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# University of South Africa (Unisa)

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## INSTITUTIONAL OVERVIEW AND FOCUS

The history of University of South Africa (Unisa) dates back to 1873, with the inception of the University of the Cape of Good Hope. For many years this university was only an examining body for other institutions. In 1916 this examining body became the University of South Africa, which was a federal university consisting of a number of constituent university colleges which gradually developed into fully fledged universities. In 1946, in terms of South African legislation, Unisa restructured its focus and developed, delivered and awarded its own degrees and diploma programmes via the correspondence mode. Over the past 50 years, Unisa has evolved into one of the ten largest distance education institutions in the world.

## LEVEL AND SIZE OF THE UNISA EDUCATIONAL OPERATION

### Number of faculties, bureaux and institutes

As a distance education university Unisa provides tertiary educational opportunities to thousands of people in South Africa and beyond its borders. Because of its distance education component over the years Unisa has developed the capacity to deliver educational programmes in six faculties, that is, Arts, Economic and Management Sciences, Education, Law, Science and Theology. Currently, Unisa has 59 academic departments, 25 bureaux, centres and institutes, and 26 administrative departments.

The evolution of Unisa has been characterised by a steady increase in the enrolment figures of learners from the various population groups, and socio-political and cultural backgrounds, as shown in table 20.

<b>Years</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Coloured</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Total</b>
1955	3948	71	195	3	1014	18	429	8	5586
1965	12934	82	466	3	1552	10	893	6	15845
1975	31024	77	1512	4	4943	12	2728	7	40207
1985	46281	61	3872	5	17556	23	8210	11	75919
1995	50925	40	4877	4	61156	47	11240	9	128198
1996	48810	38	4988	4	63113	49	11543	9	128454
1997	46891	38	4816	4	60702	49	11803	9	124212

## **UNISA DISTANCE EDUCATION SUB-SYSTEMS AND STAFFING**

Over the years Unisa has developed very efficient administrative systems to cater for the complex network of subsystems which are crucial to effective distance education programme development and delivery. Until 1994 Unisa concentrated largely on the development of the following subsystems.

### **Course creation, materials development and administration**

Before 1994 Unisa's method of developing courses was through the single person, individualistic approach. To this end Unisa procured staff for the purpose of the origination of learning materials in the various faculties, bureaux, centres and institutions. For this, the university employed staff in the following categories:

<b>Teaching staff</b>	<b>Material production and distribution</b>	<b>Student administration</b>
Lecturers	Editors	Administrators
Academic authors	Translators	Clerks
Departmental heads	Secretaries	Cashiers
Faculty deans	Printers	Data capturers
Secretaries	Book collators	
	Book finishers	
	Despatch clerks	

### **Learner advisors and counselling service**

Most of Unisa learners register centrally in the Pretoria main campus or through the regional facilities. The latter are located in three of the South Africa's largest cities, Durban, (KwaZulu-Natal), Cape Town (Western Cape) and Pietersburg (Northern Province).

Advice and counselling services are given during the registration period to learners who are able to go to registration venues.

Whilst Unisa caters for registration to be done by correspondence, very little-counselling or effective advice is offered by correspondence to assist this type of distance learner to effectively select courses or make adequately informed decisions on an effective career path.

For this service Unisa employed counselling staff, who up to 1994 were located centrally at the Unisa headquarters in Pretoria. From 1995 a counsellor was employed in Cape Town and one was employed in the Durban office in 1996. In 1997 two more counsellors were located in Pietersburg and in Johannesburg.

### **Instructional support services**

Unisa's tuition model is based primarily on print materials, in the form of a study package comprising study guides and tutorial letters. These are further supported by the following:

- assignments and exams;
- limited face-to-face encounters with the academic staff at the main campus, for those student who can travel to Pretoria, or who can phone the university. And also through 'discussion classes. These are an additional somewhat ad hoc didactic aid' (Unisa 1994:9), delivered through regular visits by the lecturing staff to the various regional facilities;
- audio-cassettes;
- library services;
- graduations and certification.

### **Overall size of staff**

The size of operation in Unisa is supported by 3 399 academic and administration staff members (Unisa pocket statistics leaflet 1997). The proportion of time spent by the academic staff on the various activities portrays the following pattern: 'In 1994, 55,6% time was spent on formal instruction, 25,13% on research, 10,66% on academic administration' (Unisa 1995:16). The bulk of this staff are centrally located at the Unisa campus in Pretoria.

### **The institution's view on role of learner support services**

Unisa's view on the role of learner support should be seen in the context of the country's view on distance education during the apartheid education period. In this period the major constraint identified in South Africa's distance education model was the 'lack of student-centred tutoring provision by the provider institutions' (SAIDE 1994:64). Whilst Unisa perfected the system to ensure effective registration and administration, the area of learner support was identified as a weakness.

The changing political context leading up to the emergence of the Government of National Unity (GNU) highlighted new educational priorities and imperatives. Unisa, as one of the largest providers of tertiary education, had to re-examine its role and service to its learners and thus explore ways of changing and expanding the character and nature of its tuition model. It must also be noted that whereas Unisa, as one of the mega-universities had pioneered the expansion of access to university education both in South Africa and internationally, it was necessary for it to 'improve the quality of its course materials and student support' (Daniels 1995).

The post-1994 period heralds a change in outlook on the needs of learners in distance education. Greater emphasis is now being placed on the role which distance education must play in -meeting new needs of learners and eliminating the backlog in education. 'Unisa has to acknowledge that the time has come for it to move away from being a "purely" correspondence institution and gradually become a well-functioning distance education institution which ensures that all its students receive effective and efficient support. It is the quality of the learning experience, underpinned by the University's administrative, academic and environment support systems, which provide the students who register with Unisa with a highly positive educational experience and thus increase their chances of successfully completing their studies' (Maimela 1995).

## Nature of learner support at Unisa

To understand the nature of the support provided by the University we need some background of who the Unisa learners are, and what their needs are.

### Who are the Unisa learners ?

#### *Racial distribution*

The political context which grew out of the apartheid era in South Africa was designed to create a socio-economically and educationally divided communities. In this context the white community was provided with educational opportunities and resources designed to encourage and develop economic and political dominance. The majority of learners who entered distance education in South Africa, who came largely from black communities, have thus not only been historically and politically disadvantaged, but also economically and educationally deprived. However, as shown by Table 20, there has been a drastic increase in enrolment of learners from such communities. By 1997 Unisa enrolled 124 212 learners, approximately 60% of these came from disadvantaged community, ie black, coloured and Asian. Table 21 shows the racial distribution of Unisa learners in 1997.

Table 21 Racial distribution (1997)

<b>Years</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Coloured</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Total</b>
1997	46891	38	4816	4	60702	49	11803	9	124212

### Gender distribution

Gender distribution as follows:

Table 22 Gender distribution

<b>Year</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Total</b>
1997	54999	44	69213	56	124212

### Geographical distribution

As one of the largest providers of distance education internationally, Unisa enrolls and delivers educational opportunities to learners from diverse backgrounds. The overall geographical distribution as shown in table 23 gives a picture of this distribution, as captured in 1997.

Table 23 Geographical distribution (1997)

South Africa	117337
Rest of Africa	4617
America (North)	285
America (South)	24
Asia	1044

Europe	772
Australia	83
New Zealand	50
Total	124212

Within South Africa Unisa occupies a significant niche as one of the largest providers of tertiary education. As shown in table 24, in 1997 Unisa enrolled 117 377 South African learners. These represented about 40% of the overall number of learners enrolled in tertiary institutions in South Africa.

The geographical distribution within South Africa is as follows:

Table 24 Learner distribution in South Africa in 1997

<b>All RSA provinces</b>	<b>Numbers</b>	<b>%</b>
Western Cape	10278	8,8%
Northern Cape	976	0,8%
Eastern Cape	7973	6,8%
KwaZulu/Natal	23307	19,9%
Mpumalanga	6712	5,7%
Northern Province	14173	12,1%
Gauteng	45421	38,7%
North West	5396	4,6%
Free State	3101	2,6%
Total	117337	100%

### **Age distribution**

Distance education affords educational opportunities to learners of different age groups. The average age of Unisa learners is 30 years. The majority of these learners are people who entered tertiary education in search of further education or for a second chance to acquire a tertiary qualification.

### **Occupational distribution**

Because of its distance education model, Unisa learners over the years have been largely part-time students who were employed or had other social commitments in their communities. Unisa statistics in 1997 show that students who are employed come from a diverse spread of economic activity. However, nearly 30% of these are teachers in primary and secondary schools.

Although Unisa learners are more mature in age, the shift in political context after the 1976 Soweto Schools boycotts highlighted new realities for South Africa. As the political crisis grew, the pressure and demand for more economic and educational opportunities and resources intensified. The quality and standards of education declined drastically, resulting in greater numbers of youth who either dropped out or completed the secondary school with very poor preparation for entry into the tertiary level. This reality has had a major impact on the nature and character of Unisa learners, particularly in the last decade. Younger and unemployed learners

with less academic preparation needed access to higher and further education. These learners, generally referred to as 'full-time' distance learners, began to turn to Unisa as the only viable route to tertiary education. This viability is in terms of relative affordability and flexibility of entrance qualifications. Between 1987 and 1994 the number of learners of the calibre described above grew from 3,3% of the overall Unisa enrolment figure in 1987 to 11,4% in 1994.

The implication of this trend was the need for changes in various ways. 'Foremost amongst these changes is the movement of the University away from a correspondence University to a distance teaching institution. More contact with students and community has called for the need for a structure to deal with this situation enhanced by an increasing number of full-time students who visit the campuses on a daily basis, to study' (Döckel: 1994).

### **The needs of the learners (a brief identification)**

An analysis of the profile of Unisa learners in South Africa highlights that the majority of learners have needs which can be briefly described as follows:

#### **Environmental needs**

- About 60% of the learners come from historically disadvantaged communities. They lack educational opportunities and learning resources. Their needs include library, study space, venues for group and peer-group learning and tutorials.
- The increase in participation by younger unemployed learners has brought about a need for venues where study and social discourse can occur regularly.
- One of the legacies of the apartheid system is that the majority of the disadvantaged communities are economically disenfranchised. The learners in this category therefore need financial support so that they can sustain the cost of higher education.

#### **Instructional or academic needs**

Apartheid educational strategies in the schools failed to give learners the academic and general skills necessary to cope with the demands of tertiary learning. Learners therefore enter tertiary education with limited capacity for reading, writing, conceptual and general cognitive skills.

This scenario is further complicated because the majority are second-language users of English and Afrikaans, which are the main media of instruction and administrative communication at Unisa. In 1997 82% of the total learner population opted for study in English, and 18% opted for Afrikaans. None of the indigenous languages are used for formal communication.

#### **Skills development – needs**

Another characteristic of apartheid education is that the students are taught mainly through the 'rote learning' mode, where the student is passive, dependent on memorising and regurgitating

information with no space for creativity, analysis or synthesis. On reaching the tertiary level the learners need to develop skills to organise, sort out, interpret and apply information. For them to cope with the pressure of distance education they need also to develop skills in time management, goal-setting and prioritisation.

### **Need for information on career choices**

As the majority of learners have been historically excluded from meaningful socioeconomic participation, their perceptions and perspectives for career-path development are limited. They then opt for the curriculum selection and combination of courses of study which are largely geared to prepare them for the traditionally 'easier' careers, which are also known to be less strategically located for modern economic development.

### **Addressing the learner's needs**

In acknowledgement of the learner needs which have been highlighted above, and also because of the changing external and internal context, Unisa decided to embark on a number of strategies to address the identified needs.

### **Instructional learner support**

#### *Correspondence tuition*

As mentioned above, the nature of the Unisa tuition model revolves largely around the development of printed study guides as the primary teaching medium. These study packages have been largely designed and developed by the academic staff who are located centrally at the Unisa headquarters. It is generally accepted that distance education study material should promote dialogue and discourse between the learner and the teacher. However, the major criticism against the bulk of the Unisa study material has been that they lacked the 'critical element of support for the learner. 'The materials are traditionally developed, from an individualistic perspective. The text often convey an authoritarian tone. Little if any scope is provided for students to interact with the ideas they are meeting or with the views of the lecturer who has prepared the study guide. Students are considered as subservient and the text ensures that they will be. Rather than being encouraged to learn actively, students are drilled through exercises as if these were the ends of learning' (Saide 1994:62).

#### *Re-designing study materials - including learner-support mechanisms*

By 1994, Unisa had embarked on a project for Planning, Designing, Development, Production and Delivery (PDDPD). This project started as an experimental programme for redesigning some of the Unisa courseware in an effort to address the identified weakness. 'The first newly designed course to hit the shelves was the Faculty of Economic and Management Science, Introduction to Economic and Management Science, a foundation course that is compulsory for all the students in the Faculty' (Van Zy] 1996:22).

Commendable in the newly designed study materials is the level of learner support which is built into the overall presentation, that is the course and graphic design. The interactive style is an effort to facilitate and enhance learning. Van Zyl (1996) stresses that 'on-going evaluation of these new materials tends to confirm that students are learning more effectively and are achieving better results. Probable reasons for this may be sought in the fact that the new guides are more accessible and student friendly, and in the scientific instructional design principle underpinning the structure of these guides.' It is also to be noted that the re-design of the Unisa study guides is tied up to the shift in the course development approach, away from the highly teacher-centred approach, whereby individual teaching staff members developed their study guide in complete isolation, towards the 'possible implementation of the project team approach to design the tutorial matter at Unisa' (Döckel 1996:7). The latter approach is a central principle which underpins the re-design projects. When the project is completed, it is envisaged that 70% or more of Unisa students will come into contact with the newly designed, more interactive, learner-centred and supportive study materials.

Through this approach, the print material can offer the flexible, in-built support mechanisms which can enhance and enrich the learning experiences of the majority of the Unisa learners.

The outcomes of this project have been included in the report which has been to Senate with recommendations on how the various support services offered by Unisa should be integrated into the core study and tuition model of the university.

#### *Other forms of correspondence-based learner-support mechanisms*

- Tutorial letters. In addition to study guides an academic department may issue a tutorial letter which may give information on departmental regulations and procedures, and updates and announcements concerning the course. Tutorial letters are also used to provide an over-view on the course, its structure, objectives and general aims and schedule of assignments.
- Prescribed books. These are additional textbooks which may be prescribed to accompany and complement some aspects of the Unisa print material. Since they are not part of the core study packages obtained by learners on enrolment, learners have to purchase these separately.
- Recommended works. The recommended texts also aim at assisting and motivating the learners to obtain a broader and more critical perspective on the subject or course of study,
- Casebooks. The Faculty of Law, for example, makes use of additional texts which may contain relevant examples of reported court decisions. These anthologies of cases are compiled by Unisa academic departments and accompany the regular study package.
- Assignments. Traditionally, assignment and project writing is a very important component of distance education assessment and feedback mechanism. Well-designed and well-marked assignments are an effective teaching-learning tool. Unisa is also exploring creative ways of re-designing the role and function of assignments in the overall study milieu/process. For example, in giving an overview of one of the newly designed courses Van Zyl (1996) also notes: 'A unique assignment system designed in collaboration with the Bureau offers students three routes: a fast route for those who are able to work through the course material at an accelerated rate: a normal route for those who prefer to submit assignments at regular



prescribed intervals; and a back-up/enrichment route for those who find it difficult to adhere to fixed submission dates.'

The flexibility implied by this system of assignments would offer the ideal perspective of an open learning process. However, for many courses Unisa still adheres largely to the system of the fixed submission dates.

## **Provision of other resources**

### *Library*

One of the key resources provided by Unisa is a well-equipped library. Unisa library is one of the largest and best-equipped research libraries in the southern Africa region.

The library is at the disposal of students and staff and also provides an essential support for lecturers, tutors and facilitators in the quest for better study materials for their learners (Unisa 1995:17). The library is part of Unisa's learner support strategies, which include lending services for learners, postage of books to learners, reference materials and skills training by some library staff.

In addition to the study collection up to 1994 the library also offered study facilities for students. For example, up to 1994 the library (at both the main and regional facilities) could offer study space with 1 968 seats. It is further noted that: 'The Johannesburg study centre could seat 466 students and often accommodates more during peak periods' (Unisa 1994:11).

### *Examination and graduations*

The university organises and coordinates the writing of over 2 200 examination papers at about 475 exam centres in South Africa and internationally.

The organisation and management of examinations and script marking is handled with precision. Traditionally the writing of the undergraduate courses is done between mid-October to mid-November. The results for these annual examinations are issued by mid-December of that academic year. Provision is made for aegrotat and supplementary exams in January of the following year. The academic cycle of any given year is complete by March of that new year.

The university can be commended for having one of the most efficient administrative systems for the management and distribution of the examinations and graduation subsystems.

## **Learner support at the Unisa learning centres**

### *Development of the Department of Student Support*

The changing socio-political context in South Africa since 1994 has caused Unisa to consider a new understanding of the role of student/learner support in distance education. The university has to explore ways in which learner support should begin to encompass the wide range of activities, structures and infrastructure which are set up by one institution, with a view to supporting its learners, during the course of their study and assisting them to meet their academic goals. According to Sweet, student support services should reflect the operating principles and

practices of an institution. Unisa, like other institutions of distance education, 'is moving away from the traditional industrial model that is characterised by the course design team and the production of instructional packages towards a more distributed model based on study (learning centres) or communication networks' (Sweet R 1994).

Acknowledging the need for this paradigm shift in approach to learner support Unisa tried 1995 to embark on the first concrete steps towards the foundation of various structures to address other learners needs which had not traditionally been given by the diversity prior to 1994.

Against this background, the university established the Department of Student support (DSS) which would concentrate on the following objectives :

- To facilitate the establishment of a receiving structure from which various student support processes could be generated. This structure would be in the form of provincial Unisa learning centres, which could be organically linked to a network of community-based study centres.

To facilitate the establishment of an integrated student support system which would include a face-to-face tutorial system.

- To facilitate the formation of a well-functioning student representative council which could enhance student participation and involvement in all the key decision-making bodies of Unisa.
- To facilitate the development of a Financial Aid Bureau which would open access and ensure sustenance for the financially disadvantaged, but academically deserving students of Unisa (Unisa/Council September 1994:36).

### **Learner support generated through these new departments**

#### *Establishment of Unisa provincial learning centres*

The year 1995 was an important foundation for the development of Unisa learning centres. By October 1996 Unisa had established learning centres in the following places

- Cape Town - Western Province
- Durban - KwaZulu-Natal Province
- Pietersburg - Northern Province
- Thutong/Preforia - Cauteng Province
- Johannesburg - Gauteng Province

The first three learning centres are extensions of existing Unisa provincial centres, which have been largely administrative centres.

The development of the latter two centres in Gauteng came out of a joint pilot project between Unisa and an NGO, the South African Committee for Higher Education (Sached) in 1994. All these learning centres are developed with a view to broaden the support services given to the learners in the province and create a supportive and conducive learning environment for Unisa

distance learners. Each learning centre is a receiving structure where the following facilities and infrastructure has been developed.

#### *Facilities and infrastructure provided by the centres*

One of the major legacies of apartheid, which has led to poor performance by the majority of the disadvantaged learners, particularly those from black communities, studying through distance education, has been the lack of learning facilities and amenities. Against this background, and for furthering the objectives of reconstruction and development, it is crucial to provide centres with the following amenities

- adequate space for tutorials, group discussion and quiet reading
- a library with basic reference materials
- office/administrative space for staff
- office/administrative space for student representatives
- assignment boxes for delivery and receipt of assignments
- sufficient lighting and running water
- recreation space for students.

#### *Nature of services provided by the learning centres*

The Unisa learning centres are seen as places where the following flexible learning processes, resources and learner support services are planned and delivered.

- face-to-face tutorial support
- self-help group discussion
- individual/quiet reading
- library facilities
- assignment boxes
- student representation in Unisa structures
- academic and psychological counselling services.

The model that is emerging is that of locating Unisa's presence in each province through a centre which is not only 'an administrative centre' (Saide 1994), but which can also concretely give academic and environmental support to the learners as clients of the university. From this core centre Unisa is beginning to explore and research ways of building partnerships with other educational initiatives in the province to construct a network of community-based learning centres.

The following satellite centres existed in 1997: Makhado, Mahwelereng, Bopedi-Bapedi, Tibumbeni, Soshanguve, Phokeng, Kwa-Mhlanga and Pietermaritzburg.

### *Development of a network of community-based learning centres*

One of the issues brought up by the new policy documents on National Education and Training is the new South African government's vision of educational provision for adult learners.

According to the Ministry of Education (1995), one institutional innovation which the Ministry wishes to see investigated is the idea of community learning centres. These can be envisaged as a network of facilities, usually pre-existing, which offer regular services to students of all varieties in pursuing their learning goals. It is further envisaged that such centres would form an essential part of the infrastructure required for the realisation of open learning approaches throughout the education and training system.

Between 1995 and 1997, Unisa Learning Centre staff have been able to negotiate with a number of communities in the various provinces and assist them in initiating community-based learning centres. The communities were assisted with guidance, planning and training of local staff on educational programme development, delivery and monitoring. The long-term view is that such centres could be multi-purpose and address a wide variety of adult learner needs from literacy, post-literacy, right up to tertiary education and training needs. During the 1995 to 1997 pilot phase, these community-based learning centres were used to extend Unisa support services to the communities. In this way it was possible to begin to deliver the tutorial programme in some of the remote rural areas.

### *The tutorial support programme*

As mentioned, one of the objectives of the Department of Student Support is the development and expansion of a well-functioning student/learner support programme which includes face-to-face tutorials.

The emergence of the face-to-face tutorial support programme is based on the development of sub-systems to cater for:

- student-recruitment
- orientation and skills development of students on the tutorial programme
- tutor-recruitment
- tutor-support and development
- planning, scheduling and evaluation of the programme

### *Student recruitment*

The face-to-face tutorial support programme started in 1995 on an experimental basis. Learners enrol on the programme voluntarily by paying an additional but very nominal fee. In order to ensure effective planning and evaluation, and for quality assurance, the tutorial programme recognises the importance of accurate, administrative records of student statistics (Calder 1994).

For the purpose of the experiment and pilot phase it was important that the enrolment figures should be limited and manageable.

However, during the 1995, 1996 and 1997 pilot phases, the tutorial programme reveals the following growth trends, shown in table 25:

Table 25 Head count of learners on the tutorial programme

<b>Unisa Learning Centre</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>1997</b>
Cape Town	500	1052	1149
Durban	740	1800	2228
Johannesburg	1155	1745	1772
Thutong (Pretoria)	1318	2200	1904
Pietersburg	600	2274	2453
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4313</b>	<b>9071</b>	<b>9506</b>

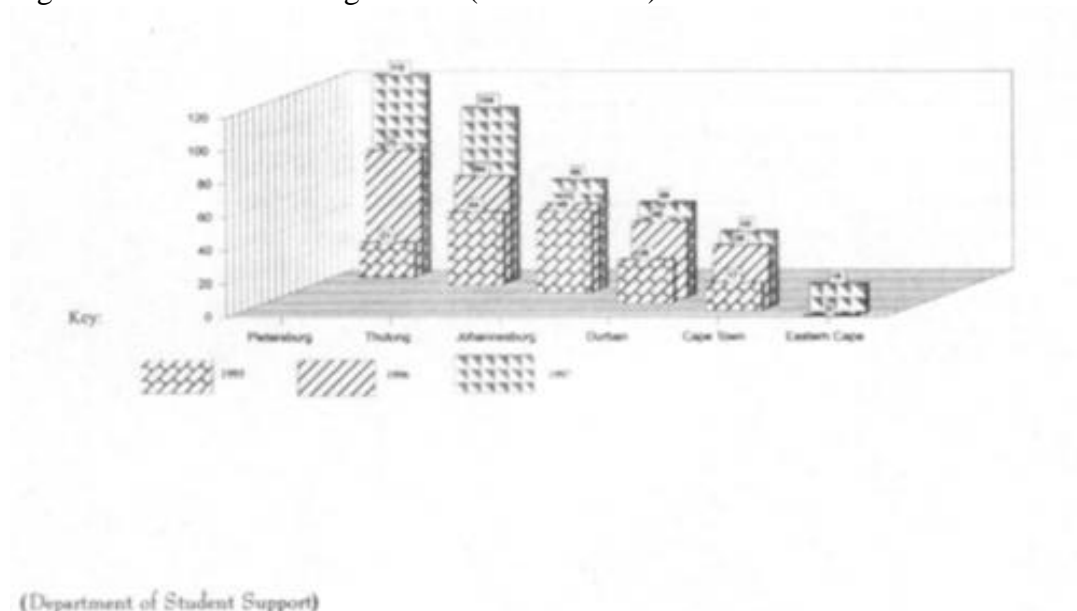
Each year the programme has catered for an additional 1 000 organised peer study groups which were planned, administered and monitored by the centres.

#### *Tutors employed in each learning centre*

Part of the dichotomy which was facing Unisa in 1995, when the tutorial programme experiment was debated, was whether it would be possible for the University to find qualified, part-time personnel who could facilitate learning for Unisa learners as tutors in the learning centres.

The 1995 to 1997 experiment proved to be very vital in ascertaining this position. By the end of 1997, the Department of Student Support (DSS) in collaboration with the academic departments was able to employ local tutors as shown in figure A.

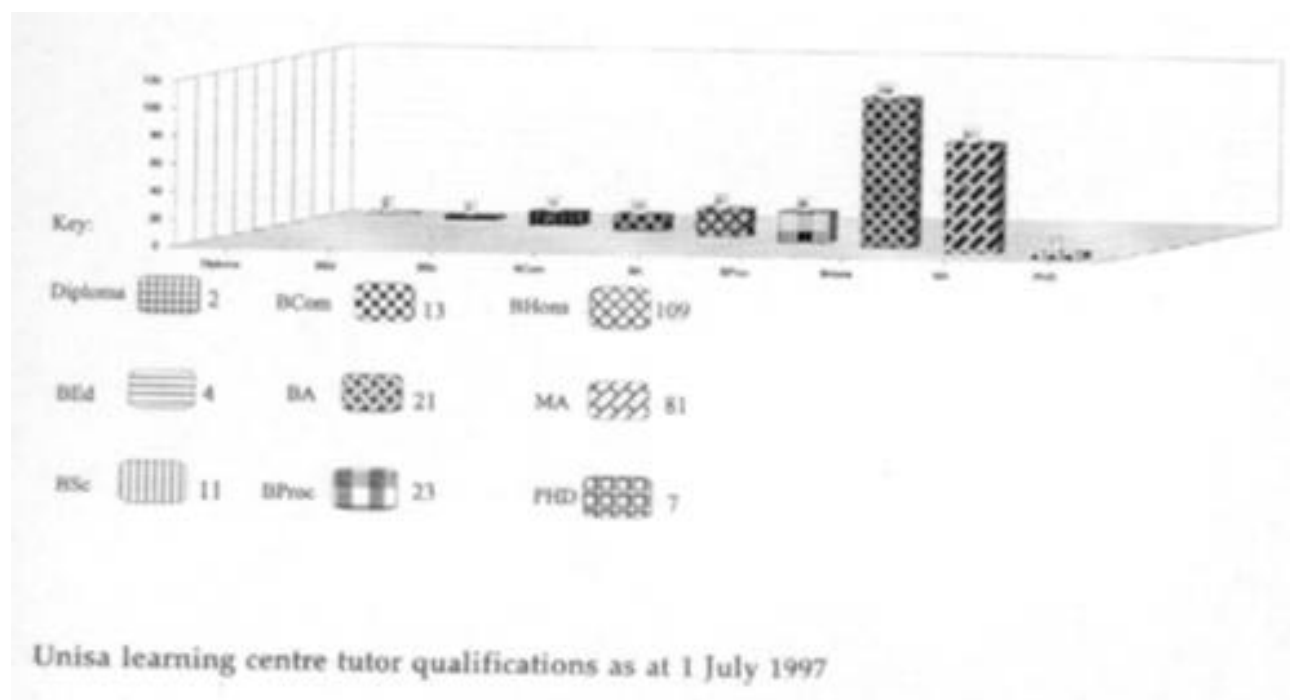
Figure A Tutors at learning centres (1995 to 1997)



Key: Pietersburg, Thutong, Johannesburg, Durban, Cape Town, Eastern Cape  
1995; 1996, 1997

The tutors were recruited to support the students in the various courses of the various faculties. For this reason it was important that the tutors should be well qualified in the relevant subject areas. Figure B below shows the distribution of qualifications held by the tutors in 1996 and 1997.

Figure B Distribution of tutor qualifications for 1997



Key: Diploma(2); Bcom(13); BHons(109)  
 Bed(4); BA (21); MA (81)  
 BSc (11); Bpoc (23) PHD (7)

### *Capacity building in learning centres*

- Tutor training and development

The success of a tutorial support programme depends on well-trained tutors and facilitators. In addressing this need, the Department of Student Support, in collaboration with the academic departments and the Bureau for Student Counselling, planned and coordinated the tutor training and development programme.

The first workshop to be run under this programme was in May 1995. In the opening remarks the Vice-principal (Tuition) at this workshop notes that 'as the first Tutor Workshop where the tutors are meeting the Unisa academic staff and Learning Centre support educators, this weekend is epoch making. Let us use this workshop to get to know one another, build bridges to initiate the formation of teams and to chart a collaborative future for this vital experiment in the transformation of our institution' (Maimeia 1995).

The aims of this workshop were as follows:

- To highlight the needs of distance learners and the providers of support, in order to inform and take forward the Unisa institutional response
- To provide an opportunity to begin the development of a dialogue and to build a shared understanding which will help to inform the experiments in support provision that are currently in operation
- To generate ideas leading to an action strategy that will guide the provision of relevant support services (Unisa 1995)

This weekend workshop was attended by members of the following Unisa communities:

<b>Departements</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>
Rectorate	4
Faculties/Academic staff	50
Local tutors	50
Learning centre staff	8
Department of Student Support staff	3
Bureau for Student Counselling	2
Institute for Continuing Education	1
External (Sached)	3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>121</b>

The workshop was facilitated by a joint team from Unisa, Sached (NGO), and the International Extension College (London).

The lessons learnt in this workshop were actively used to plan the 1996/1997 tutorial programme and also for the development of the subsequent staff development and training programmes.

In 1996 the training programme was extended to include tutors from the Cape Town, Durban and Pietersburg centres. There were two sets of workshops, the Introductory Workshop run at the beginning of the year and the Consolidatory Workshop run towards the middle of the year.

The numbers of tutors who participated in these workshops were as follows. See table 27.

Table 27 Tutor training in 1996

<b>First workshop</b>		<b>Second workshop</b>	
<b>Learning Centre</b>	<b>Tutors attended</b>	<b>Tutors attended</b>	<b>Total trained</b>
Cape Town	34	No workshop	34
Durban	31	No workshop	31
Pietersburg	46	50	96
Johannesburg & Pretoria	31	73	104

*The aim of the 1996 training programme*

The introductory workshops covered the following broad areas:

- the role of tutors

- study skills and counselling in tutorial support
- administration and programme Organisation
- use of technology in the learner support programme

The workshop was also used to orient the tutors on various aspects of distance education and specifically on the role of learner support.

The consolidatory workshops aimed at building on the tutors' experiences and skills in facilitating effective tutoring for adult learners.

The aspects of training which were established during these staff development workshops for tutors have been further developed through their exposure to the actual process of tutoring at the various learning centres. Close cooperation and collaboration has been developed between the local tutors and the academic staff of the various faculties. Through this collaboration, Unisa has established a number of communication, feedback and monitoring systems which have proved to be vital for consolidating the capacity of the tutors.

#### *Monitoring the face-to-face tutorial programme*

The smooth running of any educational and support programme depends on efficient coordination, scheduling and monitoring. The monitoring of the tutorials programmes is done by learning centre staff. The tutorial coordinators and their assistants have to ensure that the planned tutorials are delivered. This monitoring is facilitated through the filling in of appropriate attendance schedules by both the tutors and the students. The tutors' attendance schedules are then reconciled by the learning staff to generate the appropriate tutor payment claim forms.

For quality assurance and monitoring the synergy between the subject tutors at the learning centres and the academic departments, each Unisa academic department has selected a dedicated staff member to act as tutorial coordinator. Some of the functions of this coordinator are to support and guide all the tutors responsible for that respective subject by supplying them with year plans and guidelines and also to provide any other support which may be found relevant for the course.

The positive outcomes of the close collaboration that has developed between the tutors and some of the academic course teams are encapsulated in the words of one head of department who states that 'our tutors are regarded not only as purveyors of our courses they are also seen as a means of remaining in touch with students' needs, difficulties and aspirations. Indeed we envisage tutors playing a role of increasing importance in the maintenance of academic standards and in the campaign against failure' (Unisa 1997).

#### *Evaluation of the face-to-face tutorial support programme*

Ongoing formative evaluation of this experiment has been planned with special emphasis on the following:

- Programme administration



- Learner attendance
- Learner dropout rate
- Tutor attendance
- Quality of tutorials
- Learner performance in assignments and in the examination.

To form a broad picture, and to inform the way forward, summative evaluation was also planned. It included a comparison between students participating in the tutorial programme and a control group comprising students who did not receive any tutorial support in 1995, 1996 and 1997.

This latter study was done in two ways. First, a quantitative evaluation was done by Unisa's Bureau for Management Information (BMI). The nature of this evaluation was to measure the impact of the tutorial programme on the performance of the students who attended the tutorial programme in 1995 and 1996. The examination results of the students who attended the tutorial programme were compared with control groups of students who did not receive tutorials. The analysis of the outcomes came to the conclusion that 'although in the experimental stage, tutorial support services at the Learning Centres seem to be well under way to achieve a more student-centred distance education approach' (Unisa BMI 1996).

Second, the Department of Student Support, in collaboration with the academic departments, embarked on qualitative evaluation on all aspects of the tutorial support. This process involved the Department of Student Support, Academic departments, learning centre administrators and tutors in the process of developing the evaluation processes, and the questionnaires. The overall aim also included the process of having all tutors in all the learning centres and community-based learning centres evaluated by peers, students and the learning centre staff. The participation of the students who are registered on the programme is vital because Unisa concurs with Calder (1994) about the importance of evaluation in enabling organisations to find out just what being a student in an Organisation means. Participation by students has given strong indications of the strengths and limitations of the support services.

Likewise, the involvement of the actual practitioners, that is the academic, administrative staff and the tutors, also highlighted important insights and recommendations which will inform future planning of the programme, and thus will serve the interests of the learners and practitioners primarily' (Thorpe 1988).

### *Preparation of learners for participation in tutorials*

The success of a student/learner support programme also depends on the manner in which students in distance education institutions participate in the programme. It must be accepted that in South Africa, however, especially in Unisa, the whole concept of student/learner support is still not evenly understood. This affects the expectations of both the learners and the teachers. Concrete efforts 'have to be made to develop students' capacity to participate and benefit from a support programme.

Against this background, during the recruitment of the students, the learning centre staff and the bureau for student counselling staff run development workshops for learners in:

- orientation to the programme
- learning skills needed for tutorial programme
- setting expectations from the face-to-face tutorials
- participation in peer-group programmes

The experience gained in the face-to-face orientation workshops in 1995 and 1996 has been utilised for the development of student orientation handbooks and other student development and capacity building materials.

## **Other forms of learner support**

### *Computer-based support*

In 1996 the provision of computer-based support started on a limited scale for learners who had access to their own computers.

This programme is known as Students-on-line (SOL) and it started on an experimental basis. It handles a subset of the activities of a server of a 'fledged visual university'. It is envisaged that in the near future SOL should be able to dispense all the services required by the distance learner. At present the academic content of SOL is rather limited but will be enriched and extended by putting a variety of Unisa courseware on the Internet.

In 1997 Unisa negotiated a contract with Cyber Connections which is expected to improve student access to the Internet and also to the SOL server in Unisa. The first Internet Centres are now being set up as a pilot project. Through this pilot about 10 000 computers will be at the disposal of students. Students will be able to access SOL and the Internet free of charge, although they will have to pay a reasonable fee per page if they wish to print some materials.

### *Support by the Faculty of Science*

The Science Faculty has a modern personal computer laboratory on the Unisa Main Campus and is in the process of setting up another on the premises of the Durban Regional Facility.

The laboratory is extremely popular with students and staff and, apart from countless informal and individual sessions of students, is used for conducting formal practical courses in statistics, etc. The faculty puts a vast array of relevant licensed software at the disposal of students, such as word processors, mathematical and statistical programmes.

The facility, however, is not used to its full capacity, but use is growing daily. It is envisaged that the facility will be fully occupied as soon as remedial courses in science and English come onstream.

### *Compulsory practical sessions for students who study the natural sciences*

Unisa students who enrol for the natural sciences are compelled to attend a two- to three-week residential practical session. In this period they are exposed to laboratory . faculties for the practical experiments at the Main Campus in Pretoria or an arranged venue at other universities.

### *Financial support*

As already stated, the majority of learners who come from the disadvantaged communities find it difficult to access higher or tertiary education because of financial constraints. To address this, the Government of National Unity (GNU) has set up a government financial aid scheme.

In terms of this financial scheme, the concerned learners can be assisted through:

- full funding of all activities
- budget funding
- formula funding

A recent commission of inquiry into the overall higher education needs and provision concluded that: 'The policies and approaches developed by the commission in its interim report on a National Student Financial Aid Scheme for universities and technikons for 1996, should form a basis for the elaboration of a more comprehensive and longer term set of policies' (NCHE 1996:123).

In the changing South African context this financial aid system is a crucial support function which is given to the learner for tertiary education. One of the primary issues which face an institution such as Unisa as a distance teaching institution was that distance learners were discriminated against, and excluded from funds because the funding formula and selection criteria utilised favoured learners who attended conventional face-to-face institutions. The inception of this new financial aid scheme has come a long way towards assisting distance learners with funds to study through Unisa.

## **CONCLUSION**

This case study on learner support services at Unisa must be seen against the need for an overall framework for the transformation of higher education in South Africa. In concluding the investigation on Open Learning and Distance Education, the authors say: 'The impetus towards transformation is very great and education and training must be at the heart of all reconstruction and development ... conventional approaches have no chance of providing access to education and training opportunities on the scale or with the range of flexibility and speed that are needed' (SAIDE 1994).

Only well-functioning distance education policies which ensure responsive and supportive mechanisms for the learners will be able to deliver high quality education, particularly to the large mass of learners.

The innovations which have been embarked upon from 1995 with the establishment of the learning centres and the expansion of other forms of support is an important foundation which could assist Unisa to address one of the key proposals of the National Commission on Higher Education (1996) which calls for 'the Minister of Education to take urgent steps, in conjunction

with the provincial ministries of Education to maximise the use of the large number of educational facilities in the country by establishing a national network of learning centres that would be a focal point for learner support activities associated with distance education programmes' (NCHE 1996:124).

The University of South Africa is on a new path towards addressing the needs of its learners in a responsive and interactive way. This represents a major paradigm shift from the time when Unisa was founded in 1946, which can be summarised in the words of the Vice Chancellor and Principal of Unisa, who said: 'Our teaching must not be confined to our magnificent campus. Let us speak, walk around our campus - South Africa and other countries - and teach our students directly and not at a distance, by means of well-designed, self-instructing course materials, and with the aid of modern technologies'

(Wiechers: Progressio 1996:2).

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