access. Even though participation rates have increased, recent studies show that many qualified potential students who would like to pursue their studies are generally still unable to access higher education institutions (Dodds, Gaskell & Mills, 2008). Generally ODL is making a significant contribution towards access to higher education in developed countries (Davies & Pigott 2004). Access to higher education institutions appears still to be very limited in developing countries (UNESCO 2005).

## **2.5 DEVELOPMENT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN SELECTED COUNTRIES**

According to Omolewa (1992) and Adenkambi (1992), history has it that the University of London established in 1836, then follow University of Chicago in 1892 and the University of Queensland in 1911 were the first educational institutions to provide higher education at a distance. The opening of its doors to candidates from all over the world to take its examinations singled out the University of London as what might generally be regarded as the first Open University in the world. In 1836 the University of London emerged as an examination machine: certification was the goal and the opening of opportunities from 1858, for those in the colonies was done to further this goal internationally (Daniel 1999:48). Correspondence colleges in Britain capitalised on this opening and preferred tuition for students needing to write examinations (Omolewa 1992; Adekanmbi 1992). Thus distance education, then correspondence study, became an innovative route to getting educated.

Adenkambi (2008:2) and Kelly and Mills (2007:149-152) highlight the British Open University which was established in 1969 to widen access to education in Britain. It has served as a model to many others; most ODL institutions are using Open University models to deliver teaching and learning activities. Teaching materials were distributed partly by mail and partly through the internet. Trainee teachers were based in schools where a mentor guided their teaching practice with standardised conferencing as an integral part of the course to interact with tutors and with each other.

Miller (2012:36) states that in North America, distance education began as a response to the workforce and economic developments of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Industrial Revolution. It developed at the intersection of three powerful forces, namely, social change, technological development, and the need for educational institutions to adapt to changing social needs. In

1892 three institutions, the University of Chicago, followed by the Pennsylvania State College and University of Wisconsin launched the first systematic correspondence study of programs in the United States. The postal system was the delivery mode between the institutions and the students.

During the nineteenth century, in the United States (US), several activities in adult education preceded the organisation of university extension beyond campuses. In 1873 Anna Ticknor created the society to encourage studies at home for the purpose of educational opportunities for women of all classes. This Boston-based, largely volunteer effort, provided correspondence instruction to 10 000 members over a twenty-four year period despite its resolutely low profile. Some other universities in the US started to make correspondence courses available alongside their conventional programmes before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Daniel 1999:48). Print materials were sent through mail as the main way of communication, technology and learning to students. The National Technological University in the US started to use satellite and broadcasting technology to meet the needs of their students without having to leave their jobs and attend class on a full-time basis (UNESCO 2002: 11). Technology was necessary for providing learner support to adult students at a distance.

In Australia the University of Queensland entered the field of distance education in 1911. The Australian distance education is systematic and organised. It was possible to provide by a correspondence education a complete primary and secondary education for children who had never been to school (Holmberg 2005).

Ngegebule (2003) says DE has a long history in South Africa. From its initiation in the eighteenth century, stakeholders involved in distance education have come from the public and private sectors of the country and both have influenced policy in various ways. The correspondence of distance education *inter alia* with limited student support has tended to predominate throughout the years of distance education provision in the country.

Unisa was founded in 1873 as a university college which offered courses to learners via correspondence. Unisa underwent the various developmental stages of distance education until in 2004, when it was constituted as a comprehensive ODL university after amalgamation with two similar educational institutions, namely, the Technikon South Africa and Vista University (Seletse 2002, 88 - 90). The new Unisa effectively became the dedicated,

comprehensive and mega-university for ODL. Ngegebule (2003:1) adds that in 2004 UNISA had over 200 000 students. Students studying at Unisa come from both rural and urban areas. This geographical difference impacts on the service delivery of Unisa which has been mandated to enroll a large and diverse student body (Badat 2005).

Sonnekus, Louw and Wilson (2006:45) stress that not only is the infrastructure in these areas vastly different, but also the level of exposure to and availability of modern technology impact on the level of technical support that can be given by the learner support system. It also needs to be noted that Unisa has a large body of African students. UNISA's open learning policy promotes open access to courses, flexibility in learning provision, flexibility in methods and criterion of assessing learning process and achievement and lifelong learning as propagated by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL 2012).

Although DE has provided access to education for learners from disadvantaged communities, it has not been successful in enabling students to perform to their maximum potential (Makina 2008). Most learners who register in distance education institutions are adults who are motivated to learn. They expect learning to help them to deal with new challenges in their everyday lives. Although most distance education learners look or even sound like they are ready and prepared to learn from a distance, they lack most skills that are central to distance education learning, for example reading, writing and listening in an academic context.

Perraton (2000) maintains that ODL is considered to have a high drop-out and low pass rate. This could even be more acute at Unisa because most students registered with Unisa did not obtain admission to the contact institutions. Distance learners in South Africa are challenged in many ways. There is an unreliable or non-existent postal, telephone and internet service for people living outside the major cities in the rural areas. The researcher has experienced this while studying at Unisa and tutoring teacher education students at North West University before he came to Unisa in 2010.

According to West (2005) due to the high density of those who have access to, or own cellular phones (upward of 90%) Mobile Learning (M-Learning) may reduce the isolation typically associated with DE and provide more South Africans with a means of pursuing higher education. However, certain places in rural areas have no network coverage and this has implications for learner support globally.

Nigeria has been engaged in DE for teachers from as far back as 1983. Nuhu (2008: 3) says the development of the ODL and DE mode in institutional terms began very slowly. Teachers upgraded themselves and the certification of teachers as specified in the relevant syllabus took place using the distance mode. Braimoh and Osiki (2008:55) assert that learner support mechanisms are mainly internet, broadcasts where content is delivered via radio or television, CD-Rom or computer. On the medium of instruction Nigerian institutions are still very fond of print, in spite of the tremendous possibilities offered by modern technology (Adekambi 2008:2). Most institutions are using technology to facilitate the process of teaching, including Jos University (Adewumi 2010:3). Mudasiru (2006:26) and Braimoh and Osiki (2008:55) add that the lack of consistent electricity supply, the lack of libraries, social inequality, cost of DE, the dropout rate, poor societal perceptions, poor counselling services, lack of qualified teachers and postal delays and infrastructure are obstacles.

To achieve the objective stated in the National Policy on Education in Nigeria, DE depends on electricity to write and print materials. Libraries could provide conducive reading environments and act as a motivation to students to improve study habits. Telephone counselling could reduce the problem created by isolation, alienation, unpleasant experiences and other societal problems. According to Braimoh and Osiki (2008:55) if these challenges are not addressed, they will impede proper implementation of ODL globally. According to Adewumi (2010:1) most teacher education institutions are using interactive ICT laboratories to support students with ICT. However, most interactive laboratories lack the basic infrastructure that provides necessary facilities expected in an ICT laboratory.

According to Ramanujam (2002: 7), in India the DE of the 1980s has been fast changing into Open Learning since the 1990s. The institutional concerns in the previous decade and earlier had been to increase the access of education through the distance mode supported by multimedia to make available some form of education to all those who needed it. The Indira Gandhi Open University offers further teacher education among other programmes and is known to use advanced media technology to provide distance education to its clients. In this sense distance education became “learner centred”, although the overall control and choice of curricula and courses rested with the distance teachers and the institutions of distance education (Ramanujam 2002:7).



Sanat (2006:32) suggests that India faces problems of financial administration which impede quality in education. The major purpose of DE is to provide education to those who for some reason or the other could not take advantage of facilities provided by the formal system. However, DE still does not reach all the disadvantaged groups, wider sections and remote areas of the global communities. This has an effect on quality education provision and the addressing of the Millenium Development Goals. According to Manjulika (2002) learner support services are probably the weakest component of the DE system in India. There is an insufficient student support service network and no steps have been initiated for sharing the existing support service. However, in spite of these drawbacks, Indian higher education has grown in a remarkable way to become one of the largest systems of its kind in the world. The system has many issues of concern at present, such as lack of finance, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient contact classes.

Porto and Berge (2008:1) say DE in Brazil has evolved more slowly than DE in other developing countries. Bof (2004 in Gulati 2008:4) describes the Brazilian Ministry of Education distance education model, called *Proformacao*, a distance teacher education certification course designed to train 27 000 uncertified teachers in fifteen Brazilian states. The model includes face to face session, workbook activities, practice evaluations, tutorial meetings and bi-monthly tests. The programme has been a success and reduced a significantly low dropout rate by one and a half. The success of the programme is attributed to print and television technologies and not the internet, which remains inaccessible to most individuals in this country.

Litto (2002:1 in Porto and Berge 2008:4) indicate reasons why DE has not been readily adopted by Brazil's higher education system to expand access. This is partly due to Brazil's highly centralised and regulated education system which lacks resources (Litto 2002a). These issues have an effect on DE and learner support. Ongoing insufficient access to quality public education, much of which can be delivered online and at a distance, hampers most Brazilians' ability to participate effectively and benefit from the fruits of the global economy (Porto & Berge 2008).

UNESCO (2002: 11) and Vaa, Osborne and Nyondo (2001) say the University of the South Pacific serves scattered audiences over the South Pacific region. This area, which includes the Cook Islands, Figi, Kiribate, Nauvru, Nicie, Solomon Islands, Tekelou, Tsoga, Varinatu,

Western Samoa and the Marshall Islands, is huge and has natural barriers which make accessibility extremely difficult and very expensive.

Malik et al. (2005) assert that the usual reasons for adopting DE in the South Pacific are to widen access to higher education for the masses, to provide continuing formal and non-formal education, to train increasing numbers of students in areas that are target zones for socio-economic development and to upgrade the qualifications of primary and secondary school teachers. According to Belawati (2009), DE in the South Pacific region uses e-learning methods, which include the internet to deliver educational content and enable interaction between teachers and students. Through ODL the South Pacific has become interactive and personalised while increasing geographic and socio-demographic penetration.

According to Baggaley and Belawati (2007) and Latchem et al. (2008), lack of infrastructure, course materials and technical support have also been noted in other evaluative studies of online education in South Pacific. The University uses print media, video and satellite conferencing as its delivery models. However some islands face communication and postal challenges, which delay delivery of tutorial materials and information to students.

In providing DE in China financial difficulties, quality of instruction, hidden costs and misuse of technology impede quality education. According to Potter (2003), there are problems of access, many DE lecturers' lack specific training and relatively small numbers of students actually graduate from distance education programme. A lack of resources, including buildings, desks, books and qualified teachers, has been a significant obstacle for ODL (Gulati 2008:4). In the 1960s China introduced nine years' compulsory schooling and started building schools in rural and urban regions supported by televised learning (CERNET 2007). Despite these ODL alternatives to increase education for the masses, problems of infrastructure and access remain unresolved 47 years later.

In China the combined use of television, classroom sessions and printed materials is providing university education to about a third of the students in higher education. A church based non-government organisation, the American private sector and the government in China have all perceived distance education as legitimate because of its power to widen access to education (UNESCO 2002; Xing-fu 2001).

In 1990 China Radio and the TV University set up a school to meet rural education needs, which needs special attention because of the size of the population involved (Xing-fu 2001).

According to Yu and Wang (2005: 99), the digital divide exists in China. The digital divide refers to the large gap between those who have easy access and those who have little or no access to information. Therefore the digital divide affects economic, political and social progress in China. It has increasingly become an outstanding problem of China's information age. Despite these challenges China is still regarded as one of the major countries which has played a significant role in the provision of ODL.

Commonalities prevail in the selected countries discussed in the foregoing section. DE offered in developing countries depends largely on first and second-generation delivery modes and relies heavily on print as a form of information dissemination. Thus, technological challenges are often cited as the main reason for such drawbacks (Aluko, Fraser & Hendrikz 2011: 115). Regarding the above issues, Ramanujam (2002) sees a common pattern governing the practice of distance education in many of the developing countries: similar or comparable issues, problems and challenges facing their educational systems and programmes, including the current practices and the future plans of distance education in their respective contexts.

## **2.6 ADULT BASIC EDUCATION AND TRAINING GLOBALLY**

Adult education is crucial for social change globally. Adult education addresses socio-economic problems through empowering people with skills. According to Belanger (2011:18), accessibility to ABET programmes remains a challenge globally. All citizens should have the opportunity to develop themselves throughout their life at whatever age, acquire the knowledge and know-how to better pilot life transitions, improve their quality of life, develop their potential and experience the joy of learning. Belanger (2011) also identifies financial factors as inhibitors of adult education. This could be attributed to the global economic crisis. Notwithstanding adult education is the best investment governments can make to sustain an efficient and therefore participatory welfare state. This will yield results in all areas of activities, including the economy and the world of work (Belanger 2011:20).

### **2.6.1 Open and Distance Learning and Adult Basic Education and Training In South African Context**

The ABET sector in South Africa was ignored before 1994. Thereafter ABET became one of the priority areas targeted by the government in the democratic era. In 2000 the ABET Act was passed which established public and private adult learning centres. The Act seeks to regulate adult basic education and training; to provide for the establishment, governance and funding of public adult learning centres (PALCs); to provide for the registration of private adult learning centres; to provide for quality assurance and quality promotion in adult basic education and training; to provide for transitional arrangements; and to provide for matters connected therewith (DoE 2000).

As is the situation in most developing countries, South Africa has low levels of literacy. The low levels of literacy in South Africa could be attributed to the apartheid era during which many people received very little or no formal education at all. According to the Department of Education (2004:5) more than a third of South Africans sixteen years and older are illiterate. It also suggests that literacy should be alleviated through the provision of Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) to redress discrimination and past inequalities.

The government also came to realize that the people who were suffering were those who grew up during the apartheid era and who received very little or no education at all. During the democratic era ABET was identified by the government to address the problem of illiteracy in South Africa.

The ABET institute at Unisa and other ABET centres in universities such as the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the Witwatersrand and Western Cape, played an important role in training ABET practitioners in South Africa during the democratic era.

Mckay (1995) indicates that those who have never been to school or have had very little education have not only missed learning to read and write, but they have also been deprived of essential skills and the other benefits that people acquire from attending school. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa identified education as a moral concept. According to Baatjies (2004) ABET has been constitutionally enshrined as a basic right of all citizens and a legal entitlement to which every person has a claim. ABET can be described as

the foundation for justice and equality and thus contributes to the core values adopted for South Africa. Section 29(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa states “everyone has the right to basic education including adult basic education and to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures must make progressively available and accessible (Rule 2006:114).”

ABET in South Africa is booming in MacGregor’s view (2008). However Project Literacy indicated that South Africa has 4, 7 million illiterate people who have had no schooling. Another 4, 9 million adults are functionally illiterate to varying degrees. Some dropped out of school before Grade seven (Project Literacy 2008). The greatest problem lies with adults who grew up before 1994 and received very little formal education. Low levels of literacy and numeracy persist amongst these people.

The Department of National Education ABET policy document (1997:36) clearly supports the notion of integrating various media in a more flexible curriculum that allows a wide variety of approaches to materials and media. The policy document on ABET contends that an integrated and open approach will allow a wide variety of approaches for materials developed to tailor learning and support materials to the institutional context and learners’ needs.

McKay, Kotze, Vacarrino and De Necker 1998 in Quan-Baffour & Vambe (2006:300) remind us that the rural areas of South Africa suffer from poor infrastructure. In these areas more than any others, adult education driven by a multimedia-enhanced delivery approach can have a fundamental impact. Furthermore, 48% of South Africans live in rural areas. However, this situation is not peculiar to South Africa. Rural people who live and work in scattered areas need to be empowered through education. McKay et al. (1998) also note that the empowerment of people by means of knowledge can be enhanced by using the mass-media, a powerful tool of communication.

## **2.6.2 Provision of Adult Basic Education and Training in ODL context at Unisa**

According to Unisa policies, a significant example of how adult educators for ABET can be trained using distance education was the former ABET Institute at Unisa, which has now been reconstituted as a full academic department. ABET students are diverse, often located in rural

areas where there are no facilities. The students enrolled in the ABET department are taught generic ABET skills that enable them to teach and work in a range of areas.

The Unisa ABET Institute was established in 1995. It has trained adult educators both in and outside South Africa. Most of the students of the institute are community builders, non-governmental organization (NGO) staff and adult educators. According to 2003 figures, the Institute boasted a 187 dedicated part time tutors and 33 coordinators on the ground (scattered all over the country), all of whom offer academic and other support that ABET distance learning students need so urgently if they are to cope with their studies. These tutors consist of 102 females and 85 males, supported by the 33 coordinators.

In 2005 over 12000 students enrolled for the various courses in ABET. The success of the institute in its teaching programme stems from good management and effective student support (Quan-Baffour & Vambe 2005:39). According to MacGregor (2008), UNISA has trained 80 000 ABET practitioners since mid-1990. The aim is for these graduates to participate in a huge literacy campaign in South Africa. The former institute had 17 staff members; 17 000 students were registered in 2008. The students were provided with course packs including audio and visual materials; 300 tutors throughout the country supported these students. The ABET Institute identified, selected and appointed tutors who were committed and qualified ABET practitioners living or working in rural areas. These part-time tutors were past senior students or individuals identified by the Institute for their good work in the communities as adult educators. The tutors concerned contacted their students through SMS, word of mouth, announcements at churches and schools, advertisements posted at post offices, shops, education offices, and where possible, local radio and newspaper announcements. Through these various communication media, Unisa ABET students were informed of venues of tutorials and meetings.

Unisa ABET Institute's student support system was unique because it caters specifically for students in the rural areas. Unlike the learning centres based only in towns and cities, in the rural areas as few as 15 ABET students can be assigned to a tutor who usually lives in the same area and thus within the vicinity of his or her tutorial group. This small number of students offers these students effective interaction between learners and students. The ABET Institute's management believes that as distance education providers, it is their moral responsibility to support learners, particularly those who live under difficult conditions in the

rural areas. Once or twice a month Unisa ABET students in a particular rural geographical region meet at a convenient venue in their district for two to four hours for face to face tutorial so that they can share their experiences of the study material.

During 2010 the Institute became the Department of ABET at UNISA and started to offer formal programmes. The number of ABET enrolments declined when the Institute became a Department, which is a cause for concern.

## **2.7 GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE OF LEARNER SUPPORT**

Tait sees the primary functions of student support proposed as threefold, namely, cognitive, affective and systemic. Tait (2000:289) adds such an understanding of the role of student support comes primarily from social constructivist ideas that knowledge is in a real sense made and remade by participation in learning.

According to Tait (2000:289), where the support of students mediates teaching embodied in courseware, then it clearly relates to learning and thus to cognitive outcome. It also and necessarily relates to the objective of providing an environment where students feel at home, where they feel valued, and which they find manageable.

Dzakiria (2005:105) explains that in order to support the learners in an ODL environment, distance teachers must have also skills and experience to facilitate the learning process through designing and building support that will encourage learning. Some consider resources and interactivity as critical in defining learner support while others put more emphasis on individualisation or customisation of services

Thorpe (2001:3) sums up learner support as the arena within which transformations in the nature and the scale of activities made feasible by online teaching are generating widespread change in pedagogics and learning communities and access institutions as a whole in ODL.

Brindley (1995), SAIDE (1995), Tait (2000) and Lentell (2003) highlight that learner support is integral and critical for the delivery of a quality ODL system. Learner support is a generic term, which is applied to the range of services that are developed by the institutions in order to assist the students to meet their learning objectives, to gain the knowledge, expertise and skills to be successful and to complete their course or studies.

Brindley et al. (2004) say student or learner support is defined in different ways in the distance and online learning literature. It might cover learning materials, teaching and tutoring and non- academic elements, administrative aspects, guidance and counselling. In this study learner support refers to all kinds of services, including face to face teaching or tutoring.

According to Moore (1973) in Mckay and Makhanya (2008), student support is defined as a programme within the dominant institution aiming at reducing the distance between teaching and learning whereby the distance learner control at which he (she) receives information and which he (she) must make his (her) response through face to face dialogical intervention. Moore's definition corresponds with Unisa's vision and mission in service to students who are in remote areas.

Learner support has frequently been identified as of particular importance for student success in ODL.

## **2.8 LEARNER SUPPORT SYSTEMS AT UNISA**

Tait (2003) identifies three reasons why learner support is necessary: a) most students want support and interaction with others, except for about 10% of students who may not want interaction with other students. However, time and location constraints in the lives of adult learners may not allow this; b) Student support especially guidance and counselling, tutor support, effective information and administration reinforce students' sense of confidence and reduce drop-out rate; and c) the nature of learning, which includes a further explanation for students through tutoring in group work in study centres, online tutoring and feedback through the return of assignments (termed 'mediation') has an impact on the learning process. UNISA as an ODL institution should provide learner support to improve its throughput and success rate.

### **2.8.1 myUnisa**

The ODL models entail a student-centred approach that is built on integrated systems and engaged learning. This involves learning and teaching interaction whereby students actively engage and interact with institutions, their lecturers, study material and fellow students through myUnisa and other technologies. The myUnisa is a web-based system for academic



collaboration and study-related interaction. This system was developed to supplement and enhance academic interaction and improve communication between Unisa and its students as well as provide an opportunity for engagement among students (Unisa 2010:24).

The myUnisa is a learning management system which is interactive. The need for a more flexible system came about with the development of ICT. In 2008 the university introduced an ODL Policy, which changed the focus of tuition to include technology and multimedia interaction. Technologies, such as telephone, multimedia CDs and DVDs, video and audio conferencing, SMS's, cell phones, e-mail and discussion forums via myUnisa have been proposed to offer new possibilities for supporting learning in distance education. The limited ability of students to use myUnisa is an area which needs to be explored further.

Moreover, these technologies have not been adopted uniformly throughout the various colleges and academic departments, including ABET. Cant and Bothma (2010: 56) argue that even though Unisa may officially endorse a particular learning technology, it is ultimately the lecturers within a department who determine the extent and effectiveness of the technology's use and their respective views on these various technologies may differ. Moreover, the ability of students to use technologies is a concern. According to Ferreira (2009), South Africa has only 4, 59 million internet users. Currently there are 1 550 000 visitors to the Unisa Corporate website; 200 000 students are registered online; and 196369 students are using myUnisa to access teaching and learning activities. Through myUnisa the lecturer facilitates a group of students online. Large numbers of students access myUnisa.

### **2.8.2 Tutorials**

The tutorial system is an important learner support system that caters for the rural and the disadvantaged learners. Quan-Baffour and Vambe (2005: 36), explain, unfortunately, this is often neglected by many institutions that offer distance education programmes. It is a well-known fact that the rural environment is often not conducive to distance learning because of the lack of resources and amenities such as electricity and modern communication networks.

According to Unisa (2007), the teaching and learning environment at UNISA should be seen against the external context of the South African higher education statutory and legislative framework guided by the Constitution, the South African Qualifications Authority Act, No.

58 of 1995, the Higher Education Act, No 101 of 1997 and the Higher Education Quality Committee. The policy adds that the system is further benchmarked against overall ODL international principles and best practices.

With particular reference to the role of the tutor, Armstrong (1996) states: “The role of the tutor in distance learning is substantially different from a traditional teaching role, in that it is more of a “pastoral” and guidance role, rather than a direct teaching role.” Daweti (2005) asserts that, as the learning environment in ODL is intended to be highly supportive and learner-centred, regular tutor-led contact sessions are an important learner support strategy that may be an incentive for student enrolment in the programme. The tutor’s role is to impart knowledge, skills, norms and values during the tutorial session. The tutor is also expected to be the subject matter expert (SME). The tutor should deliver the subject matter effectively and should win the hearts of the students. The learners feel threatened when they face the study material alone. During the contact session the students meet their peers and have an opportunity of asking questions to their tutors and peers. They are guided and supported so that they can interact with their study material during the studies. Daweti (2005) adds that the tutor in ODL helps to foster collaborative learning and support in small groups. During tutorial sessions the tutors help the learners become aware of how they can contribute to their own learning.

Quan-Baffour & Vambe (2005) argue that one of the main reasons why many rural learners drop out of distance education programme is a lack of effective support that can see them through their studies. Such a well managed support system could offer distance learners some sort of “customer care” in the form of minimal face to face tutorials. The problem of learner support was experienced in the institute and it continues when the institute became an academic department. Many students in the rural areas feel neglected and need academic support to succeed in their studies.

The university trains lecturers and the tutors through tutor development workshops before the tutorial classes start. In this regard the researcher attended the two development workshops in Mthatha and Polokwane regions in 2012. The impression gained was that the workshop achieved its objectives through a series of sessions and the interaction between tutors and the university lecturers. During the breakaway session eight ABET lecturers were addressed about trends and challenges facing student support, the diploma modules, phasing out of the

old certificate and diploma modules, the importance of reading tutorial 101 and semester modules. Issues raised included the tutor and student's unpreparedness, inaccessibility of technology by both student and tutor, tutor class schedules not published in myUnisa, some regions not making copies available to students, insufficient student feedback and poor student evaluation.

In the Department of ABET, tutors are appointed according to student numbers and needs. Only after students register and the numbers are determined is the centre manager able to contact the department with the view to tutor appointment. After tutors have been appointed, they have to be trained so that they can conduct tutorials.

According to Visser and Hall (2006), UNISA students who attend tutorials do not necessarily have a better chance of succeeding than students who do not. In 2006 UNISA announced that more associate academics would act as tutors at the regional centres and build supportive relationships with students. This is a positive move by the UNISA to try and strengthen learner support systems.

### **2.8.3 Group Discussions**

Contact group discussions are currently not held for ABET students due to huge student numbers and insufficient lecturing staff available for this purpose. The last group discussions were held in 2009. A learner support system requires people and technology in the department. Wilson (2004) points out that videoconferencing reduces costs, supports collaborative learning, increases learning support and access and improves the personal relationships with learners. Videoconferencing is a strategy whereby people can meet at the same time, see and hear one another and share document information during a live discussion, independent of the distance separating them. According to Wilson (2004), after the institutional merger, the new Unisa planned to fully integrate visual conferencing into its student support. Most students agreed that videoconferencing group discussions were similar to contact group discussion visits.

Most learner support systems are asynchronous and synchronous which is briefly discussed here for more clarity on their use.

#### **2.8.4. Asynchronous and Synchronous distance education technologies**

When we discuss the advantages and disadvantages of both synchronous and asynchronous technologies, we need to consider what Bates (as cited in Moore and Kearsley 2012:90) proposed as the “ACTIONS model for making decisions about the use of technology”. This acronym stands for access, costs, teaching function, interaction, organization, novelty and speed. Both access and costs could be an advantage or disadvantage for both synchronous and asynchronous technologies, depending on affordability by institutions and learners, organization of the teaching and learning environment and speed of delivery, for example. Pullen and Snow (2007: 145) argue that “simultaneous teaching of classroom and synchronous online students is a highly effective approach with low costs and low barriers to adoption” and “it is most effective when integrated with asynchronous supporting material”. Interaction between participants is present in both synchronous communication (simultaneous) and asynchronous communication (intermittent with a time delay). Anderson (2003: 1) mentions that “interaction has always been valued in education” because it creates an opportunity for teachers and learners to share and discuss ideas.

Synchronous technologies have an advantage because they afford immediate (speed) real time contact and interaction where “participants at all sites could see and hear the presenters” (Moore & Kearsley, 2012:40). These technologies also allow for “multi-person conversations” and immediate “question and answer sessions” (Moore & Kearsley, 2012:80) and teachers are able to explain and obtain immediate feedback. Asynchronous technologies have a disadvantage in that they do not afford immediate feedback from either the teacher or learner. Moreover, asynchronous technologies are costly, for example, Moore and Kearsley (2012:110) mention that “it is not possible to develop interactive exercises or tests without using a web programme language such as Java Script”. Courses with large numbers of students at Unisa, for example, pose a challenge and a disadvantage for asynchronous technologies like computer-based conferencing because according to Turoff (as cited in Anderson(2003:6), “there is a practical limit of less than 30 students per teacher facilitated class”.

Asynchronous technologies have an advantage in that they “allow participants to provide their own content and choose who they want to interact with” (Moore & Kearsley 2012: 111), especially in social networking programmes. Participants also have an opportunity to read a

number of contributions and then reflect, before responding. Synchronous video-conferencing, for example, has a disadvantage because not all students are available at the time that it occurs because of other work or home commitments, as well as time differences across continents.

## **2.9 SUMMARY**

According to the literature review presented in this chapter DE is an old concept. Theories of learner support overlap and indicate that ODL can be enhanced to ensure student success. There is substantial evidence that technology can be an effective tool in supporting teaching and learning at a distance. However challenges face students in distance education particularly those who live in rural communities. The literature reviewed reveals that ODL could be an effective tool in widening participation to students from less-privileged social groups and those who have traditionally not entered higher education.

In the next chapter the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study are reviewed.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter the theoretical framework of the study is provided. Different theories are discussed with a view to underpinning the framework of the study. The focus is on teaching and learning theories which can add to an understanding of views and experiences of ABET students on learner support strategies. The literature reviewed in this chapter indicated that it is important to locate teaching and learning practices within specific theories in distance education.

#### **3.2 KEY THEORIES UNDERLYING THE STUDY**

The two theories which have had a significant influence on adult teaching and learning are by Malcolm Knowles and Paulo Freire. The work of these early writers discusses theories and their importance in framing the study project. Holmberg also stresses that theory helps us to understand the future practice of the discipline. Holmberg provided insight into the value of having theory in practice. The theories will help us to find out how the distance students learn. This knowledge will help us to improve the practice of distance education. Perraton's (1988) theory of distance education is composed of elements from existing theories of communication and diffusion as well as philosophies of education.

##### **3.2.1 ABET Theories**

###### **3.2.1.1 Knowle's theory of andragogy**

Knowles attempted to develop a distinctive conceptual basis for adult education and learning by popularising the notion of andragogy, which became widely discussed and used. His work was a significant factor in reorienting adult education. Knowles was the first person to chart the rise of the adult education movement in the US and to develop a statement of informal adult education practice via the notion of andragogy. Accordingly the education of adults should recognise the experience of learner and use that experience as resource for teaching and learning. Adult learners have to be self-directed, motivated, volunteers of learning and

cannot be forced. It is important to equip learners with motivation and skills for lifelong learning. The learners should be engaged in informal learning activities where they share and learn by doing. Educators should recognise and respect their readiness to learn. The learners should practice and refine the things learnt. The learners should be made to know why they should learn particular skills.

### **3.2.1.2 Freires' theory**

Freire made many important contributions to the fields of adult education. Freire's evolving thinking was based on the learner-centred approach. Freire viewed teaching as a political process, as an act of knowing and as a creative act. According to Freire everyone knows something and a learner is responsible for the building up of knowledge and for the re-signification of what he or she learns. For Freire a person learns through his or her own transforming action in the world (transformational learning). The learner constructs his or her own categories of thought, organises his or her life and transforms the world. Adult educators should engage learners in problem-solving and social tasks, that is critical pedagogy. Creating products, small group collaboration projects, presentations, portfolios, equality of education and equal chances for the disadvantaged are stressed by Freire. Education should be learner-centred and educators must not spoon-feed learners, that is, not deposit information in the minds of learners. Education should also operate through dialogue, lead to emancipation, empowerment and freedom (Ibid.)

### **3.2.1.3 Community Theories**

Chikuya (2007:33) believes that ODL is not carried out haphazardly but falls within structures of a given operational mode. The teaching and learning model, though generally applicable to most educational programmes, can also be aligned to ODL depending on the situations and circumstances intended to be addressed by this strategy. Marshall (2000:3-8) says the community model requires working in a manner that resembles a community. Each person should be expected to perform a specific role, which they would assume in the world of work. Moller (1998:116) supports the view that a community in a distance- learning situation functions similarly to any community in that its two prime functions are to promote social reinforcement and information exchange. More specifically a community plays an integral

role in successful asynchronous distance learning by providing the learner with three different types of support, namely academic, intellectual and interpersonal.

The groupings made for tutorial purposes, in a way, resemble a community and each person makes necessary contributions as required by a given group assignment. The model resembles a school situation in which different stakeholders interact with one another. The interaction leads to a situation in which everybody knows everybody and there is a sense of belongingness. Rovi (2002 in Rideout, Bruinsma, Hull & Modayil 2007) suggests that four essential dimensions must be present for a classroom of students, whether physical or virtual to become a community. The four dimensions are spirit, trust, interaction and common expectations. In this regard quality in education becomes a reality (Shea & Bidjerano, 2008:544).

The first function of community is to provide social membership or reinforcement. Community, through social reinforcement, provides a vehicle for satisfying the basic human need for self-esteem (Moller 1998:116). This encourages the use of the internal conditions necessary for a learner to be ready and able to learn (Maslow 1954) and improves self-esteem, self-confidence, capability and adequacy. Malsow (1954) goes on to say that the loss of feelings of recognition, attention, importance or appreciation results from a lack of community and leads to feelings of inferiority, weakness and helplessness. Such feelings are hardly prescriptive for successful learning.

McIsaac and Gunawardena (1996 in Moller 1998:116), appear to support the significance of social reinforcement as an issue in distance learning by stating that social presence, the degree the person feels, or is seen by others as real, is a significant factor that affects satisfaction and achievement. Social reinforcement from others in a community contributes to a sense of identity through shared values, norms and preferences.

Commonalities prevail between the different learning theories. They are all interested in reaching the larger masses and they are about access. They might only differ on the level of organisation. In addition to the theories discussed above, the CoI model is also presented.



### **3.2.3 The Distance Education Theories**

The ODL researchers argue that it is important to have theory in research. Peters (2006) urges distance education professionals to approach their work or research in a scientific way. Peters emphasises that we must do the research theoretically in order for distance education reform to occur. This author cites Evans and Nation (1992) who argues “the problem for those of us involved in the field is not just how we keep up with new practices, but also how to theorise these changes in ways which help us understand the broader social and historical contexts through which ODL is transformed. Therefore it was important to frame the study project within particular theoretical contexts. The theoretical framework assisted the researcher to formulate the instrument for data collection. The researcher discusses the work of the distance education scholars and their views on theoretical framework.

The early and influential scholars of distance education time Holmberg, Moore and Peters in Bernath and Vidal (2007) stressed the importance of theory in research to inform the practice in teaching and learning. Research without theory seems to be the meaningful exercise. The student support at Unisa is mediated by technologies to reach students who are even in rural areas. The literature reviewed above on distance education theories laid the foundation for online theory of Community of Inquiry to framework the instrument used to collect the data. It is known that one of the key challenges in distance education is that students are separated from the institution and their peers. For this reason access to ICTs at UNISA and even elsewhere in the world is critical in creating an online learning environment that is conducive to active engagement. Discussion forum in myUnisa is a tool intended to provide a forum for engagement among students, as well as between students and lecturers. The three presences of COI relate well with some functions of myUnisa tool. The model also emphasises the needs for online learners to be able to address the challenge of projecting themselves as real people like in discussion forums of myUnisa. I realise this in some of the modules in some department at Unisa.

### **3.2.4 The community of Inquiry Model**

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) model, originally proposed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) served as the additional conceptual framework for the study. The theoretical foundation of this framework is based upon the work of John Dewey (1938). Dewey (1933)

viewed inquiry as a practical endeavour. The framework has been adopted and adapted by researchers worldwide and used to inform research and practice for online and blended learning (Swan & Ice, 2010). What makes blended learning particularly effective is its ability to facilitate a CoI. I used this model as a guide for the empirical study (cf Chapters 4 and 5) and categorised the quantitative and qualitative questions under teaching, social and cognitive presences.

The CoI framework proposes that successful learning takes place when there are three presences in a class, namely social, teaching and cognitive presences (Garrison et al. 2000). An educational CoI is a group of individuals who collaboratively engage in purposeful critical discourse and reflection to construct personal meaning and confirm mutual understanding. The CoI theoretical framework represents a process of creating a deep and meaningful (collaborative-constructivist) learning experience through the development of three interdependent elements (Ibid.).

According to Shea and Bidjerano (2008:544) the CoI framework focuses on the intentional development of an online learning community with an emphasis on the process of instructional conversations that are likely to lead to epistemic engagement. The model articulates the behaviours and process required to nurture knowledge construction through the cultivation of various forms of presence, among which are teaching, social and cognitive presences. Garrison, Anderson and Archer's (2000) Community of Inquiry (CoI) refers to three types of online learning presences, namely cognitive, social and teaching presence. The interaction that can occur in online learning takes place within the three presences, namely social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence. Research has shown that this model is effective for guiding successful educational experiences in an online learning environment

According to Ice (2009) over the past decade, the CoI framework has been successful in measuring the quality of both fully online and blended courses. The CoI survey is also a well-validated instrument to gauge the quality of e-learning courses.

Garrison and Anderson (2003 in Vaughan & Garrison, 2005:2) state that the purpose of a CoI, however, is the initiation of meaningful learning and achievement of cognitive outcomes, that is a cooperative and a cognitive presence represented by the analysis, construction, and

confirmation of meaning and understanding within a community of learners through sustained discourse and reflection.

According to Vaughan and Garrison (2005:3) this framework can be applied to a faculty development context to ensure that participants have a meaningful experience. CoI has the potential to facilitate the transformation of one's teaching practice through collaborative project construction and dialogue in a faculty development community. This is an important extension and opportunity to understand blended learning approaches. To reiterate, the interest here is how to create and sustain cognitive presence in a blended learning context for the development of an effective and meaningful faculty learning community (Vaughan & Garrison, 2005:3). In Vaughan and Garrison (2005:3) a faculty development program must provide the time, support and encouragement for participants to re-examine and reflect on course curriculum, teaching practice and use of education technology.

One of the key challenges in distance education is that students are separated from the institution and their peers. For this reason access to ICTs at Unisa is critical in creating an online-learning environment that is conducive to active engagement. The discussion forum in myUnisa is a tool intended to provide a forum for engagement among students, as well as between students and lecturers (Mbatha & Naidoo, 2010:175).

Short, Williams and Christie (in Stodel, Thompson and MacDonald, 2006:2) define social presence as the degree of salience of other persons in the interaction and consequent salience of interpersonal relationships. Tu and McIsaac (in Stodel et al. 2006) define it as the degree of feeling, perception and reaction to another intellectual entity in the Computer Mediated Communication environment. Shin (in Stodel et al. 2006) defines it as the feeling of intimacy or togetherness in terms of sharing time and place. Rourke, Anderson, Garrison and Archer (1999) define the concept as the ability of learners to project themselves socially and emotionally in a CoI. Garrison (2009) defines social presence as the ability of participants to identify with the community and the course of study, while communicating purposefully in a trusting environment and developing inter-personal relationships by way of projecting their individual perspectives. To Greyling and Wentzel (2007:654) social presence can be described as the ability of students to project themselves as real people in an online community. According Gunawardena (1995) and Tyron & Bishop (2009:292), social presence was originally conceived of as the number of communication channel affordances in mediated

communication and further evolved in recent literature to include students' perception of the presence of another in an online learning environment. Garrison et al. (2000:89) further define social presence as the ability of participants in the CoI to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as real people.

Rourke et al. (2001:4) trace the development of social presence from the concept of immediacy defined by Mehrabian (1969) as those communication behaviours that enhance closeness to and non-verbal interaction with another. In this study social presence could relate well with the discussion tools of myUnisa that connect one student to another and the lecturers in a way that opens up opportunities for communication. Rourke et al. (2001) claim that social presence plays a significant role in the learning process of online students in that it supports both cognitive and affective objectives, thus leading to an increase in academic integration.

Thus the concept of social presence involves participants who communicate purposefully in a particular environment (Garrison & Archer, 2001). According to Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon (2003:474), the focus of social presence must remain fundamentally a theory of how technology mediates social interaction. Computer-mediated communication inherent in the online learning environment poses new avenues for learners, thereby, achieving social perception as they negotiate the social encounters they will experience there. Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000:89) also emphasise that social presence is necessary to sustain a critical community of online learners. Social presence brings together lecturers and student communications. It is, however dependent on the quality of the communication exchange (Kehrwald 2007) since it is derived from the interpretation of the conveyed messages during interaction (Tu & McIsaac 2002; Kehrwald 2007).

In its articulation of social presence the CoI model also emphasises the needs for online learners to be able to address the challenge of projecting themselves as real people. According to Aragon (2003 in Stodel, Thompson & MacDonald, 2006:2) some believe that social presence is one of the first components that must be established to initiate learning online. Stodel et al. (2006:2) see the purpose of an educational experience as more than the development of a social community. The goal is to achieve defined learning outcomes and promote cognitive development. Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) argue that if learning is to occur, interactions must be structured and systematic, rather than loose and social and a CoI

must be developed. Moller (1998:120) articulates that by learning from others of their frustration, the learner will likely understand that these feelings are typical and not abnormal, and thus will be able to continue to work toward the educational goal. Thus, the function of social presence is to facilitate the attainment of the cognitive learning objectives by supporting critical thinking in a community of learners, as well as the affective learning objectives by making the group interactions enjoyable and rewarding

The features and functions of myUnisa could be a relevant example of the social presence of a CoI. The learning management offers collaboration between the students and the lecturers, and students to students.

Garrison et al. (2001) define cognitive presence as the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse in a critical CoI based on Dewey's (1933) concept of practical inquiry. Garrison et al. (2001) delineate four phases of practical inquiry, namely triggering event, exploration, integration and resolution. The notion of cognitive presence reflects higher order knowledge acquisition and application and is most associated with the literature and research related to critical thinking (Garrison et al. 2000:7)

The CoI survey is a well-validated instrument to gauge the quality of e-learning courses. The CoI framework proposes that successful learning takes place when there are three presences in a class, namely social, teaching and cognitive presences (Garrison et al. 2000). Garrison et al (2001 in Shea & Bidjerano, 2008:545) remind us that the CoI framework suggests that the components do not exist in isolation, but rather each can be seen as an overlapping set of lenses.

Cognitive presence is operationalised through the practical inquiry cycle. The four phases of the practical inquiry are the triggering event, exploration, integration and resolution. The educational goal and challenge is to move the inquiry process through all four phases of the inquiry process to ensure a successful outcome (Vaughan and Garrison, 2005:3)

Stodel et al. (2006:1) argue that, despite the success that instructors and learners often enjoy with online university courses, learners have also reported that they miss face to face contact when learning online. Anderson, Elloumi and McConnell (2002) and Salmon (2000 in Stodel

et al. 2006:1) state that emerging technologies are offering alternative ways to conceptualise and deliver education and in the process are revolutionising how learners work, think and build knowledge. Burbules and Callister (2000) assert that online learning and the use of computer-mediated communication tools are fast growing in popularity in higher education contexts. However, according to Bibeau (2000), Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) and Tu and McIsaac (2002 in Stodel et al. 2006:2), concerns surrounding the lack of physical presence in an online learning environment have led researchers to investigate the concept of presence when learning online.

There are trends and challenges facing the CoI model. It is important to note the issues and challenges emerging from the CoI framework to understand its epistemology. The challenge of implementing CoI, according to Vaughan and Garrison (2005:4) is how best to design faculty development programs that engage participants in high level, purposeful discourse in an effective and efficient manner. According to Vaughan and Garrison (2005:4), one solution with considerable potential would be a blended approach that combines the strength of both face to face and online learning. When the strategies of each approach are integrated in an appropriate and creative manner, the possibility to become fully engaged in a sustained manner is increased exponentially. In this way, blended learning designs reach beyond the benefits of convenience, access and efficiency (Vaughan & Garrison 2005). According to Vaughan and Garrison (2005:4) the true benefit of blended learning is in integrating face to face, verbal and online text-based exchanges and matching each to appropriate learning tasks. A high level learning experience needs the intelligent integration of both spontaneous and reflective communication. Since there is evidence of the potential of blended learning to enhance effectiveness and efficiency for higher education students., an online component could then build on this community to extend the exploration, integration and testing of ideas. As a result of these complementary benefits, we need to study how blended learning can be applied to a faculty independent context. Meyer (2003 in Vaughan and Garrison, 2005:8) reported on her comparative study of face to face and online discussion. Within the face to face component students enjoyed the speed, spark and energy as they built upon each other's comments, collaborated on the spot and benefited from the enthusiasm of others. However, during online exploration, the participants felt that the online forums helped them stay connected with other members. The sense of time is expanded within an asynchronous online discussion. Not only does this allow for a dialogue to be extended beyond the physical walls

of a classroom but this increased access to discussion provides an opportunity for all to contribute.

A number of other studies indicated that there is a more focused sense of exploration within online discussion (Garrison and Anderson 2003; Meyer 2003; Strauss 1997). Meyer (2003) found that the threaded online discussion comments were often more thoughtful, more reasoned, and drew evidence from other sources than those made within face to face session (Vaughan & Garrison, 2005:61). Newman et al. (1997) indicated that students are more likely in a computer-mediated discussion to make important statements and link ideas together than within a face to face session. Meyer (2003) also suggests that students recognised connections, understood other's ideas and incorporated these new discoveries into their own detailed asynchronous discussion forum responses. Wiegel (2002) found the emphasis on written rather than oral responses within online inquiry encourages a greater sense of integration or deeper level of thinking. Vaughan and Garrison (2005:9) found that while the potential value of online inquiry for the integration of ideas is apparent, there is a cost. Participants encountered a greater time commitment involved in the online discussions and it was difficult to regularly schedule time to properly engage in these sessions.

Blanchette (2001) suggests that because of the focus on the written word, online inquiries are more demanding intellectually than the face to face ones. Both Smith et al. (2001) and Meyer (2003) concur that these discussions are more labour-intensive because of the increased amount of time involved in reading and responding to other's postings. According to Moller (1998:120), being part of a community involves shared goals. Completing an educational activity is a shared goal, especially in the collaborative environments. Thus, encouragement from others within the community as well as the individual's commitment will increase participation. However, this is only possible if a mechanism is created to share information and feelings relevant to interpersonal issues.

Anderson, Rouke, Garrison and Archer (2001) define teaching presence as the design, facilitation and direction of cognitive and social process for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes. Shea and Bidjerano (2008:545) define it as learner ratings of explicit instructor actions involving instructional and organization, facilitation of discourse and direct instruction as a predictor of variance in learner ratings of social presence and cognitive presence. Social presence plays an important

role in rating of cognitive presence. In both definitions, the instructor appears to be central in organising and facilitating the teaching presence to participants. In myUnisa, the lecturer or the instructor organises teaching and learning activities for students who are participants in the discussion forum.

According to Anderson et al. (2001:3) teaching presence is the last element in the CoI framework, which supports and enhances social and cognitive presence and is most directly under control of teachers. There are three categories of teaching presence: design and organization, facilitating discourse and direct instruction. A lecturer, who designs, facilitates and instructs the course, contributes to the teaching presence. Teaching presence is a means to an end to support and enhance social and cognitive presence for the purpose of realising educational outcomes (Garrison et al. 2000: 90). Therefore, teaching presence does not stand alone. When students purposefully construct knowledge resulting in deep learning, it also signifies a high level of cognitive presence. Facilitators stimulate learner participation and interaction by using small group discussions, collaborative projects, case studies, didactic learning partnership exchanges and one on one exchanges. In this regard participants engage in teaching presence and teach each other in the community (Hootstein 2002). According to Stodel, Thompson and MacDonald (2006:3):

*Given that some learners in our online courses reported they missed face to face contact when learning online, the purpose of this inquiry was to identify learners' perceptions of what was missing on their online learning experience. The implication is that students who engage in online learning often miss the traditional face to face learning.*

Vaughan & Garrison (2003:3) assert that teaching presence is the unifying force that initiates and sustains the inquiry and learning process through design, facilitation and direct instructional responsibilities. This stresses the roles and functions of all participants in creating and maintaining a dynamic learning community. While the teaching role may well be largely assigned to one person, in a CoI there will be situations in which participants assume responsibility for teaching presence. Hootstein (2002) facilitators can encourage interaction among learners, facilitators and subject matter experts via internet using emails, list serves, news groups, multiuser discussions, forums, instant messaging and conferencing. According to Collins and Berge (1996) and Sieber (2005), the roles of the students and teachers are



changing in the online world and one of those changes is that the instructor is moving from provider of content to designer of student learning experiences. Hawkes and Coldeway (2002 in Henry & Meadows, 2008) state that quality learning experiences occur in online education when strategies are designed specifically to engage the learner.

Institutions of higher education have slowly begun to appreciate that the content of an educational experience, and the interactions that drive learning transaction will ultimately distinguish each institution (Garrison and Anderson 2003:4).

Chapman, Ramondt, and Smiley (2005) identified elements in online conversations that differentiate a learning community from a group of individuals who simply engage in online information exchange. The identified elements of a learning community include informality, familiarity, honesty, openness, heart, passion, dialogue, rapport, empathy, trust, authenticity, disclosure, humour and diverse opinions. Developing an online community with these characteristics takes time and requires support from professional, experienced online-learning mentors.

A community of inquiry also provides the environment in which learners can take responsibility for and control of their learning through interaction and this could have a role to play in dealing with higher order learning task like critical thinking, academic writing etc. Given the accessibility and communication facilities of the internet to our students here at Unisa, an elearning environment that the university will be offering fully in future as you are aware, this models could serve as advantages and base of providing support to our students in the communities.

### **3.3 JUSTIFICATION FOR ONLINE THEORIES**

According to Engelbrecht (2003:39) e-learning models provide valuable frameworks for understanding the integration of technology and pedagogy and may help to identify key disparities between the current and desired situation. A community of inquiry provides the environment in which learners can take responsibility for and control of their learning through interaction and is a requisite for higher order learning. Given the access and communication facilities of the internet, an elearning environment has distinct advantages as a means of providing support to communities of inquiry to promote higher order learning.

The literature has shown that there is a lot of group collaboration due to different teaching presence when teaching online. Even though the researcher agrees with the views of the online theories reviewed above, for example, there is much work which the researcher thinks can be done to improve Unisa ABET programmes.

The researcher has also found that the periods of pedagogies using new technologies, learning activities are not only in DE, but also available in contact institutions. In the connectivity pedagogy, distance education is dominated by student – content and student lecture interaction, the peer and group interaction that made it possible for students to work together to create and construct new knowledge. The students have the potential to become more self-directed in their learning programmes. The role of the lecturer continues to change for example, they become facilitators, organisers of learning content, etc.

There are so many opportunities when learning in a digitised environment that presently this study cannot make claims that learning in real spaces should be totally replaced, by learning in virtual spaces due to challenges that participants have shown during the interviews and in the survey questionnaire. The learning using by new technologies is richer and provides learning opportunities. The students are not merely passive recipients of knowledge, they are producers of knowledge through interaction in learning environment.

The computers and the internet have become an integral part of the ABET department and Unisa.

### **3.4 SUMMARY**

The theories discussed in this chapter offer insight into why it had become important to use online technologies for teaching and learner support, the issues, challenges and strategies on how to use ICTs and to create the three presences were briefly presented.

In the next chapter the research design for the study is presented.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

#### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

According to Mouton (2001:86) one of the first aims of a research study should be to establish what has already been done in the field of study. In this study the literature review in Chapter Two and three has presented the literature review of DE, ODL and LS in depth. In this chapter the researcher combined qualitative and quantitative methods to design the study. The chapter deals with the methodology and methods that were used to collect data in order to test the authenticity and to respond to the research questions. The researcher looked at various data collecting strategies. This was done in order to develop the most suitable instruments to be used in the research at hand. Justification for the use of two research methodologies has been explained in detail.

#### **4.2 RESEARCH DESIGN**

Yin (2003) added further that a research design is an action plan for getting from here to there, where 'here' may be defined as the initial set of questions to be answered and 'there' is some set of (conclusions) answers. The research project was both an explorative and descriptive case study with the aim of investigating the use of learner support in ODL context for the ABET programme.

A case study is one of several ways of doing research whether it is social science related or even socially related because its aim is to understand human beings in a social context by interpreting their actions as a single group, community or single event. Gillham (2000a:1) defined a case study as an investigation to answer specific research questions which seek a range of different evidences from the case settings.

Yin (2003) defines a case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon and context is not clearly defined. The case study approach is especially useful in situations where contextually conditions of the event being studied are critical and where the researcher has no control over the events as they unfold. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) see the primary defining features of a case study as being "multiplicity of perspectives where are

rooted in a specific context. The case may also be a program, an event, or an activity bounded in time and place.” According to McMillan and Schumacher (2001), a case study examines a bounded system or a case over time in detail, employing multiple sources of data found in the setting.

The case study approach makes use of multiple methods of data collection such as interviews, document reviews, archival records, and direct participant observations and subsequently “thick descriptions” of the phenomenon under study (Yin 2003). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) argue that case studies can be generalised and that looking at multiple actors in multiple settings enhances generalisability. Yin (2003), similarly, adds that case studies are used for analytical generalisations where the researcher’s aim is to generalise a particular set of results to some broader theoretical propositions.

These for and against views indicate that no research methodology is perfect; therefore, researchers have to use data obtained with multiple methodologies.

Anderson (1998) in Burton and Bartlett (2009:64) suggested that most case study research in education is interpretive seeking to bring a case to life. He states that this often, but not exclusively, occurs in natural setting with the researcher employing qualitative and/or quantitative methods and measures as befits the circumstances. In this way triangulation automatically takes place, thereby increasing the validity of the study. Hoberg (2004:49) adds case studies are largely used to probe the contemporary real life situations of respondents and to provide a basis for further quantitative or qualitative research.

### **4.3 JUSTIFICATION FOR USING QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE APPROACHES**

This study uses the mixed method, that is, a survey in (phase one) and in-depth interviews in (phase two). The data were collected concurrently in terms of which the survey was conducted and the findings analysed. The in-depth interviews were then conducted to formulate the interview questions. The in-depth interviews were analysed and the findings contextualised within ODL and LS contexts.

The rationale for this choice of method is to gain a deeper understanding of the case study by triangulation obtained by the two methods. The methodology helped the researcher to understand how UNISA learner support systems are used in the ABET department to ensure student success and teaching.

The qualitative method supplemented the quantitative as it elicited information of a personal nature and allowed the participants to express feelings and opinions on issues which the questionnaire items did not allow.

McMillan and Schumacher (2006:404), Borland (2001:1) and Monyatsi, Steyn and Kamper (2006:431) all agree that the combination of quantitative and qualitative designs yields comprehensive and rich data. The strength of one phase in data collection will enhance the weakness of the other, and they will serve to complement rather than rival each other in the study in order to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study by comparing data obtained by the two methods.

Descombe (2002: 23) adds there has been a growing tendency to combine the use of different methods and different research strategies within individual investigation, playing to their perspective strengths' and compensating for their respective weakness, in order to achieve the most robust and valuable findings that are possible under the circumstances.

Johnson and Christenson (2008:51) view the use of multiple perspectives, theories, and research methods as strength in educational research. In essence, they see the combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods as complementary. However, Johnson and Christenson (2008) advise that one must be sure to consider the fundamental principle of mixed research, which implies that it is wise to collect multiple sets of data using different research methods and approaches in a way that the resulting mixture or combination has complementary strengths and no overlapping weaknesses.

Bryman (2006:97) says there can be little doubt that research that involves the integration of quantitative and qualitative research has become increasingly common in recent years. So far as research practice is concerned, combining quantitative and qualitative research has become unexceptional and unremarkable in recent years. In this sense, we end up with three distinct approaches to research, namely, quantitative, qualitative and what is variously called

multimethods, mixed methods, or mixed methodology (Bryman 2004; Cresswell 2003; Tashakkor & Teddle 2003; Bryman 2006: 98).

Cresswell et al. (2003) argue that giving types of mixed methods research names has certain advantages. It conveys a sense of the rigour of the research and provides guidance to others about what researchers intend to do or have done, to what extent typologies of mixed methods or multi strategy research can be helpful to researchers in clarifying the nature of their intentions or of their accomplishments. Several writers have pointed out that quantitative and qualitative research can be combined at different stages of the research process, formulation of research questions, sampling, data collection, and data analysis.

The researcher's opinion is that this study required the use of both methods. It was considered appropriate to use these two methods because they would complement each other in getting relevant and adequate data to address the problem stated in this research study.

De Vos (2002:358) argues why combining the two approaches is a matter which, as yet, is highly problematic. Many authors (cf. Mouton & Marais 1990:169-170) pay lip-service to such a combination, but are unable to do more than point out some of the differences between them. Pragmatically, to use both paradigms adequately and accurately consumes more pages than journal editors are willing to allow, and extends postgraduate studies beyond normal limits of size and scope.

Flick (2002:265-266) distinguishes two alternative ways of concretising the use of these two methods. The one is to focus the single case where the same people are interviewed and fill in a questionnaire. The other alternative is to establish the link between quantitative and qualitative research on the level of the data set. The answers to the questionnaires are analysed for their frequency and distribution across the whole sample and the answers in the interviews are analysed and compared. Thus, a typology is developed. The answers in both are compared with each other, put together and referred to each other in analysis; sampling decisions are taken in two steps. The same people are included in both parts of the study, but in the second step it has to be decided which participants of the survey study are selected for the interviews.

Although Cresswell (2003) pleads for researchers to choose one of the two possibilities, some authors like Ary et al. (2010:561) point out that, in reality, researchers often have to use both approaches to expand the breadth or depth of a study. It was in this regard that I opted to use mixed methods.

#### **4.4 CHOICE OF METHODOLOGY**

At this point it is essential to explain the concept of methodology. Research methodology is the general approach the researcher takes in carrying out the research project. To some extent, this approach dictates the particular tools the researcher selects (Leedy & Ormond, 2005: 12). Put simply, methodology is merely the body of a particular method or methods used for reaching a desired end-result. According to Meyers (2009) the research method is a strategy of enquiry, which moves from the underlying assumptions to research design, and data collection. The most common classification of research methods project uses two research methodologies. A method refers to how one gathers the relevant data, determines procedures and gets the work done as specified. But before sampling, the researcher has to decide on the methods to use, hence a distinction between qualitative and quantitative research is discussed. Greene (2008 in Ary et al. 2010:559) explains mixed methods research as a combination of quantitative research and qualitative research methods in different ways with each approach adding something to the understanding of the phenomenon. If mixing methods offers a better understanding of the research problem than a single method design, then it is worth considering. The popularity of mixed method designs has grown exponentially during the past 30 years. It was considered appropriate to use a mixed method on learner support in the context of ODL because the study attempted to investigate views and experiences of the ABET students and lecturers in using learner support systems in the Department.

Jones and Summer (2008:33) point out that there has been a rich debate in education studies on combining research methods in recent years. There are challenges and opportunities surrounding mixed methods approaches. Qualitative methods can also produce quantitative data, although the opposite is not true.

Thomas and Johnson (2002 in Jones & Summer 2008:36) add that mixing methods might have different functions: to enrich or explain, or even contradict, rather than confirm or refute. It may even tell different stories about the same subject because quantitative methods are

good for specifying relationships, that is, describing and qualitative for explaining and understanding relationships. Blakie (1991 in Fielding, 2010:127) stresses that mixed methods remain a subject of debate in the academic sphere since the seminal elaboration of the concept of triangulation.

Fouche' & Delport (2002:79) define the qualitative research paradigm in its broadest sense as research that elicits participants' meaning of experience or perceptions. In line with this definition, a qualitative researcher is concerned with giving meaning to a phenomenon in terms of the meaning people bring to them (McMillan & Schumacher 2001:395). Strauss and Corbin 1990 in (Nahid, 2003:600) define qualitative research broadly as any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification, and instead the kind of research that produces findings from real-world settings where the "phenomena of interest unfold naturally". Therefore, one approach filled the gap that was left by the other in the study.

Patton (2001 in Nahid, 2003: 600) says qualitative research uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings, such as real world settings where the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest. It thus entails an analytical study that identifies the participants' beliefs, thoughts, perceptions and values that underpin a situation. Fouche and Delport (2002:79) state that the qualitative researcher is concerned with understanding and does not use controlled measurements unique to quantitative research. In this study, the approach was concerned about the understanding of learner support activities in the context of ODL in the ABET department. The results of qualitative research are presented as a narrative description in the words of the participants (McMillan & Schumacher 2001: 395; Fouche & Delport 2002:79). McMillan & Schumacher (2001:395) note that qualitative research is important to education research because it aids in generating theories, policy development, education practice improvement, illumination of social issues and action stimulus.

O'Leary (2004:159) explains the qualitative method as a research design, which is evolving, general, flexible with questions that can be reformulated as the study proceeds. It also uses observation techniques that generally include interviews, projection and case studies. On the other hand, the quantitative method refers to the research design, which is structured,



predetermined, formal and specific questions are rigid once the empirical investigation starts. It uses experiential techniques and research methods that generally include questionnaires.

The quantitative technique emphasises a priori categories to collect data in the form of numbers. The goal in this case was to collect data from the six constructs of learner support in ODL to provide a statistical description, relationships and explanations. Quantitative research uses different types of data collection techniques such as structured observations, standardised interviews, tests, and questionnaires.

Quantitative research is strongly associated with social survey techniques such as structured interviewing and self-administered questionnaires, experiments, content analysis, and the analysis of official statistics. On the other hand, qualitative research is typically associated with participant observation, semi and unstructured interviewing and discourse analysis.

Winter 2000 in Nahid (2003: 598) states that the quantitative researcher attempts to fragment and delimit phenomena into measurable or common categories that can be applied to all of the subjects or wider and similar situations. For example, a quantitative researcher may prepare a list of behaviours to be checked or rated by an observer using a predetermined schedule or numbers (scales) as an instrument in his or her method of research. Thus, a quantitative researcher needs to construct an instrument to be administered in a standardised manner according to predetermined procedures.

#### **4.4.1 Tension in mixing qualitative and quantitative approaches**

Some researchers argue that there is a tension between qualitative and quantitative researchers.

Brannen (2005 in Jones & Summer, 2008:37) states that quantitative researchers have seen qualitative researchers as too context specific, samples as unrepresentative and their claims about their work as unwarranted – that is judged from the vantage point of statistical generalisation. For their part qualitative researchers view quantitative research as overly simplistic, decontextualised, reductionist in terms of its generalisations and failing to capture the meaning that actors attach to their lives and circumstances. Ary et al. (2010:559) remind us that the mixed method has its limitations, for example, time, resources, financial

constraints and expertise necessary to combine quantitative and qualitative research within one study. Some of these tensions have been addressed in the limitation of the study.

#### **4.4.2 Triangulation**

The concept “triangulation” is sometimes used to designate a conscious combination of quantitative and qualitative methodology. Stringer (2008:49) says triangulation involves the use of multiple and different sources, methods, and perspectives to corroborate, elaborate, or illuminate the research problem and its outcomes. It enables the inquirer to clarify meaning by identifying different ways the phenomenon is being perceived (Stake, 2005). In action research all stakeholders relevant to the issue investigated are included, observe multiple sites and events relevant to the stakeholders and issue investigated, and review all relevant materials, including resources, reports, records, research literature and so on. These multiple sources and methods provide rich resources for building adequate and appropriate accounts and understandings that form the base for working toward the resolution of research problems (Ibid.).

Burton and Bartlett (2009:26) say triangulation is a navigational term which means to fix one’s position from two known bearings. This process is carried out by researchers to increase the validity of their research and it means checking one’s findings by using several points of reference. In effect, the researcher is approaching the objectivity of the research from as many different angles and perspectives as possible in order to gain a greater understanding.

Flick (2002:227) characterises triangulation as a word used to name the combination of different methods, study groups, local and temporal settings as well as different theoretical perspectives in dealing with a phenomenon. It can mean combining several qualitative methods, but it can also mean combining qualitative and quantitative methods. De Vos (2001:17) believes in the spirit of the statement quoted above although only articulated recently, most authors agreed that in real life, education researchers use both quantitative and qualitative methodology, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously.

Researchers often talk of triangulation when referring to the use of these two methods in a sense of complementing each other. In this sense triangulation, which is the use of more than one data collection method to gather information was deemed appropriate. Triangulation has

helped the researcher in an attempt to explore more issues relating to the research topic of learner support in ODL, to learn more about the online world, and how to direct discussions and facilitate learning. The triangulation has also assisted and directed the study with the view to gain more knowledge on how to use myUnisa as a teaching tool effectively and efficiently, to learn more about the tools that both lecturers and students have not used, group discussions, tutoring and video conferencing. In using triangulation, the study explored and utilised various learner support systems in the ABET department.

#### **4.4.3 Population**

The goal of asking everyone to participate in the study was not practical as this study involved a population that could not be reached in its entirety. The population of the study comprised 1 808 students who were registered for the third year Higher Diploma in ABET. They included African, Coloured, Indian and White students. However, the African students were in the majority in this programme.

The sampling of participants was done in two phases: phase one (the quantitative phase) which used random sampling; and phase two (the qualitative phase) which used purposeful sampling. Due to financial and time constraints it was not possible for the researcher to include the entire population.

#### **4.4.4 Sampling**

According to Bryman, Tashakkori and Teddie (1998 in Croninger & Valli, 2009), a sample is a unit of observation of analysis that is being studied. There are two major types of sampling in research, which are probability and purposive sampling techniques. Usually each technique is determined by the quantitative (probability sampling) or the qualitative (purposive sampling) nature of the study. However, Kemper, Stringfield and Teddie (2003:277) are of the opinion that any study, whether single method or mixed methods can use any of a variety of sampling techniques to answer the research question under study.

According to Curry et al. (2009:1445), systematic, scientifically sound methods for developing samples for qualitative and mixed-methods studies are well established. In contrast to quantitative sampling techniques that rely on statistical probability theory,

qualitative sampling is based on purposeful or theoretical sampling principles. The aim is to identify “information-rich participants who have certain characteristics, detailed knowledge, or direct experience relevant to the phenomenon of interest”.

Furthermore, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000:91) explained that judgements have to be made about four key factors in sampling: the sample size, the representativeness and parameters of the sample, access to sample and the sampling strategy to be used. Many samples attempt to be representative, that is, the sample distribution and characteristics allow findings to be generalised back to the population. The samples make the research process manageable. They allow the researcher to explore groups of people, organisations and events that you simply could not access in their totality.

#### **4.4.5 Random sampling**

De Vos (2001:87-89) says sampling is therefore a process that is always strategic, sometimes mathematical and generally quite tricky. The goal is to select a sample that is broad enough to allow you to speak about a parent population, large enough to allow the researcher to conduct the desired analysis and small enough to be manageable. Determining a sample size is highly dependent on the shape and form of the data the researcher wishes to collect and the goals of the analysis.

In phase one, the researcher sampled 400 students from the total number of 1 808. Since the number was large, all even or odd numbers were identified and noted on pieces of paper. Selected numbers were put into a basket or hat. The basket was shuffled and the first 400 names picked from the basket were taken to participate in the research. The questionnaires were posted to the relevant students to complete with a return envelope as soon as possible. The researcher received 257 (64, 25%) responses from the 400 participants. This was explained in depth in chapter 5.

#### **4.4.6 Purposeful sampling**

In phase two, purposive sampling was selected because the study did not aim to generalise the findings (Teddie & Tashakkori, 2003). Punch (2005:187) defines this method of sampling as sampling in a deliberate way with some purposes or focus in mind. Purposeful sampling seeks

to include the full spectrum of cases and reflect the diversity within a given population by including extreme or negative cases (Curry et al. 2009:1445). The sample size varies depending on the breadth and complexity of inquiry, although samples are generally smaller than those used in quantitative studies and are studied intensively.

The participants sampled in this way included seven lecturers in the ABET Department and five students who had completed the survey questions. McMillan and Schumacher (2006:319) explain that purposeful sampling is selecting information rich cases for study in depth. Thus, information rich-participants who could help to address the problem statement and the research questions were sought. In the semi structured interview the researcher spoke to participants face to face. He interviewed them and the questions in the guide contained open-ended questions. Gorard (2001:10) points out that purpose of sampling in qualitative research is to use a relatively small number of cases to find out about a much larger number.

#### **4.4.7 Data Collection Strategies**

O'Leary (2005:98) says being familiar with the basic process of data collection and having a critical understanding of the pros and cons of various collection strategies puts you in a strong position to direct further reading. Data collection can be done by a number of approaches, including surveys, interviews, observations, unobtrusive methods and experimentation. O'Leary (2005:100) says that the collection of data needs to be rigorous. In fact, it is the systematic and rigorous nature of the researcher's approach that will help define data as more than anecdotal evidence and give credibility to the eventual findings. Data collection is a complicated process that needs to be tackled in a thoughtful and methodical manner.

The study was carried out within the framework of a cross-sectional survey research design employing both quantitative (the questionnaire) and qualitative data collection methods (the interview). A closed-ended questionnaire, including open-ended questions and a semi-structured interview, was used to gather data from the ABET students and the lecturers.

In phase two, open-ended questions were used in the interview schedules. They required participants to elaborate without limitation on certain issues in the questions about learner support systems. In open-ended questions the respondents could give any response they wished to give to the questions asked. These questions were streamlined by the topic, but the quality of the content depended on the respondent's articulation of answers, facts and logic.

Open questions ask respondents to construct answers using their own words (O’Leary, 2004:159). Therefore, the use of open-ended questions was also influenced by this idea.

#### **4.4.8 Ethical considerations**

The researcher has met the ethical requirements of the Unisa Research Ethics Committee. The ethical clearance certificate has been issued and attached in the annexures. The ethical considerations were explained to participants and they consented to voluntarily participate in the study project. The participants were also made aware that they were participating voluntarily and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage. The participant’s consent form was issued and given to the participants to indicate their choice by ticking “I accept” or “I decline” in the box.

Descombe (2002:180) warns that information that is given to social researchers during the course of their investigation should be treated as confidential. It should not be disclosed to anyone other than co-researchers involved with the specific investigation in any way that allows the information to be traced back to the individual who provided it. The information coming from individuals is not leaked to others (See Annexure 3). This could prove embarrassing and would constitute a breach of confidence. Researchers have no special status in law that privileges them when it comes to the information they collect. Burton and Bartlett (2009:29) state that ethics should be a central consideration for all education researchers. We need to be aware that research, if conducted without care and consideration, can have potentially harmful effects for those taking part. Researchers must consider the rights of the individual who may be providing data and they also need to ensure that all those taking part in the research and the information they prioritise are treated in a sensitive manner. All data need to remain confidential and the respondents need to be assured, as far as possible, that their anonymity will be maintained unless otherwise agreed.

The participants in this study were assured of their right to privacy and the confidentiality of the data collected from them. The research study was carried within the UNISA ethical structures (See Annexure D3).

The term “ethics” comes from the Greek *ethos*, meaning “character”. There are various definitions that can be used. Sieber (1992 in Burton & Bartlett, 2009:30) defines ethics as the

systematic study of the value concepts, good, bad, right, wrong and the general principles that justify these concepts. Israel and Hay (2006:12) point out that ethics is concerned with perspectives on right and proper conduct. Application of ethical principles include:

- Informed consent
- Confidentiality and privacy
- Honesty and openness
- Access to findings
- Avoiding harm (doing good)

According to Descombe (2002:176), although responsibility for the ethical conduct of research rests with the researcher, it is becoming increasingly common for researchers to need to gain formal approval from a research ethics committee before they can embark on their research. The relevant committee are those that screen proposed pieces of research to check that they were in accordance with ethical principles for research (See Research Ethics Clearance Certificate attached). In this case the information provided by the students was treated confidentially to guide Unisa's planning actions and developments to improve the academic and administration service. The participants regarded the completion of the questionnaire as an optional assignment with a view to gaining experience in completing a survey questionnaire.

Descombe (2002:182) states the normal and routine aspects of people's lives deserve to be considered as valuable and researchers should not disrupt people's lives with regard for this. Contact with people at home or work in connection with research ought to be made in a way that respects the privacy of these locations. Phone calls or personal visits can prove to be ill-timed and a nuisance invading territories of time and space in an unwelcome way.

#### **4.4.9 Survey**

According to Neuman (2000:250), the survey researcher follows a deductive approach. He or she begins with theoretical or applied research problems and ends with empirical measurement and data analysis. O'Leary (2005:103) defines surveying as the process of

collecting data by asking a range of individuals the same questions related to their characteristics, attributes, how they live, or their opinions.

In constructing the questionnaire the following steps were followed: firstly every questionnaire contained clear instructions and introductory comments where appropriate to guide the respondents as to what exactly was required from them (See Annexure D3). Leedy and Ormond (2005:190) remark that the questions in questionnaires must be written to communicate exactly what the researcher wants to know. The responses to the questionnaire were determined by the nature of the questions and the respondent's reactions to ODL and learner support structures. The questionnaire consisted of a combination of close-ended recorded items and open-ended items about learner support systems in the form of online technology, tutors and discussion classes for ABET students. The tool was used to obtain data from participants scattered in the nine provinces of South Africa.

Neuman (2000: 271-272) enumerates the following advantages of mail and self-administered questionnaires. This type of survey is cheap and can be conducted by a single researcher. Questionnaires can be sent to a wide geographical area and the respondent can complete the questionnaire when it is convenient. Anonymity is provided by mail questionnaires and the interview bias is avoided. O'Leary (2005:104) agrees that a survey can reach a large number of respondents, represent an even large population, allow for comparisons, generate standardised, quantifiable, empirical data, generate qualitative data through the use of open-ended questions, be confidential and even anonymous.

The disadvantages are that the response rate is often low and there is lack of control over the conditions under which the questionnaire is completed. Moreover, some respondents may give incomplete answers. It is also not possible to observe the respondent's reactions to questions, physical characteristics or the setting. In addition, the kinds of question a researcher can use is limited. However, the response rate in the study of learner support for ABET students was acceptable. Other challenges associated with surveying are, namely, capturing the quantifiable data with the help of the statistician, gathering in-depth data, getting a representative sample to respond, getting anyone at all to respond, needing proficiency in a statistical analysis and only getting answers to the questions asked.



Stringer (2008:77) states out that a survey is another means of providing input into an action research process. Unlike “quasi-experiments” that use statistical analysis to test a hypothesis, surveys are sometimes used in action research to acquire information from parents whose children attend a school. The major advantage of surveys is that they provide a comparatively inexpensive means to acquire information from a large number of people within a limited time frame. Their disadvantage is that it is frequently difficult to obtain responses from those surveyed and the information that can be obtained by this means is generally fixed.

**a) Instrument development**

The researcher compiled the questionnaire after a thorough review of the literature to identify all the variables to be included in the study. I framed the questionnaire looking at the CoI framework which focused on the intentional development of an online learning community with an emphasis on the process of instructional conversations that were likely to lead to epistemic engagement. Ice (2009) argues that the CoI framework has been successful in measuring the quality of both fully online and blended courses. The CoI theoretical framework represents a process of creating a deep and meaningful learning experience through the development of three interdependent elements, namely, social, cognitive and teaching presence. Therefore, the researcher designed the questionnaire around the three interdependent presences. The language used in the instrument was English as the language commonly used for teaching and learning

Stringer (2008:80) states that Likert scales are often used in questionnaires to record the level of a person’s response to an issue, experience, or event. Commonly, an item in a questionnaire will present a statement and provide a range of possible responses. For example:

I like the way announcements are made in myUnisa.

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. Agree
4. Strongly Agree

The researcher used a four-point Likert scale to obtain respondent’s views. The researcher was aware that some students had no access to the learner support facilities especially

myUnisa. The four-point Likert scale would yield rich data that would contribute to the study project.

#### **4.4.10 Interviews**

Numerous volumes on the techniques of face to face interviewing have been published. Holstein and Gubrium (1995:1 in De Vos 2001:297) say interviewing could thus be regarded as the universal mode of systematic enquiry. O'Leary (2005:113) defines interviewing as a method of data collection that involves seeking open-ended answers related to a number of questions, topic areas, or themes. The literature on the techniques of face to face interviewing treats the interview as a pipeline for extracting and transmitting information from the interviewee to the interviewer. In this way the face-to-face interview helps us to understand the closed worlds of individuals, families, organisation, institutions and communities.

According to O'Leary (2005:114), what could be better than getting out there and actually talking to real people, asking them what they really think and finding out first-hand how they genuinely feel. When you conduct an interview, you are able to put yourself in a position to see, hear, and get a sense of your participants. They provide for relatively systematic collection of data and, at the same time, ensure that important data are not forgotten.

The main disadvantage of these interviews is that they require a highly trained and proficient interviewer. De Vos (2001:305) says the following basic principles should be adhered to during each of the phases of interviewing, in accordance with the needs of both the interviewer and the interviewee:

Respect and courtesy, interviewers should always treat their interviewees with respect and courtesy, including those who may be rejected by so. Acceptance and understanding, acceptance of an interviewee implies that an interviewer has the ability to identify with the interviewee. This is known as empathy, in other words acceptance of people despite their problems and shortcomings. Confidentiality, interviewee should be satisfied that their identity and any information that they provide will in all circumstances be treated as confidential. A pseudonym should be used if preferred by interviewees. Integrity, in order to maintain a sound relationship of trust, interviewers should not raise false expectations, and interviewees should be treated with absolute honesty. Individualisation, the principle of individualisation is

based on acceptance and recognition of the uniqueness of every interviewee with regard to nationality, religion, race, personality, background, and so on.

Ernie (2008:56) adds initial stages of the interview can be a little uncomfortable for both interviewer and interviewee, and the interviewer must establish a relationship of trust in order to enable interviewees to feel comfortable in revealing their experiences, either to a stranger or a colleague. He suggested using initial contact with people to inform them of the issue being studied and to explore the possibility of their participation. The researcher identifies him or herself, identifies the issue of interest, asks permission to talk about the issue and negotiates a convenient time and place to meet.

Stringer (2008:57) warns that a classroom or school office may not be the best place to interview children or parents - the site itself might put them into a particular role of frame of mind. Behaviour and talk are greatly influenced by the environment in which they occur. Research is a sociable process and should be treated as such. According to the circumstances, people may be comfortable in their own homes, in cafes or fast food outlets, or in a park or other public place. A meeting over coffee enables interviewer and interviewee to chat about general events and establish a conversational tone in their interactions. This provides a context to move easily to the issue of interest. In this study, ABET lecturers were interviewed in their offices after their working hours.

#### **a) Recording information**

Stinger (2008:62) states that participants acquire a degree of safety in knowing their perspectives that are not forgotten or distorted over time. For reasons of accuracy and harmony, an ongoing record of information is a central feature of research. Field notes and tape recordings provide the two major forms of recordings; though increasing use is being made of video recording. Interviewers should make immediate record of responses. You should ask permission for this before the interview, or in some cases, after the first few minutes. When the person has commenced talking, the researcher can ask the participant if he wants to write or record, for example, "This is very interesting. Do you mind if I take notes as you talk?"

Stinger (2008:64) believes using a tape recorder has the advantage of allowing the recorder to acquire a detailed and accurate account of an interview. Researchers acquire large quantities of information from multiple sources, so they should keep a careful record of their tapes, noting on each tape the person, place, time and date of the interview. Tapes should be transcribed as soon as possible after the interview, and the accuracy of the resulting text should be verified by the person interviewed.

Tape recordings have a number of disadvantages, however, and researchers should carefully weigh the merits of this technology. Technical difficulties with equipment may damage rapport with respondents. People sometimes find it difficult to talk freely in the presence of a recording device, especially when sensitive issues are discussed. A researcher may need to wait until a reasonable degree of rapport has been established before introducing the possibility of using a tape recorder. When using a recorder, the researcher should stop the tape to allow participants to speak 'off the record' if they show signs of discomfort.

In this study after the recording of both the lecturers and the student's responses, the researcher started to transcribe the responses verbatim and analysis started.

## **b) Locating participants**

A letter of invitation was sent out to each of the potential participants. The details contained in the letter included, the purpose of the study, statement about the significance of the participant's contribution, an indication that the interview schedule would be sent out at a later stage as well as contact details.

## **4.5 DATA ANALYSIS**

### **4.5.1 Analysis of Quantitative Data**

According to Punch (2003:64) a description analysis of all the main variables is done focussing on distribution statements. Appropriate means, standard deviations and frequency distributions may be used. This can be done across the whole sample as well as for important subgroups within the sample using tables to present results. The researcher used SPSS to analyse the data captured from the questionnaire responses. The analysis undertaken included

frequencies, combined frequencies tables, means calculations (standard deviations, minimum and maximum values) and cross-tabulations.

The investigation of joint relationships between variables and the techniques to be used were guided by the research questions and the way those research questions were phrased. In general, Punch (2003:65) advocates the use of multiple linear regressions in the investigation of joint relationships between variables. Quantitative data may be presented in various forms, such as graphs, charts, tables and diagrams.

Punch (2003:45) recommends doing the following before undertaking survey data analysis: data preparation, data cleaning and data entry. Data cleaning refers to the tidying up of the data set before the analysis itself begins. Questionnaire responses need to be proofread by the researcher, and decisions made about unclear responses, situations where a respondent may have answered more than one alternative and missing data. Once that is done the questionnaire responses need to be entered into the computer for electronic data processing. Questions of design, layout and format will have to be answered in preparing data processing. Generally the following is recommended (Punch 2003:64):

- If both variables are cautious, use product-moment correlation.
- If one variable is continuous and the other categorical and dichotomous, use either point bi-serial correlation or t-tests for the differences between groups' means.
- If one variable is continuous and the other categorical with more than two categories, use one-way analysis of variance for the difference between groups.
- If both variables are categorical, use contingency tables.

#### **4.5.2 Analysis of Qualitative Data**

Whereas quantitative research data scrutiny only begins when all necessary information has been gathered, qualitative analysis begins with the first interview (Krueger & Casey 2000: 129). The analysis is done concurrently with data collection and each subsequent individual or group is investigated and compared with earlier individuals or groups. Thus, according to Krueger and Casey (2000) in qualitative research, analysis begins as soon as the first set of data is gathered and runs parallel to data collection.

Lee and Fielding (2004:533) state that the interview is mostly topic oriented with the focus on identifying themes emerging from the data. An adaption of Krueger and Casey's (2000) transcript based data capturing and analysis procedure was followed in this study. At the end of each interview session, notes that had been taken during the interview were examined for key themes and written according to topic and field. The tape was replayed to listen for, and to note, any patterns in the interview procedure and discussion which could be incorporated into subsequent sessions. The tapes were manually transcribed verbatim, handwritten and filed according to session date. The transcription process usually took hours.

The participants were interviewed in similar conditions: starting time, duration of interview, interview schedule and role of researcher. In addition, to ensure reliability and validity of the data, the interview was recorded on a tape recorder while further notes were taken. Every effort was made by the researcher to establish rapport with the contributors under professional conditions.

The reliability of the interview schedule used for this investigation was enhanced by specifying the role of the researcher, participant location and selection, data collection and analysis strategies. These are some of the aspects of research design which, explicitly specified, enable other researchers to discover similar phenomenon.

There must be sufficient data to constitute a trail of evidence:

- Field notes
- Recordings
- Oral summary of key points raised during each group session
- Debriefing with the moderator team following the group's session and transcripts if used (Krueger & Casey, 2000:128)

## **4.6 RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY**

### **4.6.1 Reliability**

According to Ridenour and Newmann (2008:39), the basic purpose of reliability is to help researchers estimate validity. Reliability is an estimate of measurement error. The reliability of the various learner support constructs was very high.

### **4.6.2 Validity**

Ridenour and Newman (2008:36) state that the notion of validity was accorded strong consensus among most traditional education researchers. The concept is applied in at least two contexts: in research design (internal, external validity) and in measurement (the validity of the measurement of the measurement).

Validity has traditionally meant an estimate of the extent to which the data measure (or the design measures) what it is intended to measure (Ridenour & Newman, 2008:36). Trustworthiness is a recent term that refers to a broader notion of truth value. Validity is defined as the extent to which the test or set of data or design actually measure or reflect or produce what it is supposed to measure, reflect or produce (Ridenour & Newman, 2008:39). This means the degree to which the evidence supports the interpretation of the data and the manner in which the interpretations are appropriate.

There is an important difference between measurement validity and design validity. Measurement validity estimates how well the instrument measures what it purports to measure. Design validity encompasses internal and external validity (Ridenour & Newman, 2008:40). A research design is only internally valid if it has measurement validity and reliability.

External validity is defined as the extent to which the results of a study apply to other people, groups, times and places (Newman et al. 2006).

#### **4.7 TRANSFERABILITY AND GENERALISABILITY**

Descombe (2002:149) states generalisability, however, is a quality of the findings that is measurable, testable and checkable, and tends to be associated with the quantitative and more positivistic styles of research. Contrasting with this, transferability is a more intuitive process in which the relevance of the specific research findings to other events, people or data is imagined rather than actually demonstrated. In a strict sense, most small-scale and or qualitative research concerns itself with, the transferability of findings rather than their generalisability. According to Ridenour and Newman (2008) transferability is a process in which the researcher infers how the findings might relate to other situations. They literally “transfer” the results from the research situation to other situations. Unlike quantitative research that assumes the need to generalise the results of the study, qualitative research by its very nature can only apply results directly to the context of the study.

#### **4.8 THE ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER**

I have been involved with DE throughout my teaching years while working in the primary and secondary schools of the rural areas in Limpopo Province. All my studies were obtained through distance learning from Unisa. The North West University appointed me as a part-time tutor in 2009. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of June 2010 I joined the University of South Africa in Muckleneuk Campus as an academic in the ABE department.

The qualitative nature of the interviews process establishes the researcher as the primary data collector. Therefore the issues of subjectivities, biases and assumptions could influence in a positive or negative manner have been identified prior to the design and conducting of the interviews with a view to removing any barriers that might impact negatively on the truthfulness of the research study.

I have been studying at Unisa on undergraduate and postgraduate level while living in rural areas and as such I have had first-hand experience of DE and ODL students. The experiences of studying, supporting and tutoring adult students might have brought about knowledge of learner support in the context of ODL in higher education. The ethical considerations were explained to the participants.



As an academic in the ABET department I am aware that my acquired knowledge and experience brought some assumptions and biases to the study. Therefore efforts were made to justify these assumptions and biases to ensure objectivity during data analysis and presentation. However, I am of the opinion that my understanding and knowledge have added value to the analysis which otherwise would have been absent in the research field of ODL and LS.

Therefore the study was approached from the premise that learner support in ODL context is topical and it could add value to the student learning.

#### **4.9 SUMMARY**

In this chapter the rationale for choice of a combined data collection methodology was described. The survey method as the selected non-experimental method was explained. The procedures used for finding participants for interview and for data collection and analysis for the quantitative and the qualitative phases were explained in detail.

The discussion of the findings is presented in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **PRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS**

#### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter, the findings of the study are presented and discussed under three main headings, namely: the findings of Phase One, the findings of Phase Two, and a summary. The findings of Phase One which correspond with those from Phase Two have been integrated where appropriate. The patterns emerging from both phases have been noted and the findings have been interpreted.

The researcher conducted an empirical investigation to gather information on the specific research questions that were outlined in chapter one. This chapter discusses the presentation, findings and analysis of data of the research study. The chapter also presents the meanings of ODL and the implications for learner support in the context of the ABET programme.

The results of the quantitative component were analysed and presented as frequency tables and pie charts in accordance with the seven sections of the questionnaire, namely, biographical information, myUnisa teaching presence, social presence, cognitive presence, considering future, discussion classes and tutorial classes. The qualitative data obtained during the qualitative component were analysed according to qualitative strategies and the emergent issues and patterns were discussed. The results of the study suggest that the instrument was valid, reliable and an efficient measure of social presence, teaching presence, cognitive presence and other learner support systems and structures.

The findings of Phase One consist of seven sections, namely, biographical information, myUnisa teaching presence, social presence, cognitive presence, future expectations, discussion classes and tutorial classes. The findings of the Phase Two are represented in the discussion of analysis results, summary comments and deductions.

## 5.2 PHASE ONE: THE SURVEY

This section gives attention to the quantitative empirical findings emerging from the study. The findings were discussed according to the seven sections of the questionnaire. In Phase One the researcher randomly sampled 400 students from the total number of 1808 enrolled in the Higher Diploma in Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET). They were targeted to participate in the survey to ensure the best possible representation of their experiences of learner support in ABET. However, while the findings represent the views and experiences of the target population, they cannot claim to be representative of the views and experiences of all ABET and UNISA students.

The researcher interpreted the findings and related them to the research questions which were addressed in the study. The descriptive statistics on responses to each question of the frequency of a number indicates how many respondents scored that specific number in a test. These statistics give a good general impression of how respondents perceived specific questionnaire questions: 1 (Strongly Disagree); 2 (Disagree); 3 (Agree); and 4 (Strongly Disagree). The descriptive statistics on responses to each questionnaire item are shown in tabular format in Tables 5.1 – 5.15.

In this study, the internal consistency reliability is indicated in the output of the scale reliability analyses by a value referred to as the Cronbach alpha coefficient, which acts as an indicator of internal consistency reliability. If the value of the alpha coefficient is in the region of 0.7 or greater than 0.7, it can be assumed that internal consistency reliability of the six constructs has been statistically established for that particular subset of questionnaire items (Hatcher 1994:137). The summary results of scale reliability testing conducted on the six constructs of the learner support systems are presented in Table 5.91. The interpretation of the Cronbach alpha coefficients is provided in the discussion of the analysis results. Since a Cronbach alpha coefficient in the region of 0.7 and greater is indicative of internal consistency, it can therefore be concluded that the six constructs in the survey questionnaire could be deemed reliable.

The descriptive statistics on the responses to each questionnaire according to the seven sections are reflected in tabular form. This shows which of the survey questions in seven sections elicited the most agreement or disagreement. The questionnaire from the six sections

provided an additional dimension for consideration in the formulation of the interview questions in Phase Two of the research design.

### 5.2.1 Section A: Biographical Data

The findings of Section A (questions 1 to 8) which deal with biographical data of the respondents, are summarised in this section.

**Table 5.1: Geographical location, race and gender (n=257)**

	Eastern Cape	Free State	Gauteng Province	KwaZulu Natal	Limpopo Province	Mpumalanga Province	North West	Northern Cape	Western Cape
Race									
African	172	6	21	13	22	9	7	4	
Coloured									1
Indian				1					
Gender									
Male									
Female	28	1	4	4	3	-	-	1	1
	144	6	17	7	19	9	6	4	-

Table 5.1 indicates that the respondents were scattered throughout the nine provinces of South Africa. The vast majority of the respondents live in the rural areas. Table 5.1 also indicates that there were more female students than male students. This suggests that female students have sufficient time to study at home in spite of their domestic schedules. Interestingly, it would have been expected that men had more time due to less commitment to domestic duties.

The majority of respondents (99, 2%) were Africans; 0, 8% of the respondents were Coloured and Indians combined. Africans are found mainly in rural areas; most come from a poor background and a disadvantaged schooling system and a limited proficiency in English as the medium of the instruction.

**Table 5.2: Gender**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Valid Male	41	16.0	16.0	16.0
Female	216	84.0	84.0	100.0
Total	257	100.0	100.0	

According to Table 5.2 most (84%) respondents are women; only (16%) are men. The diploma course has more female students than men. This means that there are more challenges of illiteracy in rural areas than in urban areas. The majority of students are from the Eastern Cape and Limpopo Provinces which are mostly rural provinces. There is high illiteracy rate and the development is very low.

The majority of respondents were Africans and found mainly in rural areas; most of them come from a poor background and disadvantaged schooling system and a limited proficiency in English which is the medium of instruction.

This means that female students are more concerned about the problems of illiteracy in the rural areas than the male students. They use the ABET programme to regain the time they lost during the apartheid era. During the apartheid era there was no compulsory education in South Africa. This impacted more on women than men.

**Table 5.3: Province**

	Frequency	Per cent	Valid Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Valid Eastern Cape	172	66.9	67.2	67.2
Free State	6	2.3	2.3	69.5
Gauteng	21	8.2	8.2	77.7
KwaZulu Natal	14	5.4	5.5	83.2
Limpopo	22	8.6	8.6	91.8
Mpumalanga	9	3.5	3.5	95.3
North West	7	2.7	2.7	98.0
Northern Cape	4	1.6	1.6	99.6

Western Cape	1	.4	.4	100.0
Total	256	99.6	100.0	
Missing 0	1	.4		
Total	257	100.0		

Table 5.3 indicate that the majority of the respondents are from the Eastern Cape (67, 2%), followed by Limpopo (8, 6%), Gauteng (8, 2%), KwaZulu Natal (5,5%), Mpumalanga (3, 5%), North West (2, 7%), Free State (2, 3%), Northern Cape (1, 6%) and Western Cape (0, 4%). The ABET students are scattered mainly in the rural areas of South Africa. Eastern Cape and Limpopo Provinces have more rural areas than any other provinces in South Africa.

**Table 5.4: Employment profile**

	Frequency	Per cent	Valid Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Valid Yes	149	58.0	58.2	58.2
No	107	41.6	41.8	100.0
Total	256	99.6	100.0	
Missing 0	1	.4		
Total	257	100.0		

Distance education was mainly created for people who are working and cannot leave their full time jobs hence they study while working. They register to study at Unisa to develop themselves. Presently, the university also registers students who have just passed Grade Twelve. These are the students who have not been admitted at the contact institutions. They are the type of students who often do not understand what distance education is all about in the real sense, for example, they want to see teachers teaching them.

Table 5.4 indicates that the majority respondents (52, 8%) are employed while they are studying at UNISA; 41, 8% were unemployed.

**Table 5.5: Employment**

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Valid	Part-time	105	40.9	64.0	64.0
	Full – time	59	23.0	36.0	100.0
	Total	164	63.8	100.0	
Missing	0	93	36.2		
Total		257	100.0		

Table 5.5 indicate that 64% are employed part-time either in government or the private sector in the ABET sections. Thirty-six percent (36%) are employed full-time. These could be in the ABET centres and the main stream schooling system. A further 36, 2% of the respondents did not indicate whether they were employed or not.

**Table 5.6: Learner support**

Learner Support	Frequency	Per cent
Attendance of group discussion	128	49,8
Library Visits	146	56,8
Uses of website	175	68,1
Study groups	87	33,9

Learner support is developed for students to communicate with the university. The question was asked to find out how they were communicating with the university and in what way they are communicating. The learner support is made to enhance communication between the students and the university. The function of student support entails providing the students with as much assistance as possible in order to enable them to overcome difficulties that are often encountered by distance education students. Student support takes on different forms including the following:

**(a) Group discussion classes**

Table 5.6 clearly indicates that the respondents attend discussion classes facilitated by their lecturer during the academic year as follows: (55, 4%) attend once; (8, 2%) twice; (10, 8%) three times; (7, 8%) four times; and (17, 7%) five times. The ABET department used to have

two group discussion classes before 2009, that is, one during the first semester and another during the second semester. This department has not conducted group discussions since 2010 when ABET became an academic department. The ABET modules are linked to tutors as another way of support students. The respondents seem not to differentiate between group discussions and tutorial classes. The majority of respondents see tutorial classes which are held monthly as group discussions.

**(b) Library visit**

Table 5.6 revealed that respondents visit the library per week as follows: once (62, 1%); two times (13, 6%); three times (11, 1%); four times (3, 8%); and five times (9, 4%).

**(c) Uses of website**

The students tend to visit myUnisa more regularly. At least 73, 5% reported that they visit the website at least once a week while 10, 5% of them visit the website more than 5 times a week. Table 5.10 reveals that on a weekly basis respondents visit the UNISA website as follows: one time (73, 5%); two times (7, 1%); three times (6, 3%); four times (2, 5%); and five times (10, 5%).

**(d) Study groups**

According to Table 5.6, the respondents meet with their study group on a monthly basis as follows: one time (36, 6%) and two times (12, 2%),

The question on group discussion was asked to find out if the students understand the possibly difference between discussions and tutorial class. In their reports on group discussion and tutorial classes the students tend to confuse group discussion and tutorial classes. The group discussion classes are defined as classes where lecturers meet students in the regional offices and teach them. Tutorial classes are classes where tutors who are appointed by the ABET department guide and support students with their assignments. Surprisingly to most students group discussions and tutorial classes are the same hence they reported three times, five times etc. Therefore, the majority of the students have actually given a wrong definition of group discussion and tutorial classes. The students also tend to combine direct teaching, facilitation



and group discussion together. These also show that group discussions are effective because a large number of students are actually attending it.

Most students use the library not to get resources but as a place to study. Generally the students regard the library as quite places to study. In their home communities they do not have places to study.

The majority of the students are using the myUnisa for learning. Many of the students reported that they use websites. Most of the students also reported that they access Unisa website from their mobile phones.

**Table 5.7: Guidance on writing assignment**

<b>Learner support services</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Per cent</b>
Guidance by the tutor	76	29,6
Guidance by the lecturer	64	24,9
Guidance through study guide	182	70.8
Guidance through peers	100	38.9

The researcher asked the students where they are getting guidance from when they write assignments, Most of the participants reported that they get guidance from tutors, lecturers and fellow students, through study materials and other sources.

According to the Table 5.7, most respondents (70, 8%) are guided by the study material when completing assignments.

**(e) The lecturer**

According to the Table 5.7, the majority of the respondents (24, 9%) were guided by the lecturer when completing assignment instead of relying only on study material or the tutor at group discussions.

A great majority of students 70, 8% relies on study material for guidance. 24, 9% reported that they get assistance from their lecturers, 29, 6% are assisted by the tutors.

The table tells that students still rely on study materials for guidance and support. Most of them still rely fully on study material more than any other thing else. This has an implication for curricular development, and other support facilities that the department has for the students. It is evident that the students still rely on print based materials. The students are also relying more on the study groups than their lecturers and the tutors.

**Table 5.8: Internet access**

Uses of the Internet	Frequency		Per cent
	Yes	No	
Internet access	57	196	22,2
			76,3
Downloading study material	66	186	25.7
			72,4
Sending and receiving emails	80	172	31.1
			66.9

There are many different types of technologies that an institution can utilise in order to facilitate the delivery of teaching and learning. The question was asked to students who are involved in using myUnisa for learning on a daily basis.

Unisa has an excellent Learning Management System (LMS) in place called myUnisa. It is an online tool that is available to all registered students who have an access to the internet. It is asynchronous learning management system where students. Asynchronous delivery offer advantages and disadvantages which the researcher has discussed in-depth in the literature review. Pullen and Snow (2007:143) discuss the following advantages, it is accessible at any time via web pages and it is interactive. It is a barrier to students who do not have access to internet facilities. When using technology, facilities like myUnisa, it makes it possible for the students to learn anytime, anywhere, and make learners have access to learning resources. The lecturers are able to interact with students at all times. There are also interactive responses between the students and the lecturers.

Table 5.8 clearly indicates that most respondents (76, 3%) did not have access to the internet at the time of study, and only 22, 2% had access to the internet. The question sought to establish whether the respondents had internet access with particular reference to email which is the most popular method of communication between the students and the students, lecturers and the university.

The majority of the respondents (72, 4%) were not able to download study material from the internet. Only 25, 7% were able to download study material from the internet.

Table 5.8 indicates that the majority of respondents (66, 9%) were not able to send emails; 31, 1% was able to send and receive emails.

The overall response showed that most respondents had no access to the internet which would impact their studies and access to learner support systems. In the UNISA environment, email is probably the most popular communication application of the internet. It is fast and conveys messages and files within a very short time.

Unisa is looking into the possibility of going online, therefore the researcher wanted to find out how many students have an access to technologies possible for them to go online. The majority of 76, 3% students do not have access to internet and they live in the rural areas and registered for this programme. Only 22, 4% students had access to the internet.

In the context of this programme, the majority of students do not have an access to the internet and they still rely on the print based materials. Although Unisa wants to go online and use the elearning route, the majority of the students in rural areas will be left out in teaching and learning programme.

Those who have access to the internet use it for downloading study materials, sending and receiving emails. In myUnisa students can still use it to download learning materials but they are not using it. They seem to use it mainly for administration purposes, for example, receiving and sending assignments, etc.

The findings in the table suggest that most students do not have an access to internet facilities. Although the majority of students do not have an access, they do seem to recognise the value that it brings to teaching and learning as a means of supporting the students.

### 5.2.2 Section B: myUnisa (Teaching Presence)

The questions in this section determined the extent to which respondents use myUnisa as a teaching tool.

**Table 5.9: myUnisa: Teaching Presence**

SECTION B					
myUnisa: TEACHING PRESENCE					
Please indicate your extent of agreement with each of the following statements by ticking the appropriate box					
1: Strongly Disagree					
2: Disagree					
3: Agree					
4: Strongly Agree					
	Statement	1	2	3	4
1.	On myUnisa the lecturer clearly communicated important module topics	13.2	14.8	51	17.5
2.	On myUnisa the lecturer clearly communicated important module goals	13.2	15.6	51.4	16.3
3.	On myUnisa the lecturer clearly communicated important due dates as a study guide schedule (is this what you had in mind?)	12.8	17.1	43.2	23.3
4.	The lecturer provided clear instruction on how to participate in module learning activities on myUnisa	16.3	12.5	47.1	21.4
5.	The lecturer assisted the development of my creative thinking by indicating areas of agreement and disagreement on module topics.	17.1	14.8	49.4	16
6.	The lecturer guided the class online on myUnisa to develop insight in understanding module	18.7	24.9	38.5	15.2

SECTION B					
myUnisa: TEACHING PRESENCE					
Please indicate your extent of agreement with each of the following statements by ticking the appropriate box					
1: Strongly Disagree					
2: Disagree					
3: Agree					
4: Strongly Agree					
	Statement	1	2	3	4
7.	The lecturer assisted module participants through participative engagement towards productive dialogue	16	23	47.9	10.1
8.	The lecturer helped keep the module participants on track through focused learning.	13.6	16	47.5	19.1
9.	The lecturer encouraged module participants on myUnisa to explore new concepts presented the module.	17.1	16.7	44.7	18.3
10.	On the myUnisa portal the actions of the lecturer reinforced a sense of community among the students	14.8	22.6	43.6	15.2
11.	By means of focused discussions on myUnisa the lecturer facilitated learning	15.2	19.8	45.9	15.6
12.	The lecturer provided feedback that helped me understand my strength and weakness.	13.2	14	43.2	26.1

Table 5.9 indicates that most respondents agree (51%), and (17, 5%) strongly agree that the lecturer clearly communicated important module topics to them. Furthermore, some respondents disagree (29%) that important topics were communicated on myUnisa.

The majority of respondents (51, 4%) agree, and (16, 3%) strongly agree that module goals in myUnisa were clearly communicated to them by the lecturer. However, some respondents (13, 2%) disagree, and (15, 6%) strongly disagree that the lecturer clearly communicated module goals to them.

The majority of 43, 2% of the respondents agreed, and (23, 3%) strongly agreed that the lecturer clearly communicated due dates to them. However, some respondents (17, 1%) disagreed to strongly disagreed (12, 8%) about communication of the due dates.

Most respondents (47, 1%) agreed, and (21, 4%) strongly agreed that the lecturer provided clear instruction on how to participate in module learning activities on myUnisa. Only (12, 5%) disagreed and (16, 3%) strongly disagreed that lecturer provided clear instructions on myUnisa learning activities.

Over half the respondents (49, 4%) agreed, and (16%) strongly agreed (14, 8%) that the lecturer stimulated development of creative thinking through module topics. Only (14, 8%) disagreed, and (17, 1%) strongly disagreed that lecturers develop creative thinking.

The majority (49, 9%) of the respondents agreed, and (10, 1%) strongly agreed that the lecturer assisted them through participative engagement in productive dialogue. However, some respondents (23%) disagreed and (16%) strongly disagreed about the lecturer's assistance in participative dialogue.

Furthermore most respondents (47, 5%) agreed, and (19, 1%) strongly agreed that they were sufficiently helped by lecturers to achieve focused learning; 16, 6% of the respondents disagreed and (29%) strongly disagreed that they were sufficiently helped to achieve focused learning.

The majority of respondents (44, 7%) agreed, and (18, 3%) strongly agreed that the lecturer encouraged the exploration of new concepts presented in the module. However, some respondents (16, 7%) disagreed, and (17, 1%) strongly disagreed about the lecturer's encouragement of new concept exploration.

The majority of respondents (43, 6%) agreed, and (15, 2%) strongly agreed about the lecturer reinforcing a sense of community through the myUnisa portal, while some respondents (22, 6%) disagreed, and (14, 8%) strongly disagreed about the lecturer reinforcing a sense of community.

The respondents (45, 9%) agreed, and (15, 6%) strongly agreed about the facilitation of focused discussions on myUnisa. However, some respondents (19, 8%) disagreed, and (15, 2%) strongly disagreed about the facilitation of sufficient discussion on myUnisa.

Most respondents agreed (43, 2%), and (26, 1%) strongly agreed about lecturer feedback concerning students' strengths and weaknesses, while a small percentage of respondents disagreed (14%) to (13, 3%) strongly disagreed about lecturer feedback.

The students mainly use myUnisa for downloading learning materials. These clearly show that the students are not using myUnisa the way it is supposed to be used. Most students also cited lack of communication between the students and the lecturers. This could also be attributed to that most students are in rural areas where there is mostly poor communication mediums like, internet, postal delays, network problem for cellular phones etc. Most Unisa learner support systems are in the cities and far away from the students in the rural areas. There is a geographical distance between the students and the lecturers.

Anderson (2008) argues that understanding of students' prerequisite knowledge, their learning environment and their cultural attributes are starting points in the development of the student-centred effort services. The learner support systems were established to be learner centred and to reduce the distance between the students and the lecturers.

The students who have an access to myUnisa seem happy about the services of the learning management tool. The myUnisa is mainly used for downloading and sending emails (Table 5.8). The students do not have a clear picture of the different functions of myUnisa. The students use myUnisa to check assignment results etc. This suggests that training of students on myUnisa is lacking.

What really stands out is the clear communication goals on myUnisa portal between the students and the lecturers. The majority of the students, 68,5% view communication between the students and the lecturers as good. Therefore the students use their cell phones or mobile technologies to communicate with the lecturers. The majority of the students in the survey have good communication platforms with the lecturers. The students are using technologies for learning.

### 5.2.3 Section C: myUnisa (Social Presence)

**Table 5.10: myUnisa: Social Presence**

SECTION C					
MyUnisa: SOCIAL PRESENCE					
Please indicate your extent of agreement with each of the following statements by ticking the appropriate box					
1: Strongly Disagree					
2: Disagree					
3: Agree					
4: Strongly Agree					
	Statement	1	2	3	4
1.	Getting to know other module participants via myUnisa communications gave me a sense of belonging in the module	19.5	16	48.6	12.8
2.	Via myUnisa, I was able to come to know some module participants fairly well	17.1	23.3	45.1	12.1
3.	myUnisa communication is an excellent medium for social interaction.	16.3	20.6	45.9	13.6
4.	I felt comfortable communicating on myUnisa.	15.2	16	50.6	14.8
5.	I felt comfortable participating in the module discussions.	13.6	17.1	47.9	18.3
6.	I felt comfortable interacting with other module participants on myUnisa.	17.5	22.2	47.5	10.5
7.	I felt comfortable disagreeing with other module participants while still maintaining a sense of trust on myUnisa.	19.8	33.5	35	8.2
8.	I felt that my opinion was acknowledged by other module participants on myUnisa	15.2	28.4	46.3	7.8
9.	Online discussion on myUnisa help me to develop a sense of collaboration	19.5	26.1	41.2	9.7

Table 5.10 indicates that the majority of respondents (48, 6%) agreed, and (12, 8%) strongly agreed that communication with other students gave respondents a sense of belonging.



However, some of the respondents (16 %) disagreed, and (19, 5%) disagreed strongly on this item.

Most respondents (45, 1%) agreed, and (12, 1%) strongly agreed about getting to know other participants enrolled in the module, while only (23, 3%) disagreed and (17, 1%) strongly disagreed on this item.

The majority of respondents (45, 9%) agreed, and (13, 6%) strongly agreed about the role of myUnisa as a portal for social interaction. However, some respondents (20, 6%) disagree and (16, 3%) strongly disagreed on this item.

Table 5.10 indicates that the majority of respondents (50, 6%) agreed, and (14, 8%) strongly agreed that they felt comfortable communicating on myUnisa portal. However, a minority (16%) disagreed, and (15, 2%) strongly disagreed about the comfort with which they communicate on myUnisa.

Most respondents agreed (47, 9%), and (18, 3%) strongly agreed about comfortable participation in the module discussions. However, small percentages disagree (17, 1%), and (13, 6%) strongly disagreed about the ease of participating in the module discussions.

The majority of respondents (47, 5%) agreed, and (10, 5%) strongly agreed about feeling comfortable interacting with other module participants on myUnisa. However, some respondents disagreed (22, 2%), and (17, 5%) strongly disagreed about interaction on myUnisa portal with other participants.

Just over a third of respondents (35%) agreed, and (8, 2%) strongly agreed about differing in opinion with other module participants on myUnisa while still maintaining a sense of trust. However, a large proportion of the respondents disagreed (33, 5%) and (19, 8%) strongly disagreed about this issue.

Further (46, 3%) agreed, and (7, 8%) strongly agreed about participants' acknowledging each other's opinion on myUnisa portal. However, a considerable portion of the respondents disagreed (28, 4%), and (15, 2%) strongly disagreed about this issue.

Just over half of the respondents (41, 2%) agreed, and (9, 7%) strongly agreed that the discussion on myUnisa stimulated a sense of collaboration. However, an equal portion of respondents (26, 1%) disagreed, and (19, 5%) strongly disagreed that online discussions on myUnisa helped to develop a sense of collaboration.

Most students agreed that the myUnisa offers them a sense of belongingness. There is collaboration between the students and the lecturers, students to students. The students who do not have an access to myUnisa miss the valuable learning opportunity. The university will be providing Open Educational Resources (OER) and the rural students will be left out due to lack of internet and other computer facilities. The students who have an access to myUnisa felt comfortable interacting each other with lecturers and the other students.

The majority of the students (66,1%) feel comfortable talking to one another during teaching and learning. The students use myUnisa to talk about the teaching and learning activities. The findings here are that students use myUnisa to communicate comfortably amongst themselves. There is student to student interaction and this promotes learner centredness.

#### **5.2.4 Section D: myUnisa (Cognitive Presence)**

The questions in this section were asked to determine the respondents' understanding and knowledge of myUnisa as a teaching tool.

**Table 5.11: myUnisa: Cognitive Presence**

SECTION D					
myUnisa: COGNITIVE PRESENCE					
Please indicate your extent of agreement with each of the following statements by ticking the appropriate box					
1: Strongly Disagree					
2: Disagree					
3: Agree					
4: Strongly Agree					
	Statement	1	2	3	4
1.	Problems posed stimulated my interest in particular issues of the module	13.2	26.1	48.6	8.9
2.	Module activities in myUnisa aroused my curiosity	13.2	18.7	51.4	15.2
3.	I felt motivated to explore content related questions on myUnisa	12.1	14	52.5	19.8
4.	I utilised a variety of information sources to explore problems posed in the module	12.8	12.8	58.4	14
5	Brainstorming which facilitated the acquisition of relevant information helped me resolve content related questions.	10.9	11.7	55.6	19.8
6	The myUnisa discussions were valuable in helping me appreciate different perspectives.	14.4	18.3	52.1	13.6
7	Integrating new information components helped me answer questions raised in module activities in myUnisa.	12.8	12.5	58.4	14
8	Learning activities helped me develop deductive reasoning	9.7	17.9	56.4	12.5
9	Reflection on module content and discussions helped me understand concepts explained on myUnisa.	12.8	15.6	52.5	14.8
10	I developed ways to test and apply the knowledge created in the module.	8.9	9.7	61.1	16.7
11	I have developed solutions to module problems that can be applied in practice.	10.1	12.5	57.6	16
12	I can apply the knowledge created in this module to my work or other non-class related activities.	10.5	10.1	54.9	20.6

Table 5.11 indicates the majority (48, 6%) agreed, and (8, 9%) strongly agreed that the problems posed stimulated their interest in particular issues of the module. However (26, 1%) of the respondents disagreed to strongly disagreed (13, 2%) about interest in particular issues of the module.

Furthermore the table also indicates that most respondents (51, 4%) agreed, and (15, 2%) strongly agree that they content on myUnisa aroused curiosity. However, the minority (13, 2%) disagreed, and (18, 7%) strongly disagreed on this issue.

The majority of respondents (52, 5%) agreed, and (19, 8%) strongly agreed that they were motivated to explore content related questions on myUnisa. However, the minority of respondents (14%) disagreed, and (12, 1%) strongly disagreed that they were motivated to explore content related questions on myUnisa.

The majority of respondents (58, 4%) agreed, and (14%) strongly agreed that they utilised a variety of sources to explore problems posed by the module. The minority of respondents (12, 8%) disagreed, and (12, 8%) strongly disagreed about using various sources of information to explore problems.

Still respondents (55, 6%) agreed, and (19, 8%) strongly agreed that brainstorming helped them to resolve content related questions. However, the minority of respondents (10, 9%) disagreed, and (11, 7%) strongly disagreed about the value of brainstorming.

Furthermore the majority of respondents (52, 1%) agreed, and (13, 6%) strongly agreed about the value of the myUnisa discussion forum. However, the minority of respondents (18, 3%) disagreed, and (14, 4%) strongly disagreed about the value of myUnisa as a learning portal.

The majority of respondents (58, 4%) agreed, and (14%) strongly agreed about the value of integration of new information components in my Unisa. However, the minority of respondents (12, 5%) disagreed, and (12, 8%) strongly disagreed about the value of integration of new information components in myUnisa.

The respondents (56, 4%) agreed, and (12, 5%) strongly agreed that learning activities in myUnisa helped them develop deductive reasoning. However, the minority of respondents (17, 9%) disagreed, and (9, 7%) strongly disagreed about developing deductive reasoning.

The majority of respondents (52, 5%) agreed to strongly agree (14,8%) that reflections on the discussion forum of myUnisa helped them understand the module content, However, the minority of respondents (15, 6%) disagree and (12, 8%) strongly disagreed that reflections on the discussion forum of myUnisa helped them to understand the module content.

The majority of respondents (61, 1%) agree, and (16, 7%) strongly agreed that they developed ways to apply knowledge created in the module. However, the minority of respondents (9,7%) disagreed, and (8, 9%) strongly disagreed on this issue.

The majority of respondents (57, 6%) agreed, and (16%) strongly agreed that they developed solutions to module problems that could be applied in practice. However, the minority of respondents (12, 5%) disagreed, and (10, 1%) strongly disagreed on this issue.

Finally the majority of respondents (54, 9%) agreed, and (20, 6%) strongly agreed about applying the knowledge created in the module to their work. However, the minority of respondents disagreed (10, 1%), and (10, 5%) strongly disagreed about applying the knowledge created in the module to their work.

The participants showed understanding and knowledge of myUnisa as a teaching tool During the survey questionnaire and the interviews it came very strongly to the fore that the myUnisa learning management can promote learning to students, if it is properly used and accessible. The department has to deal with the challenge of students who do not have an access. The lecturers who are not using myUnisa for teaching due to various reasons will have to be tackled to ensure student success. The university has shown commitment in putting systems and structures of learner support by reaching the rural students through mobile library. The mobile library is being piloted by the university to rural provinces of Eastern Cape and Limpopo.

The majority of the students (75, 5%) can use the knowledge that they have acquired during learning to apply in their work place or day-to-day lives. The critical thinking of the student is promoted in this regard. The students start to reflect critically on what they have learnt. This implies that the students are ready to start tackling the societal problems using the knowledge that they have acquired in the programme.

### 5.2.5 Section E: Considering The Future

The questions in this section determined the respondents' future perceptions of myUnisa.

**Table 5.12: Considering the future**

SECTION E					
myUnisa: CONSIDERING FUTURE					
Please indicate your extent of agreement with each of the following statements by ticking the appropriate box					
1: Strongly Disagree					
2: Disagree					
3: Agree					
4: Strongly Agree					
	Statement: I feel ...	1	2	3	4
1.	I would like to interact more with other students in myUnisa	10.9	7	47.1	32.7
2.	I would like to physically interact with other students in different provinces and other geographical areas	10.9	12.1	47.5	26.5
3.	I would like to interact more with other students online	11.3	12.1	50.2	22.6
4.	I would like to share documents, images and pictures with other students more easily	14.4	21	43.6	17.9
5.	Pleased, because I interact with other students	13.6	15.2	52.5	14.4
6.	Pleased , because I enjoy participating in online discussions	18.3	24.9	41.6	11.3
7.	Unhappy, because I prefer not to interact much with other students	28.4	36.2	22.6	9.3
8.	Unhappy, because I only have limited access to the internet	29.2	23	32.3	11.7
9.	Pleased, because the module helps me to feel less isolated.	16	18.3	41.2	21
10.	Unsure, because I'm not confident about my ability to communicate with others	25.7	32.7	28.4	10.1
11.	Unhappy, because I don't have the time to interact more with other students	23	29.2	30	14

SECTION E					
myUnisa: CONSIDERING FUTURE					
Please indicate your extent of agreement with each of the following statements by ticking the appropriate box					
1: Strongly Disagree					
2: Disagree					
3: Agree					
4: Strongly Agree					
	Statement: I feel ...	1	2	3	4
12.	Unhappy, because I find it difficult to participate in myUnisa	25.3	30	29.2	11.3
13	Pleased, because I think it improved my learning experience	9.3	10.1	55.3	21
14	Unsure, because I don't know whether it improved my learning experience	22.2	37.4	31.9	4.7

Table 5.12 indicates that the majority respondents (47, 1%) agreed to strongly agree (32, 7%) that they would like to interact more with other students on myUnisa. However, some respondents disagreed (7%) and (10, 9%) strongly disagreed that they would like to communicate with other students in this way.

Most respondents (47, 5%) agreed, and (26, 5%) strongly agreed that they would like to interact with other students in different geographical areas. However, some respondents (12, 1%) disagreed and (10, 9%) strongly disagreed about interacting with students in other geographical areas.

The majority of students (50, 2%) agreed, and (22, 6%) strongly agreed that they would like to interact more with other students online. However, some respondents disagree (12, 1%) and (11, 3%) strongly disagreed that they would like to interact with other students online.

Still (43, 6%) agreed, and (17, 9%) strongly agreed that they would like to share documents, images and pictures with other students more easily in future. However, some respondents (21%) disagreed and (14, 4%) strongly disagreed about the sharing of learning resources.

Again most respondents (52, 5%) agreed and (14,4%) strongly agreed that they would be pleased to interact with other students. Some respondents (15, 2%) disagreed and (13, 6%) strongly disagreed about interaction with other students.

The majority of respondents (41, 6%) agreed, and (11, 3%) strongly agreed that they enjoy participating in online discussions. However, some respondents (24, 9%) disagreed, and (18, 3%) strongly disagreed that they enjoy participating in online discussions.

Combined roughly a third of respondents (22, 6%) agreed, and (9, 3%) strongly agreed that they prefer not to interact with other students. Most respondents (36, 2%) disagreed, and (28, 4%) strongly disagreed on this item.

Less than half of the respondents combined (32, 3%) agreed, and (11, 7%) strongly agreed that they are unhappy about access to the internet. However, some respondents disagreed (23%) and (29%) strongly disagreed that they are unhappy about access to the internet.

Most respondents agreed (41, 2%), and (21%) strongly agreed that the module reduces isolation. However, some respondents disagreed (18, 3%) and (16%) strongly disagreed that the module reduces isolation.

The Table 5.12 indicates that the over a third of the respondents (28, 4%) agreed, and (10, 1%) strongly agreed that they are unsure about communicating with students in future. Most respondents disagreed (32, 7%) and (25, 7%) strongly disagreed about this item.

Less than half of the respondents (30%) agreed, and (14%) strongly disagreed that they are unhappy about having enough time to interact more with other students. More than half (29, 2%) disagreed and (23%) strongly disagreed about this item.

Table 5.12 reveals that the less than half of the respondents (29, 2%) agreed and (11, 3%) strongly agreed that they find it difficult to participate in myUnisa. Most respondents (30%) disagree and (25, 3%) strongly disagreed about the difficulty of participating in myUnisa.



The majority of respondents (55, 3%) agreed, and (21%) strongly agreed that myUnisa has improved their learning experience. However, some respondents (10, 1%) disagreed and (9, 3%) strongly disagreed about myUnisa improving their learning experience.

Finally the respondents (31, 9%) agreed, and (4, 7%) strongly agreed that they were unsure if myUnisa improved their learning experience. However, some respondents (37, 4%) disagreed and (22, 2%) strongly disagreed about this item.

The Table 5.12 show that ABET students want to interact more with lecturers and their fellow students. The myUnisa is a learner support system which can bridge the distance between the institution and the students. The university will offer online courses in future and the students will be able to participate in these learning meaningfully. The myUnisa will help students to share their learning activities through this learning management. The students learning will be promoted fully in this regard. The students show some interest and commitment for participating online. The myUnisa will help students to feel less isolated. These will still be somehow challenge to rural students. The university's initiative of offering laptops to students will assist more to rural students. The students will be able to have an access on myUnisa learner support system easily. The department would have to devise a strategy of training students on how to use myUnisa. The students indicated that they will feel motivated to learn through the myUnisa learning management.

The students will be pleased to have the accessibility of myUnisa for teaching and learning (76, 3%). This means that the ABET department has to put in place learner support systems to support the students with accessibility to myUnisa learning management. The large number of participants (76, 3%) would like to access the myUnisa learning management for studying.

## 5.2.6 Section F: Discussion Classes

**Table 5.13: Discussion classes**

SECTION F					
Discussion classes					
Please indicate your extent of agreement with each of the following statements by ticking the appropriate box					
1: Strongly Disagree					
2: Disagree					
3: Agree					
4: Strongly Agree					
	Statement	1	2	3	4
1	The lecturer clearly communicated important module topics	8.2	12.8	54.5	23
2	The lecturer clearly communicated important module goals	7.4	8.9	59.1	21.8
3	The lecturer provided clear instructions on how to participate in module learning activities in the study material	8.2	7	55.3	27.2
4	The lecture assisted the development of my discriminative reasoning by indicating areas of agreement and disagreement on module topics.	9.7	18.3	54.5	15.2
5	The lecturer guided the class to develop insight in understanding module	9.7	14.4	56.4	17.1
6	The lecturer assisted participants through participative engagement towards productive dialogue	10.5	17.9	54.1	15.2
7	The lecturer helped keep the module participants on track through focused learning.	9.7	11.3	58	17.9
8	The lecturer encouraged module participants to explore new concepts.	9.7	11.7	57.2	18.3
9	The discussion with the lecturer reinforced a sense of community among the students	8.9	15.6	58.4	14.8
10	By means of focused discussions the lecturer facilitated learning	9.7	12.8	55.3	19.8
11	The lecturer provided feedback that helped me understand my strength and weakness.	8.6	10.9	50.6	28

Table 5.13 indicates that most respondents (54, 5%) agreed, and (23%) strongly agreed that the lecturer clearly communicated important module topics. However, some participants (12, 8%) disagreed and (8, 2%) strongly disagreed that the lecturer clearly communicated module topics during discussion classes.

The majority (59, 1%) agreed, and (21, 8%) strongly agreed that the lecturer clearly communicated important module goals. However, some respondents disagree (8, 9%), and (7, 4%) strongly disagreed that the lecturer did so.

The majority of the respondents (56, 3%) agreed, and (27, 2%) strongly agreed that the lecturer's instructions provided during group discussions are clear. However, some respondents (7%) disagreed and (8, 2%) strongly disagreed about the clarity of the lecturer's instructions in module learning activities.

Most respondents (54, 5%) agreed, and (15, 2%) strongly agreed on the lecturer's assistance in promoting discriminative reasoning. However, some respondents disagreed (18, 3%) and (9, 7%) strongly disagreed about lecturer's competency in promoting discriminative reasoning.

The majority of respondents (56, 4%) agreed, and (17, 1) strongly agreed that the lecturer guided the class to develop insight in the module during group discussions. However, some participants (14, 4%) disagreed, and (9, 7%) strongly disagreed about the lecturer's role in developing insight.

Most respondents (54, 1%) agreed, and (15, 2%) strongly agreed that the lecturer assisted the participants through participative engagement in dialogue during group discussions. The minority of the respondents (17, 9%) disagreed and (10, 5) strongly disagreed that the lecturer assisted them through participative engagement in dialogue during the group discussions.

Most respondents (58%) agreed, and (19, 9%) strongly agreed that the lecturer helped the participants through focused learning. Only the minority of respondents disagreed (11, 3%) and (9, 7%) strongly disagreed about the lecturer's ability to help the participants through focused learning.

Most respondents agree (57, 2%), and (18, 3%) strongly agreed that the lecturer encouraged the participants to explore new concepts during discussion classes. However, some respondents (11, 7%) disagreed and (9,7%) strongly disagreed that the lecturer encouraged them to explore new concepts during group discussions.

The majority of respondents (58, 4%) agreed, and (14, 8%) strongly agreed that the discussion with the lecturer reinforced a sense of community among the students. However, some respondents (15, 6%) disagreed and (8, 9%) strongly disagreed about the lecturer's reinforcement of a sense of community among the students.

Most respondents agree (55, 3%), and (19, 8%) strongly agreed that the lecturer facilitated learning by means of focused discussions. Some respondents disagreed (12, 8%), and (9, 7%) strongly disagreed that the lecturer facilitated learning by means of focused discussions.

Most respondents agreed (50, 6%), and (28%) strongly agreed that the lecturer provided feedback that helped them to understand their strengths and weaknesses. Some respondents disagreed (10, 9%), and (8, 6%) strongly disagreed about the lecturer feedback.

The students indicated that they would like to have discussion classes in the department. The department has never conducted group discussion classes to rural students. The students seem not to differentiate between group discussion and tutorial classes. Most students think tutorial classes are group discussion classes. The survey questionnaire findings clearly show the misunderstanding between group discussion and tutorial classes (Table 5.7). The Gauteng province students who were registered in group by the Gauteng Education Department had group discussion classes on the campus. The group discussion sessions have a role to play in reducing distance between the students and the university. The students meet their lecturers and student colleagues during the sessions. There are collaborations between the students and the lecturers which increase success rate of the student learning.

What really came strongly to the fore is that the feedback that students obtain from the lecturers during group discussion helps them to understand their learning activities. The large number of the participants, 78,6% fully supporting the group discussion as a learner support service to promote their learning.

### 5.2.7 Section G: Tutorials

**Table 5.14: Tutorials**

SECTION G					
Tutorials					
Please indicate your extent of agreement with each of the following statements by ticking the appropriate box					
1: Strongly Disagree					
2: Disagree					
3: Agree					
	Statement	1	2	3	4
1	The tutor clearly communicated important module topics	3.9	5.8	72.8	16.7
2	The tutor clearly communicated important module goals	3.1	7	72	17.1
3	The tutor provided clear instructions on how to participate in module learning activities	3.9	5.1	71.2	19.1
4	The tutor assisted the development of my discriminative reasoning by indicating areas of agreement and disagreement on module topics	5.4	17.5	61.5	14
5	The tutor guided the class to develop insight in understanding module	6.2	8.2	68.5	16
6	The tutor assisted participants through participative engagement towards productive dialogue	8.9	14.8	60.7	14
7	The tutor helped keep the module participants on track through focused learning	5.8	9.7	67.3	15.6
8	The tutor encouraged module participants to explore new concepts	5.1	10.9	66.1	16.7
9	The discussion with the tutor reinforced a sense of community among the students	5.8	14	63.4	15.2
10	By means of focused discussions the tutor facilitated learning	5.8	10.1	66.9	16
11	The tutor provided feedback that helped me understand my strength and weakness	4.7	10.9	62.6	21

Table 5.14 indicates that the majority of respondents (72, 8%) agreed, and (16, 7%) strongly agreed that the tutor clearly communicated module topics during the tutorial sessions. However, some respondents disagreed (5, 8%), and (3, 9%) strongly disagreed that the tutor sufficiently communicated module topics during tutorial sessions.

The majority of respondents (72%) agreed, and (17, 1%) strongly agreed that the tutor clearly communicated important module goals, while only (7%) disagreed and (3, 1%) strongly disagreed about the tutor doing so.

The majority of the respondents (71, 2%) agreed, and (19, 1%) strongly agreed that the tutor provided clear instructions on how to participate in module learning activities. However, some respondents (5, 1%) disagreed, and (3, 9%) strongly disagreed about the tutor providing clear instructions on how to participate in module learning activities.

The majority of the respondents (61, 5%) agreed, and (14%) strongly agreed that the tutor assisted them in developing discriminative reasoning. Only some respondents (17, 5%) disagreed, and (5, 4%) strongly disagreed about the tutor assisting the participants in developing discriminative reasoning.

The majority of respondents (68%) agreed, and (16, 1%) strongly agreed that the tutor guided the class to developing insight in understanding module. However, the minority of the respondents (8, 2%) disagreed, and (6, 2%) strongly disagreed on this item.

The majority of respondents (60, 7%) agreed, and (14%) strongly agree that the tutor assisted students through participative engagement dialogue. However, some respondents disagreed (14, 8%) and (8, 9%) strongly disagreed about this item.

Most respondents (67, %) agreed, and (15, 6%) strongly agreed that the tutor helped the participants to achieve focused learning. Only (9, 7%) of respondents disagreed and (5, 8%) strongly disagreed about the tutor helping participants achieve focused learning.

The majority of respondents (66, 1%) agreed, and (16, 7%) strongly agreed that the tutor encouraged module participants to explore new concepts. However, some participants (10,

9%) disagreed, and (5, 1%) strongly disagreed that the tutor encouraged them to explore new concepts.

Most respondents agreed (64, 4%), and (15, 2%) strongly agreed that the tutor reinforced a sense of community among the students during tutorial session. Only 14% disagreed, and (5, 8%) strongly disagreed that the discussion with the tutor reinforced a sense of community among the students.

The majority of the respondents (66, 9%) agreed, and (16%) strongly agreed the tutor facilitated learning by means of focused discussions. However, some respondents (10, 1%) disagree, and (5, 8%) strongly disagreed that the tutor facilitated learning through focused discussions.

The majority (62, 6%) agreed, and (21%) strongly agreed that the tutor provided feedback that helped the participants understand their strengths and weaknesses. Some respondents (10, 9%) disagreed and (4, 7%) strongly disagreed on this item.

As had been note, nowadays the term tutor is also used to define a person who provides help with learning in a narrow sense, but in contrast to teacher model, in which the student is kept on reasonably tight rein, this model presupposes basically that the amounts to be learn will be learnt on independently (Peters 2006:24).

The ABET modules are linked to tutor system. Most students attend tutorial classes at Unisa regions in towns and cities. The rural students have difficulties in getting to Unisa regions in towns or cities due to unreliable transportation system. The tutorial classes help students collaborate and discuss their studies with their peers and the tutors.

In the Unisa learner support systems, the students engage the students and the lecturers engage in dialogue. The concept of dialogue does not mean the written presentation of contents in simulated letters or conversations in the way we described and discussed under the correspondence and conversation models, but rather means direct and indirect oral interaction between teachers and students. Moore (1993) in Peters (2006) characterises the dialogue by contrasting it with other interactions in learning and teaching.

A dialogue is targeted, constructive and appreciated by participants. Each party listens respectively and with interest to the other. Each party contributes something to its progress and refers to contributions made by the other parties. There may be negative and neutral interactions. However, the term dialogue always refers to positive interactions. The teachers and students are not near to each other but are at a distance.

Tutorial support aims to assist students to develop the skills they need to be able to understand the course materials, be independent learners carry the process of learning forward to others who may be in need of it. To accomplish the above aims the department provides the students with the following: tutors to assist the students through assignments, face to face tutorial, telephone tutorials, personal consultations.

To ensure that the tutors are able to perform the above tasks, the ABET department runs workshops and seminars from time to time to pass information to tutors to broaden the scope of their existing skills and teach new areas. These help tutors to perform their duties more efficiently.

Some students may feel intimidated and students who are not very confident may develop inferiority complexes. Therefore tutors should try to play down such attributes in class. The talkative, intrusive and obstructive student prevents others from expressing themselves fully.

The assignments are very important component of the course. The department is teaching at a distance, assignments are therefore the means by which the course content is taught, determine whether the students are learning, teach study and thinking skills, give students support.

Most participants, 90,3% are happy about the tutorial classes and the feedback that they were getting from the tutors. The 90, 3% shows that the students need tutorials as a learner support system to strengthen their learning activities.



### 5.2.8 Reliability And Validity

Table 5.91 indicates the scale reliability and Cronbach alpha coefficients, validating the internal consistency reliability of the six constructs investigated on different teaching presences and learner support in ODL.

**Table 5.15: Cronbach alpha coefficients**

Constructs	Questionnaire included in the construct	Standardised Cronbach alpha
Teaching Presence	B1 -12	.952
Social Presence	C1-9	.941
Cognitive Presence	D1-12	.949
Considering Future	E1-14	.876
Discussion classes	F1-11	.955
Tutorials	G1-11	.953

The alpha coefficient of the twelve items (Section B) is .952, suggesting that the items have a relatively high internal consistency. The instrument was highly reliable. The alpha coefficient for the nine items (Section C) is .941, suggesting that the items have relatively high internal consistency. The alpha coefficient for the twelve items (Section D) is .949, suggesting that the items have relatively high internal consistency. The alpha coefficient for the fourteen items (Section E) is .876, suggested that the items have relatively high internal consistency. The alpha coefficient for the eleven items (Section F) is .955, suggesting that the items have relatively high internal consistency. The alpha coefficient for the eleven items (Section G) is 953, suggesting that the items have relatively high internal consistency.

The reliability coefficient of the various presences and support in the ABET department is very high.

### 5.2.9 Concluding Remarks

The majority of the respondents who completed the questionnaire are Africans and most are women. Most respondents are working full-time or part-time and do not have access to the internet. The reliability coefficient of the various presences and student support systems in

ABET Department is very high. The increasing reliability and validity of the CoI instruments has implications not only for researchers interested in the framework, but also for course designers, degree programme, administrators and instructors (Arbaugh et al. 2008:136). The results of the study suggested that the instrument is a valid, reliable and efficient measure of the dimensions of social presence and cognitive presence, thereby providing additional support for the validity of the CoI as a framework for constructing effective online learning environments.

Many respondents live in remote areas with no access to internet facilities, which could have supported their learning. The findings suggest that the distance between student and university should be reduced to ensure student support for students.

### **5.3 PHASE TWO: INTERVIEWS**

This section discusses key thematic areas that emerged during the interviews with the participants and the subsequent analyses of the transcripts. The section is organised as follows for greater clarity: an explanation of the interlinking themes that emerged from the data, an interpretation of the findings and the conclusion of Phase Two.

The themes that emerged during the interviews demonstrate very clearly that learner support in the ABET Department is crucial in ensuring learner success. During the analysis of the data several codes were identified. These were then clustered into code families. Each of the themes and related issues have been analysed to demonstrate their relevance to the research questions and sub questions.

Interlinking themes that emerged from the data are as follows:

- The readiness of ABET students in ODL
- Computer literacy
- Accessibility of UNISA learner support systems
- Motivation
- Time

Each theme is briefly explained and incorporates the various sub themes that contributed to its formulation.

### **5.3.1 The Lecturer's views**

The section discusses the total number of lecturers and their characteristics in terms of gender, qualifications and years of experience in the ODL / ABET programme. The total number of lecturers interviewed was ten (10), six (6) males and four (females). During the period when the study was conducted, there were more male than female lecturers in the department. Their teaching experience ranges from ten to three months. They are the professors, senior lecturers, lecturers and the junior lecturers. The participants were given codes or pseudonyms during the interviews.

### **5.3.2 The readiness of ABET students in ODL**

Unisa is an ODL institution that functions within an environment in which students are living at various geographical distances from Muckleneuk, where the main campus is based. The students enrolled at the university come from different socio-economic backgrounds and also rural and urban areas (Table 5.1). The teaching and learning resources in the rural areas are generally of a low standard as compared with the resources in urban areas. The method of teaching can, however, reach diverse students from urban, semi-urban and rural areas.

#### **(a) Socio-economic background**

The ABET students come from diverse backgrounds and they are mainly scattered in the remote rural areas of the nine provinces of South Africa. The ABET Department assumes that when students enter higher education, they must have completed their general education. There is also an assumption that students come from backgrounds that equip them with the skills they need to adjust comfortably to the university environment (McInnis 2001). Qakisa Makoe (2005:45) reveals that most of Unisa's African students come from homes where they are first-generation learners in higher education. Furthermore, they come from schools that are poorly resourced and are not adequately prepared for higher education. Yet when these students enter higher education, they are expected to learn complex new material independently and to adjust to new ways of learning in a distance learning environment. The

ABET students can only be supported if lecturers understand where they come from. This view is supported by Van Heerden (1997): the social, cultural, economic and political environment in which learners grew up contributes considerably to their approach and performance in their academic arena.

**(b) Technological factors**

The vast majority of students (76, 3%) do not have access to the internet. The challenges of accessibility of technology to students who live in rural areas could become a thing of the past with the university's initiative of taking mobile buses providing internet access to rural areas.

**(c) Environmental factors**

According to Gatsha and Evans (2010:165), the current Unisa policies encourage educational expansion even to remote geographical areas. However, providing learning support in practice is a challenge in terms of the limited human and financial resources available to such remote learners. Due to lack of learner support systems in remote rural areas, these students are disadvantaged in many ways (Table 5.1).

**(d) Distance**

In the view of Gatsha and Evans (2010:166), despite the disagreement of some participants, distance education students from marginalised communities are given a voice that previously has been inaudible and the challenges that affected their learning are no longer speculative. Asked to tell about their experiences this is what Karabo has said:

*“It is yourself and the studies and you have to do it for yourself, you have to be serious about what you want to know.”*

There was somehow a distance between the students and lecturers.

### 5.3.3 Computer Literacy

#### (a) Technological facilities

- i) The technical knowledge of the lecturers to use computer facilities

According to the data collected from the lecturers in the ABET Department, they had a variety of qualifications ranging from honours degrees to doctoral degrees. Their teaching experience ranged from three months to ten years. The Department started to offer formal qualifications as a Department in 2010. About 90% of the lecturers interviewed did not have formal qualifications in computer literacy. They were not exposed to computer facilities during their professional training and this has had implications for learner support systems. The use of myUnisa by the lecturers is associated by trial and error learning.

The researcher asked the participants about e-learning because learner support depends on ICT to reach out to students. The respondents gave various interpretations of e-learning and John defined the concept as follows:

*“E-learning to me means we have to teach online. We have to prepare whatever learning activities put our modules online and engage with the students as in the classroom that is what it means to me”.*

*“It means the students can access the information related to their studies online.”*

Others defined it as follows:

*“I think it is electronically any medium through any medium, the computer but also other technologies such as cell phones, all about e-learning, the use of technology to learning something (Thatho).”*

*“We are talking about technology, how we integrate technology for teaching and learning activities. Involves technology and teaching in various forms, for example, at Unisa we do have the whole thing of using myUnisa. You have other means of social media like Skype, Facebook and*

*other things, I guess they follow under e-learning as well because those are some of the gadgets that one can use in getting through to students who are very far and that is my understanding of e-learning (Mona)."*

Despite the challenges faced by the participants, there is a positive reception of new technology. The lecturers defined e-learning as a teaching and learning method that increases communication between the students and the lecturers. In online learning students can access the information related to their studies. It was also mentioned that Unisa had training programmes for learner support systems and that lecturers should be encouraged to attend. The myUnisa as an online learning was used as a tool to debate teaching and learning issues. The learner support systems were learner-centred; they allowed for interaction or collaboration between the students and the lecturers. According to the responses given, the respondents seemed to understand the concept of e-learning and its value in ODL. The technology reached out to the students and reduced the distance between the students and the institution. There is a strong awareness about the value of using myUnisa to reduce the distance between the students and the university.

Lecturers visit the discussion forum on a general basis and provide clear instructions. myUnisa facilitates learning and dialogue to small numbers of students who have access to internet.

In general, participants believe that technology has a role to play in promoting teaching and learning in the Department. In the view of Heydenrych and Prinsloo (2010:21), although technologies can assist in facilitating communication between institution and students and among students themselves, they should not underestimate the inherent possibilities for effective support present in the communities from which students come. Alternative resources and support in student's respective communities can be investigated and harnessed to assist students in their endeavours.

It was clear that from the lecturers the use of elearning at Unisa is fairly new, and some of the lecturers do not have a comprehensive understanding of describing what elearning or online learning is. This is an issue that Unisa should be aware of. If lecturers do not have a good grasp of what elearning or online learning is all about, perhaps it is too premature for us to expect that the lecturers effectively use it for teaching and learning

### 5.3.4 Accessibility of Unisa Learner Support Systems

#### (a) myUnisa

The question was asked to test knowledge about the various functions of myUnisa. The lecturers and students do not have fairly noticeable idea of what myUnisa is. Most of the articles written by Unisa staff members concern what myUnisa is, the scope is limited to the announcement function, discussion forum. Some participants stated that they do not have time and this was an issue worth exploring. For effective teaching in online learning a teacher has to be present most of the time, but in the context of Unisa it could be difficult because of the divergent views expressed by both the lecturers and students

Of the ten lecturers interviewed, five lecturers were using myUnisa for teaching and learning activities, even though some of them had not started using the myUnisa, they have an understanding about what myUnisa can do for students, mainly that it brings the students closer to the department. However, they acknowledge that rural students do not have access to internet and other facilities (Table 5.8). They understand the importance and the value of myUnisa. They see it as a networking tool and help to reduce the distance between the student and the institution.

The lecturers gave different views on the concept of myUnisa and this is Laura's view:

*“myUnisa is providing the student with a lot of advantages. Once their materials are from myUnisa, they can see their marks. They can form study groups, communicate with each other... the lecturers design forum groups where he can discuss, say topic assignments and give feedback, find out how the students find the assignments. Things, like that, then feedback from the students can be used as an assessment tool.”*

In this definition, the respondent talks mainly about the functions of myUnisa. The lecturer's understanding of myUnisa is not meticulous.

*“I think it is like a platform where basically students share information, access information and just come together to ask about, for students to form*

*study groups, the students come together to share common knowledge (Themba)."*

The respondents gave mostly functions of myUnisa in their definitions.

The distance between the students and the lecturers remained the challenge. One respondent raised the issue of training. The myUnisa as an online learner support seems to be under utilised by the lecturers. Khanyisa gave some of the following reasons:

*"I think to some of us lecturers do not have capacity to use myUnisa, I think the institution should develop programmes where all lecturers should be taken on board, but I don't say the institution doesn't, but it is informal (Lerato)."*

However, the lecturers have made claims that they visit myUnisa and attend to teaching and learning activities. Yet 76, 3% of students do not have an access to internet. They cannot download or send and receive emails (Table 5.8). Therefore, the lecturer's teaching could be limited to 22, 2% of the students who have access to internet. The students who do not have access to internet miss teaching and learning activities. The myUnisa could be the useful tool for teaching and learning if it is accessible to students. The students could network and bridge the distance gap between the students and the lecturers. The attitude of lecturers towards myUnisa was positive. Therefore, they should be encouraged to attend the myUnisa training provided by the university.

Consequently, myUnisa is benefiting students who have access to internet and excluding students who have no access. The lecturer participants could be receiving feedback that comes from students who have an access only. Even though myUnisa is regarded as a valuable learning management tool, most participants do not use it for teaching and learning. This claim is also noted by Mabunda (2010:232) who found that participants perceived online learning as benefiting certain groups of students in particular. Apart from recognising that online learning can support distance learning generally, it can also provide access to resources for students who find it difficult to get to the campus. The participants also considered that online learning provided an opportunity for those who found it difficult to take time off work and attend face-to-face discussion classes.



The lecturers also confirmed that they did not receive much feedback from the students as indicated by the following statement:

*“I don’t make announcements except for welcoming students.”*

This clearly confirms the limited use of this technology. These statements demonstrate that most participants do not use myUnisa for teaching.

Regarding the question whether and how participants ensure that students without access to myUnisa are also kept informed and provided with extra information, most participants indicated that they keep records of discussions and present these in follow-up tutorials.

The communication with myUnisa was not two-way for certain reasons, the students felt the communication using myUnisa was not two-way because about (73, 3%) indicates that the majority of the respondents do not have unlimited access to the internet. Only 22, 2% had unlimited access to the internet. Some participants have indicated that they have an access to internet but they always do not go to myUnisa due to some technical problems on the system. Given an opportunity for training, students felt they are willing to attend the training on myUnisa.

## **(b) Tutorials**

The ABET modules are linked to tutors. The Department appointed tutors to conduct tutorial classes. The students have to register for tutorial classes held at Unisa regional offices and in rural towns. The interaction between the lecturers and tutors was minimal and this had a negative impact in supporting the students. However, almost all the participants interviewed agreed that tutorial sessions were crucial for the ODL mode and could increase the success of students. The lecturers saw their roles in tutorials as guiding and supporting tutors. The tutor provides guidelines, discusses assignments and mentors the students (Table 5.14). According to Mona, it is important that the lecturers should encourage and support the students to register for tutorial classes.

Vutomi understood the concept of tutor as follows:

*“By the way like I have said we are an ODL institution so I think the system of tutor was to help the students actually to understand the content, and they gather at a common venue and be grounded and supported with the learning content.”*

However, the lecturers see themselves having a role to play in tutoring.

*“Yes, I have a role because I am a primary lecturer I know what will come out in the examination so that I can lead in the teaching of any module, so I can guide. We need to establish the partnerships with the tutor because he or she is doing what I am not able to do because of the distance. That is why I say I am missing a link that is not there (Sayina).”*

Of the ten lecturers interviewed, six lecturers felt that the tutor system has a role to play in supporting students in the department. Five of the ten lecturers confirmed that their modules are tutor linked and only one lecturer who was not sure whether there are tutor-linked modules. Some are indicating that they do not know the tutors who are helping the students with tutorial classes.

Vuyo see the tutor’s roles during tutorial sessions as:

*“To give the students guidelines and discuss the assignment. Sometimes they can mark some of the assignments, as mentors, role models, coach, pastoral roles, to guide and support students, to help the students actually to understand the content, and they gather at a common venue and supported with the learning content, they see their role as to communicate to the tutor, train them, support to the students, to be accessible to the tutor; they see the lecturers’ role as to support, guide and train the tutors, to give support to the tutors on how to conduct tutorial class,”*

The researcher gave them a platform to make recommendations about the tutorial sessions:

The lecturer recommends tutorials as an excellent medium for learner support. Even though there are challenges of learner support in tutorial classes, the lecturers recommended tutorials as an excellent medium for learner support. This is confirmed by the students in phase 1.

One lecturer had this to say about the recommendations:

The lecturer recommends the tutorials as an excellent medium for learning learner support.

*“If we have been given the deadlines as lecturers, it should be observed when we give the necessary guidance, it must be sent to the tutors, it must be observed, if we fail to send those guidance then we are actually handicapping the tutorials, then the systems will collapse before it actual starts, so actually the life of tutors do not depend on the tutors but depends on the support (Laura).”*

The lecturer acknowledged the importance of communication between the lecturer and the tutors.

On challenges, some lecturers pointed out that as the lecturers they do not exactly know what the tutors are doing out there, you see, students cannot communicate with us and tell us what they are doing with tutors. Some lecturers have not exactly met the tutors. The communication between the lecturers and tutors is almost missing. The lecturers identified distance as one of the challenges because students have to travel for long distance and identify relevant people for obtaining assistance. There are lecturers who have no idea of the challenges facing Unisa in the tutor system. Themba pointed out:

*“There will also be challenges in every endeavour of the people for example, if the tutors cannot receive guidance and support from the lecturers, the tutor systems will be handicapped. But if all parties that are meant to make the tutorials successfully work together, then will work. So it is two worlds again if we do not have that collegiality, that spirit of teamwork working together, the tutorial systems will be handicapped. The only way for it to work effectively is to have a sense of urgency. People must*

*have a sense of urgency. We must make tutors comfortable by resourcing them. We as lecturers have the know-how, we have to back them.”*

On the role of the tutor, Khanyisa said:

*“My role is to assist the tutors, to guide them so as to how they intend to guide the students, but that does not mean that they may not invite me to their group session and that does not mean that they may not ask me further either via emails or through myUnisa.”*

Some of the issues raised during the tutor development workshops included: tutor and student unpreparedness; accessibility of technology by both students and tutors; tutor class schedules which are not published in myUnisa; certain regions which do not make copies available to students; not receiving feedback from Regional Academic Coordinators and student evaluation. The tutors and the students were also reminded about the telecentres, mobile libraries and technologies provided to them by UNISA to improve communication between the tutors and the students. Some regions are active in providing support to students through tutoring and they need the support of the academics.

**(c) Group discussion classes**

Both the students and the lecturers were asked to share their experiences of attending group discussion.

The group discussion classes have not been conducted since the ABET became a Department. The group discussion could supplement the other learner support systems provided by the Department. Most lecturers interviewed agree that group discussions have a role to play in increasing throughput rates and success rates in the Department. The lecturers have positive attitudes towards group discussion classes.

Khanyisa differed with the colleagues as follows:

*“ABET group discussions have not been held because of the number of lecturers that are few, the students being in multitudes. We last went for*

*group discussions in 2009 and it was chaotic when we were in Durban because the students were very many and you can see the hunger that the students had to discuss with lecturer. For me, group discussion is the way to go.”*

However, some respondents like Lerato had the following perceptions about the group discussions:

*“It should be because it also gives the students an opportunity to begin to learn from one another unlike if they are lonely in their own homes. It is different when they get together and they will begin to share and learn from one another. They will be very helpful, and they will find it helpful as they will be amongst their own peers. It is always a good thing seeing people who are engaged in the same course; people come together, for discussion and share their opinions. There has to be some acknowledgement that here we are not agreeing, although we disagree there, but we will also agree on this one. This actually enriches learning.”*

The group discussions were seen as the support structure that can improve teaching and learning in the ABET Department. The participants also confirmed that they had not attended group discussion classes. However, they also stressed that it was important for promoting teaching and learning activities. The students were in favour of group discussions (Table 5.13).

#### **(d) Video conferencing**

Gorman (2011) defines videoconferencing as a set of interactive telecommunication technologies that allow two or more locations to interact via two-way video and audio transmitters simultaneously. The people communicate in real time, irrespective of their location. The university connects different learning centres and the lecturer broadcasts to all of them from one room. Owen (2011) outlines the general use of video conferencing: business meetings, educational training or instruction and collaboration among health officials or other representatives. Videoconferencing has been in use at Unisa to reduce the distance between the students and the university. It is available in all Unisa regional centres and allows the

lecturer to communicate with many groups of students located in decentralized venues. It is commonly used for interviews, meetings, lecturers or tutorials, oral examinations, group discussions, workshops and demonstrations (Unisa 2008).

Some lecturers conducted video conferencing to reach students in rural areas. The student's unpreparedness to participate meaningfully during the session requires attention. Most participants interviewed agreed that video conferencing has a role to play in reaching out to the students in the remote areas. It is an effective learner support tool. During the video conferencing sessions, the students requested more video conference broadcasting in future. The attendance by the students sometimes is low and they should be encouraged to attend. Presently, there is a strong awareness at Unisa of the importance of video-conferencing to reduce the distance between the students and university.

Of the ten lecturers interviewed, seven have used video-conferencing. This is what they are saying about their experiences: The students were not active during the sessions and this led to the absence of two-way communication. The lecturer had to change his teaching style to suit the students' needs or level of education. One lecturer used the term "horrible" to describe the session. Some of the challenges or issues raised by the lecturer was that the students could not hear the lecturer properly and they said that the lecturer talked softly, slowly or fast. Therefore, some students were happy and others were not happy about the lecturer's presentation.

The lecturer used the video conferencing and found it interactive. The challenge the lecturer raised is that the facilities were limited to students, are far from their environments. This could be one of the major challenges as some students were mainly in rural areas.

The challenge the lecturer raised is that there were not many students on his sessions. This could be attributed to the large number of students who are in rural areas where there are no resources. Thus lecturer stated that his few students attended the session.

The lecturer has attended video conferencing where his two colleagues were presenting during the session. The participants indicated that the session was good and the lecturer rated it. Some of the issues raised during the session by the lecturer was that the students were lively when compared with other sessions by the lecturers. The students indicated that they

need it and the lecturer supported the idea of video conferencing. The importance of video conferencing as a learner support system is confirmed by students in phase 2.

All the lecturers interviewed had some concerns about the challenges during VC. The issues raised during the sessions were poor communication experienced during broadcast, the challenge of using the technology by the lecturers, low number of students turning up for sessions, low participation of students, the sessions were disorganised, the session was very short, the kind of a communication challenge since people were watching them from various centres linked etc.

Based on what has been raised here, the researcher would recommend that in future the VC could be used by lecturers has been trained and the systems and structures have been put in place in the regions. The lecturers need to have a profile of students and inform them on time so that they could prepare to arrange transport to the regions where broadcasts are made.

The lecturers agree that VC broadcasting has advantages of reaching out to the students who are in far away places from the campus (2.8.3 and 2.8.4)

To raise the literature with the participants, to good effect, the researcher asked the participants for the views, lot of lecturers who have used the VC maintained that they get very few students, learning centres are in the cities and they have challenges of transportations.

### **5.3.5 Motivation**

The students are differently motivated to study at the ABET Department. These include cheap fees and the flexible delivery mode.

Most students are struggling to complete the programme, this could be attributed to the lecturers' poor understanding of the students' educational backgrounds. The students' unpreparedness to learn sometimes is a cause for concern to lecturers. The lecturers have limited time to use learner support systems due to their teaching workload. There was also a lack of communication between the lecturers, tutors and students. The participants also raised the limited ICT knowledge of students and tutors. The distance and accessibility of resources is still a challenge to students. This has been raised by both the lecturers and the students during the interviews.

The participants claimed that having access to lecturers during group discussion motivated them to persist in their studies. This is similar to views of Venter (2003) and Dzakiria (2005). Distance learners in this study felt they were cared by empathetic ODL staff and tutors who supported them. They also wanted academic guidance and feedback from lecturers, which suggests that personalized academic support was highly valued. Race (1998:66) believes that wanting, doing, feedback and digesting is so close to the essence of being human that these processes should be firmly kept in mind. The basic principle of motivating a learner must be learner-centred. This means that a learner must be self-motivated. A learner must know precisely why he or she wants to learn and how to learn.

### **5.3.6 Time**

The students did not budget time for their learning activities. The accessibility of learner support systems of teaching and learning were lacking in the student's environment (Table 5.1). The participants were unable to receive, send and download learning materials due to lack of computer facilities. The lecturers are often unavailable to answer the student's telephone calls. On the subject of the improvement of practices of learner support, it appeared that participants needed to manage their time to attend to their teaching and learning activities. The recommendations made by the participants were helpful. Unisa still encourages the use of a blended approach in learner support systems. The College of Education has noted that, in spite of the use of ICT in learner support, facilities are under-utilised by the lecturers. When the lecturers use learner support systems, they should bear in mind that some students do not have the necessary access and should supply tutorial letters. Although the digital divide is real and exacerbates the information gap, technology can become the force that provides equitable access to educational opportunities for all, regardless of location or social and economic circumstances (Block 2010).

### **5.3.7 Student's views**

#### **(a) Accessibility of Unisa learner support systems**

##### **(i) MyUnisa**

Some students interviewed had adequate access to myUnisa; however, technical problems in



using myUnisa remain a problem: “Discussions on myUnisa are sometimes not very thorough, they leave you hanging. Therefore I have a slight problem with discussions on myUnisa.” Students in these areas do not have easy access to technology, especially the internet. Many learners are not able to afford the internet, even where it is available. Students struggle because they have to study on their own with little interaction with their lecturers or their peers. This is a particular cause for concern amongst the ABET students. This claim has been confirmed by students in phase 1.

Most lecturers interviewed do not use myUnisa for teaching and inconsistency in the levels of use of myUnisa were noted. This is confirmed by the students who were interviewed that the majority of them do not have access to myUnisa facilities (Table 5.8). The participants did not appear to be using the myUnisa. Thando responded:

*“I did hear about myUnisa and then I did register for myUnisa. At times you don’t go to myUnisa. The thing is that you don’t have time to go and sit and browse through myUnisa, because we don’t come to the campuses every time. myUnisa is the access and we write assignments at home and post them via the email box.”*

The participants did not have a clear view of what is myUnisa is all about. This could be due to the limited accessibility identified by the questionnaire and the lecturers. However, the participants saw the myUnisa as a valuable tool in their teaching and learning activities. They agreed that there were challenges facing them in using myUnisa as discussed below. John offered suggestions on how to teach students to use myUnisa.

*“If there is a brochure where everybody can be told about the steps on how to use myUnisa, where the brochure will explain about the different tools of myUnisa, tutorial classes, whereby when you have problems, you can go there, the tutorial and the private classes for helping students. We need some help somewhere, because most people we don’t know where to get help. In myUnisa if they explain those things, it will be better. A brochure to explain step by step what is happening in myUnisa, I think, it will help. It can make us understand what is happening.”*

The participants were also asked to make recommendations for the use of myUnisa, the students indicated that they are interested in training for myUnisa, because there are computers in student's rural towns but they are somehow not making use of these facilities. Asked why they are not making use of them, they cited reasons like lack of time, lack of internet training skills by the university, etc. The reasons are somehow understandable in their context because some internet facilities charge high fees for internet services.

Some students have no internet access, or find it too costly to access the internet. Some students value communication amongst themselves. This is how their experiences were expressed:

*"I use myUnisa to communicate with my lecturer if I have difficulties. I manage to socialise with other students by using myUnisa (Nsimbhi)."*

Such students should be encouraged to use the various learner support strategies in their learning activities in order to ensure their own success.

This is how another participant experiences the Unisa learner support systems:

*"The lecturer is seldom updating on myUnisa and rarely answers our questions. I thank Unisa for myUnisa as it is really helpful. In future, I think it will be helpful. If myUnisa helped me a lot with my studies. I have someone who is a former student and helps me with my studies and does the job of a tutor well. He is not appointed by Unisa (Nero)."*

## **(ii) Tutorials**

The participant recommended that they need to have one on one discussion with the tutor or lecturer, but because of time and work commitment they miss out on the tutorial classes. Interestingly, the participants recommend tutorial classes to students.

### **(iii) Group discussions**

The participants organised their own group discussions to support each other and the participant explained it as follows:

*“Most of the times in our area we do meet and discuss our views with each other. In general where we are, we normally discuss within ourselves and not new people (Nsimbhi).”*

They agreed that discussions with other students promoted learning in their studies. This has been confirmed by the survey questionnaire in phase 1.

*“I think it can because different ideas can boost other people’s knowledge or whatever. I am from Limpopo and another one is from somewhere else; we can put the ideas together and something new can come out that can help us (Nsovo).”*

The department has held group discussion for the Gauteng students for the first time in August 2012.

They acknowledged that the group discussion was very well organised and has really helped them. The participant indicated that they would be interested in further group discussions. The group discussion helped them to understand that the research was all about the group. The group discussion was helpful to the participant because, “normally when I write the assignment I just go to the tutorial letter and just go through the difficult questions and have the overall background of the question so that where I realise I am missing a point where I have to gather the whole information I only concentrate on the specific answers whereas I could still go further. The participants also commended the department for the bold move in organising a group discussion. The participant also added that the lecturers might have realised some challenges in students’ work when they were marking their scripts. The participants recommended that the group discussion could be done on a continuous basis in order to support the students in their studies.

On recommending group discussion to other students Thando indicated the following:

*“Yes I would because you will never know where you have gone wrong because sometimes you may think you have done it but what you interact with other people you start to overcome challenges and you learn. It could be organised maybe every month, I think it will be very good for us. Even though, I do not have any specific recommendations, what I am saying is that I think it should be done on a continuous basis.”*

Most of them indicated that group discussions should be held in the students’ backyard; therefore the department can profile students according to their geographical areas. Indeed this is a viable option and this is a goal of ODL. They see the distance as a barrier to students for obtaining quality education.

#### **(iv) Video conferencing**

Most students like Nero do not have information on video conferences as a learner support system. When asked to explain they seem to love the video conferences on learner support. One participant stated,

*“The students need to be encouraged to attend more satellite broadcasting so that this could place the university as a trend setter, advertise more on learner support systems in media like TVs.”*

The participant wanted to see Unisa growing more and more, grow from strength to strength. The students recommended that they need to have more satellite in their areas. This relate well with the lecturer’s saying that there is limited access of computer facilities around the cities and the rural areas The students also recommended that the university should have computer facilities in Further Education and Training colleges (FET). This would give students an access to learner support systems in FETs colleges closer to them.

#### **5.3.8 Reliability And Validity**

One way in which people constructing questionnaires try to validate the results, is by saying that they believe that the way the questions were set, make them understandable to the

respondents and hence the respondents' answers are likely to indeed tell us something about the issues in which the researcher is interested. A way of testing for this is to do a pilot study. The questionnaire were piloted to see if the (potential) respondents understood the questions more or less in the way the researcher expected them to understand them. That is, the researcher piloted the questionnaire to sixty students and test their understandings before the researcher proceeded to administer the questionnaire to the whole sample, after the researcher had revised them. Another way of checking for validity was to see if some peers would understand the terms in the same way as the researcher expected them. The students were the best to test them because they are similar to the respondents themselves.

These authors (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007) also suggested that ideally you should have repeated encounters with the participants. The researcher had "encountered" the students via the questionnaire and he probed further with some of them. Therefore in this sense he can confirm that he had repeated encounters with at least some of the students.

The researcher had a number of conversations with lecturers by going back to them. He went back to them on the basis of some of the data that he had obtained from the students and on the basis of him comparing this with what the lecturers have said on similar topics with the students. The researcher's interpretations of what lecturers are saying were probed with the themes that the researcher chose to probe. The themes probed were possible solutions as in the recommendations. This also meant that recommendations are substantiated on the basis that the researcher spoke to them through with lecturers to consider their feasibility in context and that the ones the researcher presented in chapter six reflect some discussion with the lecturers. The researcher also discussed some of the recommendations with the students to get their perspectives too.

### **5.3.9 Discussions**

There are more women than male students in the ABET programme. Women were oppressed for centuries and further oppressed during the apartheid era. To most women students ABET is seen as a compensatory education to empower themselves in the communities. In education in traditional societies women were not allowed to go to school and this resulted in more women than men being uneducated. The women's struggle in this democratic era is to emancipate themselves through ABET programme in South Africa. Women go for long

distances in search of water and woods in rural areas. The women in rural areas are poorer than men. Most women in the rural areas bear the burden of hard domestic work to keep their family alive and bear the burden of poverty.

It is clear that lecturers require more time to visit the discussion forums and respond to the questions as required by students. The students are also of the opinion that lecturers do not visit the discussion forum of myUnisa, and yet when lecturers are interviewed, they confirm as well that they do not have time (5.3.4).

For this reason it is clear that lecturers require more time to visit the discussion forums and other functions of myUnisa.

It is obvious from the responses that use is focussing on the group discussion and announcement therefore, it is important for Unisa to focus on the training of academics to focus on the functions that are not used frequently like additional resources, learning units, drop box etc. You can also undertake project, attaching articles and sending messages to the students. Most of the lecturers indicated that they use it for announcements, to attach policy documents etc. They use myUnisa to get into discussion forums once in a while when they have the time. The inappropriate use of myUnisa has also been noted by the students in phase 1.

During the sessions, the researcher get a sense that the lecturers have been trained on how to use the videoconference, most of them seemed to have liked it and they have access to it. Although the students have an interest in videoconferencing and indicated that they will find it useful during the interviews, they will find it difficult to go to the centres in the cities and towns. Most ABET students in the rural areas lack internet access so they will struggle to have access to the videoconference. However, the participants feel video conferencing is a possibility and this have been confirmed in the questionnaire and the interviews.

The findings of the study highlighted the importance of resources and support needed by academics to acquire the range of competencies for effective design and delivery of online learning. The study supported the views of other researchers and argued that ODL institutions need to invest in reducing the workload of academics and offer continuous training and support so that they are able to fulfill some of the roles required for the effective design and

implementation of online learning. The responses during Phase Two indicated trends and challenges facing student support at the University of South Africa. These findings indicated that enhancing Unisa services, such as group discussion classes, tutorials and online discussions, will improve social presence and open up opportunities for communication and reflection.

The data collected indicated that the institution assumes that both the students and lecturers possess competencies to use computer facilities; however, this is not always the case. Therefore, training is needed to equip lecturers to use computer facilities and lecturers should be encouraged to attend Unisa training programmes in ICT and learner support. The challenges of ICT should be attended soon because it can affect the effectiveness of student support systems in the ABET department.

The accessibility of learner support structures like the internet was a cause for concern (Table 5.8). The distance between the students and lecturers could be addressed if students have access and use of internet. The additional support in the form of tutorials should still play a major role in supplementing teaching and learning activities. The communication and collaboration between the lecturers and students was lacking due to the unavailability of proper learner support facilities. Most students had not acquired basic English language skills and struggle to express themselves. However, some of the students are technologically literate.

The accessibility of learner support systems to rural students and the competencies to use the resources are challenges to the Department. To access the technology facilities is costly for students who are struggling financially. Therefore, the accessibility of learner support systems has cost implications. The e-learning model is intended to take the distance out of distance education; however appropriate technological support and skills are important. Accessibility is a problem to about 70% of students who do not have accessibility to computer facilities. The students travel for a long distance to Unisa learning centres and to the main campus.

It could be seen that most lecturers have not used the myUnisa for teaching and learning fully. If I have to be honest, this could be attributed to the fact that the university has not gone fully online. Most lecturers are not motivated for various reasons for example, they do not have the time, and at the moment the use is limited for specific functions.

The lecturers indicated that they provided learner support systems through technology. They saw the need to support students who were isolated. The commitment of lecturers to avail themselves in myUnisa learning management would make a difference in increasing student success. However, one can see that an improvement since 2007 in terms of student support. The lecturers indicated that in future they wished to use print and group discussion classes to supplement computer facilities; while encouraging students to visit myUnisa.

However the vast majority of students (76, 3%) do not have access to the internet. Unisa has invested much in learner support systems using computer facilities. Some students have no internet access, or find it too costly to access. This is a cause for concern to students who do not have an access to the internet. The university has invested so much in the internet and there is low number of 22% who have a limited access to the internet. There are a large number of students who do not have an access to the internet. The lecturers interviewed indicated that they still use printed materials to support those who have no access to the internet. The timeous delivery of study material is a recurring problem in the distance learning environment and a problem that students often approach lecturers about. Therefore technology is seen as a means of study material delivery.

However those who have an access to myUnisa, use it for downloading study materials, communicating with the university etc (Table 5.8). myUnisa is used for communications with the students specifically, for example, assignment due dates. They communicate with the lecturers on administrative issues, due dates, and there is very little about academic activities. About 90% of the lecturers interviewed did not have formal qualifications in computer literacy. They were not exposed to computer facilities during their professional training and this has implications for learner support systems. The use of myUnisa by the lecturers is associated by trial and error learning.

Msila (2006:87), points out that students from disadvantaged backgrounds face many challenges when they enter institutions of higher learning. Many African students, especially those who come from historically African schools experience several problems at universities because of a number of problems endemic in their schools. Human resources and physical resources continue to be a problem in historically African schools long after the attainment of a democratic system of education. Recent research shows that learners from historically disadvantaged schools experience various problems when they get to university. Universities



spend more time and energy teaching ill – prepared students and the campuses need to address the inequalities of the past (Sunday Times 2004, 16)

The students have difficulty in managing their studies. The reasons for non-attendance of tutorial classes or video conferencing varied from lack of interest to logistical concerns and difficulty in getting time off from work (Prinsloo & Van Rooyen 2007:58). ODL in South Africa faces a challenge to redevelop a culture of interactive teaching and student support (Heydenrych 2009:22). The study could offer insight into the use of learner support systems for rural students.

### **5.3.10 Concluding Remarks On Phase Two**

One of the issues that come out of this study is that the implementation of these techniques represents more work. Lecturers already feel overburdened, and having to embrace a new learning technology in their already busy schedule is very challenging. Lecturers' awareness of learning technologies is limited. Another issues that was mentioned was that lecturers felt themselves to be out of touch or unfamiliar with many of the new technologies available at Unisa for teaching and learning.

Learner support systems like computer facilities can have an impact on ABET students but in the developing country like South Africa where access to students in rural areas is limited, it is a challenge which needs to be tackled as a matter of urgency in the department. It costs students to access the internet and other computer facilities for learning. It is often argued that learner support that uses various technologies is implemented without doing needs analysis for rural students. It is clear that the learner support systems for rural students are presently ignored. The adult education in South Africa is a moral concept and the constitution does support its provision.

## **5.4 SUMMARY**

The illiteracy rates are higher in rural areas than in urban areas. This is because the ABET students are coming mainly from rural areas. There is high number of people in rural areas who have not attended schools. Women were identified by the ABET programme as the group who need special attention and motivation in rural areas. The majority of women are tied to

children and this could be the reason why there are more women than men in the ABET programmes and do not proceed to higher education.

The enrolments sometimes have an effect on learning resources of the large number of students who need support in rural areas. It is important for the department to cope with challenges that ABET students are facing.

When distance education institutions fail to plan for the provision of appropriate learner support services, systematic learning support is adversely affected and the most likely outcome is that distance learners drop out of their programme.

## CHAPTER 6

### SUMMARY OF THE STUDY, FINAL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

In this concluding chapter the literature study and the empirical investigation and its findings are summarised in the light of the problem statement. Recommendations are made for the improvement of learner support practices based on findings and areas of further study in learner support in an ODL context for ABET students are made.

#### 6.2 OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main research question addressed was formulated as follows: **What is the nature of learner support in ABET programme?** To address the research question, it is imperative to answer the following sub questions:

- What are the common theories and approaches to learner support in ODL context?
- What are the common barriers which impede the use of online technologies for learner support and learning?
- What are the attitudes and experiences of Unisa ABET students and lecturers on learner support?
- What recommendations can be made for the improvement of learner support at UNISA in general and for ABET students in particular?

#### 6.3 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

##### 6.3.1 Common theories and approaches

The concept of distance education has been researched by many scholars in the past (cf. 2.1). The concepts of ODL and DE have been used interchangeably in the literature. In offering a rationale for this study which was located within the global and the South African context and more specifically the ABET Department of Unisa (2.1), the history and development of DE and ODL in some selected countries was discussed. The context of learner support systems in

the ABET Department at Unisa was described and attention given to key theories in this regard.

The recent global growth and popularity of distance learning is attributed to its advantages that include its flexibility with respect to enabling the learners to combine education and training with full-time employment. The concept of ODL includes open access, flexible delivery of instruction and learner centred approaches to course design and delivery, open learning and lifelong learning. The goal of ODL is to reach all those who would not have any alternative chance for education. The ODL model is growing because of its perceived advantages. ODL fees are cheaper than those of contact institutions (2.2). However, the challenges of ODL have implications for learner support.

### **6.3.2. Challenges**

While there is increased interest in the integration of technology in learning and teaching, very little is known about the use of ICTs and changing student approaches to learning (Rumble 2000). The new communication technologies, particularly the internet, appear to offer exciting possibilities for overcoming geographical access and cost barriers to learning. The introduction of ODL has been generally understood as a response to the new challenges of increased and diverse demands on supportive learning made on the educational sector (Danarajan 2001; Ipaye 2007; University of Botswana 2006). The distance education offered in developing countries has depended largely on first and second generation delivery modes and has relied heavily on print as a form of information dissemination. The technological challenges are often cited as the main reasons for such drawbacks (Alucko, Fraser, Hendrikz 2011:115).

Adult education is crucial for social change globally. Adult education addresses socio-economic problems through empowering people with skills. Although ABET in South Africa is booming in MacGregor's view (2008), the Project Literacy indicated that South Africa has about 4,7 million illiterate people and these low levels of literacy and numeracy persist. ABET students are diverse and are often found in rural areas without facilities (2.6).

The students in the ABET department are taught generic ABET skills that enable them to teach and work in a range of areas. Unisa as an ODL institution requires effective learner

support to improve throughput and success rates of ABET students. The dropout rate and the inability of many students to use myUnisa is a significant problem. There is substantial evidence that technology can be an effective tool in supporting teaching and learning at a distance. However, challenges face students in the distance education environment who live in rural communities (2.2).

The literature reviewed revealed that ODL could be an effective tool in widening participation to students from less privileged social groups and those who have traditionally not entered higher education after school. Technological challenges and problems should be properly addressed by the countries offering distance education.

The researcher identified two theorists who had had a significant influence in adult teaching and learning. Malcolm Knowles popularised the notion of andragogy, while Paulo Freire's evolving thinking was based on the learner-centred approach. The researcher used the CoI framework which focussed on the intentional development of an online learning community with an emphasis on the process of instructional conversations that are likely to lead to epistemic engagement (3.2.4). In this regard, technologies, such as the telephone, multimedia, CDs and DVDs, video and audio conferencing, SMS, cell phones, email and discussion forums via myUnisa have been proposed to offer new possibilities for supporting learning in distance education.

### **6.3.3 Attitude and experiences**

The rationale for the choice of mixed method was to gain a deeper understanding of the study by triangulation obtained by the two methods. The methodology helped the researcher to understand how Unisa learner support systems support ABET students in the light of the research questions (4.3).

The study explored the views, experiences and perceptions of ABET students in using learner support systems to pursue their studies. The researcher used a concurrent- triangulation mixed method design comprising a survey (phase 1) and interviews with ABET lecturers and students (phase 2) who had completed the questionnaires. The process and analyses of phase 1 and phase 2 of the mixed method research design were explained. Chapter 4 set out the research design explicitly, and justification for the use of the mixed method, instrument

development and ethical requirements. The sampling of the students and the distribution of the questionnaire, return rate and issues of validity and reliability were explained as well as data analysis, reliability and validity and confidentiality of data. The selection of the participants for phase 2 and the analysis process were briefly discussed.

The presentation of the findings was done in Chapter 5 starting with phase 1 (the survey) and phase 2 (the interviews with lecturers and students about learner support in the context of ODL). The descriptive analyses and other analytical tests of validity and reliability were explained. In Phase 2 key themes and patterns emerging from the analyses of interview data were presented. The five themes that emerged were the context of students, computer literacy, accessibility of Unisa learner support systems, motivation and time (5.2.1). The results of the analysis of phase 1 which corresponded with those in phase 2 were integrated to strengthen the findings (5.3).

#### **6.4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT OF PRACTICE**

The researcher saw discrepancies in what the students and the lecturers were saying, so he went back to the lecturers, looked at the implications, each of the themes, for example myUnisa, ABET department, etc. This was very abstract in the light of what the lecturers were doing, the lecturers should get more support from the rest of the university. Therefore something must have to be done or for more support to be provided to the department.

The participants feel that they should be trained to use the different tools of myUnisa. Their workload should be reduced so that they can have more time to focus on training the students on how to use myUnisa. They have also recommended that the myUnisa should be made compulsory for every student and they should be encouraged to visit the internet cafes to obtain a picture of what myUnisa is. They have also realised that everything is moving towards technology, which perhaps might work if students could gain access to it on their cell phones.

Of the fifteen students the majority do not have an access to online technology; therefore the department cannot expect them to have an access to myUnisa. The students who have an access felt that they had learning experience. Therefore this study do not want to send out the

message that students do not have access to myUnisa therefore lecturers cannot use myUnisa, they can use it for about 30% of students who have an access.

The recommendations are based on the themes and sub themes that emerged from the data analysis of Phase 1 and Phase 2.

#### **6.4.1 The readiness of ABET students in ODL**

- (a) The students who were struggling with their studies should be referred to the student support structures in the institution. The lecturers should send a tutorial letter to on guide students how learner support structures like myUnisa work. It was also found that lecturers sometimes use print to reach students who missed out on video conferencing or myUnisa (5.3.9). This was a positive move to address the learner support. The lecturers also recommended that students should be given a participation mark for constant use of myUnisa. Although incentives in the form of a participation mark seem to be a good move, it would be unfair on students who do not have an access to internet facilities. The ABET should train tutors at the Department to ensure successful tutorial sessions. The university should reduce the distance by establishing a central point to help rural students with learner support.
- (b) The institute of ABET initially developed from an ODL programme, therefore, the Department should build on its success to overcome the challenges of learner support in the Department and the university. Even though the institute did not offer formal programmes that are required by the university, it had learner support systems and structures for rural students in an ODL mode.
- (c) The Department should consider the local context when providing learner support strategies. If we know who the learners are, we will be able to respond to their needs instead of regarding technology as the first consideration. Starting from learners' needs prompts more creative and responsive solutions. For example, in cases where there is only limited internet connectivity in people's homes, or none at all, there may be internet cafes nearby. An education provider could establish a partnership with the internet cafes and cover some of the learners' costs in using them, and in this way improve internet access for learners.
- (d) The large number of students registered at the university is an indication that to many students, Unisa is their only access to higher education. Therefore, total commitment

to student support is crucial in this situation. As the only dedicated comprehensive ODL institution in South Africa, Unisa presents the only opportunity for access to higher education for many students.

- (e) The implementation of technology in undergraduate courses to facilitate learning is an important part in the ODL learning process. ABET students should be encouraged to make use of technology in their learning experience.
- (f) The concept of the mobile library will play an important role in providing access to technology to students in the rural areas, who are isolated.
- (g) The lecturers must interact with students. The absence of student feedback could indicate that the lecturers are not interacting sufficiently with students. Two-way communication is essential to increase the success rate of students.
- (h) The literature review indicates that it is important to overcome the distance between the lecturer and student. This will give both the student and lecturer an effective voice in the teaching and learning process of the ABET programmes.
- (i) The lecturers offer support to students mainly by email or phone on numerous occasions. Lecturers should continue this practice and offer moral support to students to reduce the distance and isolation.

#### **6.4.2 Computer Literacy of Lecturers**

- (a) The lecturers have access to computer facilities and it is recommended that myUnisa should be made compulsory for lecturers to teach and reach students. The lecturers claimed that they responded to myUnisa on a regular basis; unfortunately, most students did not have an access to internet.
- (b) It is important for the ABET lecturers to engage in new practices especially those related to online teaching and learning.
- (c) The academics in the department need to be supported with proper administrative support systems based on technology implementation and usage. Although this is time-consuming, but it will increase the success rate of the student.
- (d) The lecturers should innovate pedagogies in the ABET department to help students engage in peer-to-peer activities and in the construction of knowledge, as well as forming part of the community of learners through learner support structures.
- (e) Teaching and learning in the department largely depend on the interrelationships and interdependencies among diverse stakeholders at Unisa. Therefore, the lecturers



should familiarise themselves and make use of readily available services to support ABET students. There should be a real willingness from the Department to tackle the challenges of students to ensure student success. The Department's engagement should be informed by the ODL policy of 2008.

- (f) It is imperative for lecturers to reflect on how learner support systems in ABET can assist the students to succeed. The preparedness of the lecturers for teaching in a digital world should be considered. The Department should create a nurturing and supportive environment for lecturers as well as students.

### **6.4.3 Accessibility of Unisa Learner Support Systems**

- (a) The student is always at the centre of what the university or ODL institution should do. Therefore, the ABET Department should move to the next level and discontinue outdated pedagogical practices. The Unisa ODL policies aim to see students embark on the new culture of learning. The ABET Department has to seriously consider other forms of learner support, such as group discussion, tutorials and radio. The video conferencing, which is still under-utilised, presently it is not feasible because of the challenges raised by the students and the lecturers.
- (b) According to Unisa (2011), mobile phone access in South Africa is 70%. Thus, student support through mobile phones should be considered to tackle learner support in the department. The lecturers have the responsibility of providing opportunities for all ABET students from across a wide spectrum of diverse backgrounds and abilities. The access to a variety of ICT should be exploited in the teaching and learning activities to meet the needs of learners in a transformative way.
- (c) The ABET department is at its early stage and it might take some time before it is grounded in a specific framework of student support through e-learning, therefore, printed materials should not be abandoned but used concurrently with technology in supporting the students.
- (d) Tutoring and group discussions seem to be the interactions that are reliable for ABET students and the department must capitalise on this. The radio was found to be an important way of communicating and interacting. Therefore the lecturers could presently interact doing something different, for example, like a radio session etc.

#### **6.4.4 Motivation**

Students are faced with a lack of resources, including access to myUnisa and they have limited time to study and write their assignments. This is exacerbated by minimal contact between students and academics due to the accessibility of learner support structures. Weaker students struggle to grasp the learning content and this lowers the overall success rate of the students.

#### **6.4.5 Time**

Despite some success due to existing technological learner support systems in the ABET Department, students miss face to face contact. However, distance delivery has the advantage that students can study and access their teaching and learner material at any time.

### **6.5 AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

A number of further research possibilities have emerged from the study. Akyol and Garrison 2008 suggest that the following questions require further research:

- What is the relationship between teaching presence and cognitive presence as students progress through their course of studies?
- What is the relationship between social presence and cognitive presence as students move through the phases of inquiry?
- What effect does each of the presences have on perceived learning and satisfaction?

In addition to Akyol and Garrison, I suggest:

- Further research should focus on the development of the tutor guidelines that will inform the ABET department in the future planning and organisation of tutor development workshops;
- Future research should explore how online learning can reduce distance for ODL students;
- Research into mobile learning as a form of learner support in ODL;

- Research into the dropout of ODL students in the first and last weeks of the academic year; and
- How technology can be used to understand the framework of learner support to diverse ABET students?

## **6.6 THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY**

The usefulness of the study was in finding ways to inspire ABET students to complete their studies. This will lead to student success and reduce the dropout rate of the ABET students. The researcher has also noted that even in the urban areas, students' access is restricted by the cost of accessing the computer facilities. A number of factors impact the student's access, for example, social, political, economic and technological factors. The students register for the ABET modules, qualify and do not write the examination. Thus several factors in adult students' lives impact their learning activities.

However, the participants showed energetic, innovative and inventive commitment to their teaching and learning. The principles and theories of ODL, ABET and learner support produce student-centredness. The accessibility and acceptance of the ODL mode in South Africa has been thoroughly embraced by Unisa and the stakeholders. The focus of online education at Unisa seems to take account of the general diverse background of students and the accessibility and affordability of online learning. Although distance education may be criticised and regarded as second-chance education, Unisa is striving for excellence in its provision.

## **6.7 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The researcher took almost three to four years of study and he could not cover all the related literature review. The study is limited to the views of learners in one programme. It also does not include examining the impact one kind of presence has on the others and which presence had the greatest impact. Furthermore, a detailed discussion of the various forms of blended learning and pro's and con's of a blended ODL approach was beyond the scope of the research study. Moreover, although the mixed method may offer a better understanding of a research problem than a single method design, the method has its limitations: time and expertise were necessary to combine quantitative and qualitative research within one study.

Firstly, combining qualitative and quantitative methods in a single study requires researcher competence in each type. Secondly, a mixed-method study requires extensive data collection and more resources than many studies using only a quantitative or qualitative approach (McMillan & Schumacher 2006: 401). According to Onwuegbuzie, Bustamante and Nelson (2010:57), although mixed research has become popularised, its potential has not yet been fully realised. Many researchers do not mix qualitative and quantitative approaches in optimal ways (Powel, Mihalas, Onwuegbuzie, Suldo and Daley 2008).

There are both advantages and disadvantages to using a mixed-method design. On the positive side, using both approaches allows the researcher to incorporate the strengths of each method. This provides for a more comprehensive picture of what is being studied, emphasising quantitative outcomes as well as the process that influenced the outcomes. The method also encourages producing a more complete set of research questions as well as conclusions. It is also helpful to supplement a primarily quantitative or qualitative study with some data from the other method (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:401).

## **6.8 CONCLUSIONS**

The results of the study confirm the findings of earlier researchers concerning student support to ODL students. It was not the purpose of the study to demonstrate the pros and cons of the CoI but rather to use the elements of the model to explore students' perceptions and experiences on learner support. The model was useful in the conceptualisation of questions. The issues presented in the literature and the data from participants have administrative, pedagogical and learner support implications. The study project raised questions and issues about learner support strategies for a blended learning context. The challenges raised important questions about teaching, academic support and student support, the study suggested that the CoI is a valuable framework for exploring the issues associated with and for improving the design, facilitation, teaching and learning in a blended ODL context.

Even though both positive and negative responses were obtained from these participants, learner support in ODL has the potential to improve throughput rate and to ensure successful studies. It can also improve quality education and education for all. Students need support to study better, pass and complete their qualifications. The study demonstrated that learner support is crucial. DE is a lonely journey; ABET students who are in the rural areas feel

isolated. They come from diverse backgrounds and are struggling to be active self-directed learners. The study has also revealed that commitment and innovative ways are needed to infuse learner support systems in the Department. It is noticeable that participants in the study project are loyal and eager to address the challenges and opportunities offered by the Unisa learner support systems in the Department.

In the light of the workload within the department, the participants need to be encouraged and motivated to service the students unselfishly. Collaboration by the participants within the Department will promote innovative thinking about learner support systems. The study tried to give a richer picture of learner support in the ABET department. The recommendations confirm that institutions have to design appropriate blended learning options in a menu of service from which students can tailor-make their learning experiences to allow for maximum self-organisation of learning with support (Heydenrych & Prinsloo 2012:2).

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**ANNEXURE 1:****Consent Information form for ABET lecturers and students**

I Baloyi GP, a doctoral student at the University of South Africa wish to request you to voluntarily participate in my study project entitled: **Learner support in Open and Distance Learning context: A case study of ABET programmes at the University of South Africa.** It is in this regard I want to answer the following question, **What is the nature of learner support in ABET programme?** The research objectives is to investigate views and perceptions of use and experiences of learner support, the challenges ABET lecturers and students and to make suggestions towards effective and appropriate use for providing learner support to students in the context of Unisa and ODL institutions in general.

The information you provide during the interview will be treated as confidential and will be used solely for research purposes. Your name will not be used. Please regards your participation as optimal, and be aware that you may terminate your participation at any time should you so wish.

The research methods I am using are mixed methods. I will send out 400 questionnaire to students who have registered for the ABET diploma module. I intend to collect data by interviewing a maximum of five lecturers and 10 students who have completed the survey questionnaires.

The researcher expects no harm since the research has nothing to do with the handling of dangerous materials. You will also be informed of the rationale, recording and the safe keeping of the audio-taped interviews and transcriptions. The data provided by the participants will be locked in the steel cabinet and no one will have access to it except me.

The interview will be conducted at your convenient time and the session will last for one hour. Therefore, note that the interview sessions will be held as per agreed arrangement.

The questions can be directed to me at the telephone numbers and the e-mail address provided below.

Yours Sincerely

-----

Baloyi PG (7643284)

Tel: 012 429 2646

Cell: 0835515211

Email Address: [baloygp@unisa.ac.za](mailto:baloygp@unisa.ac.za)

## ANNEXTURE 2

### Participants Consent form

I ----- hereby agree to participate in a research study on Learner support in ODL context: A case study of ABET programmes at the University of South Africa. I understand the purpose and nature of this study and I am participating voluntarily. I therefore grant permission for the collection of data to be used in the process of completing a Doctor of Education (D.Ed) degree and any other future publication.

I understand that the purpose of the study is to:

- explore lecturers' use, perceptions and experiences of learner support strategies and investigate challenges
- explore students' perceptions and experiences of learner support strategies and investigate challenges present implications and offer recommendations for improvement of learner support for ABET, other Unisa academic departments and other ODL academic departments.

The ethical considerations were explained to me and I therefore give my consent to voluntarily participate in the study. As the participant in this study project, I am also aware of my right to withdraw from the research study at any stage, If I so wish to do so. I also aware I will be informed to the safe keeping of the audio-taped interview, transcriptions and the survey questionnaire completed. I agree to meet the researcher as per our agreement for interview session at the agreed time and venue. I also grant permission to tape recording of the interview session. Lastly, I indicate my choice by ticking the appropriate box shown below.

I accept	I decline
----------	-----------

**ANNEXURE 3**

**Memo to institution requesting permission to conduct the study (Vice Principal:  
Academic and Research)**

207 Alan's Place  
Corner Esselen and Greef  
Sunnyside  
0002  
27<sup>th</sup> February 2012

Vice Principal: Academic and Research  
University of South Africa  
P.O. Box 392  
Unisa  
0003

Dear Madam / Sir

**REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO INTERVIEW MEMBERS OF THE ABET  
DEPARTMENT ACADEMIC STAFF**

I wish to request for your permission to interview some members of the academic lecturers in the ABET department of the College of Education. The purpose of the interview is to collect data required for my research study entitled: **Learner support in Open and Distance Learning context: A case study of ABET programmes at the University of South Africa.**

Your co-operation in this matter will be highly appreciated.

Yours sincerely

-----  
Baloyi GP (7643284)

Email Address: [baloygp@unisa.ac.za](mailto:baloygp@unisa.ac.za)

Tel: 012 429 2646

**ANNEXURE 4**

**Memo to institution requesting permission to conduct the study (Executive Dean).**

207 Alan's Place  
Corner Esselen and Greef  
Sunnyside  
0002  
27<sup>th</sup> February 2012

Executive Dean  
College of Education  
University of South Africa  
P.O. Box 392  
Unisa  
0003

Dear Madam / Sir

**REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO INTERVIEW MEMBERS OF THE ABET  
DEPARTMENT ACADEMIC STAFF**

I wish to request for your permission to interview some members of the academic lecturers in the ABET department. The purpose of the interview is to collect data required for my research study entitled: **Learner support in Open and Distance Learning context: A case study of ABET programmes at the University of South Africa.** I am currently a registered doctoral student in the College of Education. The participants will be given an informed consent form, which they will be asked to sign and date soon as they agreed to participate in the research study. The form will contain information about the purpose, nature of the research study and they will be guaranteed privacy and confidentiality. The participants will be made aware that they might terminate their participation at any time should they so wish.

Your co-operation in this matter will be highly appreciated.

Yours sincerely

-----

Baloyi GP (7643284)

Email Address : [baloygp@unisa.ac.za](mailto:baloygp@unisa.ac.za)

Tel: 012 429 2646

## ANNEXURE 5

### Survey Questionnaire

Dear respondent

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research study by completing the questionnaire. Your contribution is greatly appreciated.

I am a student in the School of Education, University of South Africa, and this questionnaire forms part of my doctoral studies. The study investigates the effectiveness of student support systems in ABET department.

Information you provide in the questionnaire will be treated as confidential and will be used solely for research purposes. Your name will not be used. Please regard the completion of the questionnaire as optional, and be aware that you may terminate your participation at any time should you so wish.

Finally, it should be noted that part of the University of South Africa's mission is to undertake research and knowledge development guided by integrity, quality and rigour. By participating in this survey, you are assisting the university in reaching this goal.

Please follow the instructions below and respond to the questions as openly and honestly as possible.

**NB You are requested to return the questionnaire within five days**

#### **Instructions**

- Please answer the questions as objectively and honestly as possible.
- Unless otherwise stated, please select only **one** option per question.

- Place a cross (x) in the appropriate box below each question to indicate the option which best reflects your experience of the issue in question.
- Please remember that there is no right or wrong answer.
- Where asked to specify or to express your own opinion, please keep answers short and to the point.
- Please answer all the questions as this will provide me with more information and enhance the results.

Thank you for your participation.



---

Gezani Baloyi (90171969)

Lecturer

ABET Department, Unisa Main MUCKLENEUK Campus

TvW 6-69

PO Box 392

Unisa

0003

Tel: (012) 429-2624

Fax: (012) 429-8812 or fax to e-mail: + 0866 340 349

E-mail: [baloygp@unisa.ac.za](mailto:baloygp@unisa.ac.za)



**SECTION A**

## General and BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Serial no

--	--	--

3

1. Please indicate your cultural group:

1	<b>African</b>
2	<b>Coloured</b>
3	<b>Indian</b>
4	<b>White</b>
5	<b>Other</b>

4

2. Please indicate your gender

1	<b>Male</b>
2	<b>Female</b>

5

3. Please indicate your province

1	<b>Eastern Cape</b>
2	<b>Free State</b>
3	<b>Gauteng</b>
4	<b>KwaZulu-Natal</b>
5	<b>Limpopo</b>
6	<b>Mpumalanga</b>
7	<b>North West</b>

6

**SECTION A**

## General and BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

8	Northern Cape
9	Western Cape

## General

4. Do you work while you study Yes/No

1	Yes
2	No

7

5. If yes, on what basis are you employed?

1	Part-time
2	Full – time

8

6. As a registered student of Unisa:	Number of times						
	never	1	2	3	4	5	irregular
1. On a weekly basis, how often do you communicate with Unisa?							
2. Within your year of registration, how often do you attend discussion classes facilitated by your lecturer?							
3 On a weekly basis, how often do you visit the library							
4. On a monthly basis, how often do you visit the library							
5. On a weekly basis, how often do							

<p><b>you visit the Unisa website?</b></p>																									
<p><b>6. On a monthly basis, how often do you meet your study group?</b></p>																									
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<p><b>7. Who/ or what guides you the most when completing an assignment? <i>You may choose more than one option</i></b></p>											<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="height: 20px;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="height: 20px;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="height: 20px;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="height: 20px;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="height: 20px;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="height: 20px;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="height: 20px;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="height: 20px;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="height: 20px;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="height: 20px;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="height: 20px;"></td></tr> </table>														
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1	<b>The tutor at group discussion sessions</b>																								
2	<b>The lecturer</b>																								
3	<b>Study material</b>																								
4	<b>Student colleagues</b>																								
5	<b>Members of the study group</b>																								
6	<b>Other</b>																								
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<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse; margin-left: 20px;"> <tr> <td style="width: 60%;"><b>8. Internet access</b></td> <td style="width: 20%; text-align: center;"><b>Yes</b></td> <td style="width: 20%; text-align: center;"><b>No</b></td> </tr> <tr> <td>1. Do you have unlimited access to the internet?</td> <td style="text-align: center;"> </td> <td style="text-align: center;"> </td> </tr> <tr> <td>2. Are you comfortable downloading study material from the internet?</td> <td style="text-align: center;"> </td> <td style="text-align: center;"> </td> </tr> </table>											<b>8. Internet access</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	1. Do you have unlimited access to the internet?			2. Are you comfortable downloading study material from the internet?			<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="height: 20px;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="height: 20px;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="height: 20px;"></td></tr> </table>					
<b>8. Internet access</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>																							
1. Do you have unlimited access to the internet?																									
2. Are you comfortable downloading study material from the internet?																									
<b>23</b>																									

3. Are you comfortable sending and receiving e-mails?				
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SECTION B						
myUnisa: TEACHING PRESENCE						
Please indicate your extent of agreement with each of the following statements by ticking the appropriate box						
1: Strongly Disagree						
2: Disagree						
3: Agree						
4: Strongly Agree						
	Statement	1	2	3	4	Official use
13.	<b>On myUnisa the lecturer clearly communicated important module topics</b>					
14.	<b>On myUnisa the lecturer clearly communicated important module goals</b>					
15.	<b>On myUnisa the lecturer clearly communicated important due dates as a study guide schedule (is this what you had in mind?)</b>					
16.	<b>The lecturer provided clear instruction on how to participate in module learning activities on myUnisa</b>					
17.	<b>The lecturer assisted the development of my creative thinking by indicating areas of agreement and disagreement on module topics.</b>					
18.	<b>The lecturer guided the class online on myUnisa to develop insight in understanding module</b>					
19.	<b>The lecturer assisted module participants through participative engagement towards productive dialogue</b>					
20.	<b>The lecturer helped keep the module participants on track through focused learning.</b>					

21.	<b>The lecturer encouraged module participants on myUnisa to explore new concepts presented the module.</b>							
22.	<b>On the myUnisa portal the actions of the lecturer reinforced a sense of community among the students</b>							
23.	<b>By means of focused discussions on myUnisa the lecturer facilitated learning</b>							
24.	<b>The lecturer provided feedback that helped me understand my strength and weakness.</b>							

35

## SECTION C

## MyUnisa: SOCIAL PRESENCE

Please indicate your extent of agreement with each of the following statements by ticking the appropriate box

1: Strongly Disagree

2: Disagree

3: Agree

4: Strongly Agree

	Statement					Official use
10.	<b>Getting to know other module participants via myUnisa communications gave me a sense of belonging in the module</b>					
11.	<b>Via myUnisa, I was able to come to know some module participants fairly well</b>					
12.	<b>myUnisa communication is an excellent medium for social interaction</b>					
13.	<b>I felt comfortable communicating on myUnisa.</b>					
14.	<b>I felt comfortable participating in the module discussions</b>					
15.	<b>I felt comfortable interacting with other module participants on myUnisa.</b>					
16.	<b>I felt comfortable disagreeing with other module participants while still maintaining a sense of trust on myUnisa.</b>					
17.	<b>I felt that my opinion was acknowledged by other module participants on myUnisa</b>					
18.	<b>Online discussion on myUnisa help me to develop a sense of collaboration</b>					

## SECTION D

myUnisa: COGNITIVE PRESENCE

Please indicate your extent of agreement with each of the following statements by ticking the appropriate box

1: Strongly Disagree

2: Disagree

3: Agree

4: Strongly Agree

	Statement	1	2	3	4		Official use
5.	<b>Problems posed stimulated my interest in particular issues of the module</b>						
6.	<b>Module activities in myUnisa aroused my curiosity</b>						
7.	<b>I felt motivated to explore content related questions on myUnisa</b>						
8.	<b>I utilised a variety of information sources to explore problems posed in the module</b>						
5	<b>Brainstorming which facilitated the acquisition of relevant information helped me resolve content related questions</b>						
6	<b>The myUnisa discussions were valuable in helping me appreciate different perspectives</b>						
7	<b>Integrating new information components helped me answer questions raised in module activities in myUnisa</b>						
8	<b>Learning activities helped me develop deductive reasoning</b>						
9	<b>Reflection on module content and discussions helped me understand concepts explained on myUnisa</b>						
10	<b>I developed ways to test and apply the knowledge created in the module</b>						

11	<b>I have developed solutions to module problems that can be applied in practice</b>						
12	<b>I can apply the knowledge created in this module to my work or other non-class related activities</b>						
56							
<p>SECTION E</p> <p>myUnisa: CONSIDERING FUTURE</p> <p>Please indicate your extent of agreement with each of the following statements by ticking the appropriate box</p> <p>1: Strongly Disagree 2: Disagree 3: Agree 4: Strongly Agree</p>							
	Statement: I feel ...	1	2	3	4		Official use
13.	<b>I would like to interact more with other students in myUnisa</b>						
14.	<b>I would like to physically interact with other students in different provinces and other geographical areas</b>						
15.	<b>I would like to interact more with other students online</b>						
16.	<b>I would like to share documents, images and pictures with other students more easily</b>						
17.	<b>Pleased, because I interact with other students</b>						
18.	<b>Pleased , because I enjoy participating in online discussions</b>						
19.	<b>Unhappy, because I prefer not to interact much with other students</b>						



20.	Unhappy, because I only have limited access to the internet						
21.	Pleased, because the module helps me to feel less isolated.						
22.	Unsure, because I'm not confident about my ability to communicate with others						
23.	Unhappy, because I don't have the time to interact more with other students						
24.	Unhappy, because I find it difficult to participate in myUnisa						
13	Pleased, because I think it improved my learning experience						
14	Unsure, because I don't know whether it improved my learning experience						
<b>70</b>							

## SECTION F

Discussion classes: TEACHING PRESENCE

Please indicate your extent of agreement with each of the following statements by ticking the appropriate box

1: Strongly Disagree

2: Disagree

3: Agree

4: Strongly Agree

	Statement	1	2	3	4	Official use
1	The lecturer clearly communicated important module topics					
2	The lecturer clearly communicated important module goals					
3	The lecturer provided clear instructions on how to					

## SECTION F

## Discussion classes: TEACHING PRESENCE

Please indicate your extent of agreement with each of the following statements by ticking the appropriate box

1: Strongly Disagree

2: Disagree

3: Agree

4: Strongly Agree

	Statement	1	2	3	4	Official use
	<b>participate in module learning activities in the study material</b>					
<b>4</b>	<b>The lecture assisted the development of my discriminative reasoning by indicating areas of agreement and disagreement on module topics.</b>					
<b>5</b>	<b>The lecturer guided the class to develop insight in understanding module</b>					
<b>6</b>	<b>The lecturer assisted participants through participative engagement towards productive dialogue</b>					
<b>7</b>	<b>The lecturer helped keep the module participants on track through focused learning.</b>					
<b>8</b>	<b>The lecturer encouraged module participants to explore new concepts.</b>					
<b>9</b>	<b>The discussion with the lecturer reinforced a sense of community among the students</b>					
<b>10</b>	<b>By means of focused discussions the lecturer facilitated learning</b>					
<b>11</b>	<b>The lecturer provided feedback that helped me understand my strength and weakness.</b>					

SECTION G						
Tutorials						
Please indicate your extent of agreement with each of the following statements by ticking the appropriate box						
1: Strongly Disagree						
2: Disagree						
3: Agree						
	Statement	1	2	3	4	Official use
1	The tutor clearly communicated important module topics					
2	The tutor clearly communicated important module goals					
3	The tutor provided clear instructions on how to participate in module learning activities					
4	The tutor assisted the development of my discriminative reasoning by indicating areas of agreement and disagreement on module topics.					
5	The tutor guided the class to develop insight in understanding module					
6	The tutor assisted participants through participative engagement towards productive dialogue					
7	The tutor helped keep the module participants on track through focused learning					
8	The tutor encouraged module participants to explore new concepts					
9	The discussion with the tutor reinforced a sense of community among the students					
10	By means of focused discussions the tutor facilitated learning					
11	The tutor provided feedback that helped me					

## SECTION G

## Tutorials

Please indicate your extent of agreement with each of the following statements by ticking the appropriate box

1: Strongly Disagree

2: Disagree

3: Agree

	Statement	1	2	3	4		Official use
	<b>understand my strength and weakness.</b>						

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*THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME!*

## ANNEXURE 6

### Interview Guide for Lecturers

**Student:** Baloyi PG  
**Student no.** 7643284  
**Phone no.** 0835515211  
**Title:** Learner support in Open and Distance Learning University context: A case study of ABET programmes at the University of South Africa.  
**Subject:** Interview questions  
**Date:** 14 July 2011

#### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- How long have you been a lecturer in the institution?
- How long have you been a lecturer for this ABET module?
- What is your highest qualification?
- Do you have any ICT qualification? Or have you studied any ICT-related module in any of your qualification? If yes, can you give us details about the qualification/module?
- Were you exposed to the use of computers during your professional Teacher Education training?

#### Elearning and myUnisa

1. What is your understanding of the concept of e-learning/online learning?
2. What is your understanding of the concept of myUnisa as a learning management tool?
3. How do you use myUnisa for teaching and learning? In other words, what functions of myUnisa do you use for teaching and learning? (Please list these functions for yourself and use for guiding interviewee).
4. How often do you respond to discussions on discussion forum? (Weekly, fortnightly, monthly)?
5. How do you use the discussions to facilitate learning? How do you use the discussions to improve teaching?
6. In your view how can teaching online (myUnisa) be improved to ensure student support in ODL? Why?
7. Do you find teaching through myUnisa valuable, stimulating and relevant? Why?

8. Do you think that you get to know students well via myUnisa module communications?
9. Would you say that you were able to come to know students' learning needs of your module well via myUnisa?
10. Did you feel that your opinions were acknowledged by students on myUnisa?
11. Can you give reasons why you consider myUnisa to be helping students develop a sense of collaboration in learning?
12. What are the challenges UNISA lecturers experience in using myUnisa?
13. What strategies/mechanisms /interventions have you put in place to make myUnisa stimulating and relevant to teaching and learning?
14. What recommendations can you make towards effective and appropriate use of myUnisa for providing learner support at UNISA?
15. What recommendations can you make to improve teaching and learning activities using myUnisa?

#### **Group discussion classes**

1. How many group discussion classes do you conduct per module per annum?
2. In what format are the classes (face-to-face, telephone conference, videoconference, satellite delivery) you facilitate?
3. What are your perceptions and experiences in using face-to-face/ telephone conference/ videoconference/ satellite delivery (depending on which ones the interviewee has used) for group discussions?
4. What are the challenges facing UNISA lecturers in using face-to-face discussion to support ABET students? What recommendations can you make to improve face-to-face discussion classes?
5. What are the challenges facing UNISA lecturers in using telephone conference/ videoconference/ satellite delivery (depending on which ones the interviewee has used) discussion to support ABET students? What recommendations can you make to improve telephone conference/ videoconference/ satellite delivery discussion classes?
6. What % of students in one of your ABET modules attends face-to-face discussion classes?
7. What % of students in one of your ABET modules attends telephone conference/ videoconference/ satellite delivery discussion classes?

8. Can you share the feedback you received from students on (face-to-face, telephone conference, videoconference, satellite delivery) discussion classes Do you find the discussions on discussion forum useful?
9. Do you think that you get to know students via discussion classes?
10. Would you say that discussion classes gave students a sense of belonging?
11. Would you consider discussion classes to be an excellent medium for students' social interaction?
12. Did you feel that students were comfortable interacting with other module participants during discussion classes?
13. Did you feel that opinions were acknowledged by other module participants during discussion classes?
14. Did you feel that discussion classes helped students develop a sense of collaboration?
15. How do you plan to ensure that discussions on discussion forums are valuable for students?
16. Tell me about how you disseminate the information from discussions to other students who do not have access online.
17. What recommendations can you make towards effective and appropriate use? of discussions on discussion forums (the strategies / mechanisms /interventions)?

### **Tutor system**

1. Are any of your ABET modules on the Unisa tutor system? If yes, can you share your understanding of the Unisa tutor system? How does it work?
2. What is your role in the tutor system?
3. What % of students in one of your ABET modules attend tutorials?
4. What are your experiences of tutor system?
5. Do you think that students got to know other course participants via tutorials? Would you consider tutorials an excellent medium for learning?
6. Would you consider tutorials an excellent medium for learning learner support?
7. Would you consider tutorials a good medium for collaboration?
8. In your opinion what are the challenges facing UNISA with regards the tutor system?
9. How can the system be improved? What recommendations can you make towards effective and appropriate use tutorials (the strategies / mechanisms /interventions)?

## ANNEXURE 7

### Interview Guide for Students

#### INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

##### **Elearning and myUnisa**

1. How do you use in general?
2. How do you use myUnisa specifically for learning? In other words, what functions of myUnisa do you use for learning? (please list these functions for yourself and use for guiding interviewee).
3. How often do you engage with other students on discussion forum? (Weekly, fortnightly, monthly)?
4. How do you use the discussions for learning?
5. Do you think the discussions promote learning?
6. What are your views and experiences on the following statements:
  - On myUnisa the lecturer clearly communicated important module topics.
  - The lecturer provided clear instruction on how to participate in module learning activities on myUnisa.
  - The lecturer guided the class online on myUnisa to develop insight in understanding.
  - The lecturer assisted module participants through participative engagement towards productive dialogue.
  - The lecturer encouraged module participants on myUnisa to explore new concepts presented the module.
  - On the myUnisa portal the actions of the lecturer reinforced a sense of community among the students.
  - The lecturer facilitated learning by means of focused discussions.
  - The lecturer provided feedback that helped me understand my strength and weakness.
  - myUnisa communication is an excellent medium for social interaction.
  - I felt comfortable interacting with other module participants on myUnisa.
  - I felt that my opinion was acknowledged by other module participants on myUnisa.



- Online discussion on myUnisa helps me to develop a sense of collaboration.
7. Do you think that you get to know other course participants?
  8. Would you consider myUnisa module communications to have given you a sense of belonging in the module?
  9. Can you give reasons why you consider myUnisa to be helping students develop a sense of collaboration in learning?
  10. What are the challenges students experience using myUnisa?
  11. What recommendations can you make for lecturers improvement of teaching and learning using myUnisa?
  12. What recommendations can you make towards effective and appropriate use of myUnisa for providing learning and learner support for Unisa students?

### **Group discussion classes**

1. How many group discussion classes do you attend per module per annum?
2. In what format are the classes (face-to-face, telephone conference, videoconference, satellite delivery)?
3. What are your perceptions and experiences of telephone conference/ videoconference/ satellite delivery (depending on which ones the interviewee has used) for group discussions? Do you think the discussion classes promote learning?
4. What are your views and experiences on the following statements:
  - The lecturer facilitated learning by means of focused discussions.
  - The lecturer clearly communicated important module topics during discussion classes.
  - The lecturer provided clear instruction on how to participate in module learning activities.
  - The lecturer guided the class to develop insight in understanding.
  - The lecturer assisted students in the class through participative engagement towards productive dialogue.
  - The discussion class reinforced a sense of community among the students.
  - The lecturer provided feedback that helped me understand my strengths and weaknesses.
  - I get to know other course participants via discussion classes.
  - Discussion classes give me a sense of belonging in the module.

- Discussion classes are an excellent medium for social interaction.
  - I felt comfortable interacting with other module participants during discussion classes.
  - I felt that my opinion was acknowledged by other module participants during discussion classes.
  - Discussion classes helped me develop a sense of collaboration.
5. What are your perceptions and experiences of face-to-face discussion classes? Do you think the discussion classes promote learning?
  6. What are the challenges facing UNISA students regarding face-to-face discussion classes? (refer to admin/planning and other academic issues)
  7. What recommendations can you make for UNISA to improve face-to-face discussion classes?
  8. What are the challenges facing UNISA students regarding telephone conference/ videoconference/ satellite delivery (depending on which ones the interviewee has used) for group discussions? Refer to admin/planning and other academic issues
  9. What recommendations can you make for UNISA to improve telephone conference/ videoconference/ satellite delivery (depending on which ones the interviewee has used) for group discussions?

### **Tutor system**

1. Are you registered for the Unisa tutor system? If yes, can you share your perceptions and experiences of the Unisa tutor system?
2. What is the role of the tutor?
3. What are your views and experiences on the following statements:
  - The tutor clearly communicates important module topics.
  - The tutor provided clear instructions on how to participate in module learning activities in the study material.
  - The tutor assisted participants through participative engagement towards productive dialogue.
  - The tutor helped keep the module participants on track through focused learning.
  - The discussion with the tutor reinforced a sense of community among the students.

- The tutor provided feedback that helped me understand my strength and weakness.
  - Problems posed stimulated my interest in particular issues of the module
  - Brainstorming which facilitated the acquisition of relevant information helped me resolve content related questions.
  - The tutorials were valuable in helping me appreciate different perspectives.
  - The tutor clearly communicated important module topics
  - The tutor assisted the development of my discriminative reasoning by indicating areas of agreement and disagreement on module topics.
  - The tutor guided the class to develop insight in understanding module
  - The tutor assisted participants through participative engagement towards productive dialogue
  - The discussion with the tutor reinforced a sense of community among the students
  - By means of focused discussions the tutor facilitated learning
4. In your opinion what are the challenges facing UNISA students with regards to the tutor system?
5. How can the UNISA tutor system be improved?

### ANNEXURE 8

#### The site map of the students

