

**ASSESSMENT FEEDBACK IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: A CASE
STUDY OF KEY ACADEMIC, STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL
REQUIREMENTS**

by

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DECLARATION

I ISMAEL UISEB declare that **"ASSESSMENT FEEDBACK IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF KEY ACADEMIC, STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL REQUIREMENTS"** 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. I also confirm that this work has not been admitted to any other educational institution for degree purposes.



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I have drawn the highest inspiration during my studies from the words of JESUS CHRIST: "In the world you will have tribulations, but behold I have overcome the world". John 16:33.

A number of people contributed to the successful completion of his thesis in different ways. I feel indebted to acknowledge their selfless contributions.

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ABSTRACT

Student assessment and feedback is not new to open and distance learning (ODL) but there is a paucity of empirical evidence as to its effectiveness in improving the performance of students and institutions. The objective of this study was to identify key aspects required to optimise feedback in ODL.

In various studies, feedback has been heralded for its key role in the improvement of student learning. However, there are on-going expressions of uncertainty about whether assessment feedback is indeed delivering this potential, particularly in ODL mode. Against this backdrop of uncertainty and circumspection, this study offers a critical reflection on assessment feedback with particular focus on ODL.

This case study was undertaken using semi-structured interviews with the students, which were conducted to explore and extrapolate their experiences and views on feedback. Focus group interviews with tutors were also conducted to provide an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions. Document analysis was used to make informed recommendations.

The study recommends that creating an effective assessment programme, developing criteria, guides, exemplars and models; discussing and refining them and communicating them to students and their staff — will have a positive impact on the workload for staff with coordinating responsibilities. It is recommended that a student charter be devised to lay out student expectations alongside the expectations of an ODL institution. Such a student charter will ensure that both tutors and students know what is expected of them during the feedback giving and receiving process.

My findings offer a deeper understanding of the assessment of code disciplines which require a specialist gaze for the judgement of student work, and the pressures experienced in this type of assessment in an ODL context. It is envisaged that the research findings will assist ODL practitioners with decisions related to assessment and feedback. There are clear implications for staff in ODL institutions to encourage changes in feedback culture.

KEY TERMS

- Feedback
- Learning
- Assessment
- Open and distance learning
- Distance learning
- Distance education
- Tutors
- Tutoring
- Students
- Student support
- Tutor-markers

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- CES – Centre for External Studies
- DE – Distance Education
- ODL – Open and distance learning
- IT Information Technology
- UNAM University of Namibia
- UNISA University of South Africa
- UK – United Kingdom

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CHAPTER 1

ORIENTATION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

“Feedback is very critical in learning and teaching. Without feedback, learning is like a ship without radar as there is no direction given to students regarding their written work” (Chokwe, 2015:39).

Similarly, feedback is viewed as the utmost significant feature of the learning and teaching process. Through feedback, tutors or lecturers provide an important intervention in teaching, as students always like to know where they went wrong or what they did right in their written assessed work. Without feedback, learning is not comprehensive.

Furthermore, feedback is an inevitable tool of communication which is used not only in the learning, training and teaching environments, but also in many other environments where human beings engage and interact with each other. Hence, feedback is understood as a critical means to facilitate students’ growth as self-regulating learners who are able to monitor, evaluate, and regulate their own learning – beyond graduation into professional practice (Ferguson, 2011).

The above sentiments posit that there is a general consensus that the ultimate aim of assessment is not only to improve the results of student achievements, but also to give opportunities for continuous and constructive feedback through dialogue between the educator and the student.

In recent years student feedback has moved to centre stage. Signalling the importance of assessment feedback, Race, Brown and Smith (2005) state that nothing we do to, or for our students, is more important than our assessment of their work and the feedback we give them on it. Arguably, the results of assessment influence students for the rest of their lives. Developing effective feedback in mass higher education can

be a daunting task as it requires time and careful thought; the classes are often large and tutors face multiple demands.

Given the importance and pivotal role assessment feedback plays in teaching-learning environments as cited in the above sections, one wonders whether assessment feedback is indispensable to the teaching and learning process. Is feedback provided on academic tasks to the students worth the time and effort taken crafting the feedback given? Do students engage with the given feedback? Does the feedback enhance the teaching-learning process? These questions, coupled with the issues and concerns raised in the literature about feedback, initiated this study.

It is worth mentioning that feedback and assessment is used interchangeably in this study. In fact there is an inevitable link between assessment and feedback. In the educational arena, assessment is a pre-activity before feedback is given.

The researcher is an instructional designer in the Department of Materials Development and Instructional Design, which is one of the three Departments at the Centre for External Studies of the University of Namibia (UNAM). As an ODL (ODL) practitioner, I am obliged to continuously discover the students' learning difficulties. Furthermore, my role is to maximise student engagement with the feedback given and to evaluate the quality of students' learning.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

In this section, background information to the study deals with the current status of assessment feedback, as well as its significance. Studies done on assessment feedback internationally as well as nationally are extrapolated upon.

In the educational context, feedback is commonly used and referred to, as information provided by teachers to students about their academic work. As noted by Clark (2011), for some, assessment is a kind of measurement instrument (Quality Assurance Agency, 2011), while for others, assessment feedback is an essential part of assessment. In this study, the term assessment feedback is used as an umbrella

concept to capture the variety of definitions and forms of feedback commented on in the literature, to include the varied roles, types, foci, meanings, and functions of feedback, along with the conceptual frameworks underpinning feedback principles. Assessment feedback therefore, according to Evans (2013:71) “includes all feedback exchanges generated within assessment design, occurring within and beyond the immediate learning context”.

Although there is a large amount of proof supporting the worth of feedback to promote student learning, it is also evident that feedback alone is not adequate to improve outcomes (Lew, Alwis & Schmidt, 2010). Highlighting the challenges encountered with feedback, Boud and Molloy (2013) state that student feedback is a contentious and confusing issue throughout higher education institutions. Particularly, the coming of mass higher education in its 21st-century guise has brought with it a spate of survey findings, showing cause for concern about feedback to students on their progress and performance.

In ODL, one of the most challenging aspects of assessment is dealing with assessing large class sizes. When faced with large numbers of students in ODL, the main assessment challenge is finding efficient ways in which to assess them and provide them with feedback to support effective learning. These large classes are often in the first year where there is a diverse mix of students – most of whom are just starting to get to grips with the academic expectations of university.

In ODL, tutors are the key drivers of assessment feedback. Tutors spend a lengthy time altering the wording of assessment tasks, and designing criteria with which to measure the evidence which students deliver to them. Moreover, the decisions they make on the source of this evidence are made carefully and painstakingly. Their good meanings are sometimes unbounded and sometimes, the intended good intentions yield disastrous effects or impacts on learning outcomes.

One of the concerns could be that the assessors tend to grow gradually into the assessment culture of higher education, and may be unaware of some of the prevailing problems that dominate the scene. To this end, in the Quality Assurance Agency

analysis of nearly 3000 subject review visits, in the 1990s, to university departments in 62 subject areas “in the vast majority of subjects”, reviewers highlighted a failure “in a significant number of institutions” to provide adequate feedback on students’ work (Quality Assurance Agency, 2003).

As assessment is taking place, another challenge is to provide useful feedback. The students are too busy getting ready for their next assessment to take any notice of feedback given on their previous one. Feedback is valuable when it is received, understood and acted on and therefore it becomes a challenge when feedback does not yield the intended ultimate purpose of enhancing learning outcomes. All efforts must be geared towards making assessment feedback more efficient and effective. How does one go about that?

In order to yield effectiveness and efficiency from assessment feedback, there are prerequisites to be met. One of such requirements is that both staff and students be fully cognisant with the assessment procedures from the outset. However, Race (2002) asserts that during assessment, it is actually quite difficult to prove that some teaching has been unsatisfactory, but only too easy to demonstrate when something has gone wrong with the assessment itself.

One of the key findings of the studies on feedback is that the emphasis to date has been on academic practice of good feedback and not on student engagement with feedback and its effectiveness (Nicol, 2010b; Price, Handley, Millar & O’Donovan, 2010; Jonsson, 2012). Students lack strategies for using feedback productively (Burke, 2009; Jonsson, 2012).

Assessment is the engine which drives student learning (Cowan, 2005) and feedback is the oil which can lubricate this engine (Race, 2002). In order to serve its purpose, assessment should be valid, reliable and transparent. To ensure fairness, appropriate feedback appeal processes should always be in place to allow students a means of gaining the right of redress where this is believed to be justified.

In an attempt to address the challenges in higher educational institutions, there have been several calls to have a better understanding of assessment policies, strategies and feedback, and to use alternative and innovative assessment techniques (diversify) such as self-assessment, peer-assessment and online assessment, to cope with changing higher education environments and students' learning needs. However, there is no solid evidence that these efforts offer better and quicker feedback and that they can provide a better match between teaching, assessment and learning outcomes. In addition, the suitability and effectiveness of one single method of assessment in ODL, has not been tested and implemented successfully as yet.

UNAM has an Assessment Policy in place, which regulates the assessment feedback. Efforts are made to brief the tutors on assessment guidelines specifically in ODL. This Assessment Policy serves as a guiding and regulating document. In this Assessment Policy (UNAM, 2014), assessment is defined as the process of collecting evidence on student performance to determine how students have achieved the intended learning outcomes. This process includes inter alia, promotion of learning by providing students with feedback.

In ODL environments which are characterised by a large number of students, there is a need to find ways to minimise over-assessment and find ways to reduce the assessment load. It is against this background that this study attempts to explore assessment feedback through the lens of tutors' and students' experiences in ODL.

It is clear from the literature that feedback is possibly the most powerful and potent part of the assessment cycle, when it comes to improving further student learning. However, for some time, there has been an expanding amount of research evidence that much feedback practice does not accomplish this potential to influence future student learning, because it fails in a host of different ways.

This study intends to explore in-depth key issues with assessment feedback in ODL, in order to make learning experiences as effective and stimulating as possible. What is needed seems to be a robust assessment/feedback strategy that meets the needs of the present and prepares students to meet their own future learning needs.

Credibility and reliability of assessment procedures is a question of serious debate in the ODL system. Over the years, a considerable number of studies have been conducted to establish the importance of assessment feedback in higher education and as a result, feedback has been identified as an important element for student learning. In line with this view, Hattie (1987) reviewed 87 meta-analyses of studies and found that feedback produced the most powerful single effect on achievement for student learning. In particular, there is a lack of work addressing feedback from the lecturer perspective (Yorke, 2003; Topping, 2010) and postgraduate perspective (Scott, Evans, Hughes, Burke, Watson, Walter, Stiasny, Bentham & Huttly, 2011).

According to Walker (2015), not much is known as to how the quality and characteristics of feedback affect the manner in which students respond to it. Despite considerable time and effort put into crafting of academic feedback, for many students feedback seemingly has little or no impact on student learning.

Hattie and Timperley (2007) assert that a number of strategies were identified that inhibit the effects of feedback on learning, and it is only when students are grounded in and committed to the goals of learning and when the feedback is related to accomplishments of the learning, that feedback is effective. Some strategies aimed at improving feedback have been implemented with regard to timeliness, accessibility, legibility and constructiveness (Bols & Wicklow, 2013).

At the national level in Namibia, UNAM is an example of a dual mode university. Dual mode universities use conventional methods of teaching for resident on-campus and commuting students, as well as integrating teaching at a distance to reach off-campus part-time and international students. The lecturers who teach on campus using conventional methods for fulltime students are referred to as tutors in the ODL context. Thus, tutors and lecturers are used interchangeably in this study.

One of the centres of UNAM – the CES – is responsible for the provision of programmes housed in the faculties to the university's off-campus students through

the distance learning mode. The mission of CES is to provide accessible, quality higher education through ODL.

The students at CES expressed their dissatisfaction with the feedback they receive from their tutors during informal discussions with the researcher. The students sometimes do not understand the written comments given as feedback and also state that the assignments with feedback, often reach them too late. The strategic planning exercise conducted with the staff members indicated inter alia, the following as the weaknesses at CES: ineffective assessment approaches, low quality tutoring and marking; ineffective academic support (UNAM, 2015a).

Although UNAM has made great strides in ensuring access to quality education, there are still challenges in terms of assessment feedback in ODL. These challenges are not unique to the UNAM but are experienced at most ODL institutions.

This study resides in the field of ODL, but is not limited to the ODL environment. Within the ODL environment, the most disturbing factor could be the time and effort for providing quality and effective feedback to large number of students. This study focuses on the assessment feedback, its provision and delivery process in ODL. The Centre for External Studies (CES) at the UNAM offers education through ODL and is used as a premise for this study. The next section provides a brief theoretical and conceptual framework of feedback.

1.3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study serves as an appraisal tool for feedback in ODL environments. Asher (2013) states a theoretical framework is the structure that can hold or support a theory of a research study. Its purpose is to introduce and describe the theory that explains why the research problem under study exists.

In addition, a theoretical framework serves as an evaluation tool that helps to interpret the data presented in this study and to aid in eliciting different factors that play a

definite role in optimising feedback provisions in ODL. This framework also assists greatly with thinking through pragmatic strategies and planned activities towards improving feedback in ODL.

The theories which form the basis for this study are distance education (DE) theory, ODL theory and assessment theory. The theoretical framework is also informed by the social constructivist assessment model in Chapter 3, Figure 3.1 (Rust, O'Donovan & Price, 2005) and the model of feedback to enhance learning in Chapter 3, Figure 3.2 (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Other aspects that influence the theoretical framing of this study are the structural and procedural elements to assessment feedback. All the above-mentioned theories and factors influence the theoretical framework. They are discussed in detail in Chapters 2 and 3. The next section deals with the conceptual framework of the study.

1.4 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

According to Miles and Huberman (1994:8) a conceptual framework is a visual or written product, one that “explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied, the key factors, concepts, or variables and the presumed relationships among them”.

The researcher concurs with the conceptualisation of feedback as part of an ongoing process to support learning both in the immediate context of higher education and in future learning gains into employment as captured by Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell, and Litjens (2008).

Webster (2001:520) defines feedback as “a process in which the factors that produce a result are themselves modified, corrected, strengthened, by that result” and “a response, as one that sets such a process in motion”. This definition could fit a host of situations or systems, however, most educational researchers consider the term “feedback” in the context of instruction.

Feedback in the context of teaching and learning is the response to or comment on a student's performance that the student can use to understand more clearly and improve his or her performance. It is mostly used to find out how successful something has been done or is being done.

Sadler (1989:120) regards "feedback as a key element in formative assessment, and is usually defined in terms of information how successfully something has been or is being done". Another definition of feedback given by Ramaprasad (1983:4) is as follows: "feedback is information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way".

With regards to the above definition given by Ramaprasad (1983), Walker (2009:68) notes "a necessary precondition for a student to act on a gap is that she/he is given a comment that enables her/him to do so; the comments must be usable by the student". Consequently, "it is the quality, not just the quantity of feedback that merits our closest attention" (Sadler, 1998:84).

According to Shute (2008:153) feedback is "information communicated to the learner that is intended to modify his or her thinking or behaviour to improve learning". What is common in most definitions is the illustration that feedback contains information as a core element and that it is a purposeful action with well-intended results.

Furthermore, Kulhavy and Wagner (1993) introduced the concept of a feedback-triad, which includes three definitions of feedback:

- a) Feedback as a motivator for increasing response rate and/or accuracy;
- b) Feedback reinforcing a message that would automatically connect responses to prior stimuli, and
- c) Feedback providing information that a student could use to validate or change a previous response.

First, in a motivational meaning, some feedback, such as praise, could be considered a motivator that increases a general behaviour (e.g. writing or revision activities

overall). Second, in a reinforcement meaning, feedback may specifically reward or punish very particular prior behaviours (e.g. a particular spelling error or particular approach to a concluding paragraph). Third, in an informational meaning, feedback might consist of information used by a student to change performance in a particular direction (rather than just towards or away from a prior behaviour).

The following key concepts have been identified and explained in the following sections. Definitions of the concepts such as learning, open learning, flexible learning, ODL, distance education, student support and tutoring have been extracted from the University of South Africa's Policy on ODL (UNISA, 2008), which is the largest DE provider in Africa.

1.4.1 Learning

Learning is an active process of construction of knowledge, attitudes and values as well as developing skills using a variety of resources including people, printed material, electronic media, experiential and work-integrated learning, practical training, reflection, and research (UNISA, 2008). Learning is also related with personal change and empowerment as an aspiration to improve oneself in order to help others.

1.4.2 Open learning

As stated in UNISA's ODL Policy (2008), open learning is an approach to learning that gives students flexibility and choice over what, when, where, at what pace and how they learn. Open learning is all encompassing and includes DE, resource-based learning, correspondence learning, flexi-study and self-paced study.

1.4.3 Flexible learning

Flexible learning is defined by Christie (2006) as a general approach to education where learning opportunities and options are increased and where students have more control over the learning process. Flexible learning caters to different learning preferences by providing students with a range of pedagogical methods that they can

access on or off campus. Flexible learning is concerned with pedagogical quality, both in terms of teaching and learning methods and course delivery. It focuses on improving learning outcomes by increasing student involvement with learning. A key assumption is that students who can choose from a variety of high quality teaching and learning modes would be more motivated to learn.

1.4.4 Open and Distance Learning

Within ODL there are two concepts in one – “openness of learning” and “distance learning”. Thus, ODL is a multi-dimensional thought aimed at linking the time, geographical, economic, social and educational communication distance among student and institution, student and academics, student and courseware and student and peers. ODL focuses on removing barriers to access learning, flexibility of learning provisions, student-centeredness, supporting students and constructing learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed.

1.4.5 Distance education

DE is a set of systems or processes for teaching a diverse range of students situated at different places and physically parted from the learning institution, their tutors/teachers as well as other students.

1.4.6 Learner support

Wright (1991) describes learner support as the necessary student service vital to ensure the successful delivery of learning experiences at a distance while Thorpe (1988) describes learner support as the features of an open learning system capable of responding to a specific individual learning. Hui (1989) on the other hand, sees learner support as the support incorporated within the self-learning materials, the learning system and assignment marking, focusing very precisely on the courseware, the exercise of learning and assessment. The most modern integrities of student support services are defined by Tait (1995; 2003) who states the term student support

means a range of activities which complements the mass-produced materials which make up the most well-known elements in ODL.

1.4.7 Tutoring

Tutoring in ODL encompasses a broad range of teaching, coaching, mentoring and monitoring activities that guide students through their courses, mediating the packaged learning materials and facilitating the learning process. In the next section problem formulation which then leads to the research questions is discussed.

1.5 PROBLEM FORMULATION

There are numerous issues surrounding the provision of assessment-related feedback in ODL. As could be derived from the studies mentioned earlier in the above section, the issues raised prominently in various studies are problems of time efficiency for staff, lack of engagement by students with feedback and issues with the timeliness and quality of feedback received. Indicatively, there has been little work so far on the views of tutors on the problems of providing feedback in large, distance learning courses. The demand for ODL coupled with an ever accelerating growth rate of students who opt to study via the ODL mode is also a challenge for DE practitioners.

The large numbers of students pose tremendous challenges for ODL institutions in terms of effective feedback delivery on assignments, student support services and operational systems of DE provisions. It is undisputable that effective feedback can enhance student learning, but limited evidence exists whether the students use and learn from written feedback.

Despite obvious advantages and demand for learning via the ODL mode, there are some problems that need to be resolved. One such problem which warrants investigation is the role or impact of assessment feedback in ODL environments. As already mentioned, one way in which this study could help improve teaching and learning is to devise assessment strategies to optimize feedback in ODL. Such endeavours could counteract possible lack of strategies for productive use of

assessment feedback or lack of understanding of academic discourse. This could be done through a systematic analysis of the factors that may influence, either negatively or positively, the productive use of assessment feedback for learning.

I intend with this study to provide answers to the following questions:

Main question: What are the key academic, strategic and operational requirements for optimising feedback in ODL?

Sub-questions:

- 1) How does dialogue in the feedback process promote learning?
- 2) How does feedback on assignments enhance the teaching-learning process in ODL?
- 3) What is/are the current feedback practice(s) employed in ODL?
- 4) What are the experiences of the students and tutors of feedback in assignments and learning tasks in ODL?
- 5) What evidence-based recommendations can be made on assessment feedback?

1.6 AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The ultimate goal is to devise robust feedback delivery strategies or mechanisms which assist in optimising feedback in ODL. In turn, such strategies would enhance distance learning and could allow more students to complete studies successfully and motivate students to study via the ODL mode.

Various studies dictate that there is a clear need that feedback should be investigated and encouraged in learning (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2002; Mutch, 2003; Carless, 2006; Weaver, 2006). Similarly, the study done by Trenholm, Alcock and Robinson (2015) provides evidence that assessment feedback on online courses is not directed at student learning. In line with these views, and also to address challenges raised about assessment feedback, this study attempts to gain a deeper understanding about assessment feedback from the perspective of students and tutors.

Through this study, I would like to find ways in which feedback provided on assignments could be improved in ODL so that it yields the desired student learning objectives. This could be done by exploring the current assessment practices as well as experiences of the students and tutors on assessment feedback. Importantly, in the end, answers to the research questions as stated in Section 1.5 must be provided. Thus, the primary aim of the study is to determine key academic, strategic and operational requirements for optimising feedback in ODL.

The objectives of the study:

- 1) To evaluate how dialogue in the feedback process promotes learning;
- 2) To determine whether feedback on the assignments enhances the teaching-learning process in ODL;
- 3) To know and understand the current feedback practices employed in ODL;
- 4) To extrapolate experiences of students and tutors regarding assessment practices in ODL.
- 5) To make evidence-based recommendations on assessment feedback.

1.7 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section provides a brief description of the research design and methods of the study. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2010:12) research methodology refers to “the researcher’s general approach in carrying out the research project”. To this end, Crotty (1998:4) argues that the exploration of the kind of inquiry to be pursued and the kind of knowledge to be generated which leads to planning the general approach (methodology) and the actual sequence of activities planned (method).

More clearly stated, research methodology is a way to find out the result of a given problem on a specific matter that is also referred to as the research problem. As such, the research method decided upon as a way of conducting the research is based on the research questions. The research design is applied so that suitable research methods are used to ensure the attainment of the aim and objectives of the study. In

a nutshell, selecting an appropriate research methodology is one of the key factors in any research study.

1.7.1 Research design

The theoretical background of this study points to an interpretive research design. To this end, the interpretive design is linked more with methodological approaches that offer an opportunity for the voice, concerns and practices of research participants to be heard (Cole, 2006; Weaver & Olson, 2006). Cole (2006:26) further states that qualitative researchers are “more concerned about uncovering knowledge about how people feel and think in the circumstances in which they find themselves, than making judgements about whether those thoughts and feelings are valid”.

The interpretive design is underpinned by observation and interpretation – thus to observe is to collect information about events, while to interpret is to make meaning of that information by drawing inferences or by judging the match between the information and some abstract pattern.

In line with the above views, this study solicits the voices and views of the students and tutors on feedback practices. Understanding opinions and experiences of participants are of paramount importance to the researcher. The “truth” is in the informant’s perspective and not that of the researcher. In the next sub-sections, the research paradigm, type and methods are discussed.

1.7.1.1 Research paradigm

The research paradigm of this study resides in the social constructivist paradigm, although it also anchors on constructivist and interpretivist philosophical underpinnings. In social constructivism, the researcher seeks understanding of the world in which he lives and works. According to Creswell (2013), social constructivists develop subjective meanings of their experiences, meanings directed toward certain objects or things. However, there is a strong reliance on the participants’ view of the situation.

In addition to the above, I advocate the view that there are multiple realities and not just one objective reality. It is my view that reality is not something that exists outside the mind-set of participants. However, it can be found by the people who are experiencing it and it can be constructed by the people in the process.

This perspective is closely associated with social constructivism, which is built on exact assumptions about reality, knowledge, and learning. To understand and apply models of instruction that are embedded in the perspective of social constructivists, it is significant to know the premises that underlie them.

Social constructivists believe that realism is constructed through human activity. Members of a society together invent the properties of the world (Kukla, 2000). For the social constructivist, reality cannot be discovered: it does not exist preceding to its social creation. To social constructivists, knowledge is also a human product, and is socially and culturally constructed (Prawat & Floden, 1994; Gredler, 1997; Ernest, 1999). Individuals build meaning through their relations with each other and with the environment they live in.

Social constructivists view learning as a social process. It does not take place only within an individual, nor is it a passive development of behaviours that are shaped by external forces (McMahon, 1997). Meaningful learning occurs when individuals are engaged in social activities.

Distance learning is student-centred and is categorised in the social constructivist learning environment by Jonassen and Land (2000).

1.7.1.2 Research approach

The research approach employed for this study is qualitative. According to Maree (2013), a qualitative research methodology calls for understanding the process and the social and cultural contexts which inspire various behavioural patterns and are typically concerned with exploring the “why” question of the research.

Qualitative research in simple terms is the collection, analysis, and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual data. The purpose is to gain insights into a particular phenomenon of interest, which is assessment feedback in ODL.

The reason for the choice of a qualitative research approach as opposed to quantitative research approach is that research problem(s) pertaining to feedback practices is indeed exploratory and understanding-oriented. Hence, the domain of qualitative inquiry offers some of the richest and most rewarding explorations available in contemporary social science. As a qualitative researcher, I have been involved in collecting the data myself through examining documents and interviewing participants.

1.7.1.3 Research type

According to Garg and Eisenhardt (2012: 6-24), case studies can be used in various ways to define the aim of the research study namely to provide a description, to test a theory and to generate new findings regarding the theory. The case for this study is the UNAM but particular focus is on CES which is the unit within UNAM responsible for offering courses via the distance mode.

This study adopts a qualitative case study design. This implies a combination of a qualitative research approach and case study research type. The case study design is more of a choice for this study than methodological type of research designs. The choice for a case study research design is largely based on the research questions of the study, as research questions form the backbone of a qualitative design (Mason, 2002).

A different viewpoint provided by Robson (2002) is that case study research is a strategy for doing research involving empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence. Yin (2009) suggests that case study research have a particular ability to answer *why* and *how* research questions rather than *what* and, they could explain why particular programme did or did not work.

This is a single case study which intends to describe and generate new insights regarding assessment feedback. This case study focuses on the circumstances, dynamics and complexity of a single case which is assessment feedback in ODL with a specific focus on UNAM.

1.7.2 Research methods

Selection of appropriate research methods is fundamental to any study. Research methods refer to procedures, tools and techniques to gather and analyse data. The chosen research methods must enable the researcher to answer research question(s) and deal with the possible threats related to the quality of the study (Creswell, 2005).

In line with the above views, the researcher determines and defines the research questions, selects the case(s), determines data gathering and analysis techniques, prepares to collect the data, collects data in the field, evaluates and analyses the data, and presents the analysis and interpretation of the empirical research data.

Research methods are intended to help the researcher to accomplish the study's goals. It frames the mind-set to deal with a particular perspective towards achieving objectives and activities of the study (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Accordingly, the research question(s) or goal dictates the methods that are employed in this study.

1.7.2.1 Selection of participants

Selection and identification of research participants is a very important step which requires thoughtful consideration in the research design process. Decisions regarding the selection of participants are based on the research questions, theoretical perspectives and evidence informing the study.

According to Patton (2002:143), all types of sampling in qualitative research may be encompassed under the broad term of purposeful sampling. To select participants for this study, I used purposive sampling. Purposive sampling enables the researcher to

make conscious decisions about which individuals and which sites would best provide the desired information.

The participants were comprised of 20 students and five tutors. The selected participants would best and most broadly inform the research questions and enhance understanding of the phenomenon under study. According to Patton (2002), individuals, groups, and settings are considered for selection if they are information rich.

The students in their 2nd, 3rd and 4th year of studies via ODL mode at CES were selected because they would have experiences and perceptions about feedback in ODL. Assumably, the purposefully selected students were typical of the population from which they were drawn.

Five tutors, who are experienced in tutoring distance students, are selected for the focus group interview. The sample size would be deemed sufficient when additional interviews or focus group discussions do not result in identification of new concepts, an end point called data saturation. The criteria used in selecting documents were based on their purpose and relevance to the study.

1.7.2.2 Data collection

This study employs a decision-oriented approach as indicated in McMillan and Schumacher (2010:436) that focuses on “gathering information by making use of a variety of methods in order to make developmental decisions related to the research study”. Cohen, et al. (2011) indicate that data collected from a case study is in-depth and comprehensive and comes from an extensive variety of data sources.

Marshall and Rossman (2006) conclude that qualitative researchers classically rely on four methods for gathering information: (a) participating in the setting, (b) observing directly, (c) interviewing in depth, and (d) analysing documents and material culture. However, in this study, semi-structured individual interviews, a focus group interview and documents analysis are used as the tools for data collection.

The semi-structured individual interviews and focus group interview were audio-recorded. The questions are derived from the research questions and the literature study. Students are the participants in the semi-structured individual interviews while tutors are participants in the focus group interviews. The data collection is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

1.7.2.3 Data analysis

The goal of qualitative data analysis is to uncover emergent themes, patterns, concepts, insights, and understandings (Patton, 2002). However, the analysis also involves interpreting the data and the resulting themes to facilitate understanding of the phenomenon being studied. In the process of data analysis, it is important that the researcher always seek the most authentic, valid, true or worthy description and explanations among alternatives.

According to Doody, Slevin and Taggart (2012), qualitative data analysis practices identified as appropriate for analysing focus group data, include continual comparison analysis, classical content analysis, keywords-in-context, and discourse analysis.

Interpretive data analysis is used in this study. As interview transcripts are made or analysed, and marked-assignments assembled, the researcher endlessly evaluates the data; highlights certain points in the text or writes commentaries in the margins. These might classify what seem to be significant points, and can allow the researcher to note contradictions and inconsistencies, any common themes that seem to be emerging, references to related literature, comparisons and contrasts with other data. The data will then be organised, coded, categorised and presented in a systematic manner. The researcher can then identify themes while focusing on how themes are presented and the frequency of their occurrence (Robson, 2002).

The interpretive analysis would be conducted in three stages: deconstruction, interpretation, and reconstruction, as proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). These

stages occur after preparing the data for analysis, i.e., after transcription of the interviews or focus groups and verification of the transcripts with the recording.

Approaches to analysis depend on the nature of the enquiry and the status of the researcher's accounts on the study. However, the following approaches are used to analyse data – document analysis is applied where analysis is targeted towards providing “answers” about context of social programmes and policies, and effectiveness of their delivery and impact (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). Analysis of documents which are related to the assessment feedback can then be done.

According to Bowen (2009), document analysis is a systematic procedure which enables reviewing documents. During this process data are examined and interpreted in order to solicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The documents which were subjected to this process were assessment policies, marked assignments and other documents relevant to feedback.

Individual responses are placed in coding categories by tagging them to the appropriate themes and sub-themes in preparation for detailed analysis. In the final analysis of the data, the researcher uses theory to evaluate the data collected from the case study.

1.8 TRUSTWORTHINESS

For a study to be authentic, it must be trustworthy and valid. There are numerous elementary key elements to the study design that can be combined to enhance overall study quality or trustworthiness. As the researcher, I focused on four key elements to ensure trustworthiness in this study. These are credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability.

Credibility: According to Scheider, Elliot, Biondo-Wood, and Haber (2003), credibility can be referred to as the truth of the findings, as judged by participants and others within the discipline. I conducted a pilot interview that equipped me for the eventualities. I am an ODL practitioner with more than 14 years of experience in the

field of ODL. This experience is important in establishing confidence in the data. The questions posed to the participants were derived from the research questions derived from the literature review process, theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

Transferability: According to Grenda (2004), transferability is the strategy employed to attain applicability and to enhance transferability. As the researcher, I ensured transferability by describing the data collected in the study as accurately as possible and ensuring that full descriptions of the perceptions of the participants will also be made available.

Dependability: According to Banningan (2005), dependability can be referred to as the stability of data over time and conditions. Other independent researchers may use the same data to replicate the research findings of this study.

Confirmability: Confirmability requires one to show the way in which interpretations have been arrived at, via inquiry (Rafii, Oskouie & Nicravesh, 2004). Once the credibility, transferability and dependability are ensured, the findings, conclusions and recommendations are supported by or grounded in, the data and there is concordance between the researcher's interpretation and the actual evidence. The researcher can then analyse the data correctly as a way of ensuring confirmability.

As the researcher, I checked members, which is a crucial process for any qualitative study. I will include the voices of respondents in the analysis and interpretation of the data. According to Anney (2014), the purpose of doing member checks is to eliminate researcher bias when analysing and interpreting the results.

1.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The data collection process can only commence after the ethical clearance is granted by Unisa as per their Policy on Research Ethics. The rationale, among others, is to protect the rights and interest of the human participants.

According to David and Resnik (in Lanre-Abass, 2012:173-184) there are good reasons why it is important to adhere to ethical norms in research. Norms promote the aims of research, such as knowledge, truth, and avoidance of error. Secondly, since research frequently involves a great deal of collaboration and coordination among many different people, ethical principles endorse the values that are vital to collaborative work, such as trust, accountability, mutual respect and fairness.

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010:129), ethics are beliefs about what is wrong and right from a moral perspective. As the researcher, I attended to ethical measures pertaining to informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality, protection of privacy, protection from harm and honesty with professional colleagues.

Ethically, when selecting and involving participants, I ensured that full information about the purpose and use of participants' contributions is given. A particular ethical issue to consider is the handling of sensitive material such as marked and graded assignments. I handled these materials with the utmost confidentiality and anonymity.

Mouton (2001:238-239) states that "ethical issues arise from our interaction with people (other beings such as animals) and the environment, especially at the point where there is potential or actual conflict of interests". This cautions any researcher to ensure that their study conforms to generally accepted norms and values in order to eliminate, among others, biasness and conflict of interest. Adherence to the highest possible ethical and professional research code of conduct was maintained during this study.

In taking cognisance of the ethical principles that guide this study, participants who entered this study were informed volunteers; their integrity protected and the interests of any significant others related to the topic (students and tutors) explored and protected by anonymity.

Participants will be provided with an information sheet; they will be asked to sign a consent form. Their opinions will be treated with respect and confidentiality by myself;

ground rules will be set emphasising the need for participants to respect the views of and maintain the confidentiality of other focus group members; participants will be assured that there would be no detrimental repercussions to themselves.

1.10 CHAPTER DIVISION

This section sets out the structure of the study as follows.

Chapter 1 introduces the study, background, brief review of literature that guides the study, statement of the problem, aim and objectives, research methodology, division of chapters and a summary.

Chapter 2 provides an outline of the theoretical framework and of the context of the study reviewing collection of interrelated theories which will guide the research.

Chapter 3 carries out an extension of review of the relevant literature (conceptual framework) relating to the feedback delivery practices as well as students' and tutors' perceptions of feedback delivery.

Chapter 4 presents a detailed account of the research paradigm which deals with the research approach and research type. The research methods include procedures, tools and techniques to gather and analyse data. Ethical considerations regarding the use/participation of human beings in the study will also be discussed.

Chapter 5 presents the analysis and interpretation of the empirical research data. This includes the detailed discussions on the findings of the data collected.

Chapter 6 presents a summary of the study, provides recommendations, draws conclusions, and identifies areas for future research.

1.11 SUMMARY

This introductory chapter provides a general overview, background of the intended research study and a general orientation regarding the research under review. The rationale, problem statement, aims, research design and research methods and chapter division were set out. A brief literature review which informs this study revealed that feedback is intrinsic to the business of the teaching and learning process. It is indeed a fundamental requirement of ODL to facilitate high-quality feedback exchanges. However, a challenge for ODL is how to enhance the quality of feedback in this era of massification of education. In the next chapter, an outline of the theoretical and contextual frameworks of the study which guided the research is provided.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL AND CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORKS

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Recognising the importance of theory in research, Silverman (2005:107) comments that “without theory, research is impossibly narrow. Without research, theory is mere armchair contemplation”.

In line with the above view, the role of theory is applicable to the quality of this study in three key ways. Firstly, it influences the research design, including decisions about what and how to research and the development of research questions. Secondly, theory reinforces methodology and has implications for how data are analysed and interpreted. Thirdly, it is also crucial to develop ODL theory for its sustainability.

This chapter outlines the theoretical and contextual frameworks of the study. Furthermore, this chapter provides a combination of different factors and variables woven together in an effort to explain what theorists have reported about DE and ODL.

During the theoretical framing of this study, I was guided by the problem statement and research questions for which this study aims to find answers. To remind the reader, the main question as stated in section 1.5 of Chapter 1 is – what are the key academic, strategic and operational requirements for optimising assessment feedback in ODL?

The contextual framework helps me to locate the study within a wider context and to provide some common descriptors within which the differences between contexts can be demonstrated.

In a nutshell, this chapter serves as an epistemological guide that helps to interpret the empirical data of this study.

2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework is the theory that researchers choose to guide them in conducting their studies. It provides a particular perspective, or lens, through which to examine a topic. According to Hall (2010), the theoretical framework could also be referred to as a collection of interrelated concepts which guides the research. In this framework the issues related to feedback are elaborated upon. In addition, the theoretical framework provides support for the proposed study by presenting known theories, relationships among variables and setting limits or boundaries for the proposed study.

Based on the primary focus of this study, which is the assessment feedback in ODL, social constructivist perspective is embedded as part of the theoretical lens from which the entire study is approached. According to Amineh and Asl (2015), social constructivism is a theory of knowledge in sociology and communication theory that examines the knowledge and understandings of the world that are developed jointly by individuals. This theory assumes that understanding, significance and meaning are developed in coordination with other human beings. It would help to answer the question how academic staff members tutoring in ODL conceptualise and experienced written feedback in the broader context of what they do.

This section is of key importance for this study, as it provides theoretical framing. Without a theoretical framework, the structure and vision for a study is unclear, much like a house that cannot be constructed without a blueprint.

Garrison (2000) states that theoretical foundations of a field describe and inform practice. It similarly provides main means to guide upcoming developments. The power of ideas, as represented in our theories, effects practice directly by focusing perspective, revealing knowledge and suggesting alternatives. It is also noteworthy that theory is invaluable in guiding the complex practice of a rational process such as teaching and learning at a distance.

According to Bendassolli (2013:3), “the truth about a theoretical statement depends on a "correspondence theory" of truth: referents for these statements are found in objective facts available in the world”. In addition to the problem-solving capabilities, theories on assessment feedback help to provide a framework, by serving as the point of departure for the pursuit of a research problem. However, the key role of developing theory on assessment feedback is essential as it permits deeper understanding of data and highlights the meaning of empirical data.

According to Green (2014), a framework assists researchers in ensuring that research projects are coherent and focuses minds on what the research is trying to achieve. To this end, the purpose of this theoretical framework is to provide relevant theoretical perspectives on the feedback practices in ODL and to reflect on key issues and debates. The main purpose of the framework is to provide a theoretical foundation which will be used to interpret the empirical findings of the study.

Feedback is an important component of learning and teaching (Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Juwah, McFarlane-Dick, Mathew, Nicol, Ross & Smith, 2004; Hyatt, 2005; Weaver, 2006; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008; Hughes, 2010; Trenholm, et al. 2015). However, in studies showed, students have expressed disappointment with the usefulness of tutors’ feedback. Some students have even doubted the relevance of feedback in their studies (Hounsell, et al. 2008) and (Higgins, et al. 2001). Students expect feedback to serve as a guide to their learning (Duffield & Spencer, 2002). Student evaluations of their academic experience in higher institutions, consistently reveal across disciplines, institutions and countries, that feedback is a prominent source of dissatisfaction (Boud & Molloy, 2013).

The understanding of assessment feedback should not be considered as an endpoint, however. It can be used to create a platform to help obtain informed insight into the new trends and direction with regards to assessment and feedback.

Although this study focuses on assessment feedback, there are other aspects that are closely related to feedback in an educational context. For example, there exists a very close link between assessment and feedback. Just as learning and assessment is

intertwined, so is feedback and assessment. Undoubtedly, there is a definite relationship between feedback and learning because the reason for providing feedback is to stimulate and realise learning objectives.

There is increasing recognition that assessment is not simply a means of confirming that learning has occurred, but that it can also help reinforce the process of learning. According to Evans (2013), for this to be achieved, assessment has to be accompanied by appropriate and meaningful feedback. This indicates the link between assessment and feedback. Indeed, feedback has no effect in a vacuum and thus to be powerful in its effect, there has to be a learning context to which feedback must be addressed. In fact, assessment of an academic task precedes the feedback process.

Taras (2003:550) alludes that research on feedback shows a consensus that it “is not a freestanding piece of information, but that it forms part of a learning context where all the protagonists need to be engaged in the processes”.

In addition to the above view, Rae and Cochrane (2008) assert that to make feedback effective is not the duty of the tutor alone, but also the student and the institution. The implication is that the harnessing of effective feedback practices should be a collective activity. Both the student and tutors are the role-players in the feedback-learning cycle. The students are the recipients of the feedback. They are best suited to share experiences on assessment feedback. The tutors are crafters of feedback and thus ought to know the significance and purpose of feedback.

According to Garrison (2000) the challenge for ODL practitioners in the new century, is to offer an understanding of the chances and limitations of facilitating teaching and learning at a distance with a diversity of methods and technologies. In particular, there is a need to create a space for learning via feedback provisions, in which student and lecturer are jointly engaged.

Although some models for feedback are reported in various literature, many face challenges with implementation. The effectiveness of a model does not only rely on the designer but also depend on the skills and competencies of those who implement

it. Prior to implementation of a model discussions and consultations with the stakeholders are of paramount importance and necessity.

Shute (2008:153) writes that, “within this large body of feedback research, there are many conflicting findings and consistent patterns of results”. It creates curiosity to find out what these conflicting and consistent patterns of results in the findings are.

Feedback is a crucial element of teaching, learning and assessment. According to Bols and Wicklow) (2013) there is substantial evidence that staff and students are dissatisfied with feedback and as such there is growing impetus for change. Measures of higher education learning outcomes, particularly in ODL, has gained importance in response to a range of challenges and paradigm shifts. The theoretical framework is constituted from theoretical insights on DE, ODL and assessment, and these are subsequently presented in the next sections.

2.2.1 Distance education theory

According to Gokool-Ramdoos (2008), there have been attempts to develop theories on DE since the 1950s in order to explain underlying issues and challenges in DE. Such attempts led to the emergence of incomprehensive theories which failed to explicate all activities pertaining to DE. In table 2.1, a comparison of theoretical perspectives is provided.

Table 2.1: A comparison of theoretical perspectives (Gokool-Ramdoos, 2008:4)

Framework	Key concepts	Main focus	Influential theory
Peters - The industrial model	Industrial & post-industrial	Link societal principles and values	Cultural sociology
Moore -Transactional distance theory	Transactional distance - learner autonomy (dialogue, structure)	Perceived needs and interest of the adult learner	Independent study
Holmberg - Theory of teaching in DE	Learner autonomy, non-contiguous	Promote learning via personal and	Humanistic approach to education

	communication(Guided didactic conversation)	conversational methods	
Keegan -Theory of reintegration of the teaching and learning acts	Reintegration of teaching and learning policies	Recreate interpersonal components of face-to-face teaching	Framework of traditional pedagogy
Garrison (Shale, Bayton)-theory of communication and learner control	Educational transaction, learner control, communication	Facilitation of the educational transaction	Communication theory-Principles of andragogy

There are similarities and differences in the theories described in Table 2.1. However, the theory developed by Keegan (1993) seems to be most comprehensive. It reflects on organisational and transactional issues while having the student as a central figure.

Peters (1983) defines DE as a way of conveying knowledge, skills, and attitudes which is rationalised by the application of division of labour and organisational principles as well as by the extensive use of technical media, especially for the purpose of reproducing high quality teaching material, which makes it possible to instruct great number of students at the same time wherever they live. It is a developed technique of teaching and learning.

Moore's (1990) concept of transactional distance encompasses the distance that, he says, exists in all educational relationships. This distance is determined by the amount of interchange that occurs between the learner and the instructor, and the amount of structure that happens in the design of the course (Jonassen & Land, 2000). Greater transactional distance occurs when an educational program has more structure and less student-teacher dialogue, as might be found in some traditional DE courses.

Mclsaac and Gunawardena (1996:361) states that "education offers a continuum of transactions from less distant, where there is greater interaction and less structure, to more distant, where there may be less interaction and more structure". Furthermore, Mclsaac and Gunawardena (1996) argues that this continuum distorts the

differences between conventional and distance programs because of the variety of transactions that occur between teachers and learners in both settings. Thus, distance is not determined by geography but by the connection between dialogue and structure.

Holmberg (1981) defines DE as the kind of education which covers the various forms of study at all levels which are not under continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms on the same premises, but which, nevertheless, benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial organisation.

Holmberg (1995:160), after having studied the work of Bruner, Gagne, Ausubel and Baath (1968) in particular reaffirmed that "DE and thinking about DE are firmly based in general educational theory".

Keegan (1986) identifies three historical approaches to the development of a theory of DE. Theories of autonomy and independence from the 1960s and 1970s, argued by Wedemeyer (1977) and Moore (1973), reflect the essential component of the independence of the learner. Peters' (1971) work on a theory of industrialisation in the 1960s reflects the attempt to view the field of DE as an industrialised form of teaching and learning.

Recently a wider range of theoretical notions has provided a richer understanding of the learner at a distance (Oyarzun & Elizabeth, 2016). Four such concepts are transactional distance, interaction, learner control, and social presence.

Saba and Shearer (1994) carry the notion of transactional distance a step further by offering a system dynamics model to study the relationship between dialogue and structure in transactional distance. In their study, Saba and Shearer (1994) conclude that as learner control and dialogue increase, transactional distance decreases. It is not location that determines the effect of instruction, but the extent of transaction between learner and instructor. This concept has implications for traditional classrooms, as well as distant ones. The use of integrated telecommunication systems can permit a greater variety of transactions to occur, therefore improving dialogue to minimise transactional distance.

A second theoretical construct of recent interest to distance educators, and one that has received much attention in the theoretical literature, is that of interaction. Moore (1989) discusses three types of interaction essential in DE. Learner-instructor interaction is that component of his model that provides motivation, feedback, and dialogue between the teacher and student.

Learner-content interaction is the method by which students obtain intellectual information from the material. Learner-learner interaction is the exchange of information, ideas, and dialogue that occur between students about the course, whether this happens in a structured or non-structured manner. The concept of interaction is fundamental to the effectiveness of DE programmes as well as traditional ones.

Hillman, Willis and Gunawardena (1994) have taken the notion of interaction further and added a fourth element to the model learner-interface interaction. They note that the interaction between learner and technology, that distributes instruction, is a critical component of the model, which has been absent thus far in the literature. They suggest a new paradigm that contains understanding the use of the interface in all transactions. Learners who do not have the simple skills required to use a communication medium spend inordinate amounts of time learning to interact with the technology and have fewer time to learn the lesson.

A third theoretical idea getting attention in the DE literature, is that of unconventionality and learner control. Studies that examine locus of control (Altmann & Arambasich, 1982; Rotter, 1989) conclude that students who perceive that their academic accomplishment is an outcome of their own personal actions, have an inner locus of control and are more likely to persist in their education. Students with an external locus of control feel that their success, or lack of it, is due largely to events such as luck or fate outside their control. Thus, externals are more likely to become dropouts. Factors of control that influence dropout rates have been of concern to distance educators in search for criteria to forecast successful course completion.

Baynton (1992) developed a model to examine the concept of control, as it is defined by independence, competence, and support. She notes that control is more than independence. It requires striking a balance among three factors: a learner's independence (the opportunity to make choices), competence (ability and skill), and support (both human and material). Baynton's factor analysis endorses the importance of these three factors and suggests other factors that may affect the concept of control and which should be examined to portray accurately the complex collaboration between teacher and learner in the distance learning setting.

Finally, the social context in which distance learning takes place is emerging as a significant area for research. Theorists are examining how the social environment affects motivation, attitudes, teaching, and learning. There is a common view that technology is culturally neutral, and can be easily used in a diversity of settings. However, media, materials, and services are often inappropriately transferred without attention being paid to the social setting or to the local recipient culture (McIsaac, 1993).

Technology-based learning actions are often used without attention to the impact on the local social environment. Computer-mediated communication attempts to decrease patterns of discrimination by providing equality of social interaction among participants who may be anonymous in terms of gender, race, and physical features. However, there is evidence that the social equality factor may not extend, for example, to participants who are not good writers but who must communicate primarily in a text-based format (Gunawardena, 1993). It is particularly important to examine social factors in distance learning environments where the communication process is mediated and where social climates are created that are very different from traditional settings.

Feenberg and Bellman (1990) propose a social factor model to examine computer networking environments that create particular electronic social environments for students and collaborators working in groups.

One social factor particularly important to distance educators is social presence, the degree to which a person feels "socially present" in a mediated situation. The idea is that social presence is inherent in the medium itself and technologies offer participants varying degrees of "social presence" (Short, Williams & Christie, 1976). Hackman and Walker (1990), studying learners in an interactive television class, found that cues given to students such as inspiring gestures, smiles, and praise were social factors that improved both students' satisfaction and their perceptions of learning. Constructs such as social presence, immediacy, and intimacy are social factors that deserve further inquiry.

Keegan, (1993) has proposed the use of systems theory to assist as a foundation for systemic study of distance learning to contribute to the conceptual insights about the complexities of DE, and to provide the basis for developing methods for enhancing the teaching-learning environment. According Du Mont (2002), a systems approach looks both inward and outward, focusing on relationships and patterns of interaction between subsystems and their environments within the organisation.

Another view of Saba (1999:25) states that, "a systems approach is necessary to describe DE and define a set of prescriptive principles and rules for its effective use, as well as a set of criteria to determine its effectiveness". The next section provides a discussion on ODL theory

2.2.2 ODL theory

Pityana (2008) mentions that for the developing countries, ODL is a promising and practical strategy to address the challenge of widening access to education in general, and particularly increasing participation in higher education. It is increasingly being viewed as an educational delivery model which is cost-effective without sacrificing quality.

In line with the above, Calvert (2006) cites that ODL is considered as the most viable means for broadening educational access while improving the quality of education,

advocating peer-to-peer collaboration and giving the learners a greater sense of autonomy and responsibility for learning.

According to Pitsoe and Maila (2014:254) viewed from a sociological point of view, “ODL is an instrument of social transformation”. However, in my view, to bring about this transformation, there needs to be a systematic review of established standards to manage operations and academic tasks.

Open learning involves, but is not limited to: classroom teaching methods; approaches to interactive learning; formats in work-related education and training. D’Antoni (2009) views open learning an innovative movement in education that emerged in the 1970s and evolved into fields of practice and study. The term refers generally to activities that either enhance learning opportunities within formal education systems, or broaden learning opportunities beyond formal education systems.

ODL is a multi-dimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, educational, and communication distance between student and institution, student and academics, student and courseware and student and peers (UNISA, 2008:1). Furthermore, ODL combines two forms of education namely “open” and “distance” that focus on expanding access to learning.

Open education is a system of education which does not operate through traditional conventions which are restrictive in nature. According to Cant, Wiid and Machado (2013), “open” nature of distance learning refers to aspects such as policies of open admissions, and freedom of selection of what, when and where to learn. It is also call “open” because the student enrolment is open to more students than traditional educational institutions might permit.

Inferably, open education is a system in which both distance learning and open learning can be embedded. In conventional education there are restrictions on admissions, attendance, and period of time devoted to a course, among others. Furthermore, the “openness” in ODL implies also that learning could be taken anywhere and gives students the most freedom possible. Fe Villamejor-Mendoza

(2013) argues that openness is anchored in a perceived value added to open universities, e.g. a “swim or sink principle” where those who are interested in pursuing quality education are admitted to a degree program without an admission test requirement (open admission); but of course, the operation and delivery of content should be guided by policies, rules and regulations.

ODL is characterised by its philosophy and technology. Most of the ODL institutions aim to remove barriers to education, allowing students to study what they want, where they want and when they want. Thus, ODL is about increasing educational access and increasing educational choice. To confirm this, Conley (2010) states that ODL has the ability to increase equality and diversity in the higher education arena.

Nyatsanza and Mtezo (2013) state that ODL systems typically use technology to mediate learning, e.g. printed learning materials, audio cassettes, CD’s, memory sticks, kindles, mobile phones, radio and the World Wide Web (computer-based learning). ODL materials are based on the principles of learning theories of ODL, to create desirable conditions that will facilitate effective self-learning, i.e. knowing the objective, following the content step by step and involving the students actively in learning.

Although the theories on DE and ODL, have been derived from classical European or American models based on correspondence study, the influence of the information and communication technologies (ICTs) in ODL, is visible all over the world (Nyatsanza & Mtezo, 2013). While ICT presents some options to course delivery in ODL, such as geographical location, Dela Pena-Bandalaria (2007) identifies that a lack of knowledge and skills to use ICT and financial constraints, remain major considerations in deciding what ICT to use and in what combination.

Decisions on utilisation of technology in ODL influence not only the teaching and learning environments, but could lead to the development of new cultures, concepts, and understanding. To this end, ICT’s use in ODL is also re-shaping universities’ entire organisational structures. Westbrook (2001), for example, observed that the introduction of ICT in education has resulted in changes in four core areas: 1)

curriculum; 2) role of lecturer and students; 3) organisational structure; and 4) learning environment.

Although DE has been around for a long time, its form has evolved in a number of ways as was noted in section 2.3.1. According to Biao (2012), ODL was first known as “Distance Learning” before it became “ODL”; indeed, the concept “Distance Learning” emerged from the idea of DE. DE came from “Correspondence Education” which itself arose from “Non-formal Education”. Thus, ODL is a more recent phenomenon and its definition varies from institution to institution and is still evolving. Due to ever widening scope of methods and approaches offered, different ODL institutions vary in their nature of openness and implementation of DE.

2.2.3 Assessment theory

The theoretical foundation for this study is also based on socio-constructivist perspectives of an assessment model as presented by Rust, et al. (2005). It is a dynamic system which calls for understanding of assessment processes, criteria and standards on one hand. On the other hand, it requires active involvement and engagement in the learning process. The socio-constructivist assessment model is discussed in section 3.4 of Chapter 3.

According to Earl (2006), formal and informal assessments of learning have existed for centuries from the early Chinese civil service exams for entry into high public office, to public presentations by Aristotle’s students, and practical assessments for entrance to medieval guilds.

The term “assessment” refers to all instruments applied to measure learners’ achievements according to the study done by the World Bank (2008:3). The reviewers suggest that the plurality of theories for assessment may account for the diverse advice given to readers on the information they should collect in assessments (Crisp, Anderson, Orme & Lister, 2005:19).

Theory and assessment have two potential relationships. In the first relationship, a theory about assessment examines and seeks to explain its nature and processes or the social or political functions it performs. The critical social-constructionist perspective offers one thinkable theory about assessment (Crisp, et al. 2005).

In the second relationship, “a theory of or more precisely assessment suggests the possible existence of a systematic set of ideas that informs what information is collected, how to collect it and how to use it in forming understandings and recommendations” (Whittington, 2007:1).

Edgar (2012) argues that assessment practices need to reflect changes based on new understandings of learning theories, new curricula that are being developed, new knowledge and skills that are necessary for the 21st Century and the accountability requirements of systems and governments.

As we find ourselves in the 21st Century, which is referred to as the information age and characterised by rapid technological advancements, assessment practices are also challenged to conform to new understandings of learning theories, new curricula, new knowledge and skills.

Current learning theories attempt to capture all the parameters of human learning and provide information on how people learn. Most significantly, the emphasis is on the importance of learning with understanding (Bransford, Brown, Cocking, Donovan & Pellegrino, 2000). Thus, the curricula, learning and teaching approaches should emphasise understanding rather than memorisation. Furthermore, it is required to create opportunities for in-depth study to allow for a firm foundation of knowledge and conceptual development. Lastly, curricula must enhance student abilities to recognise and use meaningful patterns of information.

Similarly, assessment processes are supposed to allow students to show deep understanding of concepts rather than shallow knowledge and recall of facts. Assessment should be able to expose the quality of students’ understanding and thinking as well as precise content or processes. It also infers that appropriate

feedback through the learning and teaching process has to lead students to modify and refine their thinking.

Changing assessment practices is not only changing how assessment is viewed, but also changing how the learning is viewed. This demonstrates the interrelatedness between learning and assessment, where the emphasis is on learning to learn.

The question of whether there is a theory that underpins assessment is sometimes asked and debated without saying what the purpose of assessment is and thus some clarification is needed. Earl (2006) distinguishes the following types of assessments:

- **Assessment for learning** occurs when tutors use inferences about student progress to inform their teaching process (formative assessment).
- **Assessment as learning** occurs when students reflect on and monitor their progress to inform their future learning goals (formative assessment).
- **Assessment of learning** occurs when tutors use evidence to make judgements on student achievement against goals and standards (summative assessment).

This study embeds all three methods of assessment as indicated above. All these assessment methods involve feedback and relate to learning.

According to Sadler (1989:77), formative assessment is specifically intended to provide feedback on performance to improve and accelerate learning. The terms formative and summative refer to the purpose of assessment rather than the methods used (Rowntree, 1987; Brown & Knight, 1994), thus the collective data may be regarded as formative when it provides feedback on performance, but summative when the mark or grade contributes to the final outcome. Harlen and Johnson (2014) report that both formative and summative assessment enables the educator to assess the process of learning as well as the product of that process and offer feedback to students for their self-assessment and reflection.

I must reiterate that feedback is not about evaluating students' performance. Instead, it is about creating conditions enabling students to contrast and to compare their understandings against conflicting systems and, as a result, to construct their own feedback regarding the strategies which they apply (Lian, 2005). The next section presents the contextual framework.

2.3 CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

The research context is the associated entities surrounding the research and researcher. To this end, research needs an understanding of the context within which a particular phenomenon is being studied. Hence, this contextual framework highlights a general overview of trends in ODL, higher education in Namibia and the role of UNAM in ODL.

2.3.1 Overview of main trends in Open and Distance Learning

ODL is not confined to higher education, but its potential and possibilities are being explored and implemented by many schools and residential universities as well (Pityana, 2008).

Bozkurt, Akgun-Ozbek, Yilmazel, Erdogdu, Ucar, Guler, Sezgin, Karadeniz, Sen-Ersoy, Goksel-Canbek, Dincer, Ari and Aydin (2015) state that ODL is prone to continuous changes in line with technology and learning sciences. It is imperative for ODL providers to react to emergent changes in order to keep abreast and respond to new demands. Undoubtedly technology advancements have impacted on ODL environments and necessitated paradigm shifts. Therefore, online learning has not only become a prominent way of learning in ODL, but has become an integral part.

The paradigm shift has resulted in new types of educational delivery, new learning domains, new principles of learning, new learning processes and outcomes, new assessment strategies, new educational roles and entities.

Cant, et al. (2013) identify teacher contact and feedback, student support and services, alienation and isolation, lack of experience and demonstrations of practical applications as the challenges in ODL. Another challenge for ODL practitioners in the new century, could be to offer an understanding of the opportunities and limitations of facilitating teaching and learning at a distance, with a variety of methods and technologies. In particular, there is a need to create a space for learning via feedback provision in which student and lecturer are jointly engaged.

Signalling the significance of feedback, Simpson (2002), as quoted by Chetwynd and Dobbyn (2011), alludes that effective feedback on assignments is nowhere more important than in ODL, where comments on assignments may be the only learning communication between tutor and student. In the ODL mode, self-assessment questions, activities, exercises, projects and assignments are used as formative assessment features. However, this may differ from course to course. These assessment tasks are very important as they supposedly allow learning by doing and provide opportunities for trial and error.

Learning via distance mode has become a firmly embedded part of higher education over the last decades. The following discussion helps us to understand how DE has evolved over the years and how it has eventually become ODL, as it is commonly referred to today.

ODL has experienced dramatic growth over the years in national and international scenes. It has evolved from early correspondence education using primarily print based materials into a worldwide movement using various technologies. Moore and Kearsley (1996:19-20) present the historical developments of DE, using a classification of three broad generations of DE:

- Generation of correspondence study which entailed mainly printed and study guides sent by mail to students, which Holmberg (1995) traces back to 1720.
- Generation of DE which paved the way for the emergence of the first open universities such as the British Open University in 1969, Korea National Open

University in 1972 and Indira Ghandi National Open University in 1985. The open universities differed from the correspondence forms of education because they did not only rely on print media but included other media such as television broadcasts, radio and teleconferencing.

- Generation of DE that emerged in the 1990s were based on computer conferencing networks, computer-based multimedia and e-learning.

According to Rumble (2000), most universities in Africa were set up to address conventional students' needs, but later took on DE work, thus becoming dual mode institutions. The evolution of DE did not stop there. The evolution of DE is still continuing at some universities with the emergence of more dual mode universities.

Suffice it to say this evolution is the 'fourth generation of DE'. This prevalent on-going evolution necessitates changes in the teaching-learning process and the role of the lecturers (tutors) at the institutions of higher learning in general and in ODL in particular.

ODL, as popular and high in demand as it may be, also has some drawbacks. Jackson (2007), who is involved in research and trends in distance learning, has identified among others the following challenges in distance learning as alluded to in the following paragraphs.

Attri (2012) cites that in ODL, the absence of dialogue between teacher and student minimises and imposes a relatively high degree of barriers for learning goals to be met. He also alleges that DE fosters dependence rather than develops critical thinking and self-directed learning.

Sometimes there are unsubstantiated arguments made that distance learning is geared towards acquisition of skills which enable students to provide perfunctory answers based on readily apparent information contained in the study guides. In my view the very obvious drawback is that distance learning does not offer immediate feedback. In an old-fashioned classroom setting, a student's performance can be instantly assessed through questions and informal testing. With distance learning, a

student has to wait for feedback pending the instructor has reviewed their work and responded to it.

Beaudoin (1990) signals that distance learning is too prescriptive and creates dependency; others argue that it promotes autonomy and encourages self-directed approaches to learning. A more serious claim by Arinto (2016) is that of an absence of quality control in distance learning.

It is not wrong to subject ODL to criticism within the academic sphere. However, the auto-didactic mode of learning is the most common means for acquiring information. Given the effective instructional guides, appropriate texts, strong student support systems, and sound communication channels, several open learning universities have already proven that they can offer quality programmes that enjoy international acknowledgement. The Open University of United Kingdom (one the largest in the world), and UNISA in South Africa (largest in Africa), have already offered several programmes with great success.

Although technology plays a key role in the delivery of distance learning, it is recommendable that ODL providers remain focused on instructional outcomes, not the technology of delivery. The key to effective ODL is concentrating on the needs of the learners, the requirements of the content, and the limitations faced by the teachers, before choosing a delivery system.

The Regional ODL Policy Framework (2012) of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), reports that there are three dedicated ODL teaching universities, namely UNISA, Zimbabwe Open University and the Open University of Tanzania. Other countries such as Namibia, Botswana and Mozambique have distance units in their universities which are called dual mode universities.

UNISA is the only distance learning university in South Africa and as such, the only open distance learning institution with university status. In 1946, in terms of South African legislation, UNISA restructured its focus and developed, delivered and awarded its own degrees and diploma programmes via the correspondence mode.

Being the oldest distance education university to emerge on the African continent, University of South Africa (UNISA) has been offering correspondence courses since 1946. UNISA's success has, as a result, spurred the establishment of other ODL providers on the African continent.

There are few other established stand-alone ODL universities in Africa: Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), Open University of Tanzania (OUT), National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) and Open University of Mauritius. Other African countries like Botswana and Zambia are in the process of establishing ODL stand-alone universities. Developed and developing countries are adopting the ODL mode to meet the demands of students in the 21st century. According to Howell, Williams, and Lindsay (2003), many educational institutions of higher learning, especially in developed countries, are fluctuating from purely a campus-centred model of higher education to an ODL model, using information and communication technologies. More and more universities are therefore progressively offering some kind of distance learning courses.

From the above, it is clear that ODL is not a new phenomenon in Africa as it dates back to the era where distance education was stated to as correspondence education, home study, independent study, external studies, continuing education, learner-centred education, distance learning, flexible learning and distributed learning.

On the African continent where resources are scarce and higher education provisions are poor, ODL is viewed as a viable, cost-effective means of expanding provisions without costly outlay in infrastructure (Pityana, 2009). An emergent trend in Africa is the dual mode universities, offering programmes both through the conventional and ODL modes. Today, distance education has become a firmly embedded part of the higher education landscape, and is widely known as ODL.

2.3.2 Higher education in Namibia

Until 1990, the education system of Namibia was shaped by the policies located within the framework of apartheid ideologies. The independence of Namibia in 1990 heralded

a new era in education provision and philosophy, informed by the past historical inequities and driven by four goals, namely: access, equity, quality and democracy (Namibia Vision 2030, 2004). One of the basic functions of higher education in any country is to satisfy varying needs of skills development and training.

At the moment Namibia has a small higher education base consisting of two public tertiary institutions of general education, UNAM established in 1992, and the Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST), which was transformed from the Polytechnic of Namibia at the beginning of 2016. Namibia also has one private university which is the International University of Management (IUM) and Institute of Open Learning (IOL).

A number of smaller private colleges offer higher level qualifications in the country. The Institute of Open Learning (IOL) and Namibia College for Open Learning (.

Namibian institutions of higher education offer education at the levels of certificates, diplomas, undergraduate degrees, graduate degrees and post graduate degrees. The Namibian Training Authority (NTA) controls seven vocational centres. They offer a variety of courses for school leavers, including: plumbing, welding, electrical general, automotive electrical, bricklaying, cabinet making, technical drawing, dressmaking, hospitality, office management and automotive mechanics. Vocational students in Namibia are given government grants to support them in attending Vocational Training Centres.

There are a number of specialized further education institutions set up by government, the private sector and Non-Governmental Organisations. These include the College of Arts (COTA) in Windhoek; The University Centre for Studies in Namibia (TUCSIN) in Windhoek, Oshakati, Rundu and Rehoboth; the Namibia Maritime Fisheries Institute (NAMFI) in Walvis Bay; the Namibian Institute of Mining and Technology (NIMT) in Arandis and the Katutura Youth Enterprise Centre (KAYEC) in Windhoek, Ondangwa and Rundu.

The National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) has the legal mandate to coordinate higher education provisions in Namibia. In addition, according to the Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme (ETSIP, 2007) the Higher Education Act, establishing the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) serves as a central advisory and regulatory body that can interpret national development policies, priorities and goals in tertiary education and training.

Educational institutions in Namibia and their portfolios are accredited by the Namibia Qualifications Authority (NQA), which evaluates and accredits national institutions and degrees, as well as foreign qualifications of people who wish to demonstrate the national equivalence of their degrees earned abroad.

UNAM is an example of a dual mode university. A 'dual mode' means that the university caters for both conventional and off-campus students. Dual mode universities use conventional methods of teaching for residents on-campus and commuting students as well as integrating teaching at a distance to reach off-campus part-time and international students. Some of these universities allow on-campus students to take advantage of the courses developed for distance learning. These universities are historically established, dating from the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The UNAM Annual Report (UNAM, 2015b) states that starting with some 3000 students in 1992, UNAM's 2015 enrolment topped 20,000, including full-time, part-time, and DE students. Eight faculties cover the humanities and social sciences; education; law; agriculture; science; engineering; economics; and medical sciences, which saw the first 35 medical doctors graduate in 2016. There is furthermore the Namibia Business School, which is part of UNAM.

The UNAM website (2016) indicates that UNAM now has 12 campuses in the several regions of Namibia. Each of these regions have a variety of natural resources and UNAM's strategy has been to come up with ideas that could harness these resources to the fullest, and take its courses to people in those communities. The expansion of the university is connected to the policy of decentralization so that the University does

not function in a vacuum. It is one way of empowering society and thus reinforcing democratic principles of societal existence.

According to ETSIP (2007), the higher education system faces the challenges of adaptation and transformation into a vibrant network of national institutions capable of producing a highly skilled labour force – one that can drive Namibia into a knowledge-based economy. One such challenge is that students with rural schooling are at a noteworthy disadvantage as they transition to higher education, as Namibia's universities teach exclusively in English. Part of the contest is that many teachers are themselves not adequately equipped in English, so they cannot competently teach the students in English.

Harambee's Prosperity Plan for Sustainable National Development has been initiated in 2016 year by President Hage Geingob. Harambee Prosperity Plan (2016) reinforces and complements the overall national development goals. It is built on four pillars: effective governance, economic advancement, social progression, and infrastructure development. Higher education is covered specifically under the pillar of social progression. The plan's goal is to fill developmental gaps, as well as vocational training and ICT.

Much has been achieved with education in Namibia since independence. However, transformation of education is an ongoing process. To attest to that, the current Minister of Higher Education, Training and Innovation, Dr. Ithah Kandjii-Murangi states that higher education needs transformation through transparency. She urges that focus should be placed on key areas such as establishing effective communication between the ministry and the institutions of higher learning, innovation that targets employment creation and enhancement and expansion of vocational education training (New Era, 2015). In the next section the role of the UNAM in ODL is discussed.

2.3.3 The role of UNAM in Open and Distance Learning

UNAM consists of faculties and centres. One of its centres, the CES is responsible for the provision of programmes housed in the faculties to the university's off-campus

students, through the distance mode. The mission of CES is to provide accessible, quality higher education through ODL.

According to the UNAM prospectus (UNAM, 2015a), CES strives to become the leading ODL centre in Namibia and beyond, by enabling people to achieve their full potential through accessible, innovative and flexible learning.

The CES operates through three departments: Materials Development and Instructional Design, Student Support and Continuing Education. The collaboration between CES and faculties that house the programmes makes UNAM a dual-mode university. Bachelor of Education, Postgraduate Diploma in Education, Diploma in Adult Education and Bachelor of Nursing Science are just some of the few programmes that are being offered via distance mode.

The students who study via distance mode are provided with Study Guides, which are written by full-time academics. The full-time academics also provide face-to-face tutorials to distance students. The significance of Study Guides or study materials is their primary equivalence of the teaching that takes place on campus.

In each course, students are required to submit a specified number of assignments. After completion, the assignments are sent via mail or are hand-delivered to the Department of Student Support. The designated staff submit assignments to the tutor-markers, who assess (mark), grade and provide written feedback to the students. The assignments are then sent back to the students after recording of marks.

Course assessment comprises successful completion of two tutor-marked assignments and a three-hour examination. CES assessment guidelines indicate that the weight of the assessment is 40% for the assignment and 60% for the final examination. In addition to course materials, students are offered face-to-face learning opportunities in the form of group tutorial sessions or contact sessions, aimed at developing learning through peer interaction. Although attendance of the sessions is optional for many students, it is an enriching experience as it creates avenues for dialogue and feedback on assignments.

ODL essentially encompasses all technologies of learning, including postal distribution, video broadcast, CD-ROM, web-delivery in “which instruction and learning interactions may take place independent of the relatively physical locations of the individual participants” (Lundy, Harris, Igou & Zastrocky, 2002:1). However, at CES, print learning material is a foundational element of ODL programmes and the basis from which all other delivery systems might evolve. Numerous print formats are available including: textbooks, study guides, readers, workbooks, course syllabi, and case studies.

At CES, it is obligatory for the authors of instructional learning materials to provide feedback on all activities and tutors to provide feedback on the assignments. It provokes the following question: Is the provision of feedback to the distance students worth all the effort and time? How do the students perceive the written feedback given to them by tutors? Is it meaningful to the students? These are, amongst others, questions to find answers through the study.

ODL has encountered a complete paradigm shift which calls for learning support provision via technology and various other methods. The next Chapter deals with the theoretical framework of this study.

2.4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter provided the theoretical and contextual framework of the study. It is evident that the development of theory in ODL is crucial for its sustainability. Although attempts have been made to draw a distinction between DE and ODL, the conceptual confusion still exists.

Feedback design and delivery requires some theoretical ideas to be translated into practice in particular ways, if the potential benefits are to be gained. In making this translation, it is important to reflect on some theories and findings cited in various literature.

It is important that theory and practice of ODL be guided by a meta-framework on access, equity and social inclusion. Despite the technological advances in media and information technology, structural barriers prevent some students' access to ODL. Evidently, global trends and perspectives on ODL are necessitated by the increase in access to digital and online technologies, which also represents a new challenge for ODL provision. The next chapter continues to provide a literature review on feedback, with particular reference to feedback as a learning support tool in ODL.

CHAPTER 3

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: FEEDBACK AS A LEARNING SUPPORT TOOL IN ODL

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter forms part of the literature review for the study. It extends from the contextual and theoretical framework provided in Chapter Two and aims to survey literature on feedback in order to reveal the key concepts and ideas which form the basis for this study.

According to Miles and Huberman (1994:18), a conceptual framework is a visual or written product, one that “explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied, the key factors, concepts, or variables and the presumed relationships among them”.

To remind the reader, as mentioned in Chapter 1 (section 1.4), the primary aim of the study is to develop and propose an assessment model for optimising feedback in ODL. To this end, data obtained from this study would be used to propose an assessment model for optimising feedback in ODL. Thus, the purpose of this literature survey is aimed at gaining deeper insights and understanding pertaining to the concept of feedback.

Feedback is the cornerstone of learning and a key aspect in helping students to understand their progress and to becoming more effective independent learners (Orrell, 2006). However, there is much to be understood and unearthed pertaining to the concept of feedback, before it can be used in such a manner to stimulate learning. Hence, this chapter provides a shared understanding of assessment feedback through a review process of the relevant literature.

While there is much reference made around the significance of the concept of feedback, it is important to interrogate carefully what is meant by feedback and issues

pertaining to conceptual assumptions, assessment models, feedback in educational practice and types of feedback. The last section of this chapter deals with the strategies which may help to improve assessment feedback.

3.2 FEEDBACK: ASPECTS AND CHALLENGES

In this section, focus is placed on the feedback process, aspects and challenges. Developing a shared understanding of the feedback process for student and tutor is not without difficulty given that each have different positions, roles, and aims and the scope for narrowing variation in assumptions may be limited (Carless, 2006).

To this end, Beaumont, O'Doherty and Shannon (2011) note the inconsistency of feedback practice among lecturers, and Careless, Salter, Yang, and Lam (2011:406) comment that "only a minority of lecturers are likely to have the mind-set, skills and motivation to prioritize the development of self-regulative activities congruent with sustainable feedback".

From the student perspective, encouraging students to be "conscientious consumers" (Higgins, et al. 2002), who value the feedback process and demonstrate an ability to critique their own work is not straightforward, and it may be difficult to engage passive students in self-managing (Rae & Cochrane, 2008).

Having considered the effort and time spent on constructing feedback, the study done by Price, et al. (2010) is titled "Feedback: all that effort, but what is its effect?" The findings of this study describe the perspectives of students and staff on the effectiveness of feedback and examine particular factors that participants identified as pertinent to effectiveness. This study is very much related to my study, in the sense that it also aims to bring the perspectives and experiences of both tutors and students into focus with regards to feedback practices. It is therefore important to share some findings as cited by Price, et al. (2010:282) on the student and staffs' views on feedback.

Students regard feedback as very important for their studies. However, as mentioned in prior studies, they encounter problems such as illegible handwritings, negative tone of feedback, and vague or unclear feedback. Staff recognise the role of feedback in learning and concur that it contributes to students' learning outcomes. However, they are discontented with the lack of student engagement with the feedback. Some are simply not sure whether students follow the feedback given.

It is evident that the condition set above by the staff is that the feedback might contribute to student learning, provided students engage with feedback.

Another study, which is a doctoral thesis, conducted by Mbukusa (2009) at CES echoes similar findings with regards to the provision of feedback. The following excerpt is from Mbukusa (2009:269), when he interviewed a distance student who studied at CES.

Interviewer: *Do you get feedback from your tutors?*

Respondent: *Yes, in some cases but not always.*

Interviewer: *Do you understand the feedback from your tutors? Does feedback help?*

Respondent: *Feedback comes so late, sometimes after the exams have already been written. I always use my posting box. If you are lucky that you have the feedback, you might find yourself stranded as well. It is difficult to read the comments in the margin of the assignment. Some tutors seem to have difficulties with writing. They do not know how to write words that help students. What do you do with words like 'good', 'not clear' or 'what is this?' These words do not help. As students we learn nothing from such interaction with our tutors. They forget that they are not with us. They are far away from us.*

Considering assertions made by students and staff above, the element of blame-shifting between students and tutors comes to the fore. Thus, feedback practice is intriguing and perplexing, as it is sometimes extremely difficult to get to the bottom of the underlying challenges and issues. As is evident from the above assertions, students and staff concur on the need and importance of feedback in the learning-

teaching process. However, interestingly, both students and staff have different complaints about feedback.

The above challenges raised by the students render the following statement authentic: “Although students can, with difficulty, escape from the effects of poor teaching, they cannot escape the effects of poor assessment” (Boud, 1995:35). Poor assessment is tantamount to poor feedback practice.

Chetwynd and Dobbyn (2011) conducted a study to develop a taxonomy of feedback and report on the results of a survey of tutors’ attitudes to, and strategies for, providing feedback on a very large level one module, at the Open University in the United Kingdom. The authors cite some aspects or views from the tutors regarding tutor-marked assignments as mentioned below:

- Assignments are infrequent and count substantially to the final exams. In fact the tutor-marked assignments become “high stake assessments”.
- There is a lack of monitoring mechanisms on how effective the feedback given to the students is.
- There is a concern regarding the monitoring of the impact of feedback. Who gauges whether a student has understood, interpreted, acted on or even read the feedback supplied?
- The students hardly contact tutors for clarification because of among others, pressure to carry on with the next assignment. Retrospective feedback given after marks have been allocated will not be helpful to students as the students will not use it to improve learning.

The above-mentioned issues should not only be viewed as concerns but are issues, which if properly addressed, could result in improved learning outcomes. Krause, Hartley, James and McInnis, (2005) conducted a review of assessment studies in Australian universities and reported on-going student discontent over assessment feedback for at least a decade. In support of this view, many studies indicate that students find feedback difficult to understand and that staff often find it difficult to

explain what they mean (Chanock, 2000; Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2001; MacLellan, 2001). MacDonald, Burke and Stewart (2006) also reveal that there is a gap in the understanding of feedback and differing expectations of feedback between academics and students.

Adcroft (2011) suggests the possible reasons for these differences in expectations to be the behaviour of the students, the behaviour of the academics and the environment in which they interact.

Poor feedback practice has been identified as another challenge. According to Vardi (2009), an example of poor feedback practice is when it is too brief, not specific enough, involves arbitrary judgements about standards and uses terms that may be vague, cryptic, sarcastic and lacking in praise. Similarly, Burke (2009:42) proposes that poor practice is the primary cause of poor outcomes and that is when feedback is too “brief, too difficult to decipher or to understand”.

Another challenge raised by Burke and Pieterick (2010) is the fact that feedback provision is time-consuming and that there is disparate knowledge on the practice and effectiveness of written feedback. Ansari (2002) cites that a large number of students in DE, pose insurmountable difficulties in providing feedback to students through tutor comments on assignments. Yet, many ODL providers make assignments compulsory in selected programmes, in order to ensure necessary assessment feedback is provided to students.

Higher education institutions in the United Kingdom (UK) are generally under pressure to provide timely feedback to students (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004a; Lunt & Curran, 2009). Increasing student numbers, a shift towards modularisation and semesterisation, and decreasing staff to student ratios, have been identified as reasons why the quality of feedback is under threat (Higgins, et al. 2002; Gibbs & Simpson, 2004a; Hounsell, et al. 2008).

The result of the 2008 National Student Survey (NSS) done in the UK highlights that feedback on assessments is a key concern for the students. The National Student

Survey (NSS) is an initiative of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) that is designed at providing students with a chance to make their views on their higher education experience count at a national level.

From the survey mentioned above, it is deducible that irrespective of institution, background or course, students are considerably less satisfied about the feedback that they receive than their overall learning experience. This follows related levels of discontentment that have arisen in the above-mentioned survey since it started in 2005, indicating that the issue is mutually pervasive and continuous.

Nicol (2010 b) states that student surveys through the world highlight that students are unhappy with the feedback they get on their assignments and many institutions have been putting plans in place to address this issue. He further reasons that the many varied expressions of dissatisfaction with written feedback, both from students and tutors, are all symptoms of impoverished dialogue.

Further on student surveys, Crook, Mauchline, Maw, Lawson, Drinkwater, Lundqvist, Orsmond, Gomez and Park (2012) conclude that the National Student Survey Questionnaire data from staff and students at the University of Reading, confirm the core issues came across with feedback, namely problems of time efficiency for staff, lack of engagement by students with feedback and matters with the timeliness and quality of feedback received.

According to Glover and Brown (2006) at both Sheffield Hallam University and the Open University in the UK, the absence of shared understanding of assessment criteria and feedback among students and the assignment author(s) was found to be mainly pertinent when the discursive content of an assignment was high or when the central tasks involved information selection. In these cases the feedback was strongly omissions-focused. The lack of errors-feedback recommends that the assessment was a pitiable measure of students' knowledge and understanding.

A concern raised by Nicol (2010 a), is that mass higher education limits dialogue. As a result the written feedback, which is essentially a one-way communication, often has

to carry almost all the burden of tutor-student interaction. His study suggests ways in which the nature and quality of feedback dialogue can be enhanced when student numbers are large without necessarily increasing demands on academic staff. It concludes with a conceptual discussion of the merits of taking a dialogical approach when designing feedback.

Evidently, feedback practice cannot be improved or considered in isolation. As Sadler (1989) mentions, without providing strategies for improving learning and without searching for and monitoring how performance information subsequently influences the learner, feedback may simply be viewed as “dangling data”. This simply dictates that prerequisites or priorities should be in place before one might think of feedback practice. For example, as Boud and Molloy (2013) remark, it is necessary to reposition feedback as a fundamental part of curriculum design, assessment practice, teaching and learning.

It is my conviction that there is a mismatch of concerns between tutors and learners with regards to feedback practices. For example, some students do not react on the feedback that they are given, probably because they do not understand (language used) or may be too inexperienced to make sense of the feedback. The tutors could also be inexperienced in providing effective and quality feedback and may have an inappropriate understanding of the nature of learning. Who is at fault or where does the problem lie?

In the next section some assumptions regarding feedback are discussed.

3.3 ASSUMPTIONS OF FEEDBACK

According to The American Heritage Stedman's Medical Dictionary (2002), feedback refers to the “return of a portion of the output of a process or system to the input, especially when used to maintain performance or to control a system”. This explanation of feedback may seem to be straightforward enough, but conceptual confusion is continually created with the advent of new terminology (i.e. distance

learning, distributed learning, open learning, e-learning, flexible learning, learning portal and virtual classrooms).

There are a number of key assumptions about feedback as reported in literature which I deem relevant to this study:

- Feedback is not simply a matter of *linear communication*, but involves complex “issues of emotion, identity, power, authority, subjectivity and discourse” (Higgins, et al. 2001: 272).

The above assumptions on feedback call for a dialogue on feedback, particularly between staff are a result from the above assumption. These views place the credibility and reliability of given feedback into question. It further alerts DE practitioners, particularly the staff that are grading and marking and providing feedback to students, to bear in mind these issues, which if not taken into consideration might have a negative effect on the feedback given.

- “Staff and students are active participants (partners) in an interactive feedback process, which supports students in seeking to construct meanings based upon their own experience and beliefs, formulate their own learning goals and engage in actions to achieve those goals in a continuous reflexive process” (Price, Karen, Handley & Millar, 2011:883).

This assumption in a way overlaps with the first assumption as it makes reference to the working relationship between students and staff with regards to feedback. It implies also on the student-centeredness of feedback and expectation from students to engage with the feedback. Ideally, feedback should be conceptualised from students, tutors and teaching-learning processes. However, written feedback to students in itself serves as a learning-teaching tool which is supposed to compel students on a self-correcting or reflexive process when engaging with it.

- Assessment and feedback are culturally and contextually situated.

Firstly one has to assess before feedback is provided on a given learning task. Hence, effective feedback should be viewed as a multi-faceted and ongoing process that is relational and situated in a socio-cultural context.

The inextricable link between assessment and feedback is evident in the following definition of assessment given by (Black & William, 1998:22): “Assessment refers to those activities undertaken by teachers, and by their students in assessing themselves, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged”. It is suffice to state that feedback is specific information (written or oral) that a student receives as a result of assessment.

- “Feedback is the interface between teachers’ pedagogical goals, students’ learning needs, and institutional and governmental education policies, which structure and regulate practices and procedures” (Bailey & Garner, 2010:188).

The challenge for the above assumption is: how to effect the proposed linkage of feedback with assessment strategies, curriculum design, and teaching-learning processes? Another challenge is lack of a clear demarcation of roles and purposes of each of these components and how they interlink with each other. The absence of clear distinctive directives creates not only tension, but also confusion in tutors’ roles with regard to the support and facilitation of students’ learning and assessment of written work.

- Gamlem and Smith (2013:155) cite that the studies done by “researchers point out that feedback leads to learning gains only when it includes guidance about how to improve; when students have opportunities to apply the feedback; understand how to use it; and are willing to dedicate effort”.

Feedback is conceptualised as information provided by an external agent regarding some aspect(s) of the student’s task performance, intended to modify the learner’s cognition, motivation and/or behaviour (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Shute, 2008).

For a considerable period of time, feedback has been viewed and accepted as information transmitted from the tutor to the student. The recent view proposed by Boud and Molly (2013) is that feedback should be bilateral and that multilateral information should make students active learners, seeking their own judgements by consulting various other sources. While concurring with the above view, I foresee challenges not only with what tutors do with feedback during assessment interactions, but also how the courses and assignments are designed and structured in ODL.

It is suffice to argue that feedback is a dialogue. Dialogue is more than conversation or an exchange of ideas, it involves relationships in which participants think and reason together (Gravett & Petersen, 2002). Being regarded as a dialogue, feedback can help facilitate the self-reflective process through which students can become actively involved in their learning and, as a consequence, advance their learning (Marriott, 2009). Thus, feedback is part of the overall dialogue or interaction between tutor and student, not a one-way communication.

Another similar viewpoint is that feedback can be conceptualised as a transmission process in which teachers 'transmit' (feedback) communications to students about the strengths and weaknesses of their work, so that they can use this information to make subsequent improvements (Nicol & McFarlane-Dick, 2006). However, there is a call to "move beyond a view of feedback as a transmission and acknowledge the active role that students must play in such processes" (Nicol, Thomson & Breslin, 2014:103).

As mentioned above, I concur that feedback can be viewed as a transmission process. The feedback is normally transmitted from the tutor to the student. However, the problem expressed by Nicol and McFarlane-Dick (2006) regarding the transmission process is the existence of a false assumption that such feedback compels the students to embark upon corrective action. Their study provides evidence that students find feedback difficult, do not understand it and do not act on it. Another concern is that feedback is tutor-centred and thus might not help and prepare students for the challenges after studies. The deliberations about feedback as a transmission process infer feedback is a dialogue.

Feedback is also viewed as an instructional practice deemed to enhance both students' skills and motivation (Crooks, 1988; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Bruning & Horn, 2000; Brown, 2004; Kellogg & Whiteford, 2009). Being regarded as a practice, feedback is supposed to consist of strategies and rules that could be applied in various situations. In addition, feedback practices must spell out procedures and processes which need to be followed.

It is imperative to draft and implement obligations for the staff to deliver effective feedback and the responsibilities for students to give, engage with, and use the range of feedback they receive.

While there are different ways in which feedback may be conceptualised as evident above, numerous researchers reason that feedback is under-conceptualised in extant higher education literature, which has the consequence that it is difficult to design effective feedback practices and to evaluate their effectiveness (Sadler, 1998; Yorke, 2003).

Nicol and McFarlane-Dick (2006) address wider feedback practices that can support students build self-assessment and self-regulation abilities in relation to their thinking, motivation and behaviour during the learning process. This viewpoint moves the feedback process away from being a transmission of information from teacher to student, towards an on-going discussion to help build students' knowledge, skills, confidence and perception about themselves as learners.

I advocate that feedback should be reconceptualised as a process or system, rather than an event, which is a more fundamental response to the impetus for change in assessment feedback. This may create a space to address the time-dependent nature of feedback activities. Having explained some conceptual issues on feedback, the next section continues to deliberate on the concept of feedback, with specific reference to the nature of feedback.

On the question of what feedback might constitute, the following could be answered: written comments on assessments; oral feedback in lectures, seminars, and tutorials;

electronic feedback; sample answers; end of module examinations/tests, and generic feedback.

Cognisance must be taken of the core aspect of feedback which is a two-way flow. This is inherent to all interactions, whether human-to-human, human-to-machine, or machine-to-machine. For example in an organisational context, feedback is the information sent to an entity (individual or a group) about its prior behaviour so that the entity may adjust its current and future behaviour to achieve the desired result.

It emerged that a variable to be considered in the feedback process, is how to communicate feedback to the recipient. According to Brinko (1993), feedback may be verbal, written, statistical, graphical, or behavioural in the way in which it is conveyed; it can be unstructured or structured in nature. Since feedback may take a variety of forms as indicated above, some forms may be more amendable than others to feedback recipients. Deducing the nature of feedback conveyed can affect its efficiency.

Poulos and Mahony (2008) identify three key dimensions of feedback: perceptions of feedback, impact of feedback, and the credibility of feedback. These areas outline the importance of this significant aspect of learning and thus highlight issues that will also be investigated in this study, such as how students view and experience feedback, whether the intended purposes of feedback are realised or not and the issue of validity and accuracy of feedback.

When feedback is corrective in nature and explains where and why students have made mistakes, then significant increases in student learning occur (Walberg, 1999). Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum and Wolfersberger (2010) argue that, inter alia, for feedback to be meaningful it must engage the student cognitively with the correction process.

From the above deliberations, we can infer that the precise nature of feedback given to students depends on a number of variables. These are: the discipline being studied;

the nature of learning activities; the intended learning outcomes; the resources; the assessment methods; the number of students; and the need of individual students.

Regardless of its purpose and nature, feedback is a response to students' work and it is frequently given with an expectation of a reply from the student. The expectations could be in terms of enlarged motivation to learn, correction of errors, greater understanding of the topic, greater academic or pedagogic literacy, developing an understanding of the subject matter or improvement in learning and performance. The conceptual assumptions call for a mind-set change or paradigm shift about the teaching and learning process.

3.4 OVERVIEW ON MODELS OF ASSESSMENT FEEDBACK

In this section, an overview and critical insight on a social constructivist assessment process model and a model of feedback to enhance learning, structural and procedural elements to assessment feedback are provided. The theoretical and conceptual frameworks of this study are the anchors to the following models and elements as they form basis for the study.

3.4.1 Social constructivist assessment model

Despite acknowledgement given that the social constructivist assessment is important in its effect on student learning, Rust, Donovan and Price (2005) report that some problems are encountered with its implementation. Predicatively, the success of this model could be attributed to the practical examples given as how to implement it.

This model has supporting evidence from the research literature for its potential effectiveness, and practical ways of implementation are also provided (Rust, et al. 2005). Another significance of this model is that there are various phases of the model in the two parallel ongoing cycles, one for staff and the other for students.as indicated in Figure 3.1. Social constructivists view tutor and student not as distinct, but as two halves of one dynamic system, each informing the other at ideally.at every stage of

the assessment process, with common understanding being shaped and constantly evolving within a community of practice (Rust, et al. 2005). The reason why students and tutors should jointly be engaged with every stage of the assessment process is for them to acquire common understanding of the requirements.

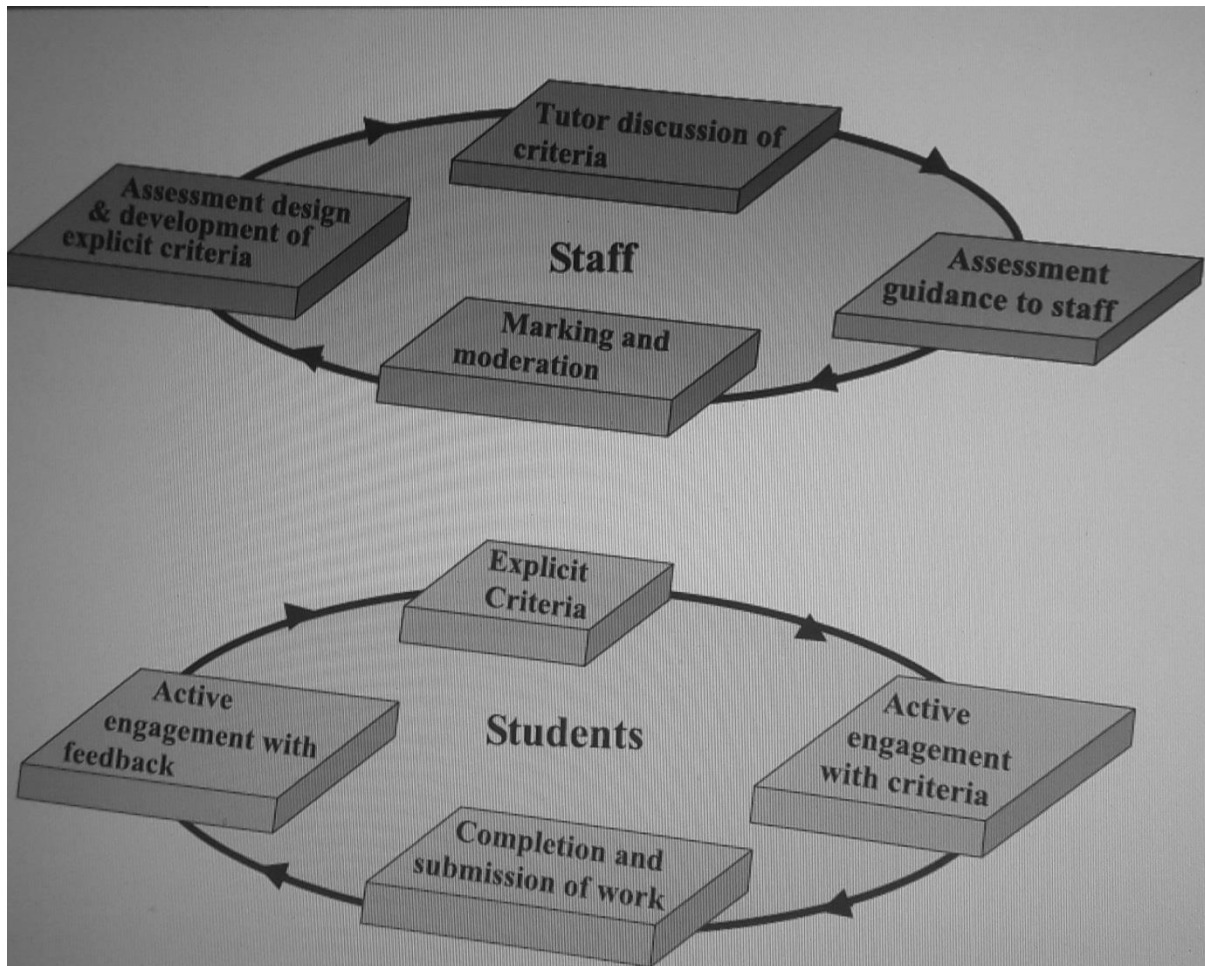


Figure 3.1: Social constructivist assessment model (Rust, et al. 2005)

The model in Figure 3.1 focuses on developing students' understanding of assessment criteria, the assessment process and assessment standards. It requires the students to be actively engaged in every stage of the assessment process. That would allow them to understand the requirements of the process, criteria and standards being applied, and should subsequently produce better work.

One of the stages of a social constructivist assessment process model needs some kind of active engagement with the criteria by both tutors and students. Rust, et al.

(2005) have indicated that students' engagement in marking and use of criteria in marking peer students' work has resulted in students' subsequent work.

Instructional models based on the social constructivist perspective, stress the need for collaboration amongst learners and practitioners. However, with the creation of marking criteria, it does not always seem logical to involve students in this task. As Orsmond, et al. (2002) highlight, students may be less able to discriminate between individual marking criteria which they have constructed, compared to marking criteria that has been provided.

Boud and Molly (2013:698) advocate for the acceptance of the students' role as "constructors of own understanding" during the feedback process. These arguments border on socio-constructivism. As could be seen in the figure above, engaging with criteria and feedback, and creating criteria are the key elements of this model.

According to Bansilal, James and Naidoo (2010), the essential strategies that can be used to improve quality of education are for tutors to use effective assessment feedback and to empower learners to voice their experiences of this feedback.

A social constructivist approach to feedback requires that the students actively engage with the feedback. Sadler (1989) puts it very explicitly, when he states that students should be trained in how to interpret feedback, how to make connections between the feedback and the characteristics of the work they produce, and how they can improve their work in the future. "It cannot simply be assumed that when students are 'given feedback' they will know what to do with it" (Sadler, 1989:78).

A critique of this model is that it has failed in practical implementation to demonstrate any tangible improvement in terms of students' marks or assessors' confidence in the efficacy of the intervention to improve performance (Price, et al. 2007). A vital prerequisite to creating a constructivist assessment process – that the course be 'constructively aligned' (Biggs, 1999) – should be taken notice of. This simply means that achieving a constructively aligned course is to have clear and explicit learning outcomes. In the next section the second model of feedback is presented.

3.4.2 Model of feedback to enhance learning

This model by Hattie and Timperley (2007) in Figure 3.2 presents the power of feedback to improve its effectiveness and enhance the effect it has on students. This can be achieved if both the assessors and students use introspection to understand where they are heading with regards to feedback, how to get there and what comes next.

Purpose: To reduce discrepancies between current understandings/performance and a desired goal.				
The discrepancy can be reduced by: Students: Increased effort or employment of more effective strategies OR Abandoning, blurring, or lowering the goals.				
Effective feedback answers three questions: <table border="0"><tr><td>Where am I going? (the goals)</td><td>Feed up</td></tr><tr><td>How am I going?</td><td>Feed back</td></tr></table>	Where am I going? (the goals)	Feed up	How am I going?	Feed back
Where am I going? (the goals)	Feed up			
How am I going?	Feed back			

Figure 3.2: Model of feedback to enhance learning (adapted from Hattie & Timperley, 2007)

This model of feedback to enhance learning (Figure 3.2) commences by indicating that there must be a clear purpose or goal for the provision of feedback, which must be understood by both the students and tutors. Next are the distinctive roles which both the students and tutors have to play towards achieving the desired goals. According to this model, feedback operates at task level, process level, self-regulation level and self-level. The concepts of “feed up”; “feedback” and “feed forward” are important considerations in this model.

Each feedback question works at four levels:

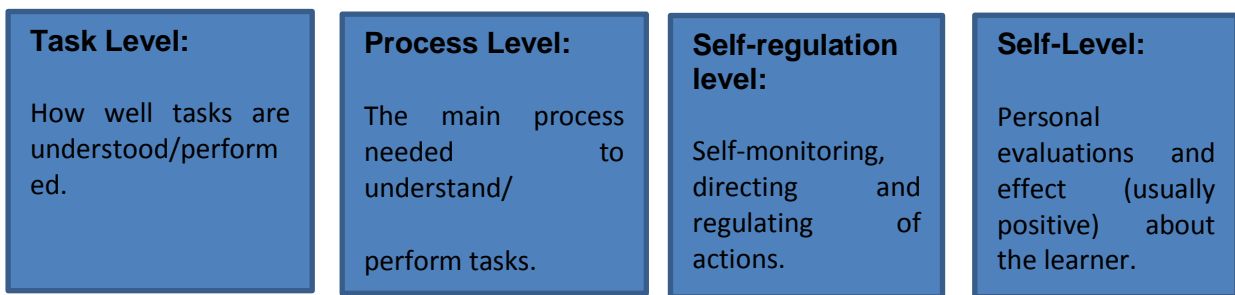


Figure 3.3 Four levels feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007)

Hattie and Timperley (2007) claim that the four levels at which feedback is directed influence its effectiveness.

At the task level, the question to ask is whether an academic task is correct or incorrect. At this level, room is created for directions, guidance and provision of correct (feedback) information. The creation or completion of the end product, takes place at the process level. What is required at this level is the processing of information and understanding which helps to complete the task. At the self-regulation level, students are accorded the autonomy and self-evaluation in the assessment feedback process. Such feedback can have a major influence on self-efficacy, self-regulatory proficiencies, and self-beliefs about students as learners. The self-level refers to the self-introspection of the student.

Nicol and McFarlane-Dick (2006) address broader feedback practices that can support students build self-assessment and self-regulation abilities.in relation to their thinking, motivation and behaviour during the learning process. This perspective moves the feedback process away from being a transmission of information from teacher to student, towards an on-going dialogue to help build students' knowledge, skills, confidence and perception about themselves as learners.

In the first instance, the relationship between feedback and a goal-related challenge is complex. In the second instance, if feedback does not lead to reducing the discrepancy between current understandings and goals, students are likely to close the gap by overstating their present status or claiming numerous attributions that

reduce effort and engagement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Furthermore, Hattie and Timperley (2007:87) state that, “feedback cannot lead to a reduction in this discrepancy if the goal is poorly defined, because the gap between current learning and intended learning is unlikely to be sufficiently clear for students to see a need to reduce it”. Structural and procedural elements applied in the assessment feedback process are discussed in the next section.

3.4.3 Structural and procedural elements to assessment feedback

The reason to exposition elements of assessment feedback is because they form part of a conceptual framework emphasising specific areas of interest: in particular, the structural influences embedded in the context, the interaction between students and assessors, and the temporal dimension through which student and staff experiences are shaped, by succeeding assessment/feedback episodes.

Only the essential elements including structural and procedural elements to assessment/feedback methods are depicted in Figure 3.4.

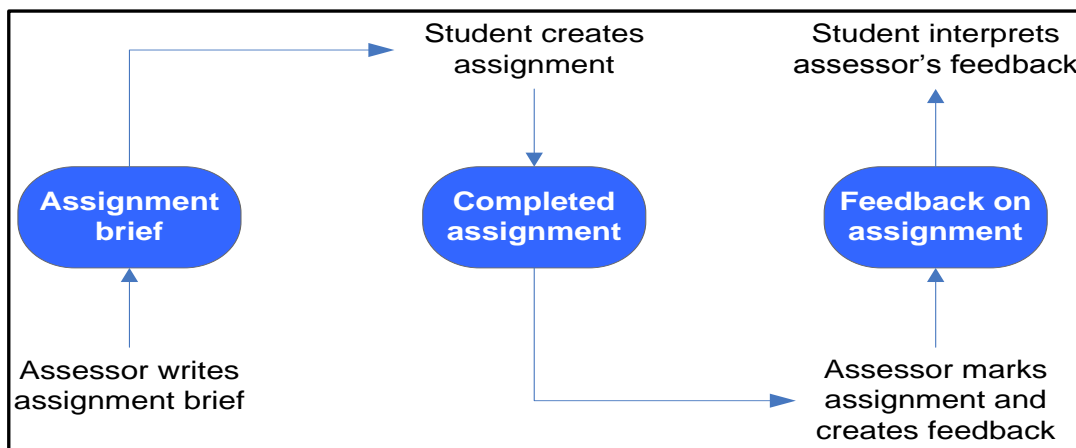


Figure 3.4: Interaction between student(s) and staff in assessment/feedback methods (Handley, et al. 2007)

Assignment briefs, completed assignments and feedback on assignments represent most central processes to feedback methods as indicated in Figure 3.3. However, there are different types of feedback and variations and options on how to provide feedback.

Figure 3.5 builds on Figure 3.4 and develops the framework by including structural and procedural elements of feedback. It reflects a more accurate picture because it includes a temporal dimension.

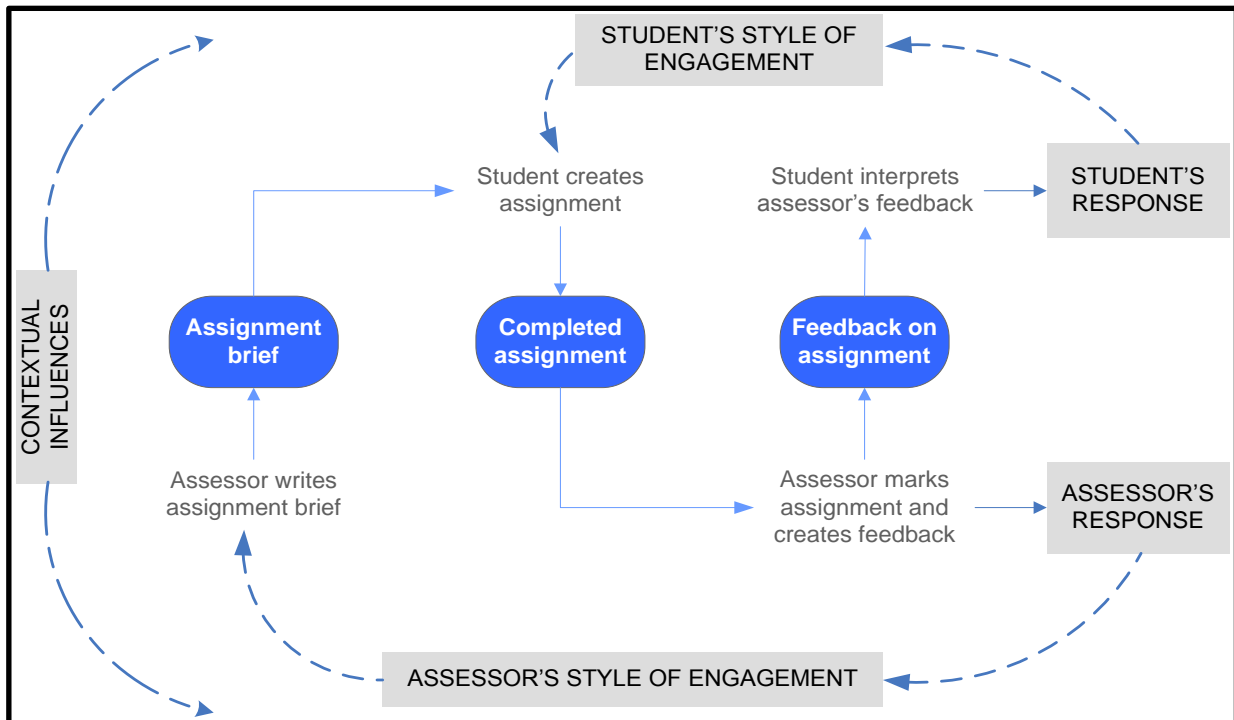


Figure 3.5: Contextual and temporal aspects of assessment/feedback methods (Handley, et al. 2007)

In Figure 3.5, the framework illustrates structural and procedural elements to assessment/feedback methods. In most ODL institutions, students are given an assignment brief or tutorial letter. It contains the necessary information such as marking guidelines, weighting of assessment and guidelines that assist students in completing the given assessment task. The student's engagement and response to an assignment, influences the end product (completed assignment), while the assessor's style of engagement and response influences the content of the assignment brief. Contextual factors which influence the setting of assignments are institutional policies, technology, academic discipline, instructional traditions and socio-cultural norms.

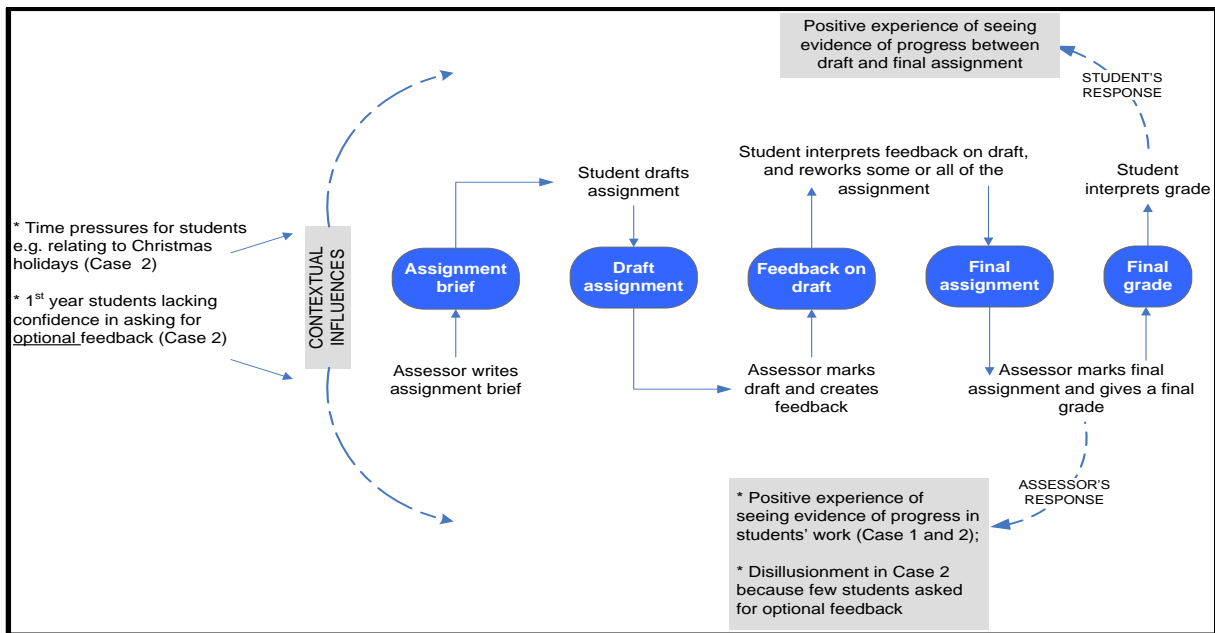


Figure 3.6 Staff and student experiences of the draft-plus-rework method (Handley, et al. 2007)

Figure 3.6 presents the students efforts in seeking and receiving feedback. The strategy of giving feedback on drafts may allow students to reflect, engage with the feedback, redo and submit improved academic tasks. However, the time pressure could be a detrimental factor.

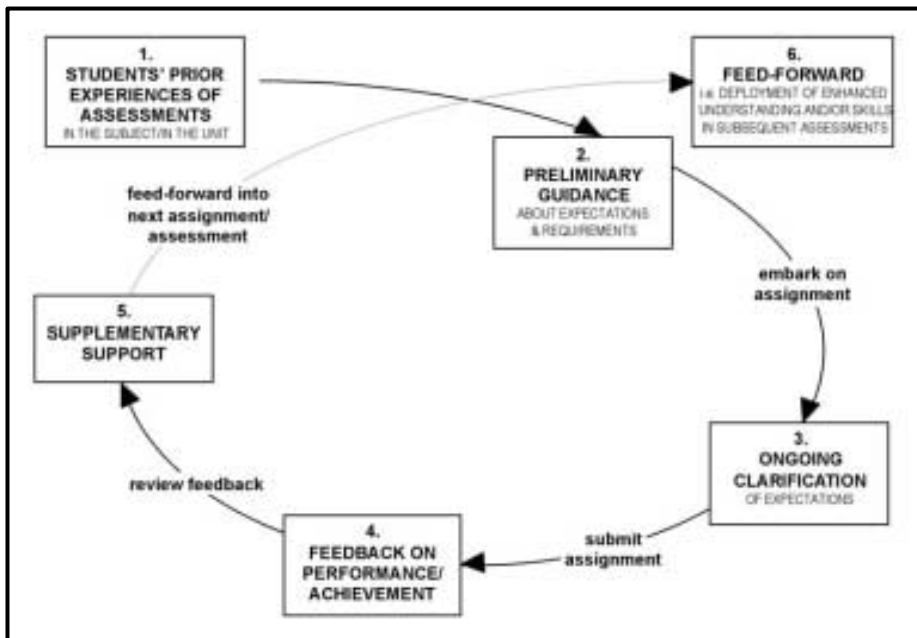


Figure 3.7: The guidance and feedback loop: main steps (Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell & Litjens, 2008)

Figure 3.7 presents ongoing guidance, a review of feedback and clarification of expectations offered to the students during the feedback process. This provides the opportunity for students to monitor their developing grasp of the subject matter.

Seemingly, the key issue depicted by the above figure is to make feedback more effective by motivating students to engage with it, and at the same time making the giving of feedback more efficient. Less may be more, if the effort in giving feedback is shifted to the point at which students are still working on their assignments.

The effectiveness of a model does not only rely on the designer, but also depends on the skills and competencies of those who implement it. Prior to implementation of a model, discussions and consultations with the stakeholders are of paramount importance and a necessity. What is also of utmost importance is 'helping models to work'. The students and tutors must be clearly informed why a model is introduced and the pedagogic reasons behind the process, sharing research or evaluation evidence of its effectiveness.

Although there are some models for assessment feedback, most of them face challenges with implementation. In the next section some variables relating to feedback in educational practice are discussed.

3.5 FEEDBACK IN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Research indicates that feedback on assessed work is predominantly in written form (Higgins, et al. 2002; Bailey & Garner, 2010). If feedback is written, then the question is whether this form of feedback is adequate and appropriate for supporting students' learning. Unfortunately, a number of studies report that students often find handwritten feedback comments too general, lacking in guidance, and unrelated to assessment criteria (Weaver, 2006; Walker, 2009); feedback that is provided is of poor quality (Merry & Orsmond, 2008; Crook, et al. 2012) and lastly, feedback comments are difficult to read due to illegible handwriting (Higgins, et al. 2002; Carless, 2006).

There is little systematic empirical evidence on what sort of feedback is best for what circumstances and milieus (Mutch, 2003). Kluger and DeNisi (1996) wanted to know whether the questions about what type of feedback works and what does not work were answerable. To this end, a more worrisome comment is made by Sadler (2010:547) when he states that “there remain many things that are not known about how best to design assessment events that lead to improved learning for students in higher education”.

According to Musingafi, Mapuranga, Chiwanza and Zebron (2015) the most reported challenges in ODL are lack of sufficient time for study, difficulties in access and use of ICT, ineffective feedback and lack of study materials.

Although there is consistency regarding the factors involved in good assessment, there is variation in the type of feedback seen as effective, in demonstrating those factors. Some of these factors are usefulness of feedback as well as particular properties and circumstances that make feedback effective. The next section deals with the purpose of feedback.

3.5.1 Purpose of feedback

The purpose of feedback is to help students to become aware of their strengths and identify areas in need of improvement and what action is needed in order to improve (Fry, Ketteridge & Marshall, 2015:111). According to Price, et al. (2010:278), “measuring effectiveness” requires clarity about the purpose of feedback. The success of feedback cannot be judged without clarity on what feedback aims to achieve. Feedback could be used for a various number and range of purposes. However, Table 3.1 provides some of the purposes and explanations where feedback could be used.

Table 3.1: Purposes of feedback (Extracted from Nicol & McFarlane-Dick, 2006)

Purpose of Feedback	Explanation
<i>Build confidence</i>	Feedback encourages students to strive for further achievement (Build self-esteem/confidence).
<i>Determine achievement</i>	Feedback determines the level of achievement.
<i>Improve performance</i>	Feedback provides information which may enable students to improve performance.
<i>Indicate level of performance</i>	Feedback provides information about how well or poorly a student performs (Is A, B or C grading?).
<i>Enhance learning experience</i>	Feedback may enhance the quality of student educational experience.
<i>Evaluate learning task</i>	Feedback which allows re-submission of task provides opportunity for self-evaluation.
<i>Diagnose strengths and weaknesses</i>	Feedback points out strengths and weaknesses in relation to assessment criteria.
<i>Clarify and accountability</i>	Feedback may be used to demonstrate and explain how an answer/grade is reached.
<i>Indicate intellectual achievement</i>	Students build their intellectual achievement on the foundations of feedback.
<i>Correct errors</i>	Correct errors and point out to students' information that they might have missed.
<i>Improve instruction/tutoring</i>	Data obtained from grading and assessment may be used to improve tutoring.

Different purposes of feedback would be appropriate at various times depending on the intended goal.

As indicated earlier, there are various ways in which assessment feedback can improve student learning. However, the acceptance and use of assessment feedback is complicated. It is challenging to devise a most workable or pragmatic strategy which will yield desired results with regard to assessment and feedback practice in any ODL environment. There are many considerations to be taken into account as there are actions to be taken and carried out by the students and tutors and the institution.

Price (1997) is one of the few researchers who has done research with a specific focus on distance learning. She cites that feedback monitoring is required to fulfil the following three functions:

- To assure students that the tutors are prompted to provide the fullest and most helpful feedback;
- To assist tutors to re-define their tutorial role, by emphasising the formative advice that they offer students;
- To engage tutors in a developing dialogue about what equals quality within a distance learning programme.

One important way of ensuring the effectiveness of teaching and learning in an ODL setting, is through the provision of meaningful feedback comments from all parties involved.

3.5.2 Types of feedback

In an educational context, assessment feedback forms the umbrella under which various types of feedback reside.

Li and De Luca (2012) define assessment feedback as comments and grades that lecturers and tutors provide for the written work submitted by students, as part of course requirements. They distinguish grades and written comments as having both formative and summative roles. This is also amplified by Taras (2002), when she argues that grades, though summative, also have a formative role because they result

from evaluating written work against set criteria and motivate students to improve learning outcomes.

Formative feedback could be viewed as information communicated to the learner that is intended to adjust his or her thinking or behaviour, to improve learning. Thus, it is a key element of formative assessment. Accordingly, I argue that formative feedback should be non-evaluative, supportive, timely, and specific. Formative feedback is generally presented as information to a learner in response to some action on the learner's part. It comes in a selection of types (e.g. verification of response accuracy, explanation of the correct answer, hints, and worked examples) (Shute, 2008).

Summative assessment measures student performance against learning outcomes and thus summative feedback provides results on which choices on progress and appraisals can be made. In summative feedback, both grades and comments assist in informing future tasks and learning needs.

According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), verbal or written evaluative feedback as an immediate and straight response to student academic performance, is one of the most powerful classroom interventions that teachers use to foster learning and improve student motivation. This type of feedback could also be provided to distance students during contact sessions.

According to Russell and Spada (2006:134), in language learning, "the term corrective feedback refers to any feedback provided to a learner, from any source that contains evidence of learner error of language form".

Positive findings have been conveyed in three studies on written corrective feedback (Sheen, 2007; Bitcher, 2008; Bitcher & Knoch 2008), however a weakness is that slight attention has been paid to investigations into the extent to which written corrective feedback can facilitate accuracy improvement in the writing of new texts. Corrective feedback is a long-standing educational practice that can arguably be linked to almost everything we learn (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Evans, et al. 2010). Thus, it is not only applicable to language teaching, but could be applied in various other disciplines.

If corrective feedback allows students to make positive changes, it is an indication that students understand why and how changes need to be effected. For this to happen, students need to learn by reasoning and making sense of their errors (Ferris, 2006).

Diagnostic feedback is given after a diagnostic assessment which involves making judgements as to how a student is performing against a predetermined set of criteria. Alderson (2005) noted that diagnostic tests are very often confused with placement or proficiency tests. Diagnostic feedback comprises of both strengths and weaknesses of students' knowledge and thus overlaps with the formative feedback. Diagnostic feedback is a very individualistic and specific type of feedback.

According to Kluger and DeNisi (1996), both positive and negative feedback could have a beneficial impact on the learning process. However, Hattie and Timperley (2007) argue that the effects of positive or negative feedback depends on the level at which the feedback is aimed and processed, rather than on whether it is positive or negative. On one hand, negative feedback might dissatisfy some students and in turn drive them to set higher performance goals for the future tasks, than those who receive positive feedback. On the other hand, negative feedback might inhibit students to be less motivated to do better in a subsequent task.

Many educators advocate avoiding negative feedback because of the psychological factors associated with it. Ilgen and Davis (2000:561) provide the advice that when negative feedback is delivered, there must be a "balance between making possible for students to accept responsibility for substandard performance, and at the same time, not to lower their self-concept". It is evident that commitment to the goals of feedback is the major determinant of the effectiveness of positive and negative feedback.

Learning via information and communications technology (ICT) seems to be a new trend in many educational institutions. Especially in the DE mode, more tutoring staff are required to communicate with students at a distance via technological means. E-learning and online learning have benefits such as that feedback can be analysed easier and may reach the students faster.

Hammond (2002) highlights the impersonal nature of electronic communication. The feedback remains impersonal whether it is feedback via an email or a handwritten comment given in an assignment. However, lack of or limited human interaction makes it difficult to verify whether the students understand the feedback. The students cannot engage and communicate with computers as they could do with tutors.

A matter of concern is that the computer system might encounter technical problems and failures, and could also be vulnerable to hacking. Despite the challenges cited above, Chaudhary & Niradhar (2013) note that ICT may be effectively used as an assessment tool in various academic programmes in the ODL system, in the form of portfolios, e-portfolios, student journals and online examinations. Moreover, in the modern digital world, application of ICT in ODL is not a matter of choice, but a must (Cosmas & Mbvette, 2009).

Orlando (2016) remarks that online courses have lastly started moving beyond their text-heavy origins, by incorporating rich media such as video to deliver course content. However, he affirms that this transformation has had less of an impact on how instructors give feedback, with most still providing students with the traditional text commentary.

My familiarisation with the written comments given to the students, dictates that most comments tend to be evaluative or advisory. Therefore, in the next table, distinction is drawn between these two types of feedback.

Table 3.2: Evaluative versus advisory feedback (Wiggins, 2004)

Advisory feedback	Evaluative feedback
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides evidence without interpretation or judgement; • Describes the performance/product using only specific, concrete, non-judgmental language; • Specifies context and goal (what/where/when/how). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides a grade mark and/or expresses how well the tutor's instructional priorities have been met; • Describes the performance/product 'using critical' language (organised, polished, unpersuasive, unclear, etc.) and general words showing likes/dislikes; • Praises and/or blames based on criteria.

Different types of feedback are used in different subject disciplines and working environments. Regardless of the type of feedback, it must change the behaviour of the students as they learn and this must have an impact on their ability to fulfil their potential and reach their aims. To this end, a review on 18 publications on assignment feedback by Parboteeah and Anwar (2009) indicate that types of feedback do not affect learning. According to them, what matters is the quantity and quality of feedback, and the content of feedback.

Table 3.3: Feedback types arranged loosely by complexity (Shute, 2008)

Feedback type	Description
No feedback	Refers to conditions where the learner is presented a question and is required to respond, but there is no indication as to the correctness of the learner's response.
Verification	Also called knowledge of results (KR), or knowledge of outcome, it informs the learner about the correctness of her

	response(s), such as right/wrong or overall percentage correct.
Correct response	Also known as knowledge of correct response (KCR), it informs the learner of the correct answer to a specific problem with no additional information.
Try again	Also known as repeat-until-correct feedback, it informs the learner about an incorrect response and allows the learner one or more attempts to answer the question.
Error-flagging	Also known as location of mistakes (LM), error-flagging highlights errors in a solution, without giving correct answer.
Elaborated	A general term, it refers to providing an explanation about why a specific response was correct, and it might allow the learner to review part of the instruction. It also might present the correct answer (see below for six types of elaborated feedback).
Attribute isolation	Elaborated feedback that presents information addressing central attributes of the target concept or skill being studied.
Topic-contingent	Elaborated feedback that provides the learner with information relating to the target topic currently being studied. This might entail simply re-teaching material.
Response-contingent	Elaborated feedback that focuses on the learner's specific response. It may describe why the answer is wrong and

	why the correct answer is correct. This does not use formal error analysis.
Hints/clues/prompts	Elaborated feedback that guides the learner in the right direction (e.g. strategic hint on what to do next or a worked example or demonstration). It avoids explicitly presenting the correct answer.
Bugs/misconceptions	Elaborated feedback that requires error analysis and diagnosis. It provides information about the learner's specific errors or misconceptions (e.g. what is wrong and why).
Informative tutoring	The most elaborated feedback (Narciss & Huth, 2004), this presents verification feedback, error-flagging, and strategic hints on how to proceed. The correct answer is not usually provided.

As can be noticed in Table 3.3, feedback strategies can vary in several dimensions: timing, amount, mode and audience. Different types of courses present different types of feedback needs. Similarly, different types of assignments naturally lend themselves to different kinds of feedback (Brookhart, 2008).

Different students have different aspirations and motivations, and therefore will expect different things from feedback. Despite differing expectations, what is mutual is the notion that feedback should create “a stimulating learning environment” (Koka & Hein, 2003:333). In addition, Weaver (2006) suggests that feedback must serve as motivation for the students in both present and future performance. It is important to point out that the expectations and preferences of both feedback receivers and providers, may influence perceptions and actions about feedback.

Nonetheless, it is still unclear how feedback exerts its effect on student behaviour and what kind of feedback is appropriate in specific situations. What I infer, is that there are effective and less effective forms of feedback. Less helpful feedback does not focus on the learning task, and does not provide specific comments and suggestions aimed at improving performance. Ultimately, effective feedback must build learners' confidence and promote a sense of control and ownership over learning.

Tutors' comments on assessed work, or feedback, can come in several formats and highly variable qualities (Hyland, 2000; Quality Assurance Agency, 2000). In the next section, some strategies aimed at improving feedback are discussed.

3.6 STRATEGIES FOR MAKING FEEDBACK EFFECTIVE

Boud and Associates (2010:2) state that “everyday learning activities as well as special tasks and tests provide opportunities for the provision of feedback”. Similarly, Rust (2002:156) suggests that faculties should provide “explicit guidelines on giving effective feedback”.

Simply by providing feedback to students' academic work can not automatically or instantaneously result in improved learning. For example, if the comments given as feedback to students' assignments are not or cannot be used by students to alter the gap between their current performance and the ideal, then those comments do not constitute feedback and learning does not take place.

Two questions which call for answers are: how to maximise student learning in the feedback process and how to ensure that students use the feedback given to them? In an attempt to provide answers to the above questions, Narciss, Sosnovsky, Schnaubert, Andrès, Eichelmann, Gogvadze and Melis (2014), suggest that a feedback strategy should address the following aspects of the learning process:

- Scope and function – what (instructional) goals or purposes the feedback serves;
- Content – what information is included in the feedback;

- Presentation – in which form and modes the feedback content is presented to a student;
- Conditions – under which situational and individual conditions feedback is provided;
- Timing and schedule – which events within the learning process trigger feedback messages.

As Walker (2009:68) notes, "a necessary precondition for a student to act on a gap is that she/he is given a comment that enables her/him to do so: the comments must be usable by the student". Consequently, "it is the quality, not just the quantity of feedback that merits our closest attention" (Sadler, 1998:84).

One strategy is to design assessment in such a way that students can see the direct benefits of attending to feedback advice. Students need to be actively involved in learning what the criteria means and in understanding the goals and purposes of feedback. In addition, students can be required to document how they used feedback to advance to the next stage of the exercise.

The suggestion provided by Taras (2003), is to withhold the grade altogether until students have read the comments and indicated this in some way. Although this might compel the students to pay attention to the written comments, in distance learning mode, time will not allow providing only comments and then grades at a later stage. When providing feedback, tutors must not focus only on the correctional, but rather on the instructional aspects of feedback.

The dialogue around assessment between tutors and students could be fostered, which in turn could create opportunities for developing a shared understanding of feedback terminology. Such a conversational process calls for a greater sharing of power between the assessors and assessed and a climate that is more conducive for students' receptivity to feedback.

Nicol and McFarlane-Dick (2006) present a framework of seven principles of good feedback practice, methods and techniques, which extend beyond written comments, to support each of the principles. Their work is assembled on the impression that feedback should reinforce the student's capacity to self-regulate their own performance and contribute to the student's ability to learn for the longer term. According to Nicol and McFarlane-Dick (2006), good feedback practice:

- Helps clarify what is good performance in terms of goals, criteria, and expected standards. Students can only achieve goals or outcomes, if they understand them, assume some ownership of them and can assess progress. If students perceive the aims of an assessment task differently to tutors, it can affect performance and their ability to use feedback;
- Facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning. When well organised, self-assessment can lead to significant improvement in learning especially if integrated with staff feedback. Self- and peer assessment processes help develop the skills to make judgements against standards;
- Encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning;
- Delivers high quality information to students about their learning;
- Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem, where feedback praises effort, strategic behaviour and progress related to the performance in context. However the extent of praise must be consistent with the level of performance otherwise students may be confused by mixed messages;
- Provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance. Feedback is most useful when students have an opportunity to improve work by being able to resubmit the work or receive feedback during the production process (e.g. comments on drafts) or apply the feedback to a subsequent piece of work. Also students can benefit from being given help to develop strategies to use feedback;
- Provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape teaching.

In addition to the above, frequent low stakes assessment (e.g. diagnostic testing) can provide feedback to students on their learning and information to tutors about students'

level of understanding and skills, so that teaching can be adjusted to help students close the gap.

Also to affirm what has been mentioned as a good practice, discussions with the tutor help students to develop understanding and correct misunderstandings and to get an immediate response to difficulties. Peer dialogue, which is used very often in ODL, enhances learning, as:

- a) Students who have just learned something are often able to explain it in a language and in a way that is more accessible than teachers' explanations;
- b) It exposes students to other perspectives on problems and alternative approaches and methods for addressing problems;
- c) Students develop detachment of judgement (of the work from themselves) which they are able to transfer to assessment of their own work;
- d) It can encourage students to persist and
- e) It is sometimes easier to accept critique from peers.

Many of the worthy feedback practices recognised by Nicol and McFarlane-Dick (2006) to help enact these principles are recommendations to integrate feedback as part of usual teaching activities, rather than stand-alone events and to actively engage students in reflection on their own learning. Most extend beyond providing written comments on student work, but still rely on usable comments as a major input into feedback activities.

Feedback should enable students to improve their future learning. However, often students do not seem to use comments on assessed work as a resource for learning (e.g. the same errors or misunderstandings recur in subsequent work). Explanations collected from numerous studies for this mutual phenomenon include that:

- Assessors' comments are little more than editing and do not give students a clear message about how they can improve their future performance;

- Students do not read or take the advice that is given and are not required to do so;
- Students do not understand the comments because of a lack of familiarity with academic discourse and the language used by lecturers;
- Students do not have appropriate strategies to use the comments as a learning tool.

The growing body of research (for example: Weaver, 2006; Burke, 2009; Walker, 2009; Careless, 2015) on students' opinions on feedback, proposes that there are two important issues that need to be addressed in turning comments into usable feedback. The first is the characteristics of the comments themselves, in terms of their technical structure and accessibility to the learner. The second is, helping students to develop strategies to use comments to improve learning. This research complements earlier work which emphasises 'process' aspects of feedback, such as the need for feedback to be rapid and sensible for students to be able to use it, which of course, remains a relevant consideration.

Two key characteristics of comments given as feedback could improve how it is used. The first is the content of the comments and the second is the language used to convey the content.

Usable feedback content should contain:

- Descriptions of the features of the student's work (what has been done and/or not done);
- Evaluative judgements/comments linked to criteria and standards that indicate the features of the work that add to or detract from its quality (how well things have been done);
- Suggestions of alternative approaches that would lead to improvement;
- Explanations, or directions to resources, that demonstrate an improved possible approach that the student could use, and

- Motivating comments (praise, encouragement) that indicate that an aspect of the work is praiseworthy and explains why the element being praised is good.

The first four aspects above together provide the information needed to assist a student to use the comments for learning. The last can help build students' beliefs about their ability to succeed. It is worth noting that students in Walker's (2009: 74) study were confused "where unqualified praise was given in connection with less than full marks", so the relationship between criteria, grades and what is praiseworthy needs to be untangled and decoded for students, for motivating comments to be fully appreciated.

In Walker's (2009) study, most written comments contained descriptions (of content and application of skills), judgements and motivating comments, but very few contained mention of alternative approaches/future study or suggestions of resources that students might use. This proposes that the content of comments limits their usability. Walker's results confirm those from an earlier study by Weaver (2006) where students indicated that they found comments that focused mainly on the negatives, did not contain suggestions for improvement or did not relate to criteria, to be unhelpful.

Lecturers and tutors bring authority, an extensive knowledge base and a developed understanding of academic discourse of their discipline to the assessment and feedback process. Often, assumptions about what is known and what are anticipated can be taken for granted and therefore can affect the comments provided to students. However, research by Sadler (1989), Nicol and McFarlane-Dick, (2006) and Weaver (2006) notes that the student's conception of learning, of the discipline and of the particular assessment task, all affect their ability to use comments as feedback. "Students who do not yet share a similar understanding of academic discourse as the tutor would subsequently have difficulty in understanding and using feedback" (Weaver, 2006:380).

In Weaver's (2006:383) study, a noteworthy percentage of students indicated that they were unsure of the meaning of phrases commonly used in tutors' comments (e.g.

"more critical reflection needed", "lacks application of theory", "superficial analysis"). To this end, Sadler (1998:82) notes that "students' knowledge of the subject being learned is by definition partial. Hence any feedback must be expressed in language that is already known and understood by the learner".

It is unreasonable to expect students to comprehend and use comments which are framed in language that is unfamiliar, e.g. to expect them to provide 'critical reflection' if they have not been taught about the nature of critical reflection and how to engage in it, or to note 'superficial analysis' if the students have not been shown exemplars of the type and depth of analysis expected (University of Flinders, 2014).

Therefore, it is important to match the language of comments to the stage of student development and understanding for comments to be usable.

Matching comments to students' current understanding can be enhanced in several ways:

- Make the criteria and standards expected of assessable work clear to students before they start;
- Discuss, explain and demonstrate predictable practical and thinking skills before students are assessed and provide examples to students;
- Write the remarks as simply and clearly as possible;
- Provide a glossary of collective terms and their denotations that you regularly use in remarks on work;
- Follow the guidelines above on content of comments, i.e. describe the characteristics of the work that are being commented on, explain the judgements being made in relation to the criteria and standards, provide ideas and clarifications that show how to do things better.

The key requirement is to find out what students know and understand and then to build on that understanding through dialogue with them. One crucial point mentioned

by Burke (2009), is that many students do not know how to use feedback as many have never been taught how to do so.

One crucial focus of dialogue with students should be the development of strategies to use feedback to improve their upcoming performance and learning. Feedback is indeed a dialogical process and not simply a message. Bloxham and Campbell, (2010:291) note that if feedback is genuinely to contribute to effective learning and development, then it must be understood as “an active, shared process”. Therefore, in designing a course it is imperative to think about how the feedback process is to be embedded (Boud & Molloy, 2013).

I concur with Laurillard (2002) who states that feedback must adhere to the following characteristics: it should be adaptive, that is, contingent on students’ needs; it should be discursive, rich in two-way communicative exchanges; it should be interactive, linked to actions related to a task goal; and reflective, it should inspire students and teachers to reflect on the ‘goal–action–feedback cycle’.

I argue that besides monitoring and other mechanisms aimed at ensuring quality feedback, the time involved in marking can make it difficult to provide good quality timely feedback, particularly to large numbers of students in ODL.

3.7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter provided a conceptual framework for the study, highlighting some imperatives and variables which have a direct or indirect influence on assessment feedback. This chapter articulated how feedback is conceptualised and how it translates into actual practices in ODL. Key aspects of a model for optimising feedback in ODL in alignment with the main research question, was highlighted in section 3.4.

From the deliberations in this chapter, it is evident that feedback is a vital learning tool and could foster personal and overall development in many ODL environments. However, there are preconditions to be met and actions to be carried out, both by the

giver and receiver of feedback. The next chapter provides the research design and methods of the study.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 provided the orientation to the study. It is also important to remind the reader that this study aims to answer the main research question: What are the key aspects for optimising feedback in ODL? Chapter 2 provided the theoretical and contextual frameworks while Chapter 3 provided a conceptual framework for the study. These chapters contained the survey of literature for this study under review.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research design and methods applied in this study. This research design is formulated to achieve the goals of the research. The research design links research questions, goals, the theoretical framework and research methods. The end result is a realisation of evidence obtained in the study.

The first section of the chapter provides the rationale for the empirical investigation which formed part of this study. It then provides details on the research design which includes the research paradigm, approach and type. The chapter also shares details on research methods, which entail issues of selection of participants, data collection methods and procedures for data analysis. Furthermore, the chapter discusses how the researcher sought to maintain trustworthiness throughout the study and how to ensure that the ethical protocols are observed.

4.2 RATIONALE FOR EMPIRICAL STUDY

David and Sutton (2004:363) define empirical study as “the collection of data” by using multiple sources unlike drawing conclusions from theoretical framework. In addition, empirical research highlights participants lived experiences regarding the research focus, in this case the assessment feedback in ODL.

This empirical study is intended to collect specific empirical data on specified topics. The analysis and interpretation of this data (in Chapter 5) will serve inter alia to address the research questions and aims of the study, as set out in 1.4 of Chapter 1. Theoretical and conceptual frameworks in Chapter 2 will also be referred to during the analysis and interpretation of the data analysis.

The justification for conducting this empirical study is to determine the factors that have got direct or indirect influence on the assessment and how to make written feedback effective in ODL environments. Hence, in Chapter 3 (section 3.6), strategies for making feedback effective were discussed. There are many examples of studies that reveal the pivotal role assessment feedback plays in the learning process as could be noted in Chapter 3 (section 3.5.3).

In my conceptual exploration in Chapter 3, I found that besides the high premium placed on the importance of assessment feedback, there are several challenges pertaining to provision of assessment feedback (3.5.2), which warrants empirical investigation. For example, in section 3.2 of Chapter 3, Ansari (2002) cites that large numbers DE providers pose insurmountable difficulties in providing feedback to students through tutor comments on assignments.

Taking into account the challenges and issues pertaining to assessment, I stand to argue that there is a need to develop a stronger conceptual base for assessment feedback, as well as to accumulate much more empirical evidence on its impact on teaching and learning. This will clarify and provide answers to some questions and topical issues regarding assessment feedback.

In the next section, the research design which serves as a “roadmap” for the study is presented and discussed.

4.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

Niewenhuis (2007:68) describes a research design as “a plan or strategy which moves from underlying philosophical assumptions to specifying selection of participants, the

data gathering techniques to use and the data analysis to be done”. This definition highlights the elements which must be included in the research design plan, while the purpose of this plan is alluded to by McMillan and Schumacher (2006:22) who define research design as “the plan and structure of the investigation, used to obtain evidence to answer the research questions”.

A different view on research design is that it is a modelled framework and overarching approach to scientific investigation, by which a researcher is able to identify multiple possible methods of study and analysis according to the identified research constructs and their contexts (Creswell, 2007).

The purpose of research design is to specify a plan for generating empirical evidence that is used to answer the research question. Each empirical research study has a research design with predefined objectives. Berg and Lune (2012) state that good planning is essential in research design. However, in qualitative research, design is not a static stage of the study but is a continuing process of review and adjustment throughout.

Providing guidance in research design process, Maxwell (2005:102) states: “To design a workable and productive study, and to communicate this design to others, you need to create a coherent design, one in which the different methods fit together compatibly, and in which they are integrated with the other components of your design. The most critical connection is with your research questions. If your methods won’t provide you with the data you need to answer your questions, you need to change either your questions or your methods”.

In addition to the above assertions, Yin (2014) states, research design is the logical sequence that connects the empirical data to a study’s initial research questions and ultimately to conclusions. In other words, it is a strategy which shapes the research. In line with the afore-mentioned definition, the research questions guide the careful crafting of this ‘blueprint’ of the study.

I employed socio-constructivism as the research paradigm in this study. It serves as a methodological lens, as hinted at in Chapter 1. The interpretivist and constructivist paradigms are also discussed because they have close ties with socio-constructivist paradigms. These paradigms are deemed appropriate for this study because they enable the researcher to develop an understanding of the meaning of the concept on one hand and on the other hand the nature of the experiences of others on assessment feedback.

The basis for this research design is anchored on the question: What research design will assist in addressing the research questions adequately? However, the logic and principles of methodology which have implications for the research design also need to be addressed. In order to provide the methodological rigour, logic and principles against which the claims and data analysis are formulated and substantiated, in the next subsections I discuss the research paradigm, research approach and research type.

4.3.1 Research paradigm

Morgan (2007) refers to the research paradigm as a shared belief system that guides the way a researcher conducts the study, while Creswell (2013) sees it as a basic set of assumptions that guides enquiries.

The methodological lens through which I view the world of this case study is interpretivism and constructivism, both in a cognitive and social sense. This puts a high premium on how people construct and understand their experience, how their intentions and perceptions affect how they act in specific situations and how they make sense of what they do.

4.3.1.1 Interpretivist research paradigm

According to Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit (2004:21), the “interpretive paradigm focuses on the understanding of individual participants’ experience and perceptions of

their professional roles as experienced in their day-to-day working environment, from the standpoint of their unique contexts and backgrounds”.

According to Myers (2009) the premise of interpretive researchers is that access to reality (whether given or socially constructed) is solitary through social constructions such as language, consciousness and shared meanings. The interpretive paradigm is underpinned by observation and interpretation, therefore to observe is to gather information about events, whereas to interpret is to make meaning of that information by drawing inferences or by judging the match between the information and some abstract pattern (Antwi & Hamza, 2015) .

It is my position as researcher, that reality is not something that exists outside the set boundaries or context. However, it can be found by the people who are in it and it can be constructed by the people in the process.

The design based on interpretivism, studies individuals with their many characteristics, different human behaviours, opinions and attitudes (Cohen, et al. 2011). It also provides opportunities to garner understanding and make sense of others' perspectives which are shaped by the philosophy of social constructions (Taylor, 2008).

Interpretivists believe that human beings will consider and analyse what they do which in turn allows them to make judgements about what it is they will say and to whom. This perspective is closely associated with socio-constructivism, which is grounded on specific assumptions about reality, knowledge, and learning. To understand and apply models of feedback that are imbedded in the viewpoints of social constructivists, it is significant to know the premises that underlie them.

4.3.1.2 Constructivist research paradigm

Crotty (1998:42) defines constructivism from the social perspectives as "the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human

practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context".

In line with the above constructivist view, distance learners construct meaning for knowledge by only having learning content at their disposal in most instances. Students are not just learning by constructing meaning from feedback delivered by tutors; rather they are learning by constructing feedback meanings themselves (Nicol, 2011).

The continuous development of knowledge and learning is viewed as a cognitive activity involving the ongoing construction of mental representations of reality. To this end, constructivism may be viewed as a most significant trend in new technological-based learning in ODL.

The basic and most central assumption of constructivism is that knowledge does not exist independent of the student, knowledge is constructed. This statement has several implications for the nature of learning and teaching in ODL environments.

The students studying via the ODL mode are not always in close proximity with tutors, technology and other factors, mediating learning experiences. Therefore instructional design in ODL must be based on new approaches based on constructive approaches. However, students learn independently, creatively and actively. Their personal experiences and environmental influences provide rich sources for constructing meaning of concepts and phenomena.

To transform DE, constructivists Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell and Haag, (1995) propose to use tools and a learning environment that enables particular meaning-making and discourse among students (socially negotiated meaning) rather than by instructional interventions that control the sequence and content of instruction which seek to map a particular model of thinking onto students.

The terms constructivism and socio-constructivism tend to be used interchangeably and subsumed under the common term 'constructivism', particularly by Charmaz

(2000, 2006). Constructivism proposes that each individual mentally constructs the world of experience through cognitive processes, while social constructivism has a social rather than an individual focus (Young & Collin, 2004). However, all of the terms relate to the belief that learning is 'constructed' by learners (individually or socially) rather than merely being received from an instructor or additional source.

Although constructivism and socio-constructivism is used interchangeably in order to provide more clarity, the next section deals with socio-constructivism.

4.3.1.3 Socio-constructivist research paradigm

To socio-constructivists, knowledge is also a human product, and is socially and culturally constructed (Prawat & Floden, 1994; Gredler, 1997; Ernest, 1999). Individuals create meaning through their interactions with each other and with the environment they live in.

The origins of socio-constructivism can be traced in part to an interpretivist approach of thought. However, my understanding is that while they may share mutual philosophical origins, social constructivism is separate from interpretivism. Socio-constructivism places great importance on everyday interactions between people and how they use language to construct their reality. It concerns the social practices people engage in as the focus of enquiry. This is very parallel to the focus of grounded theory but without the stress on language.

Socio-constructivists view that society exists both as objective and subjective reality and is completely compatible with classical grounded theory, unlike constructionist grounded theory which takes a relativist position. To this end, Berger and Luckmann (1991) maintain that conversation is the most important means of maintaining, modifying and reconstructing subjective reality.

Socio-constructivism is also based on specific expectations about reality, knowledge, and learning. To comprehend and apply models of instruction that are rooted in the

perspectives of socio-constructivists, it is vital to know the premises that underlie them. The assumptions are as follow:

- **Reality:** Socio-constructivists believe that reality is constructed through human activity. Members of a society together invent the properties of the world (Kukla, 2000). For the social constructivist, reality cannot be discovered: it does not exist prior to its social invention.
- **Knowledge:** To socio-constructivists, knowledge is also a human product, and is socially and culturally constructed (Prawat & Floden, 1994; Gredler, 1997; Ernest, 1999). Individuals create meaning through their interactions with each other and with the environment they live in.

A social constructivist's view of learning, argues that knowledge is moulded and evolves through growing participation within diverse communities of practice (Scribner, 1985; Cole, 1990). There is another sense in which change becomes problematic and this is related to what socio-constructionism has to say about human agency, that is, human activity, which according to Burr (1995) has not been fully addressed within social constructionism. Berger and Luckmann (1991) maintain that change is brought about by human activity. They note that though reality is always socially defined, it is individuals and groups of individuals who define it.

Socio-constructivist theory believes that the realities of individuals can only be explored as the world is experienced, drawing on the interpretations of others. A socio-constructivist approach to feedback requires that the students actively engage with the feedback. Sadler (1989) puts it very explicitly when he states that students should be trained in how to interpret feedback, how to make links between the feedback and the characteristics of the work they produce, and how they can improve their work in the future.

It cannot simply be assumed that when students are given feedback they will know what to do with it. In this regard, Nicol (2009:339) gives very valuable advice: "When students receive feedback from teachers they must engage in self-assessment if they

are to use that information to improve academic performance: that is, they must decode the feedback message, internalise it and use it to make judgements about and modify their own work”.

The vital element in achieving a constructively aligned course is to have clear and explicit learning outcomes. This alignment should not only be applied to the learning outcomes but also be stretched over everything that is related to curriculum, such as learning and teaching and assessment methods. According to Brown (2001) and Biggs (2001), the key principle of effective assessment is the linkages, or what is referred to as ‘alignment’, between learning outcomes, assessment tasks, assessment criteria, marking procedures and feedback. The challenge is how to interweave and realise these links.

Commensurate with the above view, Mutch (2003) reckons that providing feedback on assessment is a social practice which relates to the entire course design process. She suggests that problems of non-engagement with the feedback could be addressed via dialogue with the students.

As hinted earlier, an inevitable element of the socio-constructivist model is clearly defined and explicit assessment criteria. This dictates that the best way is to train the tutors on the assessment criteria of a given module, before marking commences. According to Bansilal, et al. (2010) essential tools that can be used to improve the quality of education are for tutors to use effective assessment feedback and for learners to be empowered to voice their experiences of this feedback.

The premise of this research is that student learning processes progress and are restricted by socially-constructed norms of behaviour and value systems. It must be noted that learning is situated structurally in the relations between students and tutors, and in the academic norms of the discipline.

While there has been a move over the last decade to ponder learning from a social or socio-constructivist paradigm, assessment feedback involves provision of comments

and suggestions to enable students to make their own understanding without dictating what those understandings will be (Archer, 2010).

From the socio-constructivist perspective, feedback has mostly been considered from an information transmission perspective. Tutors 'transmit' feedback messages to students about strengths and weaknesses in their work, assuming that these messages are easily decoded and turned into action. Nevertheless, delivering and receiving feedback involves more than just an 'objective transfer of information' (Jacobs 1974:408, in Falchikov 2005).

A qualitative research approach which has been employed in this study is discussed in the next section.

4.3.2 Qualitative research approach

I opted for a qualitative research approach in this study because it allows for an interpretive paradigm to the world in natural settings. The choice of the qualitative research approach is also to realise its purpose of constructing a detailed description of social reality (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delport, 2011).

As indicated earlier, the qualitative methodology shares its philosophical basis with the interpretive paradigm, which supports the understanding that there are many facts and multiple realities. To this end, the interpretive paradigm is related more with methodological approaches that provide an opportunity for the voice, concerns and practices of research participants to be heard (Cole, 2006; Weaver & Olson, 2006). Furthermore, qualitative research is defined as an interpretive, constructivist, naturalistic, post-positivistic approach of the subject matter, a field or reality, by Cooper and Schlinder (2006:143,196); Neuman (2000:123,126); Patton (2002:39); Niewenhuis (2007:65) and Leedy and Ormrod (2005:133).

A different view given by Marshall and Rossman (2011:91) is that qualitative research seeks cultural description and it elicits tacit knowledge, subjective understandings and interpretations.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005:3) offer the following comprehensive definition of the qualitative research. Qualitative research is a located activity which finds the observer in the world. It entails of a set of interpretive approaches, material practices that make the world visible. These practices change the world. They turn the world into sequences of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and the memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the connotations they bring to people.

The focus of qualitative research is to comprehend a particular social situation, individuals, event, or group. This is affirmed by Hallway and Wheeler (1996), in Maree (2007) when they state that qualitative research typically studies people or systems by interacting with, and engaging the participants, in their natural environment and focusing on meanings and interpretations.

In any qualitative research, the aim is to "engage in research that probes for deeper understanding rather than examining surface features" (Johnson, 1995:4) and constructivism may facilitate towards that aim.

In an effort to understand how the assessment feedback manifests itself in ODL and how it can be strengthened, this study embraced a qualitative research approach. As a qualitative researcher, I concur that the world is made up of people with their own assumptions, intentions, attitudes, beliefs and values and that the way of knowing reality is by exploring the experiences of others regarding a specific phenomenon (Maree, 2013:55). In this regard, I believe that both the tutors and students have their own beliefs and values on what constitutes an assessment feedback.

I decided on a qualitative research approach because the range of methods and approaches used in this study falls under the qualitative research approach. In the next section, the research type is discussed.

4.3.3 Research type

As hinted already in section 1.7.1.3 of Chapter 1, the case study research strategy is used as a methodological anchor for this study and is adjusted to suit the specific needs of the study.

Although a case study was not considered as a formal method for a long time, lately it is an acceptable research methodology. In support of this view, Stake (2005:443) cites that a case study is less of a methodological choice than “a choice of what is to be studied”. However, “whether you consider case study as a way of conceptualizing human behaviour or only as a way of encapsulating it, its strategic value lies in its capability to draw attention to what can be learned from the single case” (Schram, 2008).

Yin (2009:18) defines a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident”. While it has boundaries, a case study could also be viewed as an all-encompassing method which also entails different epistemological orientations such as interpretivist and realist.

According to Merriam (2009), a case is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system. Similarly as above, Cohen, et al. (2008:253) define a case study as a “bounded system which provides a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply by presenting them with abstract theories or principles”. They further argue that “it is important in case studies for events and situations to be allowed to speak for themselves, rather than to be largely interpreted, evaluated or judged by the researcher” (*ibid.*). Having this in mind, as a researcher, I allowed the data to “speak” to each other with minimum interference.

There are many types of case studies. However, Baxter and Jack (2008) assert that the selection of specific type of a case study design must be guided by the overall purpose of the study. Yin (2014) and Schram (2008), use different terms to describe

a variety of case studies. Yin distinguishes between single, holistic case studies and multiple case studies. Schram (2008) refers to three types of case study, all having different purposes:

- *The descriptive or intrinsic case study* which is solely focused on the aim of gaining a better understanding of the particular case by describing, analysing and interpreting a particular phenomenon.

The data in the forms of quotations, descriptions and excerpts from the documents will result in narrative description. In order to understand the system as a whole the researcher has to study the current status of assessment feedback and related issues. This case study will provide a descriptive account of the participants' experiences and/or behaviours kept by the researcher through field-notes during interviews and group discussions.

- *The instrumental case study* which is used to provide understanding into or elaborate on a theory or to gain a better understanding of a social issue through studying the case.

This case study merely serves the purpose of facilitating the researcher's gaining of understanding about a social issue.

- *The collective case study* is an instrumental case study extended to a quantity of cases. The focus is on further the understanding or theorising of the researcher about a broad phenomenon or condition. Cases are selected so that comparisons can be made between cases and concepts and in this way theories can be extended and validated.

Firstly, I used a case study research type as it allowed me to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events. Secondly, I had the desire to understand a real-world case and understood that the single case would enable important contextual conditions. Thirdly, the case study strategy has great flexibility in its

application, whether it is used for an individual, group or institution. Fourthly, a case study has the ability to make visible the details of social processes and mechanisms by which one factor affects the other.

In this case study, practices and experiences of students and tutors pertaining to feedback in ODL, were being investigated in order to understand real situations as prevailing in ODL environments, as opposed to simply presenting abstract theories or principles. I situated this case study within its larger context, but the focus remained on either the case or an issue which was being studied.

The case study is most suitable, because the researcher is also an ODL practitioner and his own experiences and flexibility in the field under investigation is vital in his role as a researcher. Thus, the context and case are important to understand the issue being studied. This case study is being applied in the context of the working environment of the researcher (applied context).

The most general limitation raised against case study research strategy is its inability to generalise from case study findings. However, contrary to this, Gummesson (2003) and Stuart, McCutcheon, Hadfield, McLachlin and Sampson (2002) state that in case study research, it is also possible to generalise if it is useful for theory building and testing. Halinen and Törnroos (2005) and Johnston, Leach and Liu (1999) add that case studies may also be used for advancing theory generation, providing replication, confirming, refining or refuting the findings of the first case, investigating whether they could be expanded to (somewhat) diverse situations.

4.4 RESEARCH METHODS

Cohen, et al. (2008:47) refer to methods as a “range of approaches used in educational research to gather data which are to be used as a basis of inference and interpretation, for explanation and prediction”. In the next sections, strategies used to select participants, data collection methods and data analysis are discussed.

4.4.1 Selection of participants

Within a qualitative approach, the number of the participants depends greatly on the information provided by the individuals involved and the data saturation derived from the richness of the data (Sargeant, 2012).

As the researcher, I decided to limit the number of participants to 20 students for individual interviews and five tutors for a focus group interviews. Cognisance was taken that the number of selected participants should not be too large to inhibit involving most participants and should also not be too small that it lacks substantially greater representation of the population. In a nutshell the sample of participants was done with the view to undertake greater depth of enquiry.

Purposive selection of the students (participants) was done within the homogenous population of the distance students. This selection procedure increased the scope of the data obtained and enhanced the possibility of uncovering multiple realities. The participants that were selected for the semi-structured individual interviews were those in their 2nd to 4th year of their distance studies. The selection is based on the reasoning that they are capable of providing better comments on their experiences of the feedback provided on the assignments, as they have at least been using the ODL mode for more than one year.

The selection of the five tutors for the focus group interviews was done purposefully as well. Experienced tutors, who at that time of data collection were involved in tutoring distance students for more than five years, were selected as participants. The decision to make use of purposeful sampling both for the students and tutors is because it gives considerable amount of flexibility and transparency in choosing participants.

Merriam (2011:133) refers to “public records, personal documents, and physical material as the three major types of documents available to the researcher for analysis”. In many studies, document analysis has proved to be a very valuable source of data. The documents which are included in this study are comprised of: Assessment Policy of UNAM and 50 marked assignments. Although it may not be deemed

representative of the total number of assignments, 50 marked assignments are appropriate to illuminate how assessment feedback on written assignments are provided. The marked assignments provide indication of the graded marks and written comments. The selection of the marked assignments was done through open sampling. To guard against biasness during open sampling, the researcher didn't read or page through assignments.

The reason for the selection of these documents is that they could deepen the understanding about the larger process of feedback provision on assignments. Another reason is that they could create new insights and might reveal distinctive aspects of assessment feedback.

In addition to the above criteria, I followed the following steps in document analysis:

- Studying the material and taking notes of relevant information;
- Listing follow-up questions for the participants;
- Reviewing and comparing notes with data from the structured interviews and focus group interviews;
- Make conclusions by establishing the meaning of the content of the documents and its contribution to the issues being explored.

One key step, among others in documentary analysis, is clearly devising the analysis criteria and as such, I devised the following criteria as indicated in appendix H for the analysis of the documents.

4.4.2 Data collection

Cohen, et al. (2008:79) indicate that data collected from a case study is in-depth and detailed and comes from a wide variety of data sources. As a qualitative researcher, I regard myself as a key instrument in the data collection process, through interviewing participants and examining documents.

Creswell (2007) states that qualitative researchers tend to collect data in the field at the site where participants experience the issue or problem under study. The data collection methods for this study include semi-structured interviews, focus-group interview and document analysis.

As the data are gathered, they are analysed to allow for continuous adjustment in the data collection process so that analysis can be done. This is in line with De Vos, et al. (2011), who argue that data collection and analysis go hand in hand in order to build a coherent interpretation of the data. Data analysis could necessitate revisions in data collection strategies.

Another qualitative research method used to collect data is document analysis. Document analysis is a common practice in qualitative studies. According to Bowen (2009), documents can provide data on the context within which research participants operate, as well as background information.

There were two instruments pertaining to the data collection process. The interview schedules for semi-structured individual and focus-group interviews were designed and the interview questions were carefully framed according to the research questions.

4.4.2.1 Pilot study

The pilot-testing of the instruments, provided opportunity to collect, sort and attempt to make some sense of the data and see if the method of analysis I had chosen worked. During the piloting stage of the research instruments, the interviews with five students and focus group interview with three tutors, was conducted based on the pre-set interview schedules. The aim was to fine-tune the research instruments before they were applied during the actual data collection stage. Piloting is used to ascertain the reliability of data collection tools. Pilot testing also allows the researcher to correct unclear questions and to make modifications with the view to achieving quality interviewing during the main investigation.

4.4.2.2 Semi-structured interviews

This qualitative study employed semi-structured individual interviews to capture and interpret the students' perspectives of written assessment feedback. Rule and John (2011:65) state that a semi-structured individual interview involves “a set of pre-set questions which initiate the discussion, followed by further questions which arise from the discussion”.

An interview schedule (see Appendix B) is prepared with semi-structured questions consisting of broad and open questions. According to Kawana (2007:29), semi-structured interviews “allow respondents to talk freely about their experiences and feelings without the researcher losing track”. Semi-structured individual interviewing differs from the structured interview in several important ways. Firstly, the semi-structured questions were pre-set to determine a line of inquiry when conducting an interview. Secondly, the researcher is at liberty to move the conversation to cover any issue of interest that may come up. This type of interview makes it possible to ask supplementary questions not included in the interview schedule. Thus, the choice for the semi-structured individual interview is mainly to allow flexibility when interviewing participants. This type of interview technique allows for the exploration of new and developing themes in a conversation.

The semi-structured individual interviews with the students would also yield a higher response rate than the questionnaires. Rule and John (2011:65) assert that semi-structured individual interviews, involves “pre-set questions which initiate the discussion, followed by further questions which arises from discussions”. In line with this view, the students as they get involved in the discussions might get motivated and may provide more insights about the topic under discussion.

In general, interviewing is a process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions associated to a research study. During the interview sessions, the researcher initiates a conversation on content stated by research objectives of systematic description, prediction or explanation.

Silverman (2012) regards interviews as the core and effective method in a qualitative data collection process. Similarly, interviews enable the researcher to explore an individual's views and experiences and are especially helpful for potentially sensitive topics such as responses to one's assessment feedback (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2007).

As indicated earlier, semi-structured individual interviews with 20 selected students, created a platform for the researcher to gain precise information correlated to the study and to compare and contrast evidence gathered during other interviews. All the students selected and interviewed were in their 2nd year and 4th of study via distance.

4.4.2.3 Focus group interview

Focus group interviews are organised discussions with a selected group of individuals to gain information about their views and experiences on a topic being discussed (Wilkinson, 2004). A focus group interview with the five tutors was conducted to obtain a better understanding of the research questions. The tutors were selected purposefully as only those that are tutoring distance students were included in the focus group interview. A focus group interview was conducted with the tutors (see Appendix C).

Focus group interviews are useful in exploring and examining what people think, how they think, and why they think the way they do about the issues of importance to them, without pressuring them into making resolutions. To this end, Stewart, Shamdasan and Rook (2009) view the focus group method as a flexible research tool which can elicit information from any topic from diverse groups of people in diverse settings. Although they might be diverse in views and opinions, the group of people are selected because they have characteristics in common that relate to the topic.

Hennink (2007: 6) cites that the success of focus group interviews depends heavily on 'the development of a permissive, non-threatening environment within the group where the participants can feel comfortable to discuss their opinions and experiences without fear of being judged or ridiculed by others in the group'.

Both the semi-structured interviews (Appendix B) and the focus group interview (Appendix C) were tape-recorded. Tape-recording allows for authentic record and the recorded audio can be replayed for verification. De Vos, et al. (2011) emphasise that the recording of data must be a planned activity, conducted in a manner appropriate to the setting and participants. In this regard the researcher made sure beforehand that the recording device is in proper working condition.

Note-taking cannot always ensure the same degree of accuracy of recording of the actual words spoken, however, as the researcher, I also took notes during the interviews.

4.4.2.4 Document analysis

The last data collection method that is used is document analysis. De Vos, et al. (2005:314) define document analysis as “the analysis of any written material that contains information about the phenomenon being researched”.

To complement the data I collected through semi-structured interviews and a focus group interview, I analysed the following documents. There could be some other relevant documents, however I regarded the following two documents as relating to the feedback and as sufficient to provide in-depth data on the topic being studied.

- Assessment Policy of the UNAM;
- Marked assignments.

Documentation is perceived as the process of analysing documents in order to gather facts. According to Bell (2005:133) documents are useful because, as one studies sources, one will gradually gain insight and detailed knowledge which gives one a “higher common sense” which will, in turn, permit a fuller appreciation of the worth of evidence.

The interpretive nature of this study is realised when documents are employed as data collection tools. The data in the forms of quotations, descriptions and excerpts from the documents result in narrative description.

4.4.3 Data analysis

De Vos, et al. (2011) advise that the data analysis commences by referring to the purpose of the study. The purpose of the study guides the depth and intensity of analysis.

Qualitative interpretive analysis generally uses content, thematic and discourse analysis in which raw qualitative data is transcribed, coded, categorised and interpreted.

According to Patton (2002), the goal of qualitative data analysis is to uncover emerging themes, patterns, concepts, insights, and understandings. Qualitative data analysis is the processes and procedures whereby data collected are accorded some form of explanation, understanding or interpretation (Lewins, Taylor & Gibbs, 2005).

Cohen, et al. (2008:183) define data analysis as organising, accounting for and explaining collected data. During the data analysis process, it is required from the researcher to locate information and to keep that information in context. According to Girbich (2004), the analysis involves checking data to see what emerges and identifying ideas to be followed up and then questioning where the information already collected is leading the researcher.

Procedures and strategies employed for data analysis are discussed in the next sections. A variety of analytical strategies are used in this study. Table 4.1 highlights the strategies which are used to reduce the data in a more manageable format.

Table 4.1: General inductive approach of qualitative analysis (Thomas, 2006)

Strategies	General inductive approach
Analytic strategies and questions	What are the core meanings evident in the text, relevant to evaluation or research objectives?
Outcome analysis	Themes or categories most relevant to research objectives identified
Presentation of findings	Description of most important themes

Thomas (2006) remarks that although the general inductive approach is not as strong as some other approaches in the area of theory or model development, it provides a simple and straightforward approach for deriving findings linked to the research questions. It is for this reason I found this approach more useful than other approaches. De Vos, et al. (2011: 399) state that, “qualitative data analysis is, first and foremost, a process of inductive reasoning, thinking, and theorising which certainly is far removed from structured, mechanical and technical procedures to make interference from empirical data to social life”.

Therefore, an inductive approach for qualitative data analysis was used over-archingly in this study. This allowed the categories or themes to ‘emerge’ from the data gradually. Another reason for using this approach was because the data were used to highlight underlying structures, experiences or processes of assessment feedback which may be evident in the raw data. The data will also be used to determine evidence-based key aspects for optimising feedback in ODL.

Thematic content analysis was used to analyse data from the open-ended questions and the material produced by the interviewees. The following steps were used in analysing such data as derived from Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2002):

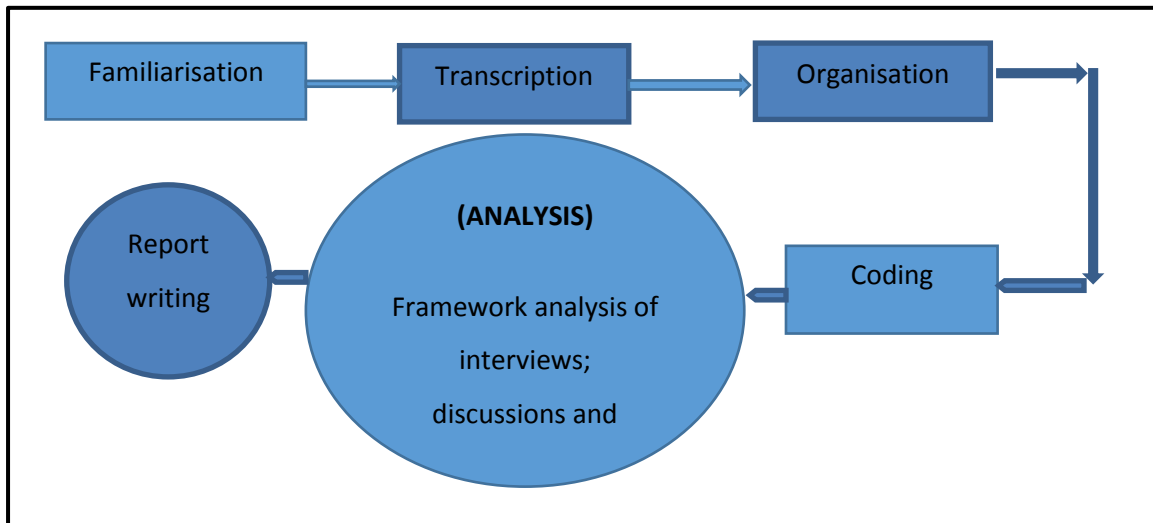


Figure 4.1: Stages of Data analysis (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002)

- Familiarisation and immersion is to be carried out by reading and re-reading the text over and over. This enables the researcher to understand and make meanings and interpretations from the data.
- Coding and defining of categories by putting data into analytically suitable themes.
- Inducing themes which the researcher is able to do on reading and re-reading the text. The themes normally emerge from the data.
- Elaboration which allows continuation with coding until new insights are found.
- Interpretation of the data and re-checking which is examining whether an interpretation is given of the categories found in the data and how it helps to derive the key aspects for optimising feedback in ODL.

According to Bowen (2009), document analysis is a systematic process for reviewing or evaluating both printed and electronic documents. A characteristic of the documents is that it contains text (words) and images that have been recorded without a researcher's intervention. Therefore, the researcher does scanning (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and clarification during document analysis.

The significance of using document analysis in this study is that it yields data in the form of excerpts, quotations, or entire passages that are then organised into major

themes, categories, and case examples specifically through content analysis (Labuschagne, 2003).

As is the case with other qualitative analytical methods, during document analysis the researcher will examine and interpret the data in order to solicit meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Furthermore, the researcher codes the content into themes similar to how the interview and focus group transcripts are analysed. During document analysis, systematic procedure of reviewing documents is done. The significance of documents is provided by Silverman (2012:79) when he states that, “many research questions and settings cannot be investigated adequately without reference to the production and use of documentary materials”. However, since documents are developed independently from the research agenda, they may not provide sufficient detail to answer the research question(s).

Document analysis is a form of qualitative research in which documents are interpreted by the researcher to give voice and meaning around a given topic. The documentary data are analysed together with data from interviews so that themes will emerge across all three sets of data. As part of the data analysis, clarification of findings and connecting qualitative evidence with theoretical and conceptual research questions are done. In the end, presentation and reporting on the findings are done.

Document analysis is a low-cost way to obtain empirical data, which if combined with data from interviews could minimise bias and establish credibility. The diverse data provides the evidence required to draw conclusions. It also maintains a “chain of evidence” that gives credibility, reliability and validity to the case study (Yin, 2014:128).

The following stages of data analysis were used in this study. The reason behind using thematic analysis is that it has the potential to highlight similarities and differences across the data set.

Table 4.2: Thematic analysis

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarising yourself with your data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading, and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes	Checking in the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells; generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis. (Braun and Clarke, 2006:87)

Data transcription was an on-going process and involved transcribing anything that involved oral speech into a written form. This included voice-recorded interviews, as well as events that occurred during the interviews. This enabled me to listen to the recorded voices during the data analysis process.

Cohen, et al. (2000) point out that transcriptions are certainly lose data from the original encounter and are hence an interpretation of the data. In an effort to avoid too much loss of data, I tried to capture what was being said, the speaker's tone of voice and inflections of the speaker(s), mood, and speed of speech as well any other events that were taking place at the same time.

Initially, I wanted to outsource the interviews for transcription due to the amount of time, energy, and emotional effort required in the production of each transcript. Nevertheless, as the process of transcription is also vital to the process of analysis (Bird, 2005), my personal transcription of each interview kept me close to the participants' 'lived' experiences and allowed me to hear each participant's views and ideas through familiarity with the interview transcripts.

This is also where field notes, a reflexive journal and feedback from observations helped me to gain a fuller picture. Another benefit of on-going collection and analysis is that transcriptions are done while they are still fresh in the mind.

4.5 MEASURES FOR TRUSTWORTHINESS

According to Rolfe (2006), a study is trustworthy if, and only if, the reader of the research report judges it to be so. In qualitative research, the notions of trustworthiness and validity of the study are synonymous.

Research is the pursuit of valid knowledge. Walsh (2001) states that validity in research "refers to the issue of whether the data collected is the true picture of what is being studied". Inferably, for data to be valid it must portray accurately the reality of the phenomena being studied. Thus, in this study, correct data collection procedures need to be followed and the data collection tools must collect the data successfully in order to achieve the goals of the study. The validity also has to do with the extent to which the researcher has used the research design and data analysis.

Different facets of trustworthiness in this study are operationalised by choosing the best possible data collection tools and format that portrays the results. The researcher needs to ensure that the participants' voices rise above that of the researcher and the conclusions drawn are based solely on the data gathered. Thus, the drawing of the conclusions is grounded in the results of the study.

With respect to the trustworthiness of this study, several measures are put in place to ensure that. In qualitative research, such measures have to do with the credibility,

transferability, dependability and confirmability as trustworthiness criteria, as they ensure rigour of findings (Schwandt, Lincoln & Guba, 2007).

4.5.1 Credibility

Credibility can be achieved through accurately describing the phenomena being researched, via careful transcription, engagement in the empirical field, triangulation of methods, sources, investigators and theories (Anfara, Brown & Mangione, 2002; Cohen, et al. 2008).

A member check (or participant validation) is another strategy that is used to ensure credibility. To this end, one such strategy used in this study was to give participants option of listening to the audio recordings afterwards, in order to verify whether recordings have been captured correctly. The questions were derived from the literature study in Chapter 2 and 3.

4.5.2 Transferability

Transferability is the degree to which the results of a study can be generalised to a broader population, case or situation. This is a difficult aspect of qualitative research, particularly in case studies. This is further intensified by the fact that I am working in the interpretive paradigm and am trying to understand a subjective experience. In order to guarantee that transferability in my study I provided what is called a 'thick description'. Schofield clarifies that this is a "clear, detailed and in-depth description so that others can decide the extent to which findings from one piece of research is generalisable to another situation" (in Cohen et al. 2008:110). As such, feedback key factors for optimising feedback could be generalised to other ODL institutions.

4.5.3 Dependability

In order to ensure dependability, the researcher applied overall approach of describing the results and findings of this study based on critical reflection. This approach to data analysis helps researchers to transform data into actual results (Watt, 2007). A vivid

description of the entire qualitative research process is done, including clarifying issues on validity, trustworthiness, and the analysis process. Accounts of the data and data analysis strategy and procedures are also documented in this study.

4.5.4 Confirmability

Anney (2014) states confirmability is the degree to which the results of an inquiry can be confirmed or corroborated by other researchers.

Thus, the researcher provided evidence that corroborates the findings and interpretations by means of auditing. One such way is that the tape-recorded audio and transcribed notes could be provided on request for auditing.

Besides the above mentioned measures, triangulation and trustworthiness are preserved through the differing and varied data collection methods and through the use of constant comparative methods which allow interplay between the data and theory, and continued engagement with participants in the study. As the researcher, I ensured that the participants' voices rise above that of my own, and that the conclusions drawn are based solely on the data gathered.

4.6 ETHICAL MEASURES

There are ethical considerations for this study. In accordance with the ethical guidelines of UNISA, initial permission and approval was obtained from UNAM where the tutors and students are from, and for access to the relevant documents. As stated in Chapter 1 (section 1.9), ethical clearance was obtained prior to the data collection process (see Appendix A). Ethics in qualitative research cannot be enshrined by passively adhering to one or another ethical code. However, it is important for the researcher to think through what the study means for the participants and devise the most relevant and helpful ethical protocols.

As an ethical measure, permission in the form of informed consent of the participants was obtained before recording the data (see Appendix F and G). The researcher will

store the recorded data safely until it is destroyed or deleted, after the data have been transcribed.

Ethically, only those participants who voluntarily avail themselves to partake in the interview are selected. The selected 20 students were interviewed. The interviews took place during the contact session arranged for distance students, which is attended by all students from Namibia. I deemed this a suitable opportunity to conduct individual interviews as there was a large concentration of students registered via ODL. Table 4.3 stipulates how the ethical issues in this study were taken care of.

Table 4.3: Ethical issues (Extracted from Creswell, 2013)

Where in research process ethical issues occurs	Type of ethical issues	How to address
Prior conducting the study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obtain local permission from UNAM and from Unisa ethical clearance. • Select sites without vested interest in outcome of the study. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consult ethical standards, codes and guidelines. • Seek permission in writing and follow steps and guidelines.
Beginning to conduct the study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disclose purpose of the study. • Don't pressurise participants into signing consent forms. • Involve participants voluntarily. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact participants in writing and explain the purpose of the study. • Invite participants in writing to participate voluntarily. • Obtain written consent from participants.
Collecting data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid deceiving participants. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build trust and inform participants of their rights and issues of anonymity.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect potential power imbalances and exploitation of participants. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inform the participants about tape-recordings and obtain their permission.
Analysing data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid siding with participants. • Avoid disclosing only positive results. • Respect the privacy of participants. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report multiple perspectives, report contrary findings. • Assign fictitious names or develop composite profiles.
Reporting data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not falsify evidence, data, findings, conclusions. • Don't plagiarise. • Avoid disclosing information harmful to participants. • Communicate in clear, simple and appropriate language. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report honestly. • Use appropriate language.
Publishing study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share data with others. • Publish extracts in journals. • Complete proof of compliance with ethical issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide copies of report to participants. • Share practical results such as the strategies to improve assessment feedback.

Table 4.3 illustrates where ethical issues occur in the study, which type they are and how they have been addressed. This table serves as a reminder as I continuously referred to it in addressing and adhering to ethical issues in the study.

4.7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter, a detailed explanation of the research design and methodological aspects of conducting the study were discussed. The evolution of qualitative research in itself is a methodological journey. A case study research strategy is used to portray a research design and methodological framework. As stated in Chapter 1, if constructed, applied and operationalised, the qualitative research approach would yield the desired research outcomes. In the next chapter, I present the data analysis and interpretation.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH DATA

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 4, the research design and methods of the study were discussed. This chapter presents the data, data analysis process and how the interpretation of the empirical data was conducted. Furthermore, the chapter reports briefly on the data capturing and presentation of data. Discussion of the analysis and interpretation of responses of the interviewees are also provided. Document analysis on the selected documents is provided.

The responses of the participants are interpreted in view of the literature findings. The questions in the interview schedules are posed in order to allow the students and tutors as participants to share their experiences on assessment feedback. This chapter ends with a brief summary.

To remind the reader, the aim of this study is to devise robust feedback delivery strategies or mechanisms which assist in optimising feedback in ODL. I would like to refer you to the main research question as stated in section 1.5 of Chapter 1. What are the key academic, strategic and operational requirements for optimising feedback in ODL?

5.2 RESEARCH PROCESS

This section provides a brief anecdotal report on the research process. This study employed a case study approach, using data generated from semi-structured interviews with students, a focus group interview with the tutors and document analysis.

The data collection has been done as the first step through semi-structured interviews, a focus group interview and document analysis. However, before the data collection

process commenced, preliminaries had been carried out. I applied and obtained the ethical clearance from UNISA (see appendix A) before the data collection process could be conducted. This was granted because the study complied with various ethical principles.

As mentioned already in Chapter 4, the research instruments have been pilot tested and refined. The research instruments used in the data collection process were two sets of interview schedules. The first schedule was for the semi-structured interview (Appendix B) and the second schedule was for the focus group interview (Appendix C).

Most of the questions were derived from the research questions and the literature study. They were mostly of a descriptive nature and were designed to obtain factual answers, views and opinions from the participants. As a result of the pilot testing, I effected few amendments on the interview schedules. Most of the changes were with the rephrasing and shortening of the questions. The pilot testing was an important phase in this study as it enabled me, using appropriate interview techniques, to improve the quality and reliability (trustworthiness) of the data collected. In the next sections, the report on the data collection processes, as per the respective data collection methods applied are provided.

This study employed an inductive process where data are sorted, sifted through, read and re-read. Codes were assigned to certain themes and patterns that emerged.

Generally the research process was satisfactory as the process went as planned with few challenges which could be addressed as alluded in the next sections.

5.2.1 Semi-structured interviews

I personally collected data from the students via semi-structured interviews. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 students. I used the prepared interview schedule to guide me during the interviews (see appendix B).

The participants were assured about the confidentiality of the data collected and that the information would solely be used for research purposes. The participants were also informed that they could withdraw at any time if they wished to do so, without any prejudice against them.

I did not have the contact details of the distance students, and as a result I could not obtain the permission and consent for participation in the study well in advance from the students. However, I made sure that I first had the consent of all my participants before I started with interviews. Two of the students withdrew because they did not want their interviews to be tape-recorded and I did not have any objections. As such, volunteerism of the participants was ensured and the participants could exercise their right to withdraw at any given time from the study.

“The guiding principle in selecting settings and participants for a qualitative study, is not usually to ensure representativeness or comparability, but, first, to identify groups, settings, or individuals that best exhibit the characteristics of the phenomena of interest, and second, to select those that are most accessible and conducive to gaining the understanding you seek” (Maxwell, 2012: 94).

The distance students came to Windhoek for the scheduled contact session from 22 August – 25 August 2016 to UNAM Khomasdal Campus. I made use of this opportunity to conduct semi-structured interviews with the students. The interviews took place in a classroom which was conducive for individual interviews. I had to make prior arrangements with tutors during contact sessions, to accord me 10 minutes to explain my research study and to ask for volunteers who wanted to partake in the semi-structured interviews.

I was mindful that involving participants, who just happened to be available, may result in data that is not specific or detailed. Therefore, I gave a thorough explanation to the participants individually for the second time regarding my study and clarified questions and issues raised by the participants. Some of the students were sceptical to partake and as such two participants withdrew. Some participants raised questions which were addressed satisfactorily before the commencement of the interviews.

It was a challenge to create an atmosphere for participation while doing tape-recording and taking written notes simultaneously. The semi-structured individual interviews were conducted over three days. The interviews varied between 20 to 30 minutes. I kept note-taking during the interviews to a minimum, as it was often distracting to the interviewee.

5.2.2 Focus group interview

I decided to conduct one focus group interview, which is an efficient way to gather information in a short time period. All participants were informed of the logistics, date, time and venue and all confirmed to attend.

Setting a date which suited all five tutors who were selected to partake in the focus group interview was a bit problematic. The first date for the focus group interviews had to be rescheduled as two participants notified their unavailability just a day before the scheduled date for the interview. However, the interviews were conducted on the rescheduled date and all participants were present. All participants were informed of the logistics i.e. date, time and venue in advance. I used the interview schedule for the focus group interview which comprised of open-ended questions designed to capture the in-depth experiences of the participants.

At the beginning of the focus group interview, I once again reminded the participants of the aims of the study, and emphasised their confidentiality and anonymity to be upheld throughout the study. The focus group interview lasted for 55 minutes.

Refreshments were provided at the end of the focus group interview in order to promote a positive atmosphere and to express appreciation to the tutors for participation in the study. The focus group interview went as planned.

5.2.3 Documents

In a case study, various types of data may be generated from a number of sources, using several methods. Therefore, I used documents as a third method to collect data

for the study. In this study, the institutional documents, voices of assessors (tutors) and students provided insight into the assessment feedback practice in ODL. I used the following four criteria suggested by Scott (1990:6) in selecting the documents: authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. In addition, I was mindful that documents are not just a simple representation of facts or reality but regarded them as a means of communication.

The reasons why I employed document analysis as one of my instruments are two-fold. Firstly, as Bailey and Garner (2010) assert, complexities that surround feedback exist due to the competing and often conflicting demands within lecturers' goals, institutional and education policies, and students' learning needs. Secondly, I employed document analysis to verify information from my other two data collection tools, the semi-structured interviews and the focus group interview. Thus, I collected and studied several documents to familiarise myself with how assessment feedback manifested itself in ODL. The documents selected are: UNAM Assessment Policy and 50 marked assignments.

5.2.4 Researcher as instrument

During this study, I made many observations as I interviewed participants. I gathered, analysed and interpreted all the information provided by participants. Thus, throughout the study, I served as the main data collection instrument during the data gathering process.

It is also suffice to refer to myself as an insider researcher. Within the institutional context, my position as an Instructional Materials Designer at CES and staff member of UNAM, was an aspect that I felt could not be ignored or eliminated from this study. Cousin (2013) proposes that such positioning be recognised, and addressed by using a reflexive approach, which incorporates the researcher's experience as a component of the data.

As an insider researcher, I brought particular perspectives, experiences and pre-conceptions to the research process, which could impact on the study in a number of

ways, as illustrated in the following sections. The participants (tutors and students) and myself, have had many formal and informal discussions regarding education, students, curricula, assessment, teaching and the broader issues facing higher education and in particular DE. As much as I saw myself as part of the greater academic community at UNAM, with no hidden agenda of judging tutors and their performance during the data-generating process, this may not have been the perception of all participants. I tried to be aware that my position could play a greater role on certain participants.

Cousin (2013:127) cautions that the researcher therefore, should consider “what perspective I am bringing to the inquiry? What insights does it afford? What alternative lens might be useful? What were the limits and scope of my inquiry? How was I positioned?” Therefore I considered how my view of the phenomenon, as well as my experience, might provide insight or cloud my vision. I recorded my thoughts and feelings in a research journal in an attempt to reflect, identify and raise my awareness of such conceptions. However, they were not included in this study, as they were merely aimed at interrogating my own assumptions.

The advantages of being an insider researcher contain providing profounder levels of understanding and consideration of participants (Taylor, 2011), tacit knowledge of the organisation and social group (Griffith, 1998; Hannabuss, 2000), and the potential for enhanced rapport and communication (Gunasekara, 2007; Mercer, 2007).

As the research was undertaken at UNAM where I am employed, consciousness and thought was given to each element in the research design, owing to my position as an insider researcher.

In general, the data collection process went as planned and only minor setbacks occurred during semi-structured interviews and in setting up a date for the focus group interview.

5.2.5 Trustworthiness of data collected

It was essential to triangulate data generated from the different data collection methods, so as to try and find out to what level the sets of data were alike or different. This helped me to comprehend the phenomenon from different viewpoints, and in so doing, I also supported the validity of the findings. The differing and varied data collection methods helped to maintain triangulation and trustworthiness through the use of constant comparative methods, which allow interplay between the data and theoretical framework. The process of triangulation allowed me to retain focus, identify logical patterns and themes linked to the theoretical framework and permitted flexible amendment of those evolving themes when necessary.

According to Patton (2002), triangulation helps the researcher guard against the accusation that a study's findings are purely an artefact of a single method, a single source, or a particular investigator's bias. Moreover, triangulation is the way in which the researcher explores different levels and perspectives of the same phenomenon and obtains a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena being studied.

To establish and promote trustworthiness of the study, four issues were considered important and incorporated in various phases of the study. These are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability as mentioned in Chapter 4. To this end, I ensured that this case study suits the case, research questions and study design.

I also ensured that all data collected remained confidential and anonymity was imposed at the point of transcription. I attempted to build genuine rapport and trust amongst myself and the interviewees, to allow for open and relaxed discussions.

5.3 DATA ANALYSIS

Nieuwenhuis (2010:100) understands qualitative data analysis to be “an ongoing and iterative (non- linear) process, implying that data collection, processing, analysis and reporting are intertwined, and not merely a number of successful steps”.

In line with the above, this section focuses on presenting the data in an organised manner. Given the interpretive perspective in this study, the purpose of the data analysis was to provide a description of the characteristics, processes, transaction, and contexts that constitute the strategic conversation of the phenomenon being studied.

5.3.1 Biographical data of participants

The biographical data of the students who participated in the semi-structured interviews and tutors for the focus group interview are presented and discussed in the next sections. The criteria used for selecting documents for analysis in this study are also provided. For ethical reasons, the names used for participants are pseudonyms and participants are referred to as the students A-T and tutors A-E.

Table 5.1: Participants of semi-structured interviews

Students Participants numbered from A	(20	Region	Year of study	Course of Study	Gender
Participant A		Khomas	2 nd	BEd (Pre & Lower Primary)	Female
Participant B		Kunene	3 rd	BEd (Pre & Lower Primary)	Female
Participant C		Oshikoto	4 th	BEd Secondary	Male
Participant D		Erongo	4 th	BEd (Pre & Lower Primary)	Female
Participant E		Okavango	4 th	Advanced Diploma in Secondary Education	Female
Participant F		Khomas	2 nd	BEd (Pre & Lower Primary)	Female
Participant G		Oshikoto	2 nd	Advanced Diploma in Sec Education	Male

Participant H	Okavango	3 rd	BEd Secondary	Male
Participant I	Oshana	2 nd	BEd Secondary	Female
Participant J	Khomas	3 rd	BEd Secondary	Female
Participant K	Oshana	3 rd	BEd Secondary	Female
Participant L	Ohangwena	3 rd	BEd (Upper Primary)	Female
Participant M	Omusati	2 nd	Advanced Diploma in Sec Education	Female
Participant N	Omusati	4 th	BEd Secondary	Male
Participant O	Khomas	2 nd	BEd Secondary	Female
Participant P	Oshana	2 nd	BEd Secondary	Female
Participant Q	Erongo	2 nd	Advanced Diploma in Sec Education	Male
Participant R	Okavango	4 th	BEd Secondary	Male
Participant S	Ohangwena	4 th	BEd Secondary	Female
Participant T	Oshana	2 nd	Advanced Dip in Professional Training	Female

Namibia is divided into 13 educational regions as indicated in the following map.



Figure 5.1: Educational regions of Namibia

From Figure 5.1, I noticed that 14 female and six male participants were included in the semi-structured interviews. No attempt was made to balance the gender equation, as only those who volunteered participated. The participants were one from Kunene, one from Erongo, four from Oshana, four from Khomas, two from Ohangwena, three from Okavango and two from Omusati. Unfortunately, there were no participants from Hardap, Karas, Omaheke, Otjozondjupa and Caprivi regions. As an important requirement, students who were in their 2nd, 3rd and 4th year of study via distance mode were included, as indicated in the table. The majority of participants pursued a BEd Secondary Degree, followed by BEd Pre- & Lower Primary and Advanced Diploma courses. In the next table, biographical data of the tutors who participated in the focus group interview is provided.

Table 5.2: Participants of the focus group interview

Five Tutors (numbered from A-E)	Course teaching	Years of experience in ODL	Faculty	Gender
Participant A	Adult Education	16	Education	Female
Participant B	Inorganic chemistry	25	Science	Male
Participant C	Economics	8	Economics & Management Science	Male
Participant D	Curriculum Studies	10	Education	Female
Participant E	Mathematics	21	Education	Male

Table 5.2 shows that participants included in the focus group interview, were from a variety of disciplinary and subject areas. The table also shows that the majority of tutors who participated in the study taught subjects such as Economics, Education and Science with the number of years' experience ranging from eight to twenty five years. In the selection process of participants for the focus group interview, I focussed

on the need to obtain rich experiential description (views) from the participants, without sacrificing the equal representation of experiences across the population of possible participants.

Although I thought of a second focus group interview, I reached the point of saturation because of the rich data collected during data analysis. I was cognisant that saturation was about the depth of the data (Burmeister & Aitken, 2012). According to Fusch & Ness (2015:1408), “data saturation is reached when there is enough information to replicate the study when the ability to obtain additional new information has been attained, and when further coding is no longer feasible”.

Ritchie and Lewis (2003) suggest that when conducting research interviews with professionals in their own working situations the setting needs to be private, quite comfortable, and conducive for concentration. It is also important to maintain a comfortable and non-threatening atmosphere during interviews. Therefore the focus group interview took place in the UNAM Foundation Board room which was deemed suitable to conduct the interview.

5.3.2 Interview data

In the next sections data obtained via the interview schedules are discussed in accordance with headings in the data collection process. During the interviews students were probed on their experience of various aspects of feedback on their assignments, whether given feedback was helpful, how long it took to get feedback on assessed work, what they did with the given feedback, whether they were familiar with the assessment criteria and what alternative assessment strategies they proposed. In addition to this, they were asked to elaborate on particular feedback experiences (situations) and possible shortcomings, if any (See appendix B). In the next sections data of the individual and focus group interviews are presented.

5.3.2.1 Individual interview's data

The following section indicates the data of the interviews conducted with the students. The questions as indicated on the interview schedule were followed in presenting the data.

(i) Do you get feedback on assignments from the tutors?

On this question the responses from the participants differed almost on an equal basis, where 10 students responded affirmatively, while the other 10 said that they did not receive feedback.

With further probing, some students responded that in the case where they received feedback it always came late – even after the exam had been written. Participant E indicated that feedback was received on an assignment, a year after it had been submitted.

(ii) On the question whether given feedback is clear and detailed, the following responses were received:

Participant B replied: "Yes, it is clear"; Participant C indicated: "Not at all, some comments are too vague and general"; Participant D responded: "Sometimes, I don't understand the comments". Participant R answered: "I will say yes and no. Some comments are clear some not. Some tutors' handwriting is not legible". Participant S said: "Yes the comments I received so far are all clear". Participant T replied: "I don't find the comments clear and thus not helpful to me".

To my view, it is true that the handwriting of some of the tutors is illegible and warrants improvement. Too many marking load and lack of guidance as how to provide constructive feedback may hinder tutors to provide clear and detailed feedback.

(iii) Is the feedback on assessment tasks helpful? Please explain

The majority of the students expressed that some tutors had a tendency of not answering students' email enquiries on course-related matters and were hardly reachable even via telephone.

Participant N commented: "There were no comments given for one of my courses, only the grade and in that way, as there were no comments, the grade only was not helpful at all".

On the question whether they understand written feedback given by the tutors, the following responses were received: Participant H indicated: "The feedback comments are not helpful, but I suggest that the memo be attached for Maths as it will be helpful in that way".

Participant M mentioned that for Science and Maths courses, solutions are put on the portal for all the students which they regard as very helpful.

Participant K stated: "Sometimes it is helpful especially some tutors give additional readings or websites that we should consult but some comments are not helpful".

Participant G said: "Yes, helpful comments are those that guide you not to repeat the same mistakes, but some comments are too short and difficult to make out what the tutor want".

It is important that the assessment and feedback guidelines be discussed at various faculty and departmental levels so that standardised guidelines and procedures are introduced and implemented.

(vi) What is the time it takes to receive feedback on assignments or academic tasks after submission?

As already indicated by some of the participants as they responded to previous questions, the majority of the participants expressed that the time taken for assignments to be returned to them is a major concern.

Upon further probing of what the appropriate timeframe would be appropriate to receive feedback on assignments, Participant L suggested: "I would appreciate it if we at least receive it two weeks before we write the exams".

Participant A replied: "Before we write the exams, even two weeks before the exams is enough".

Participant F answered: "Since, we are given 1 month to complete the assignments; the tutors must also take only one month to return the assessed work to us. The tutors must be given exactly the same time as we are given; if we are given two weeks then the same must apply for the tutors".

Participant I said: "It will be good if tutors return the assignments a two weeks after submission to give for revision and corrections and so on".

(v) What do you do with the feedback provided on assignments?

A few students just wanted only the marks/grades for the assignments, while the majority of the students interviewed indicated the need for both the marks and comments, as constructive comments as feedback would help them improve their performance in future based assignments. On the question what action students embark upon when they receive the assignments, the following responses were received:

"I first check the grade and then the comments".

"I just look at the grade as I am interested only in the grade".

"I read the assignment through it page by page and read the given comments".

"I just look at the grade as there are no comments given."

It is my conviction that the students want to see the graded mark first upon receiving their assignments and not the comments. Seemingly, those students who do well in their assignments don't bother with the written comments and only those who didn't do well bother to read the feedback comments.

vi) With regards to collaborative learning endeavours in ODL mode, the majority of the students explained during interviews that working with other students gave them a chance to discuss the assignments (feedback) and that peers provided support and that they learnt from one another. The following responses serve as examples.

Participant N revealed: "Discussing feedback with peers is helpful, because someone else knows what I don't know and he/she doesn't know what I know. So we learn from one another".

Participant O mentioned: "Ya, the world is too small to achieve greatness on your own, that's why is it important to work as a team and to learn from one another".

Participant P: "I also rely on the full-time students doing the same course as me to assist me where I don't understand".

Participant S stated: "Discussing feedback with fellow students makes it easier to understand your mistakes".

The data revealed that the students embark upon collaborative learning process in order to foster a culture of exchanging views and opinions on education issues for mutual benefit. This gesture is commendable.

(vii) Are you familiar with the assessment criteria for the particular course you are enrolled for? (Marking guidelines)

The participants mentioned rubrics and marking schemes that are provided to them in some courses and that they were familiar with the assessment criteria for most of their courses. No single student from the twenty students could confidently confirm their

awareness of the Assessment Policy of UNAM. Most of the responses varied between – “*I don't know*” to, “*I think I know*”.

As a shortcoming/challenge with the assessment criteria Participant F remarked: “I think the most burning issue is for us as students is to receive feedback on time and if whatever methods aimed at getting feedback on time is implemented, we will appreciate that. And also if we as distance students are treated equally with full-time students and receive equal services, then it will be fine”.

Participant R mentioned: “There are times that we as distance students are treated as full-time students. To be more specific some lecturers are treating us like that and being a distance student is really tough. We must be given even enough time to complete and submit assignments as courses are many and we are working people”.

The Assessment Policy of UNAM is a very important document which supposedly has to regulate issues pertaining assessment feedback. Thus, it is embarrassing to note that the students are not familiar with it.

(vii) What do you think of having ITC in the assessment process, for example, online submission of assignments, online assessment and you also receive online feedback on your academic tasks?

The participants expressed the need for alternative assessment procedures which are suitable for them as ODL students. However, they also expressed that embarking upon technology may disadvantage those who live in remote and rural areas where there may not be access to Wi-Fi and internet connectivity.

Participant J stated: “I heard that the online submission which supposedly should be faster is more problematic and have caused delays. So I rather submit the printed copy as I don't want to take chances. I even don't want to try it from the bad experiences from other students”.

Participant R indicated: “Its’ a good move, but most of us are living in rural areas where there is no network or internet access. Another thing is not all of us are computer literate.”

As per data, to embed technology in ODL and particularly in assessment process is inevitable. However, planning process towards its implementation is of paramount importance as it will ensure relevance and effectivity of a given technological tool.

5.3.2.2 Focus group data

This section presents the data collected from the tutors during the focus group discussion. The interview questions on the schedule (Appendix C) covered tutors’ perceptions of feedback, feedback process and the nature of feedback. Furthermore, questions about the impact of feedback, credibility, implications of feedback for instructional materials development and what strategies are required to improve feedback, were asked. In accordance to the interview questions on the interview schedule, the following data were captured.

The emphasis of the questions was on how academic staff members tutoring in ODL conceptualise and experienced written feedback in the larger context of what they do. The interviewer encouraged them to reflect on their own practices and the institutional processes they engage with.

(i) Perceptions of feedback

a) What is your understanding of feedback?

On this question, tutor C said that it is a process whereby a tutor gets back to the students and provides feedback even if they have done well. Another one said it is a process that involves not only a tutor but should ideally be a two-way process where students also are expected to get back to the tutors to enquire about the given feedback. A different view given by tutor A was, “To me in short, it is a process whereby comments and grading are given to the students”.

In general, tutors displayed understanding of what feedback is. However, the two-way communication of feedback seems to be lacking between tutors and students.

b) Do you think feedback matters?

There was a consensual agreement among all five participants (tutors) that feedback matters especially for distance students. Tutor D contended: "For distance students feedback remains the only means of communication, therefore it is a must to give feedback to them. Tutor-marking is in fact a process through which we do teaching to distance students".

Although the tutors commented that tutors feedback is inevitable, I think the major concern is whether it is worth the effort and time they spent on it. There is no certainty whether the students engage with given feedback and whether it indeed assists in student learning.

(ii) Feedback process

a) How is assessment of academic work of students done?

Tutor E responded: "For my particular course, I give two assignments and a test from which I obtain the continuous assessment mark".

It seems that each course have different requirement as how continuous assessment is obtained.

b) How is feedback delivered to the students? Verbal/written?

All five participants (tutors) indicated that only written feedback is given to the distance students, except during the contact sessions where verbal feedback is provided to the questions raised.

c) Is there an assessment policy or guidelines for the assessment process?

I referred the tutors to the UNAM Assessment Policy and wanted to know whether they were familiar with the policy which was with me. To my dismay, only tutor C from the five indicated knowledge about the UNAM Assessment Policy. Experienced and senior tutors expressed a lack of awareness of the policy.

(iii) The nature of feedback:

a) In which form(s) is feedback provided to the distance students?

Tutor D: "It must be understood that it is not in all subjects that it is possible to provide proper written feedback like in Physics and Maths. What else do I have to give as comments except to say work harder? In face to face scenarios or during contact sessions, it is possible to show and direct the students where they have gone wrong".

(iv) Impact of feedback (purpose):

a) Is feedback read and acted on by students?

According to tutor B: "It is important to give good feedback to the students which will enhance learning, but we can't ensure whether the students use it or not. If they don't use it, it's up to them".

b) Does feedback have any value for you as the tutor?

I obtained the following three different responses to this question:

Tutor A replied: "I think it has..... you know. By providing feedback one assists students in learning and thus it provides self-satisfaction".

Tutor D indicated: "Teaching takes place through commenting that in itself is a value for me".

Tutor E mentioned: "Regarding the value of feedback for us, it is difficult to see the impact of written comments as we mark the end exams. There is no time to assess its impact".

The data indicate that tutors don't provide explicitly affirming answers whether feedback has value to them.

c) What is your experience during crafting assessment feedback for the students?

What most of the tutors highlighted as to what they noticed when assessing the academic work of distance students are plagiarism and the fact that they copy from each other.

Tutor C said: "Students are prone to copy each other when the assignments are typed, probably because of the electronic format".

According to tutor B, students seem not to be aware of the policy on plagiarism and the consequences of plagiarism.

d) Do you get queries/clarification on feedback from the students?

Tutor D mentioned: "Yes some of the students do call or contact me with enquiries on given feedback, while some students do not enquire".

e) On the question of why some students do not engage with the feedback, most of the tutors did not provide convincing reasons, tutor E responded: "I really don't know, but it is worrisome after we spend a lot of time on that", was the response from one tutor".

Tutor A believed: "Some students simply don't understand the role of feedback. They don't see it as particularly valuable and don't really understand what we are doing or trying to tell them. I also doubt whether they even read the given comments".

(iv) Credibility of feedback

a) How do you ensure the assessment on academic work is done in a fair and justifiable manner?

Tutor A contended: “From my experience, sometimes the students come to enquire about given marks and an amicable solution is found and students’ concerns are addressed satisfactorily”.

Tutor C indicated: “No students have come back to me regarding marks – that’s number one. Number two – there are allegations going around that we don’t do justice to distance students when marking, but how is it possible if we have all the memorandums or mark schemes for all the students? It is unfair to say that as there are no grounds to say that”.

(vi) Implications for designing learning materials:

a) What problem(s)/challenges do you experience in crafting feedback on assignments?

Tutor B: “The challenge with distance students is that I never see their progress, they remain anonym to me and it’s difficult to assess their academic progress or even the impact of that assessment or feedback on their learning”.

Tutor C: “I have got a bit of challenge with the materials developed for distance students. Firstly the some study Guides are not self-instructional as it is claimed. It doesn’t guide students. I suggest study should be written differently and text books not reproduced as study guides.”

Tutor D: “I think the answers to activities in the study guides should not be given in the guide as it discouraged thinking and learning from the students. Some questions in the activities encourage copy and paste, which I think should also be looked into”.

The design and development of instructional materials process for distance students seems to have some challenges.

(vii) Strategies for improving feedback practices:

a) Can you provide suggestions as how feedback practices could be improved?

Response from tutor E: “Distance students don’t make use of the consultation hours which are given for full-time students. It would be good, when possible, if they also came in person to consult us during those consultative time-slots”.

Suggestion from tutor B: “Especially for the Languages, what may also work for other courses is that I make notes of the mistakes made by the students as I do marking. In the end I compile a report and share it on the portal with all the students. By doing so all the students benefit from such generic feedback”.

Comment from tutor C: “If I may comment, the assignments for distance students should be compiled in such a way as to discourage students from copying and pasting from the Study Guide”.

b) Other comments/ issues which you want to raise regarding assessment feedback in ODL?

Tutor B indicated: “There is not much to improve, for as long as the numbers of students were still high, it is likely that we will continue use objective testing”.

Another proposal made by tutor C: “Change the current ratio of 40% continuous mark and 50% final exam mark to 40% continuous assessment mark and 60% final exam mark”.

I agree that the ratio could be changed to 40% continuous assessment mark and 60% final exam mark but that couldn’t be regarded as alternative method of assessing distance students.

5.3.3 Document data

For the document analysis, as already indicated (See section 5.2.3 of this Chapter), the following documents were selected: UNAM Assessment Policy and 50 marked assignments.

I had to decide which documents were suitable and relevant for analysis and would aid in gathering empirical evidence for this study. I selected these documents as they relate to feedback and as such relevant to the study. The reason why I employed documentary analysis in this study is for the purpose of triangulation as indicated earlier. The document analysis assisted in answering the research question: What is the current feedback practice(s) employed in ODL?

5.3.3.1 UNAM Assessment Policy

With regards to the UNAM Assessment Policy, the majority of students and tutors indicated during the interviews that they were not familiar with this policy. This signals a very worrisome situation, as it indicates that the policy which is aimed at guiding academic staff and students of UNAM in all assessment and evaluative processes is not known to the recipients.

The policy makes provision for the development of alternative or additional forms of effective assessment. However, except for traditional methods of assessment such as formative, summative and continuous assessment, there is an absence of alternative or additional methods of assessment. Particularly absence of the technology-based assessments is evident.

It is stated in the UNAM Assessment Policy that students will be informed how they will receive feedback and by when. It is also stated in the Policy that the University will provide timely feedback. Some of these provisions stated in the Policy do not augur well for the students studying via ODL. The reality is contrary to these statements as this does not occur in the case of distance students. Feedback does not stand out as an integral part of assessment in this policy. Neither is it indicated that feedback is a core element of teaching, learning and assessment.

Reflecting on the data from the UNAM Assessment Policy, I asked both students and tutors during interviews about their knowledge of the Assessment Policy of UNAM. I must report, to my embarrassment, that the majority of tutors and students expressed

that they were not familiar with UNAM's Assessment Policy. The following are examples of the responses from both tutors and students about their knowledge of the UNAM Assessment Policy: *"I think it is there, but I didn't find time to read it". "I don't know about it". "I think it is on the intranet"*.

I noted that although this policy has been approved by the UNAM Senate, its implementation and monitoring mechanisms are lacking. In meeting the expectations set out in this policy, all the faculties offering programmes via ODL mode must develop guidelines in support of this Policy. Monitoring of this policy could be done through quality assurance and management processes.

5.3.3.2 Marked assignments

I selected a total of 50 marked assignments, five from the already mentioned courses as indicated in the table 5.3. As the researcher, I employed document analysis as a method for gathering, analysing and interpreting the content of the marked assignments. The analysis focused on students' writing and tutor feedback on assignments. This data collection strategy was also employed to validate both student and tutor responses to confirm or corroborate information from other instruments (semi-structured and focus group interview). I have drawn a total of 50 assignments from the courses indicated in the table below.

Table 5.3: Marked assignments

Name of the courses	Programme	Number of marked assignments
Educational Research	BEd (Adult Education)	10
Project Phase 2 of English	B (Business Administration)	10
Physical Chemistry 2	BEd (Secondary)	10
Curriculum, Primer and Teaching	BEd (Secondary)	10

Contemporary Social Issues	Diploma in HIV/AIDS management and counselling	10
		Total = 50

Table 5.3 shows the name of the five courses, programmes and number of assignments drawn and perused for this study. The selection was dictated by the courses taken by the students who participated in the semi-structured interviews while attempts were made to include courses from different subject disciplines.

Considerable evidence came to the fore during the analysis of the marked assignments which could suggest reasons why some students do not understand or know how to respond to the feedback given.

Moreover, document analysis was adopted in this study to answer the sub-question: What are the experiences of the students and tutors on feedback in assignments and learning tasks in ODL?

Some of the themes emerging from analysis of marked assignments are illegible hand writing, negative tone, ambiguous feedback, and incomprehensible feedback, less time spent on feedback, inappropriate feedback, clarity and applicability of feedback.

Assessment at CES for the ODL students is done in two ways: continuous assessment and term-final examination. In continuous assessment, students are required to do a certain number of assignments or tests for each course. The marks obtained in the assignments contribute to the final course result. Fifty percent of the continuous assessment mark obtained from the assignments contributes to the final exam mark.

Term-final examination is another component of the overall assessment system of a course. The eligibility to sit for the final examination in respect of each course, is based on the performance in continuous assessments. Written assignments are still the main way in which ODL students are assessed in higher education.

Feedback content entails elements of feedback and the format in which feedback is provided. The next extract shows an example of assignment of a distance student.

Assignment Question 2

Discuss the merits and demerits of Article 23 of chapter 3 of the Namibian Constitution (affirmative Action).

e.g.

Introduction

Article 23 chapter 3 of Namibia constitution recalling the social and cultural rights, the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, the convention against inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, the convention on the rights of the child, and the international convention on the protection of the rights of all migrant workers and the international covenant on civil and political rights, the international convention on the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination.

Affirmative action is a government policy which promotes equality among minority groups and protects them from hate crimes and racist injustice.

Is the policy of favoring members of a disadvantaged group who are currently suffer or historically have suffered from discrimination within a culture, these people are disadvantaged for historical reasons, such as oppression or slavery. Historically and internationally, support for affirmative action has sought to achieve goals such as bridging inequalities in employment and pay, increasing access to education, promoting diversity, and redressing apparent past wrongs, harms, or hindrances.

It recognize the inherent dignity and worth and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family as the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.

Affirmative action is one of the most effective tools for redressing the injustices caused by our nation's historic discrimination against people of color and women, and for leveling what has long been an uneven playing field. A centuries-long legacy of racism and sexism has not been eradicated despite the gains made during the civil rights era. Avenues of opportunity for those previously excluded remain far too narrow. We need affirmative action now more than ever.

The merits of Article 23 of chapter 3 of the Namibian Constitution

Increasing Diversity: A large part of the Affirmative actions laws specify minority percentages for employment. This means that companies cannot discriminate a person or refuse to hire a person, solely based on their skin color or sexual orientation.

Increasing Greater Opportunities to the People: Children of minority are much more likely to be subjected to poverty, violence, and other disrupting things. This greatly impacts the education and schools of these communities. These laws help to give these students the help and boosts that they need to succeed in the world.

Do not Copy and
paste information
acknowledging of
cheats
plagiarism

Figure 5.2 Feedback comments on assignment

In the comments in figure 5.2 it is stated: "Do not copy and paste information without acknowledging, it cheats, plagiarism". This creates doubt whether the newly registered students pursuing courses via ODL are sensitised about plagiarism, academic writing and other issues such as assessment and feedback. In figure 5.3, the feedback comments which could be regarded as much helpful to the students are illustrated.

Assignment Book		Official
PARTICULARS REQUIRED MUST BE FURNISHED BY STUDENT		2016 -08- 18
Student number	Private Bag 13245, Windhoek Centre for Distance Education STUDY CENTRE:	
Subject	Indicate the centre you would like to complete this assignment	
Assignment no.	Subject Code	Windhoek -
2	C S 1 3 5 8 0	Gobabis -
Lecturer's Comments		Katima Mulilo
<p>Your work lacks supportive literature. Please consult APA guide for both in-text citation and referencing guidance.</p>		Keetmanshoop
		Khorixas
		Otjiwarongo
		Oshakati
		Rundu
		Swakopmund
		Tsumeb
		Eenhana
Tutor's name		Tutor's name
Tutor's signature		Tutor's signature
Marks awarded	50	Re-submission mark
Date	25/07/2016	Date

Figure 5.3 Lecturer's comments on assignment

I noticed that the some feedback provided in Figure 5.3, is balanced as it points out the positive as well as areas which need improvement. Explicit suggestions as how

students might improve subsequent assignments are not indicated as part of the feedback. Generally, I observed that some tutor markers gave useful comments while others did not give any helpful comments.

SUBJECT		Gobabis		GO	<input type="checkbox"/>
Curriculum, Primer and Teaching.		Katima Mulilo		KM	<input type="checkbox"/>
ASSIGNMENT NO.		Keetmanshoop		KE	<input type="checkbox"/>
3		Khorixas		KH	<input type="checkbox"/>
SUBJECT CODE		Otjiwarongo		OT	<input type="checkbox"/>
APT 2580		Oshakati		OS	<input type="checkbox"/>
COMMENTS		Rundu		RU	<input type="checkbox"/>
The assignment required you to explain how you will teach a lesson of a primer. But, you explained how you will design a primer. You did not answer the question.		Swakopmund		SW	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tutor's name		Tsumeb		TS	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tutor's signature		Eenhana		EE	<input type="checkbox"/>
Marks Awarded		Opuwo		OP	<input type="checkbox"/>
47%		Tutor's Name			
Date		Tutor's signature			
		Resubmission mark			
		Date			

Figure 5.4 Example of constructive feedback

In the comments in figure 5.4, a student is informed what he/she did wrong and what he/she should have done correctly. Though not explicit, the comments suggest to the student how to improve or correct mistakes in the future. Figure 5.5 indicates an example of ambiguous feedback.

Assignment Book

PARTICULARS REQUIRED MUST BE FURNISHED BY STUDENT

Student number

2 0 0 9 7 1 9 0 5

Subject

PHYSICAL CHEMISTRY 2

Assignment no.

1

Subject Code

C H M 3 6 3 1

Lecturer's

Comments

Student did not write compulsory Test, therefore Assignment not marked! Student did also not do practicals!

STUDY

Indicate the
you would
this

Windhoek

Gobabis

Katima Mu

Keetmans

Khorixas

Otjiwaron

Oshakati

Rundu

Swakopm

Tsumeb

Eenhana

Tutor's name	1
Tutor's signature	[REDACTED]
Marks awarded	0
Date	10 May 2016

Tutor's name	
Tutor's signature	
Re-submission mark	
Date	

Assignment Book

PARTICULARS REQUIRED MUST BE FURNISHED BY STUDENT

Student number

2 0 0 9 7 1 9 0 5

Subject

PHYSICAL CHEMISTRY 2

Assignment no.

1

Subject Code

C H M 3 6 3 1

Lecturer's
Comments

Student did not write compulsory
Test, therefore Assignment not
marked! Student did also not
do practicals!

STUDY

Indicate t
you woul
this :

Windhoek

Gobabis

Katima Mu

Keetmans

Khorixas

Otjiwaron

Oshakati

Rundu

Swakopm

Tsumeb

Eenhana

Tutor's name	1
Tutor's signature	[Redacted]
Marks awarded	0
Date	10 May 2016

Tutor's name	
Tutor's signature	
Re-submission mark	
Date	

Figure 5.5 Example of ambiguous feedback

The comments given on the assignment in figure 5.5 indicate an unavoidable lack of clearness of assessment standards and consequently the potential for vagueness in the giving, receiving and interpretation of feedback. Debatably, feedback can only be effective when the learner understands the feedback and is prepared and able to act on it.

In several cases, tutors just gave a one-word comment (*Excellent*) on the assignment. Notably some tutor markers just ticked the paragraphs to indicate they were fine. Students indicated during semi-structured interviews that they do not only want ticks, but want tutors to point out where they were correct or incorrect. Figure 5.6 indicates an example where tutors provide limited comments to the students on assignments.

Rundu	RU	<input type="checkbox"/>
Swakopmund	SW	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tsumeb	TS	<input type="checkbox"/>
Eenhana	EE	<input type="checkbox"/>
Opuwo	OP	<input type="checkbox"/>

Tutor's name	
Tutor's signature	
Marks Awarded	48%
Date	19/09/16

Tutor's Name	
Tutor's signature	
Resubmission mark	
Date	

Figure 5.6 Example of limited comments

For example, on this assignment in figure 5.6 “*good effort*” is the only comment given for a student who obtained 48%. This kind of comment is not helpful and will not steer the students on to engage with the feedback.

It is the ideal for students to engage with written feedback, but if students do not understand the feedback they are given, they will not engage with it. Another reason given by the students for non-engagement with the feedback, is because they do not find that it offers them motivation or guidance, or is not seen as useful for their future learning.

In view of the above, analysis of the data from the Assessment Policy, marked assignments and marking guides, provided insight into assessment feedback that were espoused in the institutional documents. The marked assignments were therefore from the 2nd and 3rd year levels of a degree. These assignments were selected as they were all year-long modules, and were discipline-specific in that they dealt directly with the practice of assessment feedback.

Issues picked up on marked assignments:

- Some assignments had only a graded mark with no comments. Getting a grade with no comments is understood by students as useless and does not contribute to further learning.
- Some tutors gave the same or very similar feedback to many students.
- Tutors correct mistakes while failing to address errors which can be a costly waste of instructional time.
- Tutors' remarks given as feedback are often confusing, non-reasoned, and students have difficulties in applying it to their learning.
- Some feedback given does not contain cues for improvement and renders it to be useless for student learning.
- Some feedback does not suggest remedial actions to improve weaknesses.
- I noticed that feedback given on assignments tended to focus mainly on the mechanical aspects of language although it is not wrong to point out grammar aspects as part of feedback.

I found that the rich data of the marked assignments and the interviews of the tutors added depth and detail, covering the explicit and tacit aspects of assessment feedback. Subsequently themes and categories are discussed in the next section.

5.3.4 Themes and categories

As stated in Chapter 4 (section 4.4.3), the general inductive approach of qualitative analysis is applied for this study. Also, as indicated in the same section, stages of data analysis derived from Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2000) are followed.

As stated in Chapter 1 (section 1.7.2.2) both semi-structured and focus group interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants and transcribed (see Appendix D and E). Data generated from the interviews were analysed from the taped-scripts and the notes taken, plus the notes based on the observation of the participants during the face-to-face interviews. The content analysis of the interviews was based on the themes set out during the interview schedules as well as those which emerged from the data.

I was aware of the necessity to sift, reduce, label, interpret and present the raw data that I engendered from the field. The raw data I generated was then coded and sorted into categories in relation to the study goals.

From document analysis, I developed two categories being, feedback strategy and feedback content. Feedback strategy is to do with how (written or verbal) comments are provided, whether both grade and written comments are given or only one of them and whether opportunities are given for students to apply the feedback.

I reviewed the texts in order to identify the underlying themes. I have done profound reading which produced an array of topics. These topics were organised into themes with their subordinate categories. I also constructed a framework for the discussion of the evidence.

Subsequently, I transcribed directly onto the computer as this allowed the attachment of labels, sorting, searching and collating the data in many different ways. As I read through the transcripts, I made notes to become immersed in the data. Identification of patterns and theme generation followed. Anfara, et al. (2002) ask: what precisely does it mean when a researcher writes 'themes emerged'? They point out there is 'no right way' of analysing data but propose a method of code mapping with three iterations of analysis. In the first iteration, original codes appear from the data and allow meaning and insight to be brought to the words and actions of the participants. In other words, scrutinize what is there and label it (Anfara, et al. 2002).

During the analysis, new codes emerged from the data, or existing codes were refined by adding sub-codes. The emergence of the new codes came when I did the triangulation of the data of the two interviews, as well with the document analysis.

As I read through the transcriptions I made use of the codes. The phase of coding assisted in the relating of conditions and formation of an understanding of the situations affecting assessment feedback while searching for explanations behind the phenomena is studied. I also detected which codes were most popular amongst the set of 20 participants and highlighted which codes were rarely used and why. The coding procedure was based on that developed by Charmaz (2006), who suggests open coding line by line, which although rigorous helps to reduce researcher influence and bias.

Five major themes emerged from the data. Themes and categories are outlined in the next table.

Table 5.4: Themes and categories

Themes	Categories	Codes
1. Types of feedback	Format of feedback	Written feedback; Poor feedback; Language.
2. Purpose of feedback	Effectiveness; Helpfulness; Engagement.	Don't serve purpose; Impact of feedback.
3. Timeliness of feedback	Delayed feedback.	Don't receive assignments
4. Assessment feedback	Criteria; Technology-based assessment.	Online assessment method
5. Challenges of assessment feedback	Strategies; Recommendations.	Lack of support; Workload; Volume of marking.

The next section provides data interpretation of the study.

5.4 DATA INTERPRETATION

As I discuss the themes, I have interwoven literature into these themes and evidence derived from the data during the interviews. This empirical approach complemented both the more abstract reasoning and evaluative perspectives found in some literature on feedback, and also issues raised by the students during semi-structured interviews about feedback.

Each of the themes in Table 5.6 represents a single possible way to approach the questions that were posed to the participants during the interviews. These themes are not intended to be seen as mutually exclusive or definitive, but instead complement or overlap one another. The transcriptions of the semi-structured interviews were grouped under the headings of the themes in Table 5.7 and discussions of findings provided in the following sections.

5.4.1 Theme 1: Types of feedback

Feedback is very important, more especially in the ODL context, as it is one of the few interactions that tutors or markers have with students. Therefore, the type of feedback that students receive from tutors cannot be underestimated. The type of feedback is critical towards a better understanding of a particular course and what is expected from students and moreover for exam preparation. It is recommendable for tutors to provide type of feedback that is more likely to be understood and acted upon by students.

I deduced from the data that feedback remains overwhelmingly in the written form despite innovations in teaching and learning.

All the students interviewed expressed a preference for both grade and marks allocated on their assignments. This is in contrast with the proposal by Black and William (1998) and Rust, O'Donovan and Price (2005) that feedback should contain comments only and not the final grade.

This study enables me to concur with Taras (2003:550) (See Chapter 2, section 2.2) who alludes that research on feedback shows a consensus which states, “ feedback is not a freestanding piece of information, but that it forms part of a learning context where all the protagonists need to be engaged in the processes”. In line with this view, consideration of assessment feedback from academic, strategic and operational perspectives at the given ODL institution may provide a holistic view.

Given today’s information era and “knowledge explosion”, ODL institutions have no choice but to align their activities towards e-learning and computer-based technology. The data indicated that some students proposed implementation of online assessment which may help resolve some issues.

5.4.2 Theme 2: Purpose of feedback

The data revealed that there is a perceived lack of understanding on the part of tutors as to why feedback is provided on assignments. In Chapter 3, section 3.3 Gamlem and Smith (2013:155) cite that the studies done by “researchers point out that feedback leads to learning gains only when it includes guidance about how to improve; when students have opportunities to apply the feedback; understand how to use it; and are willing to dedicate effort”.

Students may use feedback in different ways, from enhancing their motivation and learning, to encouraging reflection and clarifying their progress. Quite a number of students indicated that they simply did not get their marked assignments back, which meant that they received no feedback at all. Students who do not receive feedback may not know where they are going wrong, what they need to improve, and what their relative strengths and weaknesses are.

In Chapter 3, sections 3.2 Price et al. (2010) argue that much staff time and effort go into the production of feedback, while little is being done to measure the impact of feedback.

In many instances at CES, tutor-markers not in the employ of UNAM are hired to mark assignments of ODL students. As a result they may not be known and reachable by ODL students. The possible predicament is that an increase in the use of anonymous markers has also been cited as a barrier, as this can lead to students being reluctant to approach lecturers because they do not know them (Price, et al. 2011).

In order to help address issues pertaining to feedback quality and its effectiveness, tutor-markers need to be supported in developing strategy-focused approaches of feedback, rather than engaging in diagnostic processes that focus purely on problem identification. As they mark the assignments, tutors should be able to identify patterns in errors, address targeted and common errors, and guide students to an increased understanding. Feedback given in such a manner bridges the gap between the actual level of performance and the desired learning goal. Only if feedback given narrows this gap will it have an impact on learning.

Furthermore, new students using the ODL mode must be inducted into how the assessment system works. Academic support is needed more for new students than those that are already in the system.

In Chapter 3, section 3.6 provides strategies for making feedback effective. Among these strategies, the suggestion by Rust (2002:156) that faculties should provide “explicit guidelines on giving effective feedback” is of much value.

5.4.3 Theme 3: Timeliness of feedback

Each of the participants in this study repeatedly expressed concern about the delay in feedback and pointed out long turnaround times of assessed coursework. The data revealed two encounters that tutors have regarding feedback, namely, fewer time to write comments on students’ work and less opportunities for tutorial interaction. Particularly with the large class sizes, it is a daunting task to provide feedback in a required fashion. In my view, semesterisation of courses in ODL contributes to less assessment and feedback opportunities, which directly results in feedback being delayed or reaching the students late.

Delayed feedback to students are not unique to UNAM or CES, as many higher education institutions have policies for feedback turnaround times for assessment tasks and assignments, yet the report of National Union of Students (NUS, 2008a) highlights that almost a quarter of the 2 398 students they asked had waited more than five weeks to receive feedback. However, timely feedback is an accepted principle for effective feedback which Poulos & Mahony, (2008) and (Huxham, (2007) view as a requirement for credible feedback in Chapter 3, section 3.3.

More technology for student support and with that, more tailor-made training of tutors and students to use the technology, would yield positive results, especially in view of the fact that a large number of interviewees stated that a delay in feedback was onerous. ODL institutions need alternative assessment methods, resourceful approaches to assessment, marking and feedback coupled with creative, dynamic and flexible assessment systems.

Tutors must provide timely feedback on students' academic performance through their assignments. Well-timed feedback and assessment not only inspire students but also prepare them for their term-end concluding exam.

CES as a distance arm of UNAM should regard it as its responsibility to provide timely and quality feedback to students via written evaluations on assignments or verbal comments during contact sessions. This could be achieved by providing necessary induction and training to tutors. It became clear during my study, that ongoing feedback forms a crucial, inevitable and critical link between tutors and student learning outcomes in DE contexts.

The implication is for student support services to intensify awareness programs of their services, so that students are aware of the student support available. These include drafting student charters. Improving the efficiency of feedback could be realised through dynamic engagement with feedback processes, in combination with a student charter. Feedback becomes just a message of little use in the learning process, since there are no formal opportunities to apply the feedback.

5.4.4 Theme 4: Assessment criteria

Some tutors provide assessment criteria and marking rubrics to students while some do not. Feedback should be contextualised and framed with reference to the learning outcomes and/or assessment criteria. Why students are not using the feedback provided more efficiently could be an indication that students are not assessment literate. To this end, as also indicated in Chapter 3, section 3.2, Boud & Molloy (2013:705) indicate “under preparedness’ is one of the factors contributing to incomprehensibility of feedback by students”.

The validity and reliability of assessment practices within higher education is questionable, due to the inherent fragility of marking practices and the variability of standards which remain largely unchallenged in the literature (Bloxham, 2009). Assignments of students studying via ODL are also subject to a marking or evaluation process and based on that, feedback is given to the students. Specific focus is on the manner and ways in which feedback on assignments of students in ODL are provided.

Similarly, students do not identify with assessment criteria and the feedback, through a lack of understanding of their meaning (Chanock, 2000; Higgins, et al. 2001; Weaver, 2006). In Chapter 2, section 2.2 Higgins, et al (2001) indicated that some students doubted relevance of the feedback given to them.

Instructional models based on the socio-constructivist perspective, stresses the need for collaboration among learners and with practitioners. However in ODL, with the creation of marking criteria it seems not always logical to involve students in this task.

There is a need to prepare students for assessment through active engagement with assessment requirements, standards, criteria and feedback. O’Donovan, et al. (2001), state that students often do not understand what a better piece of academic work is and do not understand what is being asked of them, particularly in terms of standards and criteria. Price, Handley, Millar & O’Donovan, 2010 (2010) cite that the studies on

feedback put emphasis to date on academic practice of good feedback and not on student engagement with feedback and its effectiveness (See Chapter 1, section 1.2).

Alternative assessment methods within ODL could be explored and implemented in the ODL mode. Electronic marking and feedback provision on academic work has been one of the latest adaptations of technology in the teaching and learning process and offers a new format of delivering feedback. Electronic methods of assignment submission, marking and feedback can result in more timely feedback for students. However, the students need to acquire the needed computer literacy to make use of such technological approaches.

Alternative assessment could be introduced, preferably online or automated, in order to save time and cost. This could replace resubmission of written assignments. As an alternative way of assessment, oral test/exams could also be introduced.

5.4.5 Theme 5: Challenges encountered with feedback

On one hand a great number of students felt that institutional challenges greatly affected their academic performance and learning, while on the other hand tutors also indicated some institutional challenges with feedback provision to distance students. Berge, Muilenburg and Haneghan (2002) classified challenges to distance learners as situational, epistemological, philosophical, psychological, pedagogical, technical, social, and/or cultural related challenges. As stated in Chapter 3, section 3.2, Burke and Pieterick (2010) cite that feedback provision is time-consuming and that there is disparate knowledge on the practice and effectiveness of written feedback.

Instructional related challenges were established as, ineffective and delayed feedback of students' assignments and examination results, lost scripts, unrecorded grades, accessing administrative services such as difficulty in obtaining continuous assessment marks on time, lack of an effective institutional network of enquiries on academic work, difficulty in accessing materials and assignments on UNAM web portal, lack of responsiveness from regional centres on enquiries, poorly organised contact sessions and lack or delayed important information such as policies on

assessment and assessment criteria. The following email communication from a student to me serves as an example of some of the challenges students encounter accessing assignments online.

From: [mailto: @gmail.com]

Sent: 22 February 2017 09:33 AM

To: Uiseb, Ismael

Subject: Assignment

Good morning sir, my name isStudent number 201700636, I just want to find out about the assignment online. I have not found any of the assignment on my portal yet. But some of my colleague got theirs some got 2 or 3. I am doing Bed pre - lower primary in distance. If you can help me please in any way, I want to start doing my assignment now.

Thank you very much in advance. Warm regards

Although above email communication was not part of the initial data, the intention to include it was to enrich the data. Many students reported that they did not receive their assignments back. Publishing of schedules for returning marked assignments with feedback in student charters or study guides, along with submission dates, could help to minimise the missing assignments. From experience, I can mention that some distance students do not change postal addresses as they relocate to different towns and as such the assignments which are sent out never reach them.

Many students indicated that they tried in vain to engage tutors on assessment related enquiries. In order to address student enquiries on assessment or academically related matters, establishment of a helpdesk for ODL students, which is non-existent at CES, is recommendable. Such helpdesk officers would channel all student queries to the respective staff to provide needed student support.

During the focus group interviews the increased workloads and class sizes were singled out as two prominent factors which hinder tutors to craft effective feedback to students. In line with this view, Bailey and Garner (2010) and Gibbs and Simpson, (2004a) cite that limited resources have also been reported as affecting the quality of

feedback, due to increasing workloads and class sizes, resulting in increased marking loads.

The tutor expressed concern that some students pay little attention to comments on marked assignments. This is in line with assertions made by Weaver (2006) and Higgins, et al. (2001) that most students are more interested in the grade they receive from the assignment, than carefully reading tutor comments. The cause of dissonance between tutors and students about their experiences and views are perhaps the behaviour of students, the tutors and the environment in which they interact.

A number of tutors expressed their doubts whether students engage with given feedback on assignments. Non-engagement with feedback renders feedback unhelpful and will not enhance learning. Considering the complexity of factors that affect student learning, it is difficult to determine why given feedback does not appear to motivate some students to engage with it.

Learning is a complex process that has generated numerous interpretations and theories as to how exactly it can be effectively facilitated to ensure that accomplished and meaningful learning is attained. Though feedback may be singled out as an important contributing factor for learning, and has indeed a positive impact on learning and teaching in the ODL context, it cannot be viewed as the only aspect that enhances student learning. However, it remains a pivotal element in the learning and teaching strategy.

In support of the above views, researchers point out that feedback leads to learning gains, only when it contains guidance about how to improve, when students have opportunities to apply the feedback, understand how to use it and are eager to dedicate effort (Butler & Winne, 1995; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Similar assertions have been already reported in Chapter 3, section 3.4.2 (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

As per data from the semi-structured interviews, the focus group interview and document analysis, I observed that the existing system of assessment in ODL fails to

satisfy students' expectations and their development in learning. Seemingly there are some challenges with validity, reliability and fairness which are crucial for assessment. For an assessment system to be valid, care should be taken to verify whether the purpose of assessment has been achieved or not.

The language that is used in feedback is described as concentrating on spelling, grammar and referencing, being vague, overly critical, impersonal, as having a judgemental tone and offering no guidance or suggestions about how to improve (Carless, 2006; Duers & Brown, 2009; Ferguson, 2011; Hendry, Bromberger & Armstrong, 2011; Li & Barnard, 2011; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008). In Chapter 3 section 3.5, Careless, (2006) indicated the difficulty of reading given feedback. However, in this study none of the 20 students interviewed complained about language or illegibility of the comments, but I had difficulty in reading some of the comments given on the marked assignments.

I found that the feedback in the marked assignments were more judgmental than non-judgemental, evaluative rather than descriptive, and does not focus on performance goals and not just on learning goals. Contrary to the students' expressions that the comments given as feedback on assignments are not difficult to read and the quality of the handwriting does not impair them to follow what is written, I found that some tutors' writing of comments illegible.

Tutors indicated during the focus group interview that it is difficult to give comments on science and mathematics-related courses as the answers are either right or wrong. *"I have nothing more to say than to write please work harder or correct mistakes"*. However, I would suggest that tutors for these courses keep a separate paper as they mark assignments to jot down mistakes which are made frequently and post it for all students to see, as generic feedback or with answers to questions where most students made mistakes.

5.4.6 Synthesis

In interpreting the data, I drew on the wealth of literature and evidence derived from the data. The extracts from the transcriptions of the voices of students and tutors used in this study illustrate the unique experiences of the participants, particularly the students as receivers and the tutors as providers of feedback on assignments.

As indicated previously in the discussions, the empirical evidence confirmed the existence of the following: delayed feedback on assessed work, lack of an effective institutional network on students' enquiries, lack of responsiveness from tutors, lack of appropriate student services support and delayed important information.

The findings strengthen the conclusions that have been drawn in a number of earlier studies in terms of the sources of dissatisfaction developing from individual interactions and institutional practices. In addition, the results expand on present understanding of feedback in ODL by demonstrating how participants sought out creative solutions to the encounters they experienced. For example, although Blair and McGinty (2013) iterate that students want a one-to-one consultation with the tutor regarding feedback, it is not always possible for distance students because of the nature of DE practice. In line with the above view, the need for increased consultations and communication seems to be a common desire for both students and tutors as per data in Table 5.2.

Furthermore, the findings indicate inconsistencies regarding the provision of feedback by tutors. This could be found among the same courses as well as across the various disciplines from which the assignments were selected. A lack of clearly specified ground-rules for writing in and across disciplines, makes both the quality and substantive form of feedback problematic (Mutch, 2003).

The responses from the participants on research questions provided a variety of ideas regarding assessment feedback. These findings are in agreement with other research, documenting that feedback leads to learning gains only when it includes guidance

about how to improve (Black, et al. 2004; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

The fact that students complained about the lateness of assessment feedback, indicates that there is a system, structural or procedural problem in dealing with these issues. Despite challenges and different experiences encountered with feedback provided, throughout their years of studies via ODL, more than half of the students interviewed consistently reported that feedback was useful at all points of measure.

With regard to the assessment model, the transmission model which is linked closely to student grading, must be replaced with a model of feedback which links directly with learning. Such a model by Hattie and Timperley (2007) in Figure 3.2 presented and discussed in Chapter 3, has reportedly the potential to enhance student learning.

It is noteworthy and interesting that most students reported that they comprehended the feedback that they received. Presumably, the more students understand the feedback that is given to them, the more they will report it useful. It should be noted that each student experienced, or did not experience, feedback conversations on assignments in a different and unique manner. This is because of the individual differences of the students towards learning process.

Furthermore, the findings show that the potential pedagogical value and benefits of written comments on assignments do not seem to be clear for tutors. However, they may not be fully aware that feedback comments support learning, as they did not engage in action research on the feedback themselves, to find whether it had an impact. What tutors may not know and realise, is that assessment feedback reveals to them information that they could use to help shape teaching and learning. Hence, Yorke (2003: 482) notes: "The act of assessing has an effect on the assessor as well as the student. Assessors learn about the extent to which they (students) have developed expertise and can tailor their teaching".

The literature proposes that part of the problem is that tutors and students see feedback in segregation from other features of the teaching and learning process, and

consider feedback to be mainly a teacher-owned endeavour. As stated by Taras, (2003) in Chapter 2, section 2.2, this study confirms that there is a mismatch in understanding the purpose of feedback between tutors and students.

Overall, the evidence suggests that when conversations around assessment and feedback are extended and the students are more active participants in the entire process, then feedback is extra likely to be useful to student learning. I observed during interviews that students were comfortable with the idea of discussing feedback with peers, as it had the benefit of collaborative learning. A learning environment where students help and are supportive of one another, is highly recommendable for ODL students. This could be achieved by creating discussion groups (technology-based), study groups and peer assessment mechanisms where possible.

Generally, results of the analysis of the semi-structured interviews showed that student perceptions and experiences on feedback did not change over time. It is peculiar that most of the challenges conform to those reported in various other studies. For example in Chapter 2 Section 2.2 it is stated that some students have even doubted the relevance of feedback in their studies (Hounsell, et al. 2008).

While both tutors and students shared the same view that feedback is important in clarifying criteria and standards, they differed in their views regarding its helpfulness. Students' view it as being helpful and tutors argue that it could be helpful only if students engage and make use of it.

My evidence suggests that institutional practices designed to facilitate the effective communication of written feedback to students, are often seen by tutoring staff to generate problems of their own. It is clear from the foregoing that tutors have many reservations about the process of providing feedback and its pedagogical value. Their bone of contention is that feedback is not acted upon and thus cannot be of any help for the students.

Feedback could be confusing and if read out of context, or not fully understood, can leave the student with a perception of an abrupt and negative tone. However, feedback

can be influenced by the same subjectivities (values, beliefs, health or mood) that can affect a marker's judgements when grading work, further emphasising that a single text can be read in several different ways (Read, Francis & Robson, 2005). It should also be noted that marking coursework contains more than mere checking for correctness of content or for accomplishment against set criteria and learning outcomes.

During this study, it became evident that there are some factors that influence the nature and success of the assessment feedback in ODL, either positively or negatively; and which are generic across all the organisational levels. Just to mention a few factors, such as challenges with assessment methods and strategies, workloads of marker-tutors and delay in feedback. The research confirmed that these issues should not be underestimated and that ODL practitioners should keep them in mind when assessment policies are designed.

5.5 SUMMARY

This chapter illustrates what was actually done during the data collection process and provides an understanding of how the findings evolved out of the data that were collected or constructed. Thus, the chapter presented categorised data obtained from the research instruments used, namely semi-structured interviews, a focus group interview and document analysis.

The responses received from the participants indicated that assessment feedback indeed manifests itself in ODL as a vital tool for teaching and learning. It is a necessary teaching and learning tool and could enhance teaching and learning in ODL. The responses also revealed that there are challenges that may hinder the effective implementation of assessment feedback such as grey areas in policies, inadequate teaching/learning materials, increased workload for tutors and poor time management.

In this case study, the data narrative approach was used, where structured interviews with the students, focus group interview with tutors, documents (policy documents) and marked assignments were weaved together. The narratives are based on the

themes and categories that are important to the description of feedback and associated to the research questions. Furthermore, the narratives are aimed at reconciling stories and highlighting tensions and challenges which can culminate into opportunities for innovative ideas.

5.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study highlighted the contrasting perceptions of students and tutors in relation to the feedback for written assignments. Throughout the study, the centrality of assessment feedback for students and tutors has been recognised, supporting the assertion that assessment remains a significant event in the lives of students and academics in ODL.

With regard to the concept of feedback, I contend that feedback must be conceptualised as a supported sequential process rather than a series of unrelated events. In my view, only a sustained approach would maximise any effect feedback might have.

This research was quite daunting, but nevertheless meaningful. It was a positive experience because I learnt many things that I did not know, for example, I learned more about what is going on during the contact sessions arranged for distance students. I found that the rich data of the marked assignments and the interviews of the tutors added depth and detail, covering the explicit and tacit aspects of feedback in ODL.

The integration of individual and focus group interview data along with document analysis, made three main contributions: a productive iterative process whereby an initial view on feedback as the phenomenon, guided the investigation of individual accounts and successive individual data further deepened the conceptualisation of the phenomenon; identification of the individual and contextual conditions surrounding the phenomenon, which were supplementary to the interpretation of the phenomenon; and convergence of the key academic, strategic and operational requirements for feedback to yield optimal results in ODL. This process enhanced the trustworthiness of findings.

This chapter and the supporting appendices compromise a transparency to the judgements that have been made during my study in an effort to ensure trustworthiness. The last chapter of this study, which follows next, provides a discussion of the recommendations from data and concluding remarks.

CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

As indicated in Chapter 1, section 1.6, the initial research aim of this study was to devise robust feedback delivery strategies or mechanisms, which assist in optimising feedback in ODL, while the objective was to determine key academic, strategic and operational requirements for optimising feedback in ODL. Chapter 2 and 3 provided the scholarly review of assessment feedback while Chapter 4 outlined the research design and methods. In Chapter 5, the data analysis and interpretation of the research data were provided

This last chapter of the study provides the summary, research conclusions and recommendations. Furthermore, this chapter provides avenues for further research, limitations and concluding remarks. A summary of the main findings is provided in the next section.

6.2 SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

This study did meet the research objective, which was to determine key academic, strategic and operational requirements for optimising feedback in ODL. However, it may be that some of the research questions were not satisfactorily answered. Subsequently, I discuss the key scholarly review findings.

6.2.1 Scholarly review findings

I found out that the timing of feedback may independently influence its effectiveness. Timely and explicit (preferably immediate) feedback is ideal in all learning environments. However, it became clear that ideally structured and appropriately timed feedback does not always achieve the desired effect. The receiver has to engage, understand and act upon the given feedback; only then can its impact be

assessed. The time-factor in feedback provision has been indicated already in Chapter 3, section 3.2. It has been heralded that tutors are under pressure to provide timely feedback to students in higher education institutions in the United Kingdom (UK) (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004b; Lunt & Curran, 2009).

By conducting this study, I realised that feedback is much greater and more powerful than traditionally described by the educational literature. It is intentionally and unintentionally used at all times in many environments and thus is not restricted to an educational arena. In line with this view, Hattie (1987) reviewed 87 meta-analyses of studies and establish that feedback produced the most influential single effect on achievement for student learning as stated in Chapter 1, section 1.2.

6.2.2 Empirical research findings

I found that the nature of feedback given to ODL students depends on a number of variables. These variables are discipline being studied, the nature of the learning activities, the intended learning outcomes, the resources accessible to complete the task. The assessment methods employed and number of students. Feedback is context-specific and as such what works well in one discipline may not necessarily work in another course.

The study revealed that ineffectiveness of feedback could be the result of many other variables at different levels in an institution.

The data analysis has shown that the lack of time and workload of large numbers of assignments to be marked and feedback comments to be provided seems to be a major counteractive situation for the effectiveness of feedback in ODL. The issue of workload is central to any decision about assessment in ODL, for it has repercussions for students and staff alike. It is not only marking according to marking guides alone, but also correcting grammatical and numeracy errors, that seem to take time during the marking process.

The evidence from the data both from the students and tutors, confirmed the lack of communication channels with regards to issues related to assessment feedback. It became clear that there is a need for a very innovative and friendly assessment system in ODL, which can be fulfilled by using ICT assessment tools on a large scale.

6.3 RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

The initial research question of the study was (See Chapter 1, section 1.5): What are the key academic, strategic and operational requirements for optimising feedback in ODL? I state my research conclusions as answers to my initial research questions and I will answer the sub questions first. Concluding findings on the sub-questions are provided as follows:

6.3.1 How does dialogue in feedback promote learning?

On the first sub-question of the research: How does dialogue in feedback process promote learning – this study confirmed that dialogue is limited in ODL, as there are limited opportunities for face-to-face communication with students to sort out any difficulties with the coursework. In ODL mode it remains tutor-driven and a one-way process.

Arguably mass higher education limits dialogue with the result that written feedback, which is fundamentally a one-way communication, often has to carry virtually all the burden of tutor-student interaction. Ideally, when feedback is provided to the students, it is supposed to be an interactive experience, which engages the student, and requires from the student more involvement than simply receiving information.

6.3.2 How does feedback on the assignments enhance the teaching-learning process in Open and Distance Learning?

On the second sub-question on how does feedback on the assignments enhance the teaching-learning process in ODL, this study yields that it is not automatically given that feedback enhances teaching and learning process. However, it is a finding of this

study that feedback enhances the teaching-learning process but not in every context and not for all the students.

6.3.3 What are the current feedback practices?

On the third sub-question which states: what is/are the current feedback practice(s) employed in ODL? With regard to current assessment practices at CES, the findings from the interviews with students and tutors indicate that despite much strength with current practices there was a tendency of oversight with assessment strategies applied in ODL mode. All the assessment on assignments has been done by evaluating academic coursework by providing marks, grade and comments. There is no significant evidence that traditional practice of assessment has changed to meet the need of the contemporary era of 21st century.

6.3.4 What are experiences of the students and tutors on feedback?

The last sub-question states: what are the experiences of the students and tutors on feedback in assignments and learning tasks in ODL? Students' experiences range from delayed feedback to feedback that they deemed not helpful, while tutors as crafters of feedback perceive written comments as time wasting. This study confirms what has been reported in many studies, regarding different perceptions of students and tutors towards the assessment, marking and feedback process. The data I collected have supported some of these positions.

The focus of this study on assessment feedback is relevant in that it provided contemporary insight into assessment feedback practices in ODL. ODL, an educational mode, in which the students and tutors are separated by time and place, is currently the fastest growing of domestic and international education.

I came to the conclusion that the main purpose of assessment is not only to simply rank or grade students' academic tasks, which is secondary in the process of assessment, but to increase students' learning and development. I deduced that

feedback is complex and contextual. Given the complexities of feedback provision in ODL, I wonder whether feedback can ever be effective.

It is not easy to tell if learning results from feedback unless students are able to use the feedback to produce improved work. This study could not confirm or provide evidence whether feedback given enhances learning outcomes. Nonetheless, from the various studies, it was noted that feedback has a significant impact on learning.

It might be concluded, in alignment with many other studies, that assessment of students in the ODL system is critical, since the student is not present physically in front of tutors as is the case in face-to-face teaching environments. For assessment model and feedback strategies to yield desired results, it needs supportive policy frameworks and institutional ability and willingness to bring about effective change.

6.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

In the following paragraphs I provide recommendations with regards to assessment feedback which can be applied to improve feedback provision in ODL institutions, enhance instructional design choices, as well as efficacy and quality of assessment practice. It should be noted that learning is dynamic and so is ODL.

Therefore, continuous improvement and transformation is required to address challenges in ODL as no once-off remedy or panacea will bring about instant changes or betterment of feedback practices in ODL. The literature study in Chapter 2 and 3 as well as empirical data in Chapter 5 provided evidence of strategies which are required to optimise feedback in ODL – evidence which I used to make recommendations. In some instances, motivation for a recommendation is provided where it is deemed necessary.

The recommendations are divided into academic, strategic and operational levels. In some instances motivation for the recommendation is provided.

6.4.1 Academic level

Taking into consideration that assessment or grading criteria differs from course to course, it is recommended that tutors develop and communicate clear grading criteria for each writing assignment. Such grading criteria combined with a written list of discipline-specific standards and conventions, may be distributed to students or posted on the course Web site so that students familiarise themselves as to how they will be evaluated. This calls for greater transparency and equity in assessing students in ODL. Striving to achieve greater consistency of assessment across and within departments could be one step in right direction.

6.4.1.1 Recommendation 1

Assessment in ODL should not only be employed for students to earn a grade, but should be used to monitor the effectiveness of academic programmes and adopt appropriate strategies to accomplish institutional objectives. One way to address this is to put mechanisms in place to counteract limited communication avenues between tutors and students except written feedback in ODL.

6.4.1.2 Recommendation 2

Although it is not always possible to provide immediate and prompt feedback to students, feedback should be given timely while students are still mindful of the topic, assignment or performance in question.

6.4.1.3 Recommendation 3

ODL practitioners should rectify the shortcomings of face-to-face contact sessions arranged for ODL students. More specifically, the absence of tutors during contact sessions while students have travelled from far and incurred other financial expenses to attend to contact sessions, is among other such issues that need to be addressed.

6.4.1.4 Recommendation 4

There should be a conscious workload management system to circumvent the workload of tutors in ODL. One such proposal is to devise a quota system e.g. maximum of hundred and fifty students or any manageable number per tutor. This would also possibly counteract the longer turnaround time of feedback provision on assignments.

6.4.1.5 Recommendation 5

Another recommendation is for ODL institutions to have a tracking system or monitoring mechanism for the assignments movement, after submission by the students. This is to ensure that assignments are marked and returned to students in a stipulated timespan e.g. three weeks after submission.

6.4.2 Strategic level

With institutional commitment, strategies for optimising assessment feedback in ODL institutions are implementable and could lead to improved learning outcomes. Feedback can only yield desired results if it is a joint and shared responsibility of all stakeholders such as institutional leadership, students and tutors. Hence, there is a need to embark upon broader discussion on provision of feedback to students, who study via distance learning modes. This can be done through involvement and collaboration of distance education providers, tutors, students and student support providers, and instructional material designers.

6.4.2.1 Recommendation 6

In devising strategies for optimising feedback in ODL, tutors must take into consideration the course, influence of the faculty/department, epistemology and interdisciplinary practices. Such strategies should be in line with the policies and statutes that regulate the assessment practice at institutions. One practical strategy is to tailor feedback according to the learning processes in a specific discipline. It is

recommended that a collaborative approach with colleagues in the same faculty or department will foster any change in assessment feedback.

6.4.2.2 Recommendation 7

It is recommended that the ODL institutions should revisit their assessment policy and clearly stipulate the methods of assessment that should be used in ODL mode and these should include the alternative methods of assessment such as online assessment.

6.4.2.3 Recommendation 8

ODL institutions must attempt to employ a paradigm shift from content-based assessment to problem-solving and competency-based assessment, examinations of shorter duration, flexible time limits, open book examinations, self-assessment, peer assessment and feedback, oral assessment and use of ICT in assessment. However, whatever new assessment method is being decided upon, it must be implemented on an experimental or trial basis and should not be applied in totality right away. This will allow time to plan, evaluate and eradicate any hiccups encountered.

6.4.2.4 Recommendation 9

ODL institutions and dual university institutions must integrate education systems which allow students to choose freely between conventional methods and ODL mode on the basis of personal preference or individual convenience. The students should not be disadvantaged in either form of delivery and no distinctions must make it difficult for students to benefit from concurrent participation in either mode. Provision of sound administrative and academic support services are required to ensure students' success in ODL mode. Therefore, leadership of ODL institutions must embrace the principles and methodologies of ODL and ensure parity of standards to deliver quality education via ODL mode.

6.4.2.5 Recommendation 10

The technology should be used to embed formative assessment into ODL mode. Tools supporting assessment, such as Blackboard, Moodle and Turnitin could be used to provide formative feedback. They have got, among others, the benefit of immediate feedback. ODL institutions must strive to embed innovative and creative technologies that are changing the way of assessment, feedback and content delivery. Discussion forums on “WhatsApp” of smart cellular phones are one practical manner in which students and tutors can discuss course related issues and support each other academically. This could help students to spend less time achieving learning goals on one hand and will make the learning experience more interactive and effective on the other hand.

6.4.2.6 Recommendation 11

ODL institutions should involve ODL students in decision-making about assessment/feedback policy and practice. This is to ensure that students are kept informed or engaged in consultations regarding assessment policy decisions of the institution. One way to foster engagement is to devise a student charter on assessment feedback. A student charter will also address frequent mismatch between tutors’ expectations of the purpose and usefulness of feedback and those of the students could be eradicated by such a charter. There is no student charter at UNAM/CES. Devising a student charter is an attempt to effect dialogue about feedback and how to use it so that students become aware of the importance of using feedback to improve their learning. This will also provide some insight into how to improve feedback and assessment practices.

6.5.2.7 Recommendation 12

As a strategy to ensure that ODL students get engaged with the given feedback, I propose the following action plan for the students. This could be made part of the assignment paper for the students’ use after receiving the marked assignments. What

is crucial is that the information provided is taken up by the students, acted upon and leads to some desirable changes.

Table 6.1: Feedback action plan

Date:		
Course:		
Mark or Grade		What does this mean?
Most significant comments		
How to improve		What are the learning points?

If students make an effort to work on this action plan, it would help in developing their capacity to calibrate their own judgments and appreciate qualities of their own work. The students should look carefully at the comments and work out feedback action plans for each course. It is advisable for the students, where possible, to compare comments received with those received by fellow students. This will give some more information about the standard of own work.

6.4.2.8 Recommendation 13

Feedback should be more dialogical and ongoing, meaning that during contact sessions, a time-slot be devoted on discussions, clarification and negotiation between students and tutors with the aim to equip students with a better appreciation of what is expected of them in the process of writing assignments.

6.4.2.9 Recommendation 14

As the tutors are assessing coursework of the students, they must promote dialogue and conversation around the goals of the assessment task. They must also emphasise the instructional aspects of feedback and not only the correctional dimensions. The

dialogical feedback is seen as an essential component of assessment interaction where the intention is to support learning.

6.4.3 Operational level

Before any change can happen with regards to assessment, strategic imperatives of the institution must be taken into account. The ODL programmes must be designed so that the volume of assessment is manageable and devise and apply workload models that ensure that the strategies adopted to optimise feedback are sustainable. For every course offered via ODL mode, assessment expectations, standards and marking criteria must be clearly communicated via assignment briefs to the students.

6.4.3.1 Recommendation 15

Considered efforts should be made to ensure that appropriate feedback is provided by the tutors on assessed work in a way that promotes learning and facilitates improvement. As such, the focus of tutoring in ODL must also promote learning. Tutors should not just provide feedback simply as a requirement. They must increase the responsibility of students towards learning and thus must provide feedback in such a way to learning forward and create structures for students to act on it. There is no point in giving feedback, in whatever form, without ensuring whether it is effective or meaningful for the students.

6.4.3.2 Recommendation 16

In an ODL system everything should to be planned previously, and anticipated difficulties should be identified in advance. Although the success of an ODL programme is severely dependent on the student approach and commitment, the responsibility of the academic staff cannot be weakened.

6.4.3.3 Recommendation 17

ODL institutions must create a website, a site that supports the electronic submission of assignments and allows staff to upload students' feedback and marks, only for the ODL students. This could be another way to counteract delay in provision of feedback.

6.4.3.4 Recommendation 18

ODL institutions must ensure that all the different systems for ODL delivery are in place and functioning. This is to counteract the interplay of many other factors that have a direct or indirect influence on the assessment practices. Dual mode universities must plan strategically on how to implement an ODL unit at an existing university as it has got its own dynamics which must be taken into consideration. The challenges of CES as the ODL at UNAM, dictates that for education institutions moving towards ODL, to adopt a singular vision, policies, and procedures for ODL implementation. To this end, it is recommended that academic planners of ODL think about the reasons for offering courses via ODL and whether it is possible to offer the course via ODL.

6.4.3.5 Recommendation 19

As already hinted in section 6.4.2.6, it is strongly recommended that ODL institutions develop student charters through negotiation between university staff and officers of the students' representative body. Such charters must contain a simple and clear outline of key issues regarding feedback. It should align with the institutional assessment and feedback policies and codes of practice, and highlight key aspects felt by students to be priority issues. The content must reflect a balanced view of staff and student responsibilities with respect to feedback. It must also reflect what students can expect from their tutors and what they themselves should do. In conjunction with above, a sustained systematic approach to assessment must be maintained and therefore monitoring, analysing and improving student learning at ongoing basis is crucial.

6.4.3.6 Recommendation 20

There should be concrete mechanisms in which tutors and students should be encouraged to view written feedback as an integral part of practice-based and embed situated approach to develop academic literacies in ODL.

6.4.3.7 Recommendation 21

Students should use self-regulation as the process to monitor and control their own learning. By self-regulating the students will seek, accept and act on the feedback information or not. As ODL students, they have to create internal routines that include figuring out when they need information, assessment or suggestions, and embark upon strategies for getting the feedback from tutors.

Table 6.2: Proposed template for assignment cover

Stage 1		
Major issue	Minor issue	
1. Referencing style	1. Some accents missing	
2.	2.	
3.	3.	
4.	4.	
Stage 2		
Issue	Tutor advice	Action to be taken by student
Referencing style referring	Incorporate citations correctly using Harvard style	Review guidelines on referencing style; See examples in http://www.rtw/sst/document_uploads/3456.pdf

I devised the above template which could be part of the assignments for the use of the tutor-markers. I recommend that this template be made part of the assignment book for tutor markers to provide comments on academic tasks. This template is in response

to the expressions from the tutors for non-engagement of students with the given feedback. It is aimed at creating conditions for students to act on feedback.

However, there could be number of other strategies that could be used to maximise student engagement with the assessment feedback. One such strategy is to design assessments in such a way that students can see the direct benefits of attending to feedback advice.

6.5 AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study raises a number of areas for future research as not all aspects that were interesting to its focus could be covered in the study, due to its bounded nature.

The results of this case study might be beneficial for identifying comparable cases. I strongly believe that future case studies would serve to reinforce and validate the findings of this study.

In the area of theory building, the critical constructs identified can be used by academicians as the basis of undertaking rigorous empirical studies that test assessment feedback in relationship to these factors.

Further research is required to explore the feedback potential of different assessment practices and to help clarify how students' individual contributions can benefit from collaborative learning.

For further research, what constitutes quality within the feedback offered by distance learning tutors to students might be debated upon.

6.6 LIMITATIONS

Having strategies in place for optimising feedback in ODL will not yield improved learning outcomes instantly. Having implemented such strategies, a study is needed

to evaluate its impact on student learning. This study did not evaluate the impact of strategies identified and recommendations provided because of lack of time.

The study is limited to being a case study at UNAM and its centre CES as the ODL provider. Thus, the generalisability of the results is also limited.

A limitation of this study is that the selection of both the students and tutors was purposive and from a single institution using the reason that cases are “hand-picked for a specific reason” Lewin (2005:219). In this instance, the reasons were that the volunteer students and tutors had experience in learning and tutoring via ODL mode, and therefore participated in semi-structured and focus group interviews respectively.

6.7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

As I started my journey with this study, with the research proposal as an initial entry point, I was not clear where it would take me. Throughout this study, I was cognisant that it aimed at addressing a peculiar researchable problem which is feedback in ODL.

The reason why I conducted this study is best captured by the following: “Those who conduct research belong to a community of scholars, each of whom has journeyed into the unknown to bring back an insight, a truth; a point of light, what they have recorded of their journeys and findings will make it easier for you to explore the unknown” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005: 64).

Part of the problem which I stated in Chapter 1 was that the large number of students expressed tremendous challenges for ODL institutions in terms of effective feedback delivery on assignments, student support services and operational systems of DE provision.

To remind the reader, the ultimate goal of this study was to devise robust feedback delivery strategies or mechanisms which could assist in optimising feedback in ODL. In turn, such strategies would enhance distance learning and could allow more students to complete studies successfully and motivate students to study via ODL

mode. One prominent strategy which has been recommended is the devising of student charters. The importance of a student charter is that it clearly lays out student expectations alongside the expectations of the university. This study has broadened my knowledge of feedback, particularly in ODL mode and made me knowledgeable about the current assessment trends.

Another implication of this study is a need to give staff more inter-departmental and inter-disciplinary opportunities to communicate clearly and discuss academic issues. This will help them to better understand the assessment policies, assessment strategies and changes which occur university-wide and in the ODL sector.

It became evident from this study that the ultimate goal of feedback is to foster students who are owners of their own learning. Being students pursuing studies via ODL mode, and also in line with the constructivist perspectives, students have to take ownership of their learning.

Transformation with regards to feedback should not be just rhetoric of ODL. Measures and strategies that would bring about impactful transformation to counteract the challenges with feedback provision and delivery in ODL, should be derived at.

In conclusion, feedback is a troublesome issue in higher education institutions in general and particularly in ODL mode, but remains however, a core component of the learning process.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: ETHICS CLEARANCE

APPENDIX A: ETHICS CLEARANCE



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

18 November 2015

Ref # 2015/11/18/6704913/13/MC
Student#: Mr II Uiseb
Student Number #: 6704913

Mr II Uiseb

Decision: Ethics Approval

Researcher: Mr II Uiseb
Tel: +264 612 14131
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College of Education
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Proposal: Practices and experiences of feedback in open and distance education (A case study).

Qualification: D Ed in Curriculum Studies

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the College of Education Research Ethics Review Committee for the above mentioned research. Final approval is granted for the duration of the research.

The application was reviewed in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics by the College of Education Research Ethics Review Committee on 18 November 2015.

The proposed research may now commence with the proviso that:

- 1) The researcher/s will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.*
 - 2) Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study, as well as changes in the methodology, should be communicated in writing to the College of Education Ethics Review Committee.*
- An amended application could be requested if there are substantial changes from the existing proposal, especially if those changes affect any of the study-related risks for*



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APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

(SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR STUDENTS)

Dear Participant,

The aim of this interview is to gather information on the experiences and perceptions pertaining to the assessment feedback from you as the registered distance student at CES. You are expected to provide your honest views, experiences and opinions on the assessment feedback given on the assignments by the tutors. This information will enable the researcher, DEd scholar, to understand and use the data to conduct the empirical study.

All the responses will be treated **confidentially** and individual **anonymity** will be safeguarded. Please do not write your name on any part of this questionnaire.

I THANK YOU IN ADVANCE FOR YOUR ASSISTANCE AND WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE AND COOPERATION.

General information:

- The name of the course.....
- The year of registration for the course.....
- Gender: Male Female

Interview schedule:

A) Types and nature of feedback

1. Do you get feedback on assignments from the tutors?

Probes:

- What kind or type of feedback do you get?
- Which format of feedback do you prefer and why? (written/grading or both)
- Is feedback provided clear, detailed and specific? (Language)

B) Usefulness of feedback

2. Is the feedback on assessment tasks helpful? Please explain.

Probes:

- What do you find most useful/appreciate when getting feedback from tutors? (Why?)
- Do you understand written feedback given by the tutors?

C) Timing of feedback

3. What is the time it takes for you to receive feedback on assignments or academic tasks after submission?

Probes:

- How long does it take for assessment feedback to be returned to you from the tutors after submission of the assignment?

- What would you recommend as ideal turnaround time of assessment feedback?

D) Engagement with feedback

4. What do you do with the feedback provided on assignments?

Probes:

- Do you discuss the feedback given with your tutor? (Why/why not?)
- Do you discuss feedback assessment with your peers? (Why/Why not)

E) Assessment criteria

5. Are you familiar with the assessment criteria for a particular course you are enrolled for? (Marking guidelines)

Probes:

- Does it help to make informed judgements on your own work?
- Are you aware of the Assessment Policy and how familiar are you with it?
- Are there any shortcomings or problems/challenges you are experiencing with the current assessment criteria used on assignments?

F) General/Closing questions

6. What do think of having ITC in assessment process, for example online submission of assignments, online assessment and you also receive online feedback on your academic tasks?

- Do you have specific changes to the assessment assignments that you would you recommend?
- Any other issue/comment with regard to the assessment feedback?

Thank you!

APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR TUTORS

(INTERVIEW SCHEDULE)

1. **Perceptions of feedback**
 - a) *What is your understanding of feedback?*
 - b) *Do you think feedback matters?*
2. **Feedback process**
 - a) *How is assessment of academic work of students done?*
 - b) *How is feedback delivered to the students? Verbal/written?*
 - c) *Is there assessment policy or guidelines for assessment process?*
3. **The nature of feedback**
 - a) *In which form(s) is feedback provided to the distance students?*
 - b) *What are the other possible forms/ways in which feedback could be provided to the students?*
4. **Impact of feedback (Purpose)**
 - a) *Is feedback read and acted on by students?*
 - b) *Does written feedback on assignments serve a purpose?*
 - c) *Do you think it is useful? (How?) Why not?*
 - d) *Does feedback have any value for you as the tutor?*
 - e) *What is your experience during crafting assessment feedback for the students?*
 - f) *Do you get queries/clarification on feedback from the students? Does feedback help students take action to improve their learning?*
 - g) *What problem(s)/challenges do you experience in crafting feedback on assignments?*
5. **Credibility of feedback**
 - a) *Is the given feedback true reflection of academic work submitted by the students?*
 - b) *How do you ensure the assessment on academic work is done in fair and justifiable manner?*
6. **Implications for designing learning materials**
 - a) *What problem(s)/challenges do you experience in crafting feedback on assignments?*
 - b) *How do you think could the learning materials for ODL students be developed in order to assist in assessment practices?*
7. **Strategies for improving feedback practices**
 - b) *Can you provide suggestions as how the feedback practices could be improved?*
 - c) *Another comments/ issues which you want to raise regarding assessment feedback in ODL?*

APPENDIX D: A LETTER INVITING TUTOR TO PARTICIPATE IN A FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

Full title of the study: Assessment feedback in Open and distance learning: A case of key academic, strategic and operational requirements

Purpose of the study: The primary aim of the study is to develop and propose an assessment model for optimising feedback in ODL.

The name of the university: University of South Africa

The supervisor: Prof EC du Plessis

The researcher's contact details: iuiseb@unam.na

Dear.....

This letter invites you to consider participating in a study. I, Ismael Uiseb, intent to conduct a group interview with you as part of the doctoral research study entitled: Practices and experiences of feedback in open and distance education (A Case Study) at the University of South Africa. Permission for the study has been given by the Research and Publications Committee of the UNAM as well as ethical clearance obtained from the UNISA. This study focuses on the assessment feedback, provision and delivery process in ODL. I have purposefully identified you as a possible participant because of your valuable experience and expertise related to my research topic. In this interview I would like to capture your views and opinions on this topic. This study aims to find answer for the following main research question: What are the key academic, strategic and operational requirements for optimising feedback in ODL?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It will involve an interview of approximately **30 minutes** in length to take place in a mutually agreed upon location at a time convenient to the group. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions if you so wish. Furthermore, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences.

With your kind permission, the interview will be audio-recorded to facilitate collection of accurate information and later transcribed for analysis. Shortly after the transcription has been completed, I will send you a copy of the transcript to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or to clarify any points. All information you provide is considered completely confidential. Your name will not appear in any publication resulting from this study and any identifying information will be omitted from the report. However, with your permission, anonymous quotations may be used. Data collected during this study will be retained on a password protected computer for 5 years in my locked office. There are no known or anticipated risks to you as a participant in this study.

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact me at **+264 812485818** or by e-mail at iuiseb@unam.na. I am looking forward to have a discussion with to you and thank you in advance for your assistance in this project. If you accept my invitation to participate, I will request you to sign the consent form which follows.

Yours sincerely,

Ismael Uiseb

APPENDIX E: A LETTER INVITING STUDENTS TO PARTICIPATE IN SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

Full title of the study: Assessment feedback in Open and distance learning: A case of key academic, strategic and operational requirements

Purpose of the study: The primary aim of the study is to develop and propose an assessment model for optimising feedback in ODL.

The name of the university: University of South Africa

The supervisor: Prof EC du Plessis

The researcher's contact details: iuiseb@unam.na

Dear student,

This letter invites you to consider participating in a semi-structured interview. I am conducting a study as part of doctoral studies at the University of South Africa. Permission to conduct the study has been granted by the Research and Publications Committee of the UNAM and ethical clearance granted by the University of South Africa. This study focuses on the assessment feedback, provision and delivery process in ODL. I have purposefully identified you as a possible participant because of your valuable experience and expertise related to my research topic. In this interview I would like to capture your views and opinions on this topic. In this semi-structured interview, I would like to obtain your views and opinions on this topic: assessment feedback. This information will be used to find ways for improving feedback provision in ODL.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It will involve a semi-structured interview of approximately 15 minutes in length to take place at mutually agreed and identified location and time. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions if you so wish. Furthermore, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. All information you provide is considered completely confidential and will be treated as such. Your name will not appear in any publication resulting from this study and any identifying information will be omitted from the report. However, with your permission, anonymous quotations may be used. Data collected during this study will be retained on a password protected computer and the hard copies will be locked in the cabinet of my office for 5 years. There are no known or anticipated risks to you as a participant in this study.

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact me at or by e-mail iuseb@unam.com.

If you accept my invitation to participate, I will request you to sign the following consent form.

Yours sincerely

Ismael Uiseb (6704913)

APPENDIX F: CONSENT LETTER FOR STUDENTS

RESEARCH ETHICS: CONSENT FORM FOR STUDENTS

Name of the Researcher: Ismael Uiseb (iuseb@unam.na)

Full title of the study: Assessment feedback in Open and distance learning: A case of key academic, strategic and operational requirements

The researcher undertakes to adhere to the fundamental principles of research ethics and scientific integrity while gathering and analysing data obtained during the interview with the students. Researcher will also maintain the highest standards of honesty and integrity at all times and will handle the data according to internationally acceptable ethical norms and values. Thus, the researcher is prepared to take responsibility and may be held accountable for all aspects and consequences of this research activity.

Dear participant, kindly complete following form of consent prior to the commencement of the focus group discussion.

Please Initial Box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.
3. I agree to take part in the above study.
4. I agree to that the interview being audio recorded.
5. I agree that the researcher use anonymised quotes from the interview in the study.

Name of participant

Signature

Date

Name of Researcher.....Signature

Date

APPENDIX G: CONSENT LETTER FOR TUTORS

RESEARCH ETHICS: CONSENT FORM FOR TUTORS

Full title of the study: Assessment feedback in Open and distance learning: A case of key academic, strategic and operational requirements

The researcher undertakes to adhere to the fundamental principles of research ethics and scientific integrity while gathering and analysing data obtained during this consultative focus group discussion with the tutors. Researcher will maintain the highest standards of honesty and integrity at all times and will handle the data according to internationally acceptable ethical norms and values. Thus, the researcher is prepared to take responsibility and may be held accountable for all aspects and consequences of this research activity.

Dear participant, kindly complete following form of consent prior to the commencement of the focus group discussion.

Please Initial Box

- | | | | |
|---|--------------------------|------|--------------------------|
| 1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. | <input type="checkbox"/> | | |
| 2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason. | <input type="checkbox"/> | | |
| 3. I agree to take part in the above study. | <input type="checkbox"/> | | |
| 4. I agree to that the focus group consultation being audio recorded. | <input type="checkbox"/> | | |
| 5. I agree that the researcher use anonymised quotes from the consultations in the study | <input type="checkbox"/> | | |
| Name of Participant | Signature | Date | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Name of Researcher.....Signature Date

APPENDIX H: TRANSCRIPT OF SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

Transcript – O

Dear Participant,

The aim of this interview is to gather information on the experiences and perceptions pertaining to the assessment feedback from you as the registered distance student at CES. You are expected to provide your honest views, experiences and opinions on the assessment feedback given on the assignments by the tutors. This information will enable the researcher, DEd scholar, to understand and use the data to conduct the empirical study.

All the responses will be treated **confidentially** and individual **anonymity** will be safeguarded. The interviews will be recorded and you are welcome to listen to the recordings or look at the findings to make sure that it was recorded correctly. Your participation in this research is voluntary and you have the right to omit any question or to withdraw from this research without penalty at any stage. This interview will last approximately 15 - 20 minutes. Please do not write your name on any part of this interview schedule.

I thank you in advance for your assistance and willingness to participate and cooperation.

General information:

- Political Region of Namibia: **KHOMAS**
- The name of the study programme: **BED SECONDARY**
- The year of first registration for the course: **3rd Year**
- Gender: Male Female: **X**

Interview schedule:

A) Types and nature of feedback

Interviewer: Do you get feedback on assignments from the tutors?

Participant: Actually, we only get some kind of feedback from some lecturers. After they mark they put the memo on the portal as feedback for us see where we did mistakes but not all of them only a few do that.

Interviewer: What kind or type of feedback to you get?

Participant: We only get feedback in written format for everybody who is registered on distance.

Interviewer: Is that kind of generic feedback helpful?

Participant: Mmm... since we are distance students, to me it is helpful rather than nothing. Although I didn't get my assignment and didn't see where I made mistake and made me fail, still it is helpful. I won't get time to attend classes.

Interviewer: Is feedback provided clear, detailed and specific?

Participant: The one I have seen is readable and clear and I can understand. Step by step you can understand it but it is not all of them. Last year I only get back one feedback among all the courses I did and I am not going to mention the subject. Others there were nothing. I expect feedback from all my courses because that is what is helping me to prepare for the exams.

B) Usefulness of feedback

Interviewer: Is the given feedback on assessment tasks helpful?

Participant: Ya, sometimes.

Interviewer: Please explain.

Participant: If the feedback come before I write exams it's ok but sometimes the feedback come after we wrote exams. So it is not helpful. Like no we have vacation school but time is not enough. And sometimes the classes clash.

C) Timing of feedback

Interviewer: Now tell me, what is the time it takes for you to receive feedback on assignment or academic task?

Participant: Last term some of them I received immediately before exams but I remember the one I receive only now but it was for the first semester. I don't know whether the delay was in mail with the tutor. I didn't feel happy to get it back after I have written exams as I was supposed to get it before exams.

Interviewer: How long does it take for assessment feedback to be returned to you from the tutors after submission of the assignment?

Participant: We supposed to receive before the exams at least week or....mm I know marking takes time I am also a teacher 1 or 2 weeks before exams it will be ok to get back the assignment.

D) Engagement with feedback

Interviewer: What do you do with the feedback provided on assignments?

Participant: I take it, read and recheck it whether I went wrong. Sometimes I look at the comments but only when you do well you get comments. You get well done, if you do well that's all. On some of the assignments the marks for the questions on the assignments are put on and it is difficult to see whether marks given are exactly how it is supposed to be. In English for Academic Purpose I receive long comments telling me what to read and where to improve and it was very helpful.

Interviewer: Do you discuss the feedback given with your tutor?

Participant: Ah...what I remember I didn't return to tutors, but anyway I just went to my notes and see where I can improve. Most of the time the telephone is not correct on tutorial letter as it is for the Department and is difficult to get hold of the specific lecturers.

Interviewer: Do you discuss feedback or assessment with your peers?

Participant: Ya I tried to find some students to help me but most of the time they are saying I am busy. But I am getting help from one full-time student whom I going to meet on Sunday to help me with Calculus and that is just voluntarily help I don't pay him anything.

E) Assessment criteria

Interviewer: Are you familiar with the assessment criteria for a particular course you are enrolled for?

Participant: Most of the marking criteria are only on the Projects if not mistaken but for general subjects like Chemistry we are not given marking criteria. Maybe it is not important to give for those subjects because is straight questions but for Projects we got. The marking criteria is directing and tells you what to do.

Interviewer: I am having Tutoring and Assessment Procedures and Guidelines here with me, are you aware of it?

Participant: No, Ya most of the things might be on portal but it goes without reaching us.

Participant: Are you aware of the Assessment Policy of UNAM?

Interviewer: I think I have seen that one on the portal, but I didn't read it.

F) General/Closing questions/Recommendations

Interviewer: What do you think of having ITC in assessment process, for example online submission of assignments, online assessment and you also receive online feedback on your academic tasks?

Participant: It is good because you know you get your mark and feedback immediately. But sometimes it is also bad, I am not talking on my case, there are people who can't open a computer. I now all the people who completed Computer Literacy Course in year 2015 they good in computer but before that people don't know computers. Will they scan and send assignments or will it be compulsory to type and send? It is good but those who don't have computer literacy must also be considered.

Interviewer: Any other issue/comment/recommendations with regard to the assessment feedback?

Participant: After the assignment is marked it should be given immediately to the students. There is no other way of communication with us the distance students. The feedback must be given on the portal although I said not everybody is computer literate. Everybody is trying to learn computers. Anyway improvement on sending the assignment early and any lecturer responsible setting the assignment should also do in advance for us to get it on registration.