Evaluating the Quality of Student Support Services at the University of Namibia's Centre for External Studies

Delvaline Möwes
Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning
Polytechnic of Namibia

Distance education and open and flexible learning policies have done much to extend accessibility to higher education throughout Namibia. However, open and distance learning is not just a move away from learning in the classroom. It is a complete paradigm shift and when delivering learning materials outside the classroom, across any distance, it is important that technologies and techniques support students.

Against this background, this paper reports on a research project concerned with various issues related to student support services in the University of Namibia's distance education system. Evaluation and student opinion are important sources of information needed to identify strengths and weaknesses in a support system, and areas where improvements need to be made. This paper specifically summarises recent data on the evaluation of student support services provided to distance education students at the northern campus of the University of Namibia.

The results of the study have provided evidence that adult distance education students expect and indeed value the provision of student support services. Specifically, students in this study placed the greatest importance on student support services related to getting started with their studies, for example orientation sessions about available student support services; contact and communication with tutors and fellow students by means of vacation schools, face-to-face tutorials on Saturdays at regional centres and support through tutor-marked assignments and study groups. The research further found that students expected specific guidance and support from tutors within a largely directive framework.

From student data, their expectations, analysis and review of different teaching and learning models in distance education, and extrapolating from personal experience, the author suggests a model of support services for distance education students.

The paper concludes with recommendations and implications for institutional policy and the crucial role of management in the establishment of an effective student support model to facilitate open and distance learning.

Introduction

Openness and accessibility, the hallmarks of many open and distance learning institutions, all too often seem to be associated with significantly lower rates of successful completion of courses and programmes of study than conventional institutions. Fraser and Van Staden (1996) state that levels of dropout and withdrawal from distance education programmes at the tertiary level tend to be higher than for comparable residential courses and are a matter of concern to providing institutions. Tait and Mills (2002) substantiate this concern and report that the decline of 5% in student retention over the last five years has led to the review of student support in the United Kingdom's Open University (UKOU). Tait and Mills (2002) reported that according to the UKOU Retention Project Report, 95 000 out of 166 000 registered students completed and passed their courses in the teaching year 1997/8. The UKOU has a unique mission statement – open as to people, open as to places, open as to methods, and open as to ideas – an "open access" policy that attracts students from a variety of backgrounds, all seeking a divergent range of study goals. With this

mission in mind, the UKOU regard it as vital to secure the best possible chances for its students' success. However, the above report reflects a non-completion and failure rate of 43%, which has negative implications for the access mission of the UKOU, hence the establishment by this university of a significant action research project at strategic level tasked with the identification of a range of retention-supportive activities.

The above account clearly reflects that participation and persistence in education and those factors that contribute to their occurrence continue to interest practitioners and researchers alike. As Powell, Conway and Ross (1990:5) so aptly note: "The question of why some students successfully study through distance education and others do not is becoming increasingly important as distance education moves from a marginal to an integral role in the overall educational provision." A considerable body of previous research has given some insights about factors that can contribute to the success or failure of students, specifically in open and distance learning (Brindley and Jean-Louis, 1990; McAlister, 1998; Nonyongo, 2002 and Peters, 1992). For example, Nonyongo (2002:128) identified major weaknesses in the University of South Africa (UNISA) system which include:

- *low success in terms of completion and throughput rates;*
- *the correspondence nature of programmes in comparison with well-functioning distance education; and*
- *inadequate student support which is exacerbated by the lack of a co-ordinated regional network of learning centres.*

Success in open and distance learning is a complex matter. Isolating specific variables that will guarantee student success may not be possible, but developing an educational environment that will contribute to student success is possible. In this context, Tait (2003:2) argues that:

> *While it is very difficult to isolate the variables in an educational system and identify a simple causal relationship of student support with student success, the UNISA example provides the clearest case for the importance of student support in a distance education institution. For many students, especially from the majority population who were excluded from the best universities in South Africa, the opportunity offered by distance education was not a real one. UNISA provides us with the best-documented case hitherto of the dangers of developing distance education without adequate student support.*

Studies internationally (Dodds, Lawrence and Guiton, 1984; Dillon, Gunawardena and Parker, 1992 and Shin and Kim, 1999) indicate that withdrawal from distance education has many different causes. Research (Rae, 1989) has found that students with higher previous educational qualifications tend to perform better than those with poorer qualifications. Those who find it difficult to reconcile the conflicting demands of their jobs, family and studies tend to do less well, as do those who find it difficult to direct their own learning (Kuhn and Williams, 1997). However, Paul (1988) introduces a strong note of realism when he argues that the notion advanced by earlier adult educators of the self-directed independent adult learner is largely a myth to anyone who has had the experience of working closely with students in a distance education environment. Brookfield (1988) agrees that it is a myth and sees methodological contradictions arising from the fact that most studies of self-directed learners have used subjects from middle-class, educationally advantaged backgrounds.

Similarly, Burge (1988:19) concludes that:

> *We need not so much an andragogical system which encourages and reinforces self-directed learning, but a neo-andragogical approach – one that recognises the realities of adulthood, not the myths. We need not so much self-directed learning as much as self-responsibility for learning. We need not so much to admire the independence of students, as we need to facilitate the interdependence of students and the collaboration of educators.*

It is the opinion of the author that those of us who work in distance education institutions in Southern Africa can identify strongly with the arguments of the above-mentioned authors. Specifically, the adult distance education students in this context need particular forms of support, since they are a socially and

educationally disadvantaged majority. Nonyongo (1993) notes that students who completed their studies were adamant that without the support services provided, they would not have succeeded in the face of the various pressures in their lives. According to her, the particular needs of distance education students from educationally and socially disadvantaged communities in Southern Africa include:

- the need to develop and maintain self-confidence in the face of an unfamiliar learning process;
- the need to understand the vocabulary as well as the discourse of a particular subject/course;
- the need to unlearn rote learning as a way of "learning" and to learn to become autonomous students;
- the need to develop time management skills, in view of long working hours, or long hours spent travelling, and multiple responsibilities;
- the need to have access to tutors and tutorials; and
- the need to study together with other students in order to engage in "conversation" and develop a "community" of fellow students (Tait, 1996:59-60) which affirm what is culturally the case among many African students in Southern Africa.

From the literature (Sewart, 1983; Bääth, 1982; Dodds, Lawrence and Guiton, 1984; Brindley, 1988; Paul, 1988; Fritsch and Ströhlein, 1989; Rae, 1989; Dillon, Gunawardena and Parker, 1992; Nonyongo, 1993; Nonyongo and Ngengebule, 1993; Rumble, 1993; Sweet, 1994; Tait, 1995; Boonzaaier, 1996; Basson and Nonyongo, 1997; Shin and Kim, 1999; Lamb and Smith, 2000 and Tait, 2000) on student support in open and distance learning, it was concluded that:

- student-institution contact, such as regular contact with support staff, appears to have a positive effect on student performance and persistence rates;
- factors which correlate positively with course completion rates include the use of course assignments, early submission of the first assignment, short turn-around time for giving students feedback, pacing progress, supplementary audio-tapes or telephone tutorials, favourable working conditions in the student's context, the quality of learning materials and reminders from tutors to complete work;
- students value contact with support staff and their peers, though they do not always use the services provided; students most often report a preference for face-to-face tutoring compared to other media, though where face-to-face tutorials are not possible, other forms of contact are rated valuable; and
- personal circumstances and lack of time are the most common reasons given for poor academic performance.

It is therefore evident that the profile and needs of distance education students justify the provision of individualised support if they are to complete their studies and develop into critical learners with appropriate competencies.

There is common agreement between both student and institutional perspectives that there is a need for student-student and student-teacher interaction, for access to library and other resources, and a place for the introduction and test-running of new technology applications, particularly telecommunications (Harrison, 1991c; Kember and Dekkers, 1987; Livingston, 1994). Student support therefore, is not an "add on" but "an all pervasive component of educational processes which ensures that learning and teaching are approached from a learner-centered vision of education" (Nunan, 1993:1). Moreover, in his recent address at the third Pan Commonwealth Conference in Dunedin, the president of the Commonwealth of Learning, Sir John Daniel noted that:

> Learners are the best ones to judge best practice. Learner-centeredness should be a
> focal point regarding best practice and a 'culture of care' should be part of best
> practice in open and distance learning.

(Daniel, 2004:5)

Consequently, student support *is* as important as teaching; it *is* teaching; it *is* central to all we do as professionals. Debate within an institution about who its students are, or will be, provides the platform on

which to analyse what they need in terms of student support services (Tait, 1995). Sewart (1992), is of the opinion that providers of distance education should take into consideration the expressed needs of their students in whatever support they offer. The overwhelming experience of distance educators has been an increasing recognition that adult students, especially those at a distance, require all the personal support they can get if they are to succeed. While it is critical that such students have the support of family and friends in their academic endeavours, the institution has important responsibilities to provide its own forms of support. As such, Simpson (2002) noted that, as open and distance learning provision grows, so competition mounts. Where students have a choice, they will judge institutions by both the quality of the course materials they produce and probably even more by the standards of student support they offer. It is therefore imperative that open and distance learning institutions attend to and accept the challenge to seriously consider the development of adequate student support services to come to the point where this aspect of education is no longer looked upon by the public as an add-on.

Background

There can be little doubt that distance education and open and flexible learning policies have done much to extend accessibility to higher education throughout the world. In South Africa specifically, Glennie (1996) provides evidence that the distance education sector is considerable and is becoming a very significant part of higher education provision. She states that approximately one-third of the national teaching corps is involved in distance education programmes. Moreover, South Africa's White Paper on Education has identified distance education as an essential mechanism for achieving its goals (Department of Education, 1995:28). In a similar vein, Möwes and Siaciwena (2000) state that the University of Namibia's (UNAM) first five year development plan (1995-1999) committed the university to continue and expand its distance education services. One of the key objectives in UNAM's first five year development plan was to address some of "the relics of colonial regimes" and it states in this regard that many Namibians from formerly disadvantaged communities, who were already in employment, needed to have their work skills upgraded and sharpened without having to leave their jobs (University of Namibia, 1995). The development plan noted that such people were scattered throughout the country. Therefore, one of UNAM's key goals and responsibilities is to reach out to people and to assist them to continue with their education, through the University's Centre for External Studies. The Centre for External Studies (CES) was set up as part of the new University of Namibia (UNAM) in August 1992. It grew out of the Department of Distance Teaching of the former Academy. CES is an academic centre of UNAM with faculty status, headed by a Director. It makes quality higher education accessible to adult members of the community by the provision of open learning through distance and continuing education programmes ([http://www.unam.na/centres/ces/index.html]).

The University of Namibia's First Five Year Development Plan (1995-1999) not only committed the University to continue and expand its distance education services but can also be taken to be the new University's first policy commitment to that mode of delivery. Consequently, the University's First Five Year Development Plan specifies that the principal objective of the Centre for External Studies "is to contribute to the mission of the university, and of the Ministry of Education and Culture, for extending higher education to people outside the walls of the University, and beyond the city of Windhoek" (University of Namibia, 1995: 28).

The Centre for External Studies continues to serve, among other responsibilities, as an administrative and professional unit through which the university offers some of its degrees by distance education. Instructional design, editing, delivery, and management of administrative and student support services are the responsibility of the CES, while Faculties are responsible for curriculum decisions (content and structure of courses) and writing of course materials, marking and tutoring on a part-time basis, supervised and organised by the CES. All distance education programmes are entirely managed by the CES on the above mix.

Institutional profile

In 2001, the Senate of the University approved a restructuring of the Centre for External Studies. In the main, therefore, the CES comprises the Department of Materials Development and Instructional Design,

the Department of Student Support Services, the Department of Continuing Education and the Administrative Department.

The Centre for External Studies inherited distance education courses from the Academy from which the University was established. The programmes consisted almost exclusively of teacher education certificate and diploma courses for the then University of Namibia and of courses leading to the National Diplomas in Public Administration and Police Science for the Technikon (Dodds, 1999a). In 1995, a decision was taken to phase out all the existing teacher education programmes except the newly introduced Diploma in Education African Languages (DEAL). The government, having developed a Basic Education Teacher's Diploma in the Ministry of Education and Culture (replacing these programmes) felt that UNAM should be responsible for secondary level teacher training.

At the end of 1995, the Polytechnic of Namibia made a decision to de-link itself from the CES to set up its own Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning. This was followed by the University of Namibia's decision to introduce its first two external degree programmes – the Bachelor of Nursing Science and the Bachelor of Education, which were launched in 1997 and 1998 respectively.

In 1998 a third external degree was launched on a very small and experimental basis – the Bachelor of Business Administration. The latter has been re-launched as a full-scale external degree in 2000.

Furthermore, the Faculty of Education and its Department of Adult and Non-formal Education in particular, in collaboration with CES, launched the Diploma in Adult Education and Community Development towards the end of 2000.

The Mathematics and Science Teachers' Extension Programme (MASTEP) was launched in 2000. This programme is supported by funds from the European Union's Human Resource Development Project, and is run jointly, as a mixed-mode open and distance learning programme, by the Faculty of Science, Faculty of Education and CES. At the end of 2000, Senate approved the creation of a Further Diploma in Education: Mathematics and Science, as the qualification to be awarded to successful graduates.

This was followed by the launch of the Basic Education Teacher's Diploma (BETD) towards the end of 2001, as a result of the non-accreditation of teacher training programmes offered by the Azaliah College. Modalities were put in place whereby CES and the National Institute for Educational Development (NIED) were commissioned to manage and deliver the in-service teacher education programme in order to accommodate the Azaliah students in the BETD in-service training programme.

In 2003, CES started offering the Post-Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) in response to a request from the Faculty of Education to accommodate teachers without a teacher's diploma and who cannot attend full-time studies.

An important consideration in the development of these programmes is the fact that UNAM is a national university based in the capital city, at least 700 kilometres from the regions where more than 45% of the population live. If it is to claim to be a truly national university it needs to make and to be seen to make a more significant contribution through improved open learning facilities and courses to the tertiary education of the population as a whole.

The University of Namibia had around 5 352 students in 2002 of which 3 658 were external students, while 56% of the student population is rural and geographically isolated. The distance education student profile indicates that the mean age of the population is 35, while a gender analysis shows that women are over-represented in all study programmes offered by CES, representing 74.5% of the student body (Möwes, 2002).

Instructional system
Printed course materials are central to the study programmes offered by CES and are the main mode of instructional delivery. However, efforts have been made to supplement printed materials by one or more of

the following: audio cassettes, video cassettes, weekend tutorials, week-long vacation schools, interactive video conferencing, science practical tutorials and teleconferencing tutorials.

The CES operates through nine regional outreach centres throughout the country, one of which is in Oshakati where the University has opened a new northern campus. Study materials are sent to regional centres by courier from where they are distributed to, or collected by students. Students in Windhoek either collect their study material from CES or it is mailed to them. Students must submit, regularly, assignments usually based on study materials for evaluation and tutorial guidance by marker-tutors. Week-long vacation schools in the form of face-to-face tutorials or by means of interactive video conferencing are offered three times a year while regional face-to-face tutorials are organised once a week in various centres throughout a student's study career. Currently, distance education students doing science courses are expected to attend practical tutorials in Windhoek. These practical tutorial sessions are a compulsory part of the science courses.

The implementation of a student support system at the Centre for External Studies is regarded as crucial in order to facilitate the full development of each student and to ensure success in the learning process of the student. Furthermore, the author believes that if the Centre for External Studies is to achieve its mission of making quality higher education accessible to adult members of the community, assessment strategies need to be put in place to find out whether this mission has been achieved, and if not, how to realise it. Such a strategy would be to evaluate the effectiveness of the current student support system from the perspective of the student. As it is the goal of student support services to reduce barriers and facilitate academic endeavours, emphasis should also be placed on measures to determine which student support services have been the most effective and which should be improved.

Methodology

A combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies was used in order to follow a suitable research plan and to gather the necessary data that would answer the research questions of this study. Quantitative data provided basic research evidence, while qualitative data were used to round off the picture and to provide examples and reasons behind the quantitative findings. Furthermore, the study was situated within both positivist and interpretive paradigms, since objective facts as well as the meanings students attach to such facts were crucial for the purpose of this study.

Sampling and population

The population for this study was made up of adult distance education students from the Ondangwa East and West educational regions in which the northern campus of the University of Namibia is situated. These students are enrolled for a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree through the Centre for External Studies at the University of Namibia. Both second- and third-year students were included in the study. A random sample of subjects was drawn from the defined population. Random selected samples have the advantage that they yield research data that can be generalised to a larger population (Gall, Borg and Gall, 1996).

Twenty percent of the population, which amounts to 110 subjects, were randomly selected from this region. Ideally, B.Ed. students from all regions in the country should have been included in this study for the findings to be properly generalised to the entire population of B.Ed., Centre for External Studies students in Namibia. However, this was not possible because of the nature of the study. The nature of the study did not permit the use of other regions, since not all student support services provided at the northern campus are provided at the other regional centres in the country. A single regional centre was used to ensure that respondents were subjected to a similar student support environment so as to rule out the effects of extraneous variables in their evaluation of student support services in relation to their expectations and needs.

Design of the research instruments

As stated above, the research design incorporates both a quantitative (positivist paradigm) and a qualitative (interpretative paradigm) dimension. Consequently, a combination of a questionnaire and open-ended questions was used for data collection. Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire made up of scaled, checklist, and "yes" and "no" questions, while qualitative data were collected through

11 open-ended questions. These open-ended questions were used to obtain data supplementary to that obtained by items from the questionnaire. In addition, the open-ended questions were administered to establish whether students' expectations and needs had been met and whether they were satisfied with the provision of student support services.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first section elicited general background information, while the second part inquired about access to and attendance rates of student support services. The third section of the instrument set several evaluation items for each type of student support service being provided. Students evaluated the various student support services in terms of their expectations and needs for such services.

Data analysis

Data were prepared for computer entry, cleaning and processing, using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

The independent variable for the study was student support services, which included administrative support, orientation seminars, vacation schools/interactive video-conference tutorials, telephone tutoring, face-to-face tutoring/Saturday classes, and tutor-marking.

The dependent variable was students' expectations and needs with regard to student support services. In view of the independent variable, dependent variable and the questionnaire, the main test statistic appropriate for the study was a non-parametric test, namely the chi-square test (χ^2). The chi-square test is a measure of how closely the observed distribution approximates the expected distribution, and it is effective when testing goodness-of-fit where nominal variables are categorised in two or more ways (Gall, Borg and Gall, 1996). Whether there would be significant relationships and/or differences between demographic variables and students' access to and evaluation of student support services was determined, using the chi-square test.

Descriptive analyses, frequencies and percentages to compare the proportions of subjects who responded in different directions were also used.

The data analysis for the 11 open-ended questions involved a process of constant comparison, whereby each response was compared to the previous, enabling the development of a broad set of categories.

Summary of findings

Student profile

This study has provided a composite profile of distance education students at the northern campus of the University of Namibia. It not only shows some similarities with previous reports, but also adds considerably to our understanding of who are our Namibian tertiary distance education students.

Participants in the study were primarily women. The proportion of women responding to the evaluation instrument was 88.9%, which is consistent with their overall participation rate at the University of Namibia's Centre for External Studies.

It was furthermore evident that the current findings on age range fit with the overall picture of adult distance education students in Namibia, with more than half of the respondents in the 28-39 age bracket, while students in this study were also largely married (60%) and employed (96%). The current study reinforces the perception that tertiary distance education in Namibia is largely reaching the geographically isolated, with half of the respondents residing more than 60km from the northern campus.

Access to and attendance of student support services

Participants' responses on access to and attendance of 14 student support services covered both administrative and academic student support services available at the northern campus, namely study facilities; library facilities; photocopying facilities; access to computers, internet, e-mail; audio/video

facilities; study groups; developmental counselling; orientation for new students; vacation schools; face-to-face/Saturday tutorials; telephone tutorials and interactive video-conference tutorials.

Use of study and library facilities

The findings of this study have provided evidence that more than half of the respondents made use of study and library facilities available at the northern campus. This finding was supported by students' responses to open-ended questions whereby a major portion of them were of the opinion that library services was one of the most effective and useful student support services. However, a few students also responded that library services were not effective, because prescribed and recommended textbooks were not available. In addition, concern was raised by some students that they did not know how to use the library, while others suggested that the library be opened on Saturdays and after hours.

Use of computers, internet and e-mail services

Table 1 yielded results indicating that almost 80% of the respondents did not make use of modern information and communication technology (ICT). This result corresponds with the results which indicate that the majority of students did not own a computer or had regular access to a computer or internet and e-mail services. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of the respondents reported that they did not know how to use computer, internet and e-mail services. Paralleling this finding is respondents' particular disagreement as reflected in table 2, that adequate and timely support was available regarding guidance and assistance on how to access and use ICT.

Table 1: Access to and attendance of student support services

SUPPORT SERVICE	ATTENDANCE									
	Never		Seldom		Often		Very often		TOTAL	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. Study facilities	3	5.5	20	36.4	19	34.5	7	12.7	55	100.0
2. Library facilities	6	10.9	16	29.1	17	30.9	15	27.3	55	100.0
3. Photocopying facilities	3	5.5	11	20.0	21	38.2	18	32.7	55	100.0
4. Access to computers	41	74.5	1	1.8	8	14.5	2	3.6	55	100.0
5. Access to internet	44	80.0	3	5.5	3	5.5	0	0.0	55	100.0
6. Access to e-mail	43	78.2	0	0.0	3	5.5	3	5.5	55	100.0
7. Audio/video facilities	24	43.6	8	14.5	3	5.5	5	9.1	55	100.0
8. Study groups	6	10.9	10	18.2	17	30.9	17	30.9	55	100.0
9. Developmental counselling	26	47.3	11	20.0	9	16.4	4	7.3	55	100.0
10. Orientation for new students	11	20.0	15	27.3	14	25.5	9	16.4	55	100.0
11. Vacation schools	0	0.0	10	18.2	18	32.7	26	47.3	55	100.0
12. Face-to-face/Saturday tutorials	3	5.5	17	30.9	14	25.5	16	29.1	55	100.0
13. Telephone tutoring	39	70.9	5	9.1	3	5.5	3	5.5	55	100.0
14. Interactive video-conference tutorials	10	18.2	12	21.8	26	47.3	3	5.5	55	100.0

Table 2: Evaluation of administrative support services

STATEMENT	EXTENT OF AGREEMENT/DISAGREEMENT WITH STATEMENT					
	Agree		Disagree		No response	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. Adequate and timely support available on admission and registration	40	72.7	13	23.7	2	3.6
2. Adequate and timely support available on programmes and courses	39	70.9	13	23.7	3	5.5
3. Adequate and timely support on course exemptions and amendments	30	54.5	19	34.5	6	10.9
4. Queries are directed to appropriate UNAM staff	35	63.6	15	27.3	5	9.1
5. Adequate and timely support to facilitate contact between students and staff	27	49.1	25	45.4	3	5.5
6. Adequate and timely support on issuing and purchasing of course material	31	56.4	20	36.4	4	7.3
7. Adequate and timely support available on developmental counselling	28	50.9	24	43.6	3	5.5
8. Guidance and assistance available on access and use of ICT	10	18.2	42	76.4	3	5.5
9. Assistance available on study and library facilities	37	67.3	15	27.3	3	5.5
10. Adequate support available to facilitate and form study groups	26	47.3	25	45.4	4	7.3
11. Adequate and timely support available on information regarding vacation schools	33	60.0	17	30.9	5	9.1
12. Adequate and timely support available on scheduling of face-to-face tutorials	35	63.9	16	29.1	4	7.3
13. Adequate and timely support available on telephone tutoring	16	29.1	37	67.2	2	3.6

Use of developmental counselling

The data revealed that almost half of the respondents did not make use of developmental counselling services (see table 1), with 32.8% of them indicating reasons such as: *don't know who is responsible for this service; not aware of such a service; service is poor, rather want to drop out; staff do not have time to attend to us; and staff do not have answers to our questions* for not making use of developmental counselling services. The greatest frustration expressed by the respondents was that they did not find consistency in their constant search for clarity of institutional practices and requirements. A primary source of this frustration was the recent change in the B.Ed. curriculum and the requirement for teaching practice. The suggestions below clearly demonstrate students' frustration in this regard:

> *They must give us orientation sessions on teaching practice before we start with it.*
>
> *We are confused with the new B.Ed. subjects they added. These subjects were not in the prospectus when we started with the B.Ed. They must explain to us and give us orientation.*

While there is justification and need for such changes and requirements, responsible administrators must give explicit consideration to the impact upon distance education students when such changes become necessary. It is imperative that frequent and timely in-service training be held for regional staff to assure that the information that they distribute to students is up to date and accurate.

The necessity for readily available developmental counselling is further highlighted and supported by Lentell and O'Rourke (2004:5) who observed that:

> *...adult education experience suggests that at least 50% of a student's needs are not strictly related to the subject at hand. That is not to say that their needs are solely psychological and unconnected with the content of study; the help they need is of an educational kind, even of an academic kind, but not strictly subject-based.*

Attendance of orientation for new students

Consistent with previous literature, the results in table 1 revealed that only 20% of the respondents never attended orientation seminars for new students, while 41.9% often attended it.

This finding supports the suggestion by Bird and Morgan (2003) that the ability of today's distance education student to become part of a learning community depends on the provision of detailed explanations of the types of academic and administrative student support provided by the particular university, so that new students can feel confident that support is not only close at hand, but that it is also something to which they are entitled.

Moreover, particularly women, who constituted 89% of the respondents for this study, often enter higher education after long absences from any formal education and need to balance a variety of complex commitments in their lives. It has been suggested (Kirkup and Von Prümmer, 1997) that more female than male distance education students suffer from the isolation of studying at a distance, and that for women it was particularly important to have access to some sort of personal communication with the university to "humanise their studies" and help them to "feel valued" (Hipp, 1997:44). This may explain the finding that many of the respondents attended orientation seminars, even if it was difficult for them to get there. In this respect, results indicated that 61.8% of the respondents, the majority of whom were women, made use of taxis as means of transport to the northern campus.

Use of study groups

This study has shown that 61.8% of the respondents often made use of study groups. Moreover, the majority of students commented that they contacted fellow students in their study groups when they felt lonely or isolated. This finding mirrors findings by Chadibe (2002) who described how participation in self-directed study groups enabled UNISA students to make better use of distance education courses.

The importance of contact with fellow students is further emphasised by Lentell and O'Rourke (2004:4) who cite Betram's (2003) observation that learners are adopting a communal approach to learning by sharing responsibility for reading and explaining the course materials.

Attendance of face-to-face/Saturday tutorials and vacation schools

Concerning the opportunities provided for face-to-face/Saturday tutorials and vacation schools, results in table 1 revealed that 80% of the respondents often attended vacation schools, while 54.6% often attended face-to-face/Saturday tutorials. Furthermore, the majority of participants viewed face-to-face tutorials and vacation schools as the most valuable support service and integral to their studies. This finding is similar to that of Fung and Carr (2000), who reported that the attendance rate at tutorials for students at the Open University of Hong Kong was very high, with over 70% of them attending over 75% of the tutorials, including 30% who attended all.

Use of telephone-tutoring

Another way of reducing the distance between students and their institution and to minimise the isolation they experience is through the use of the telephone. However, the findings from table 1 revealed that the majority of respondents (70.9%) never attended telephone tutorials or used the telephone to contact their tutors. Though results showed that more than 70% of the respondents had access to telephones, the findings showed that many students did not make use of this support service for the following reasons: they did not have the contact details of their tutors; it was too expensive; tutors were not willing to help; tutors were not available when they phoned, or they did not return voice-mail messages.

Evaluation of student support services

From an analysis of the students' responses to statements that covered several aspects relevant to the quality of various student support services available to distance education students enrolled at the northern campus of the University of Namibia, the statements were grouped into six categories of student support services, namely administrative support, orientation, vacation schools/interactive video-conference tutorials, telephone tutorials, face-to-face/Saturday tutorials and tutor-marking.

Administrative support

The administrative support system embraces the admission procedures, the registration process, accessing information from records, distribution of course materials, submission of assignments for marking, examination and arrangement of face-to-face/Saturday tutorials.

The results of the evaluation of administrative student support services were positive. Findings in table 2 indicated that more than half of the students were satisfied and agreed that adequate and timely administrative support was provided.

However, a considerable number of respondents felt that administrative staff had a careless attitude, were absent and not helpful. Another bone of contention among students was the slow turn-around time with regard to administrative enquiries and assignments as demonstrated by one student who suggested that:

> *The staff at the northern campus need training on how to deal with students*
> *and they must get the correct information to answer our questions. Every time*
> *we have a question, they must first phone to Windhoek and we must wait days*
> *to get a response. We travel long distances and cannot come to the campus*
> *every day.*

These concerns raised by students in this study support Bird and Morgan's (2003) suggestion that regional centres usually provide a first point of contact for many students and the accuracy and timeliness of information provided to students at this point is critical to their future.

Some of the respondents were also unhappy with the dispatch of examination results, examination timetables and vacation school timetables. The students felt that such information should be forwarded well in advance to each individual student through the postal services, while one student suggested:

> *I want a schedule for the year with all the dates, so I don't miss out.*

Orientation seminars

With regard to the trend of all the responses, the results revealed that the respondents were satisfied with the effectiveness and value of orientation seminars. Respondents, however, expressed their frustration about lack of awareness of student support services. The findings indicated that less than half of the respondents agreed that the orientation seminar had made them aware of all the student support services available at the northern campus. For example, students expressed their concerns and experience with orientation seminars:

> *The orientation seminar is too short to become known with everything.*
>
> *They don't inform us about all the services during orientation. I only realise*
> *now, when I completed this questionnaire, that telephone-tutoring is also*
> *available.*

Consistent with previous literature, students commented: *No career guidance and study skills are offered during orientation seminars.*

Vacation schools/interactive video-conference and face-to-face/Saturday tutorials

Finding illustrated that more than two-thirds of the respondents in this study believed that in order to be successful in their studies, personal contact with their tutors through vacation schools/interactive video-conference tutorials and face-to-face/Saturday tutorials is of vital importance. When asked which one of the available student support services they most often made use of, results revealed that the majority had replied that they most often attended face-to-face tutorials and vacation schools, because it was the most effective and useful student support service. In addition, the high attendance rate for vacation schools and face-to-face tutorials reported earlier (see table 1), also suggests that students felt a strong need for tutorials to support their studies.

However, students' expectations about, hopes for, and level of satisfaction with tutorial provision also revealed negative results. There was considerable expectation that tutorials should lead to improvement in

their performance, particularly in examinations. This expectation is clearly demonstrated by one student's comment:

> *Lecturers give tutorials on different topics than those covered in assignments and examinations.*

When analysed according to highest level of qualification, results in tables 3 and 4 revealed that significantly more respondents with certificates as their highest level of qualification than respondents with teaching diplomas and teaching diplomas plus further qualifications disagreed that tutorials enhanced their understanding of course material and that tutorials allowed them to be better prepared for examinations. For most of the students, the forms of tutorial support, with which they are most familiar and comfortable, are those where the tutor "teaches". They therefore expect to be assisted with their assignments, guided through their studies and pass their examinations.

Table 3: Whether tutorials enhance understanding of course material, by highest level of qualification

HIGHEST LEVEL OF QUALIFICATION	Extent of agreement or disagreement with statement									
	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree		TOTAL	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. Certificate	4	40.0	3	30.0	3	30.0	0	0.0	10	100.0
2. Teaching Diploma	6	46.2	4	30.8	2	15.4	1	7.7	13	100.0
3. Teaching Diploma + further qualifications	5	45.5	5	45.5	1	9.1	0	0.0	11	100.0
4. Other	0	0.0	10	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	10	100.0
TOTAL	15	34.1	22	50.0	6	13.6	1	2.3	44	100.0

Note: $\chi^2 = 17.20$; df = 9; $p < 0.05$

Table 4: Whether tutorials allow respondents to be better prepared for examination, by highest level of qualification

HIGHEST LEVEL OF QUALIFICATION	Extent of agreement or disagreement with statement									
	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree		TOTAL	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. Certificate	2	20.0	6	60.0	2	20.0	0	0.0	10	100.0
2. Teaching Diploma	8	57.1	6	42.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	14	100.0
3. Teaching Diploma + further qualifications	7	63.6	4	36.4	0	0.0	0	0.0	11	100.0
4. Other	2	20.0	8	80.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	10	100.0
TOTAL	19	42.2	24	53.3	2	4.4	0	0.0	45	100.0

Note: $\chi^2 = 13.57$; df = 6; $p < 0.05$

The expectation that tutorials should be concerned primarily with assignment and examination questions is not uncommon among distance education students. For example, Stevenson, Sander and Naylor (1996) reported that a high proportion of the UKOU students in their study expected tutors at tutorials to devote time to forthcoming course assignments.

Furthermore, the finding illustrated in table 3, that significantly more respondents with certificates as their highest level of qualification reported that tutorials did not enhance their understanding of course material, could be attributed to the fact that they preferred a largely directive approach in tutorials, which also appears to confirm the general belief that many of Namibia's adult distance education students are compliant and passive learners. This finding is further clarified by Bird and Morgan (2003) who noted that expectations of students entering university might be largely formed by previous educational experiences and study approaches. Negative prior experiences will affect students' confidence and self-concept, as well as their ability to form new teaching and learning relationships, and develop more appropriate approaches to study. For some, a lifetime of responses to highly teacher-controlled, teacher-centred education may be difficult to cast off in favour of independent and lifelong learning strategies. It is therefore evident that previous education level can be a significant predictor of academic success for adult distance education students.

When analysed according to gender, the results in tables 5, 6 and 7 revealed that significantly more male than female students disagreed that tutors had a sound knowledge of subject matter; encouraged students to share their experiences/knowledge and encouraged questions and dialogue with students. One possible explanation for this is McGivney's (1996) argument that men are more likely to cite course-related reasons if they experience difficulties in their studies, whereas women are more likely to cite reasons to do with family commitments and the lack, inadequacy or costs of childcare. She further noted that this had been found in all types of provision, including distance learning.

Table 5: Whether tutors have sound knowledge of subject matter, by gender

GENDER	Extent of agreement or disagreement with statement									
	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree		TOTAL	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Male	1	20.0	1	20.0	3	60.0	0	0.0	5	100.0
Female	16	40.0	18	45.0	3	7.5	3	7.5	40	100.0
TOTAL	17	37.8	19	42.2	6	13.3	3	6.7	45	100.0

Note: $\chi^2 = 10.69$; df = 3; p < 0.05

Table 6: Whether tutors encourage students to share experiences/knowledge, by gender

GENDER	Extent of agreement or disagreement with statement									
	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree		TOTAL	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Male	2	40.0	2	40.0	1	20.0	0	0.0	5	100.0
Female	12	30.8	26	66.7	0	0.0	1	2.6	39	100.0
TOTAL	14	31.8	28	63.6	1	2.3	1	2.3	44	100.0

Note: $\chi^2 = 8.54$; df = 3; p < 0.05

Table 7: Whether tutors encourage questions and dialogue with students, by gender

GENDER	Extent of agreement or disagreement with statement									
	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree		TOTAL	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Male	2	40.0	2	40.0	0	0.0	1	20.0	5	100.0
Female	7	17.9	32	82.1	0	0.0	0	0.0	39	100.0
TOTAL	9	20.5	34	77.3	0	0.0	1	2.3	44	100.0

Note: $\chi^2 = 9.87$; df = 2; p < 0.01

Concerning tutors' punctuality and attendance of tutorials and whether tutorials enhanced understanding of course material, data in tables 8, 9, 10 and 11 showed that significantly more single, younger students and those staying nearer to the northern campus, disagreed that tutors were punctual and that tutorials enhanced the understanding of course material. One possible explanation for this finding is that more students who were single, younger and who stayed nearer to the campus, had the opportunity to attend tutorials than those who were married or stayed further away from the campus. As a result, they were more exposed to and experienced the occurrence of tutors who were not punctual, who did not turn up for their classes and tutorials that did not meet their needs for understanding the course material.

However, responses to open-ended questions revealed that married students and students who lived far away from the campus experienced similar frustrations. The passage below demonstrates this:

We waist our money to travel to campus for Saturday classes, because when we arrive, we wait for long hours and many times, they just do not turn up.

I have to travel long distances to attend tutorials. The schedules of Saturday classes are changed, but not communicated to us.

These frustrations support McGivney's (2004:41) argument that some institutions are not adult-friendly. She noted that:

> *Some mature students feel alienated when their existing skills and experiences are not taken into account or when their outside commitments are ignored. I recently met a mature under-graduate with three children who had to travel a considerable distance to her nearest university. She complained that in her first term induction meetings, lectures and seminars were frequently cancelled or re-scheduled without any prior notice:* do they think that my time is less valuable than theirs?

In this context, Simpson (2002:79) argued that:

> *Distance education students who are making considerable efforts to attend rare and distant tutorials may expect a higher quality of support than students at conventional institutions who can shrug off the occasional system failure or poor tutorial.*

Such practices can cause resentment and disillusionment and predicate early withdrawal.

Table 8: Whether overall attendance and punctuality of tutors is good, by age

AGE CATEGORY	Extent of agreement or disagreement with statement									
	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree		TOTAL	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
23 – 27	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	25.0	3	75.0	4	100.0
28 – 33	1	5.6	6	33.3	8	44.4	3	16.7	18	100.0
34 – 39	2	13.3	6	40.0	4	26.7	3	20.0	15	100.0
40 – 45	3	25.0	8	66.7	1	8.3	0	0.0	12	100.0
46 – 50	1	50.0	0	0.0	1	50.0	0	0.0	2	100.0
Older than 50	1	50.0	1	50.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	100.0
TOTAL	8	15.1	21	39.6	15	28.3	9	17.0	53	100.0

Note: $\chi^2 = 25.56$; df = 15; p < 0.05

Table 9: Whether overall attendance and punctuality of tutors is good, by marital status

MARITAL STATUS	Extent of agreement or disagreement with statement									
	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree		TOTAL	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Single	0	0.0	9	45.0	4	20.0	7	35.0	20	100.0
Married	7	21.9	12	37.5	11	34.4	2	6.3	32	100.0
Widowed	1	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0
TOTAL	8	15.1	21	39.6	15	28.3	9	17.0	53	100.0

Note: $\chi^2 = 16.70$; df = 6; p < 0.05

Table 10: Whether overall attendance and punctuality of tutors is good, by distance from campus

DISTANCE FROM CAMPUS	Extent of agreement or disagreement with statement									
	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree		TOTAL	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
0-20km	0	0.0	6	60.0	3	30.0	1	10.0	10	100.0
21-40km	0	0.0	4	44.4	4	44.4	1	11.1	9	100.0
41-60km	1	14.3	1	14.3	5	71.4	0	0.0	7	100.0
61-80km	4	50.0	1	12.5	1	12.5	2	25.0	8	100.0
81-100km	2	16.7	8	66.7	0	0.0	2	16.7	12	100.0
More than 100km	1	14.3	1	14.3	2	28.6	3	42.9	7	100.0
TOTAL	8	15.1	21	39.6	15	28.3	9	17.0	53	100.0

Note: $\chi^2 = 30.68$; df = 15; p < 0.01

Table 11: Whether tutorials enhance understanding of course material, by distance from campus

DISTANCE FROM CAMPUS	Extent of agreement or disagreement with statement									
	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree		TOTAL	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
0-20km	2	33.3	3	50.0	1	16.7	0	0.0	6	100.0
21-40km	2	25.0	4	50.0	1	12.5	1	12.5	8	100.0
41-60km	0	0.0	3	42.9	4	57.1	0	0.0	7	100.0
61-80km	6	75.0	2	25.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	8	100.0
81-100km	2	22.2	7	77.8	0	0.0	0	0.0	9	100.0
More than 100km	3	42.9	4	57.1	0	0.0	0	0.0	7	100.0
TOTAL	15	33.3	23	51.1	6	13.3	1	2.2	45	100.0

Note: $\chi^2 = 27.61$; df = 15; $p < 0.05$

Tutor-marking

Although the overwhelming majority of respondents in this study indicated that tutor-marked assignments are meaningful and an important teaching and learning device, nearly all had experienced some level of dissatisfaction in this area. This was clarified by their comments in the follow-up open-ended questions regarding turn-around time and feedback on tutor-marked assignments. Participants were frustrated at being required to submit assignments as part of their formative assessment, while the slow turn-around time and inadequate feedback on assignments made it extremely difficult for them to perform as expected. This finding supports the suggestion by Purnell, Cuskelly and Danaher (1996) that issues such as turn-around time and quality feedback that can enhance student achievement need careful attention since these can be critical in supporting students in their studies.

In a study reported by Benza, Chitsika, Mvere, Nyakupinda and Mugadzaweta (1999), students felt that the assignment turn-around period was unsatisfactory. They argue that students appear to have made a genuine observation because feedback on marked assignments is the most critical tutoring strategy in open and distance learning. The earlier the feedback is provided the more it is likely to have a positive impact on the students' performance.

When analysed according to gender, the data in table 12 further revealed that significantly more male than female respondents expressed the concern that no comments or feedback had been given on their assignments. A possible explanation could be that male students are specifically much more dependent on support from their tutors than female students. With the absence of support from tutors, men may feel discouraged, while women tend to display a preference for cooperative learning in supportive environments where they can share their problems as found by Burnham (1988), Hipp (1997) and Kumar (1999). The major portion of the respondents in this study were women and the findings reported in table 1 revealed that 61.8% of the respondents often made use of study groups. In addition, it has been suggested (Kirkup and Von Prömmer, 1997) that more female than male distance education students suffer from the isolation of studying at a distance, and that for women it was particularly important to have access to some sort of personal communication. Taplin and Jegede (2001) further reported that women prefer and are more likely to seek further support from peer or colleagues than from tutors, hence the men reported more difficulties with their studies than women.

Table 12: Whether no comments/feedback are given on tutor-marked assignments, by gender

GENDER	Extent of agreement or disagreement with statement									
	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree		TOTAL	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Male	3	60.0	0	0.0	2	40.0	0	0.0	5	100.0
Female	7	16.3	12	27.9	12	27.9	12	27.9	43	100.0
TOTAL	10	20.8	12	25.0	14	29.2	12	25.0	48	100.0

Note: $\chi^2 = 7.83$; df = 3; $p < 0.05$

The results in tables 13 and 14 furthermore indicated that significantly more younger and single students disagreed that comments and feedback on tutor-marked assignments were constructive, relevant and encouraging and that tutors were available for consultation to provide academic support to complete assignments. This could indicate that it is probable that younger students, entering higher education programmes through open and distance learning, immediately after completing their secondary education, require a greater degree of motivation as they were used to a system where there may be other "pull factors" (McGivney, 2004:42) like social elements, set course times and face-to-face contact with tutors. While outside constraints relating to work and family prove to negatively affect mature, married students' performance, many of them manage to overcome such pressures. This is often due to personal drive and motivation. McGivney (2004:42) noted:

> *Lecturers and tutors find that mature students tend to be more motivated than younger students for a number of reasons: because the course or programme is something that they long wanted to do; because they have made sacrifices in order to participate; because they want to prove to themselves and others that they are capable of learning and gaining a qualification; or because they need or are required to study for career or employment reasons.*

Table 13: Whether comments/feedback are constructive and relevant, by age

AGE CATEGORY	Extent of agreement or disagreement with statement									
	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree		TOTAL	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
23 – 27	0	0.0	1	25.0	0	0.0	3	75.0	4	100.0
28 – 33	2	11.8	6	35.3	4	23.5	5	29.4	17	100.0
34 – 39	2	12.5	5	31.3	8	50.0	1	6.3	16	100.0
40 – 45	4	33.3	3	25.0	4	33.3	1	8.3	12	100.0
46 – 50	2	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	100.0
Older than 50	0	0.0	1	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	100.0
TOTAL	10	19.2	16	30.8	16	30.8	10	19.2	52	100.0

Note: $\chi^2 = 26.82$; df = 15; $p < 0.05$

Table 14: Whether comments/feedback are encouraging, by age

AGE CATEGORY	Extent of agreement or disagreement with statement									
	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree		TOTAL	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
23 – 27	0	0.0	1	25.0	0	0.0	3	75.0	4	100.0
28 – 33	2	11.1	9	50.0	3	16.7	4	22.2	18	100.0
34 – 39	1	6.3	8	50.0	7	43.8	0	0.0	16	100.0
40 – 45	3	25.0	7	58.3	1	8.3	1	8.3	12	100.0
46 – 50	1	50.0	1	50.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	100.0
Older than 50	0	0.0	2	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	100.0
TOTAL	7	13.0	28	51.9	11	20.4	8	14.8	54	100.0

Note: $\chi^2 = 27.06$; df = 15; $p < 0.05$

In some cases, the findings appeared to relate to the specific context of Namibia; in others they showed similarities to results reported elsewhere. The most significant result in this study is that respondents attached primary importance to communication with both administrative and support staff and their tutors. Certainly, this study illustrated that students value highly academic support from tutors which enhances their understanding of the course materials and provides general guidance on their assignments. Their high attendance rates suggest that many tutors were meeting this expressed need. The expectations that tutorials should be concerned primarily with covering course content and assignments showed that actual practice in tutorials deviated from students' prior preference. However, this did not necessarily lead to a low evaluation of them. It seems that as long as tutors are able to organise fruitful tutorials, which meet students' expectations of enhancing their learning, Namibian students are ready to participate in a variety of tutorial formats.

Other factors contributing to a high attendance rate of tutorials related to certain attributes of the tutors themselves – their being able to present the subject matter systematically, clearly and effectively. The cultural context in which a distance education system operates, and the previous educational experience of its students, inevitably has some effect on the expectations and learning styles of adult distance education students. The results from this study, for example, suggest that student expectations on the functions and formats of tutorials are inclined to passive, tutor-directed approaches.

The importance of communication with fellow students; assistance in accessing study and library facilities; assistance received from administrative and support staff and assistance to access and use computers, internet and e-mail services were highlighted by many respondents and identified as vital for helping them in learning by distance education mode.

Likewise, respondents identified a number of factors in the open-ended questions as hindering their academic progress. Difficulties in communicating and contacting administrative and support staff and tutors were identified. Many respondents also expressed a sense of isolation.

Problems with course design and implementation were identified as hindrances to success. Although not formally a support service, the issue of course material availability was clearly significant to respondents. Respondents commented on late course materials, unresponsive tutors, lack of access to prescribed books and a lack of response from the staff at both the northern campus and the main campus. Poor course materials, for example unclear expectations and guidelines for completion of assignments, and a lack of high quality and timely feedback on assignments were also mentioned as hindrances to success.

There was an abundance of findings on suggestions and recommendations regarding the improvement of student support services to meet students' needs and expectations. In particular, respondents wanted timely and constructive feedback on assignments. Assistance with study skills development and guidance on the use of internet and e-mail services was suggested, and several students commented on the need for more and better tutoring services geared to their specific needs.

Improving communication with staff and tutors also received attention. Regular contact, whether by telephone or face-to-face, was clearly a priority. Respondents also suggested that comprehensive information about available student support services be provided during orientation seminars.

Respondents had much to say about ways in which the Centre for External Studies could smooth their study career. Primary among these suggestions were the issues of improved access to library resources; the establishment of a Dean of Students Office at the northern campus; a Student Representative Council member for distance education students; and closer contact between students at the northern campus and the Centre for External Studies Management through regular campus visits and meetings. The provision of timely and accurate information and of clear procedures for problem solving was significant to these students.

Access to academic guidance was important to respondents, as they were confused with the changes in the B.Ed curriculum, which were implemented after their initial enrolment. With respect to administrative support services provided during admission and registration, respondents stressed the need for accurate and clear procedures.

Implications and a suggested student support model for the University of Namibia's Centre for External Studies

For distance education students, continuing their education requires the linking of two worlds, that is, their personal sphere with that of the institution. Although the same might be said of any educational experience for any student, the need for integration is emphasised by the particular characteristics of adult distance education students (adults with home, family, employment, and community responsibilities) and by the lack (for the majority of these students) of the physical presence of the institution in their everyday lives. Distance education students interviewed in this study provided an account of individuals trying to integrate

both worlds – the personal and the institutional – and to manage the responsibilities required of both. In an attempt to address their student support needs and meet their expectations to integrate both worlds, the results of this study suggest the following model of student support services for distance education students (figure 1), as adapted from Brindley (1993).

The model presented in figure 1 is based on a broad definition of student support and suits an institution that views support as a holistic function and that is prepared to provide an integrated and distributed approach. It takes a student perspective and assumes that support is best provided by multi-skilled professionals with a broad base of experience who can call on specialist advice when and if it is needed. It rests however, on a high degree of staff training and good organisation and coordination.

The model is inclusive, acknowledging the importance of providing quality information, advice and guidance at pre-enrolment, early and post-enrolment stages (McInnis-Rankin and Brindley, 1986; Zaykowski, 1993). Support provided at these stages is essential for distance education students to permit them to successfully plan and develop a course of study.
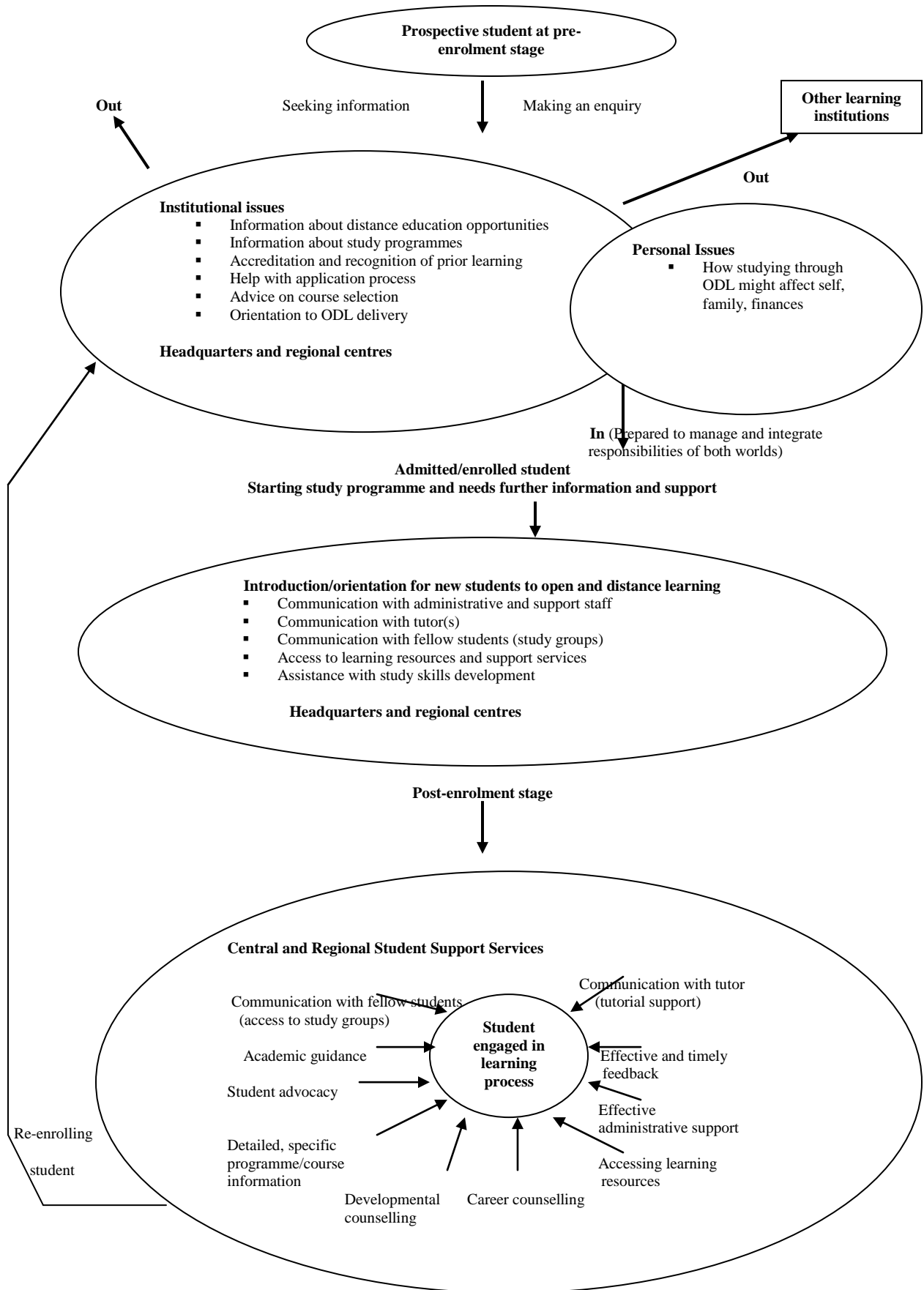
In order to implement this student support model successfully, the Centre for External Studies needs to allocate greater institutional resources to aspects of career counselling and academic planning, rather than just providing generic course or programme information at the pre-enrolment stage. Brindley (1993), states that it is at this pre-enrolment stage that enquiries into the recognition and accreditation of prior learning must be addressed. These initial enquiries for institutional information and advice will often be made at the main campus in Windhoek, but there is evidence to support the flexibility of local or regional responses to enquiries. Students in this study indicated their need for ready personal contact and interaction at this stage and a centralised open and distance learning institution may not be able to respond in time. As a result, the Centre for External Studies should provide regular and thorough information sessions on current developments regarding course and programme information to regional staff for them to provide adequate and resourceful information to prospective students at the pre-enrolment stage.

Some prospective students will make the decision not to enrol while others may be guided by staff towards other learning institutions that better meet their needs. Students will then need an introduction or orientation to open and distance learning to provide a safe and structured introduction or return to higher education. In the next section of the model those who have admission to courses and programmes should be able to access a wide range of administrative and academic support. The Centre for External Studies should therefore ensure that the following services are available at central and regional level:

- effective administrative support;
- specific course and programme information;
- academic guidance;
- access to learning resources;
- access to study groups;
- tutorial support (including one-to-one tutorial assistance, regional face-to-face tutorials, week-long vacation schools and telephone tutoring);
- effective and timely feedback;
- developmental counselling;
- student advocacy; and
- career counselling.

Not all student support services indicated are required by all students, but because of individual differences among adult distance education students, something that may be insignificant to one may be of crucial importance to another and may make a vital difference. Therefore, in considering students' support service needs and expectations, the Centre for External Studies cannot simply plan for the majority. In addition, some student support services need to be available at all stages, as each student will move through the learning process at a different pace. A systemic approach to this model, which captures student support as a process, rather than as a series of second order activities, is therefore proposed to ensure equalising opportunities for all students, irrespective of their different needs.

Figure 1: Model of student support services

Prospective student at pre-enrolment stage

Out

Seeking information

Making an enquiry

Other learning institutions

Out

Institutional issues
- Information about distance education opportunities
- Information about study programmes
- Accreditation and recognition of prior learning
- Help with application process
- Advice on course selection
- Orientation to ODL delivery

Headquarters and regional centres

Personal Issues
- How studying through ODL might affect self, family, finances

In (Prepared to manage and integrate responsibilities of both worlds)

Admitted/enrolled student
Starting study programme and needs further information and support

Introduction/orientation for new students to open and distance learning
- Communication with administrative and support staff
- Communication with tutor(s)
- Communication with fellow students (study groups)
- Access to learning resources and support services
- Assistance with study skills development

Headquarters and regional centres

Post-enrolment stage

Central and Regional Student Support Services

Communication with fellow students (access to study groups)

Communication with tutor (tutorial support)

Academic guidance

Student engaged in learning process

Effective and timely feedback

Student advocacy

Detailed, specific programme/course information

Effective administrative support

Accessing learning resources

Developmental counselling

Career counselling

Re-enrolling student

Recommendations

While some success has been achieved in providing student support services for distance education students through the Centre for External Studies of the University of Namibia, the results of this study raise many pertinent recommendations for the improvement of student support services and the successful provision of open and distance learning.

Without exception, students expressed their need for diversified and improved student support services and demanded quality education that is flexible in its delivery.

It is in recognition of these needs, and the ability to respond appropriately, that the foundations of quality open learning provision lie. Students must be recognised as adults with life responsibilities who are prone to life events. Tait (2000) argued that while a minority of students in any institution regard themselves as almost entirely autonomous, it is clear that a majority welcome student support services, and in fact always demand more. As a result, support structures to facilitate cognitive, affective and systemic functions of a student support system need to be in place to address students' personal and professional development.

In essence, respondents seemed to ask the Centre for External Studies to provide the information they require, streamline processes and procedures, help reduce their sense of isolation, and give them the academic tools they need to succeed. The following recommendations are therefore put forward:

- The Centre for External Studies should consider the call for providing quality student support as a priority and an integral part of the delivery of open and distance learning.

- Reliable communications and good logistics should be available at the northern campus. Both are essential so that the distance between the system and its users does not introduce unacceptable delays between the availability of course materials and their actual use by students; between posing a question and getting an answer; and between sending an assignment and receiving the corresponding evaluation.

- The role of the tutor should be redefined, as indicated by the findings of this study. Improving tutorial support specifically implies that the role of the tutor is multifaceted. Tutors' skills in offering student support are not only vital, but also unique. This is largely because tutors should be supportive, and adult distance education students have a wide range of needs that are different from those of the average school leaver entering higher education by attending residential classes. This means that the Centre for External Studies should assign more responsibility to the tutors and set up mechanisms that make it possible for students and tutors to stay in direct contact. In addition, systems should be set up to make the tutor accountable. The selection of tutors must be thorough. Consequently, these changes would include financial restructuring. Involving the tutors more in the tutoring process, means having to improve their financial compensation. This indicates that extra funds should be made available for student support. As tutors would need to spend more time on tutoring, performing different tasks in addition to their traditional role as "markers" of assignments, work to perform such extra tasks must be financially compensated, as tutor fees are currently based on marking only. In addition, the findings of this study revealed clearly that the Centre for External Studies should expect the tutors to become much more personally involved and accountable for tutor-student interaction. This recommendation is likely to result in an increase in tutor costs, both with regard to an increased workload for the tutor and costs involved for tutor training.

- It is vitally important that all resource materials reach students in good time. The student support staff should therefore ensure that all relevant information be fully accessible to the student. It is not enough, for instance, to provide students with an extensive bibliographical list, without making sure that all the corresponding references are equally and readily available at the library and campus bookshop.

- The Centre for External Studies should conduct periodic and regular studies of its distance education students to determine who they are and what their needs are. Breakdowns of the student population, for example, by gender, age, location, study programme, as well as detailed information regarding personal and professional circumstances, can contribute substantially to understanding this clientele. This will contribute to the design, development and provision of student support services that will be tailored to students' specific needs and expectations.

- If the Centre for External Studies is concerned about student success in distance education and wishes to make higher education more accessible, attention must be paid to support services that help reduce barriers. The model for student support services as suggested in figure 1 provides a grounded framework from which to work. Support services that may counteract barriers and attend to students' needs and expectations as expressed in the findings of this study, include convenient access to prescribed textbooks and other learning resources, as well as to assistance with logistics and solving problems arising from the distance between the student and the campus. Well-designed course material and effective and timely feedback processes are recommended. Good developmental counselling and academic guidance services, for example assistance with developing study skills, are recommended to diminish barriers. Specifically, developmental counselling and support should include the role to help students build confidence, enhance their learning skills, and maintain a commitment to their studies. This kind of support does not necessarily require subject-matter expertise, so it should be possible to make it available at regional level. Regional staff responsible for this service should be sensitised that counselling is intended to develop confidence, and enable students to make informed decisions. This is particularly relevant to adult students who face a myriad of personal and special problems which include role conflict, financial pressures, learning difficulties and confusion about their goals.

- Students expressed their frustration at the difficulty of making contact by phone and the long distances they had to travel to the northern campus to seek vital information and support. An associated concern was the lack of approachability of administrative staff at the northern campus. It is therefore recommended that administrative and support staff ensure that the correct and prompt information and guidance are given to students for them to take the best decision on their course.

- A number of students commented on their disappointment with the quality of feedback on tutor-marked assignments and it is therefore recommended that the Centre for External Studies further strengthen its assignment monitoring system to assess both the marking standards (i.e. are grades comparable across tutors offering the same course) and the quality of tuition (i.e. are students getting speedy, accurate and helpful feedback on their assignments). Issues such as turn-around time and quality feedback that can enhance student achievement, need careful attention, since these can be critical in supporting students in their studies.

- The Centre for External Studies should establish a procedure for identifying and following up absent or under-performing students, especially for those students who failed to complete their first assignment. Tutors and support staff should take swift action to determine the cause of non-completion of assignments and provide help and support for students who are experiencing difficulties. It is anticipated that in many cases it will result in significantly increased retention rates.

- A major factor that assists distance education students in building self-esteem and in developing a strong identity with the institution, is interpersonal relationships with fellow students, tutors and support staff. Without exception, students in this study expressed their need for communicating with fellow students and tutors. The importance of residential opportunities such as vacation schools and face-to-face/Saturday tutorials is also evident from the findings of this study. It is therefore recommended that the Centre for External Studies should continue to provide adequate training for tutors, since it is essential that tutors are well prepared for the special challenges presented by open and distance learning. As tutors are the main persons with whom students will

be in contact about their coursework, the quality of tutors' feedback and advice can have a decisive impact on progress and persistence.

▪ Students also expressed the need for more tutorials. Supplemental tutoring should be provided by using interactive video-conferencing, which is currently under-utilised and only used twice a year during the week-long vacation schools.

▪ This study revealed that the formation of local study groups could help to maintain the motivation of isolated distance education students. In recognition of the essential support that is inherent in peer relationships, it is recommended that the Centre for External Studies put students in contact with each other. A very simple but effective means to improve peer communication and support is to publish directories on students enrolled for the same course. Such directories should include the students' names, contact details and course(s) enrolled for. However, those who wish not to be listed, should be given an opportunity to prevent their inclusion in such directories by means of a check-off on the registration form.

• As noted earlier, adults entering university without the prerequisite information technology skills are at a considerable disadvantage. Their ability to overcome this disadvantage will be closely related to the level of understanding and practical support offered by the University. The majority of students in this study commented on their lack of information and communication technology (ICT) skills and indicated their need for computer literacy training. It is therefore recommended that the Centre for External Studies implement and design an appropriate ICT course to empower students adequately for the use of modern ICT. The technology required to implement such a course at the northern campus is available through networked computers in the library.

• It is further recommended that the Centre for External Studies carry out an analysis on accessibility to ICT on a frequent basis in order to maintain currency, since the availability of ICT is rapidly changing in developing countries. As ICT becomes more and more widely used, the Centre for External Studies also needs to take informed decisions about the extent to which it will make use of ICT to strengthen existing delivery mechanisms and supplement existing student support services, keeping in mind that different students will choose support media according to different criteria at different times of their study. An important aim for the Centre for External Studies will be to analyse these different criteria for its students in order to make appropriate decisions about the particular media mix for its course delivery and student support services. Moreover, an analysis should be carried out on existing practices on ODL delivery through ICT at other open and distance learning providers in order to benefit from lessons learnt. The ODL community expected that delivery of open and distance learning programmes through the use of modern ICT would open up doors and widen access. It was believed that it would enhance equity, that students would prefer it and that it would contribute towards sustainability. However, Zemsky and Massy (2004) reported that those who promote, fund and depend on e-learning need to talk less and succeed more. The early adopters need to understand that their success depends as much on the context in which they operate as on the power of the technologies they employ. Although technology brings more options, technologies by themselves are simply the tools or the implements. It takes a teacher to impart substance, content and meaning to any technology and its use. In this context, Sir John Daniel, in his opening remarks at the third Pan Commonwealth Conference in Dunedin, stated:

> *We should take a breather in e-learning and re-evaluate our practices.*
> *We should pay attention to the specific pedagogy required to deliver*
> *courses through ICT and pay attention to the approach necessary and*
> *not the technology alone.*

(Daniel, 2004:4)

Conclusion

Researchers observed that many distance education students do not finish their courses, often because of inadequate attention to student support services. The results of this study indicate that adult distance

education students regard the provision of administrative support, orientation seminars for new students, vacation schools/interactive video-conference tutorials, telephone-tutoring, face-to-face/Saturday tutorials and quality and timely feedback on tutor-marked assignments as pivotal to the success of their studies.

In this study, a case has therefore been made that the provision of student support services, according to the diverse needs and expectations of adult distance education students, should be an integral part of the provision of open and distance learning.

Another conclusion that can be drawn is that institutional policy and the role of management are crucial in establishing an effective student support model to facilitate distance learning. Strong leadership of the distance education unit is of crucial importance to the success of a distance education programme. Perhaps more importantly, the support of Senior University Management is a necessary precondition for the success of distance education in a dual-mode institution where opposition and scepticism from traditional academics about the possibility to do real academic teaching by distance education is prevalent.

As the learning landscape is gradually changing and more and more learning opportunities are being offered through open and distance learning, it is important that the Centre for External Studies give increased attention to not only the cognitive needs of students, but also to the affective and systemic needs. As such, the Centre for External Studies should take cognisance of the evaluation of student support services as expressed in this study, and couple it with the situational and dispositional realities of students to develop multifaceted student support services and implement an improved student support model.

References

BÄÄTH, J. 1982. Distance students' learning – empirical findings and theoretical deliberations. *Distance Education,* 3(1): 6-2.

BASSON, R. & NONYONGO, E. 1997. Interpreting the student perspective on DUSSPRO tutorial support and its implications for a distance education provider. *SAJHE/SATHO,* 11(2): 97-110.

BENZA, T.E.S., CHITSIKA, R., MVERE, F.S., NAJAKUPINDA, D. & MUGADZAWETA, J.G. 1999. A critical assessment of learner support services provided by the Zimbabwe Open University. Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning, Case Studies A-G. Brunei: Commonwealth of Learning.

BETRAM, C. 2003. Exploring informal student study groups. In TAIT, A. & MILLS, R. (Eds.), Rethinking Learner Support in Distance Education: Change and Continuity in an International Context. London: Routledge.

BIRD, J. & MORGAN, C. 2003. Adults contemplating university study at a distance: issues, themes and concerns. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning,* 4(1). Retrieved July 2003, from the World Wide Web: [http://www.irrodl.org/content/v4.1/bird_morgan.html].

BOONZAAIER, C. 1996. Why did so many students go? Pretoria: Bureau for Management Information, UNISA.

BRINDLEY, J. 1988. A model of attrition for distance education. In SEWART, D. & DANIEL, J.S. (Eds.), Developing Distance Education. Oslo: International Council for Distance Education.

BRINDLEY, J. 1993. Student Support. An unpublished seminar given to staff of the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand. Lower Hutt.

BRINDLEY, J. & JEAN-LOUIS, M. 1990. Student Support Services: The Case for a Proactive Approach. *CADE: Journal of Distance Education / Revue de l'enseignement à distance:* 5(1). Retrieved August 2002, from the World Wide Web: [http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?151.5.1.3].

BROOKFIELD, S.D. 1988. Conceptual methodological and practical ambiguities in self-directed learning. In LONG, H. & ASSOCIATES (Eds.), Self-directed learning: Application and theory. Athens: Adult Education Department of the University of Georgia.

BURGE, L. 1988. Beyond andragogy: some explorations for distance learning design. *Journal of Distance Education*, 3(1): 5-23.

BURNHAM, E. 1988. Educating Rita and Snow College: the impact of the non-traditional student. Eric Document #ED304185.

CHADIBE, I.E. 2002. A Case Study Examining the Extent to which Urban and Semi-Rural Learning Centres are used as Support Systems for Distance Education Learners. Pretoria: UNISA. Retrieved November 2003, from the World Wide Web: [www.col.org].

DANIEL, J. 2004. Summary Presentation. Third Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning. Dunedin, New Zealand: Commonwealth of Learning.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, 1995. Government Gazette, White Paper on Education and Training, 357 (16312). Notice No. 196 of 1995. Pretoria: Government Printer.

DILLON, C.L., GUNAWARDENA, C.N. & PARKER, R. 1992. Learner Support: The critical link in distance education. *Distance Education,* 13(1): 29-45.

DODDS, A.E., LAWRENCE, J.A. & GUITON, P. 1984. University students' perceptions of influences on external studies. *Distance Education,* 5(2): 174-185.

DODDS, T. 1999a. The University of Namibia, Centre for External Studies: Purposes, Programmes and Plans. Unpublished Paper prepared as a contribution to UNAM's presentation to the Presidential Commission on Education, Culture and Training, 1999.

FRASER, W.J. & VAN STADEN, C.J.S. 1996. Students' opinions on factors influencing drop-out rates and performance at distance education institutions. *South African Journal of Education,* 16(4): 216-223.

FRITSCH, H. & STRÖHLEIN, G. 1989. Mentor support and academic achievement. *Open Learning*, 3(2): 27-32.

FUNG, Y. & CARR, R. 2000. Face-to-face tutorials in a distance learning system: meeting student needs. *Open Learning*, 15(1): 35-46.

GALL, M.D., BORG, W.R. & GALL, J.P. 1996. Educational Research: An Introduction, 6th edition. New York: Longman Publishers.

GLENNIE, J. 1996. Towards learner-centred distance education in the changing South African context. In MILLS, R. & TAIT, A. (Eds.), Supporting the learner in open and distance learning. London: Pitman Publishing.

HARRISON, C.M. 1991c. Open all Hours: The TAFE Learning Resource Centre – Its Roles in Open Learning. Source unknown.

HIPP, H. 1997. Women studying at a distance: what do they need to succeed? *Open Learning*, 12(2): 41-49.

KEMBER, D. & DEKKERS, J. 1987. The role of study centres for academic support in distance education. *Distance Education,* 8(1).

KIRKUP, G. & VON PRÜMMER, C. 1997. Distance Education for European women. *European Journal of Women's Studies,* 4(1): 39-62.

KUHN, E. & WILLIAMS, P. 1997. Does Learner Support Make a Difference? In DILLEY, L. & ROMAN A. (Eds.), Support Services in Distance Education. South Africa: SACHED Trust.

KUMAR, A. 1999. Learner characteristics and success in Indian distance education. *Open Learning,* 14(3): 52-58.

LAMB, A.C. & SMITH, W.L. 2000. Ten facts of life for distance learning courses. *TechTrends*, 44(1): 12-15.

LENTELL, H. & O'ROURKE, J. 2004. Tutoring Large Numbers: An Unmet Challenge. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning,* 5(1). Retrieved May 2004, from the World Wide Web: [http://www.irrodl.org/content.v5.1/lentell_orourke.html].

LIVINGSTON, K. 1994. Student Support Direction Paper. Lower Hutt: Open Polytechnic of New Zealand.

MCALISTER, S. 1998. Credible or tentative? A model of Open University students with 'low' educational qualifications. *Open Learning,* 13(3): 33-42.

MCGIVNEY, V. 1996. Staying or Leaving the Course. Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE).

MCGIVNEY, V. 2004. Understanding persistence in adult learning. Open Learning, 19(1): 33-46.

MCINNIS-RANKIN, E. & BRINDLEY, J. 1986. Student Support Services. In MUGRIDGE, I. & KAUFMAN, D. (Eds.), Distance Education in Canada. London: Croom Helm.

MÖWES, D.L. 2002. Improving the quality of learning. Paper presented at the Namibia Educational Research Association (NERA) Conference. Windhoek: University of Namibia.

MÖWES, D.L. & SIACIWENA, R. 2000. The Management of Open and Distance Learning at the University of Namibia: A Case Study of the Centre for External Studies. Windhoek: University of Namibia.

NONYONGO, E. 1993. "An oasis in the desert". A case study of the SACHED Trust DUSSPRO tutorials. Unpublished M.Ed. Research Report. Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand.

NONYONGO, E. 2002. Changing Entrenched Learner Support Systems. In TAIT, A & MILLS, R. (Eds.), Rethinking Learner Support in Distance Education: Change and Continuity in an International Context. London: Routledge.

NONYONGO, E. & NGENGEBULE, A. 1993. The SACHED Distance Education Students' Support Programme. *Open Learning*, 8(2):131-138.

NUNAN, T. 1993. The role of stakeholders in achieving or improving quality: exploring some issues in the context of Australian Higher Education. Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning: European and International Perspectives. Cambridge: Downing College.

PETERS, O. 1992. Some observations on dropping out in distance education. *Distance Education,* 13(2): 234-269.

POWELL, R., CONWAY, C. & ROSS, L. 1990. Effects of student predisposing characteristics on student success. *Distance Education*, 5(1): 5-19.

PURNELL, K., CUSKELLY, E. & DANAHER, P. 1996. Improving Distance Education for University Students: Issues and Experiences of Students in Cities and Rural Areas. *Distance Education,* 11(2): 75-101.

RAE, M. 1989. Successful distance learners: Some New Zealand correspondence school strategies. In TAIT, A. (Ed.), Proceedings from Interaction and Independence: Student Support in Distance Education and Open Learning. England: Cambridge: Downing College.

RUMBLE, G. 1993. The Economics of Open Distance Education. In HARRY, K., JOHN, M. & KEEGAN, D. (Eds.), Distance Learning Education: New Perspectives. London: Routledge.

SEWART, D. 1983. Distance Teaching: A Contradiction in Terms? In SEWART, D., KEEGAN, D. & HOLMBERG, B. (Eds.), Distance Education: International Perspectives. Beckenham: Martin's Press.

SEWART, D. 1992. Student Support Systems in Distance Education. In SCRIVEN, B., LUNDIN, R. & RYAN, Y. (Eds.), Selected papers from the 16th World Conference of the ICDE, Thailand. Queensland University of Technology: International Council for Distance Education.

SHIN, N. & KIM, J. 1999. An exploration of learner progress and drop-out in Korea National Open University. *Distance Education*, 20(1): 81-95.

SIMPSON, O. 2002. Supporting Students in Online, Open and Distance Learning. London: Kogan Page Limited.

STEVENSON, K., SANDER, P. & NAYLOR, P. (1996). Student perceptions of the tutor's role in distance learning. *Open Learning,* 11(1): 22-30.

SWEET, R. 1994. Introduction: Directions for Change in Student Services. In Perspectives on Distance Education: Student Support Services. New Delhi Symposium.

TAIT, A. 1995. Student Support in Open and Distance Learning. In LOCKWOOD, F. (Ed.), Open and Distance Learning Today. London: Routledge.

TAIT, A. 1996. Conversation and Community: Student Support in Open and Distance Learning. In MILLS, R. & TAIT, A. (Eds.), Supporting the learner in open and distance learning. London: Pitman Publishing.

TAIT, A. 2000. Planning Student Support for Open and Distance Learning. *Open Learning*, 15(3): 287-299.

TAIT, A. 2003. Editorial: Reflections on Student Support in Open and Distance Learning. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning,* 4(1). Retrieved August 2004, from the World Wide Web: [http://www.irrodl.org/content/v4.1/tait_editorial.html].

TAIT, A. & MILLS, R. (Eds.), 2002. Rethinking Learner Support in Distance Education: Change and Continuity in an International Context. London: Routledge.

TAPLIN, M. & JEGEDE, O. 2001. Gender Differences in Factors Influencing Achievement of Distance Education Students. *Open Learning*, 16(2): 133-154.

UNIVERSITY OF NAMIBIA, 1995. University of Namibia First Five Year Development Plan (1995-1999). Windhoek: University of Namibia.

ZAYKOWSKI, M. 1993. Business Students learning at a distance: one form of pre-enrolment counselling and its effects on retention. *Distance Education*, 14(2):33-39.

ZEMSKY, R. AND MASSY, W. 2004. Thwarted Innovation: What Happened to e-learning and Why? A Final Report for the Weatherstation Project of The Learning Alliance at the University of Pennsylvania.