

**EXPERIENCES OF STUDENT SUPPORT
IN THE DISTANCE MODE BACHELOR OF NURSING
SCIENCE DEGREE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NAMIBIA,
2005 - 2011**

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KEYWORDS

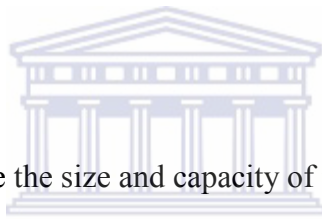
Distance education, Distance education support, Support strategies, Student support, Technological innovation, Video-conferencing, Institutional barriers, Discontinued studies, Barriers to learning, Interactivity, Attrition/*Drop out* rate



ABSTRACT

EXPERIENCES OF STUDENT SUPPORT IN THE DISTANCE MODE

BACHELOR OF NURSING SCIENCE DEGREE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NAMIBIA, 2005 – 2011



An urgent need to rapidly increase the size and capacity of the health workforce to manage the health system in Namibia motivated the development of a Bachelor of Nursing Science degree which has been offered at a distance since 1997 at the University of Namibia. The programme is delivered from the University's Central and Northern Campuses, enabling qualified nurses to develop management and educator capacity while continuing to work; throughput has however been low and slow. Since student support is posited as a vital ingredient of distance education success, this study sought to understand how students experienced the support services offered by the University of Namibia's distance education unit – the Centre for External Studies. The study explored students' experiences and perceptions of administrative, social and academic support services provided by the University.

The research design was qualitative, and exploratory, using focus groups and interviews for data collection. The sample comprised of forty Bachelor of Nursing Science students enrolled on both campuses between 2005 –2011 as well as seven staff involved in student support services. Documents and interviews of envisioned support services from the Centre for External Studies served as the basis for the evaluation of services. Data was analysed using thematic content analysis. A comparison was made of the findings from the two campuses.


The findings reflected positive experiences of support from family and lecturers as well as institutional offerings such as video conferences. There were, however, some institutional weaknesses in the programme delivery such as the late delivery of study materials which impacted on students' submission of assignments, and weak communication systems which affected delivery of support workshops. The libraries on both campuses were not adequately resourced and prescribed books were not always available at the local bookshops. Lecturer presence was missed by many students who were not used to distance learning, although the intensity of this experience differed between the students on the different Campuses.

Personal challenges were sometimes responsible for student discontinuation of the programme, and work-related challenges affected attendance of vacation schools. These problems were experienced more by the students on the Northern Campus.

Out of this study, recommendations were made on how to improve support services for advanced nursing students studying at a distance at the University of Namibia. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from both the University of Namibia and the University of the Western Cape.

DECLARATION

I declare that the “Experiences of Student Support in the Distance Mode, Bachelor of Nursing Science Degree at the University of Namibia, 2005-2011”, is my own work. It has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any university. All the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.



Carol-Denise Du Plessis

Signed in November 2012



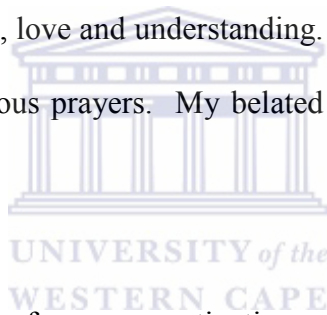
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ABBREVIATIONS

CES	Centre for External Studies
HR	Human Resource
Sms	Short message services
MOHSS	The Ministry of Health and Social Services
NOLNET	Namibian Open Learning Network Trust
NADEOSA	National Association of Distance Education Organisation of South Africa
OU	Open University
ODL	Open Distance Learning
UNAM	University of Namibia
FGD1	Focus Group Discussion 1
KIF1	Key Informant 1
DS1	<i>Discontinued</i> student 1
VC	Video conference
UK	United Kingdom

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Attrition	The act of a student leaving a course of study for their own reasons including inadequate fees, social issues, academic difficulties.
Academic exclusion	A student being refused further enrolments on account of not having fulfilled the requirements of the programme.
<i>Discontinued</i>	This concept implies that a student has left the programme through personal choice or because the university has excluded them from further registration. This data is merged because those that chose to leave and those who were excluded cannot be distinguished. The effects of attrition and failure/exclusion is equally negative for human resources development.
Distance Education	Any form of education where learner and teacher are separated in time and space.
External students	A synonym for distance students, who take courses at a distance, usually while working.
Student support	A range of services offered to support students in their studies including academic, administrative and social support.

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction to the Study

In 1996, The Ministry of Health and Social Services (MOHSS) of Namibia developed a long-term health human resource (HR) strategic framework, forecasting the future needs and supply of staff required in the country for a period of thirty years (1997-2027). In *The Health and Social Review of 2008*, Kahuure (2008) drew attention to the inadequate numbers of graduates being produced by the Ministry of Health Training Centres in Windhoek and Keetmanshoop and by the University of Namibia (UNAM), resulting in an inadequate number of health professionals and sub-professionals for the country's needs. In 2007, the vacancy rate for the overall public sector stood at 27% and the MOHSS (2008) institutional records revealed that the attrition rate for registered and enrolled nurses was 4% in the same year.

One strategy designed to address this health human resources shortage was the national policy for open, distance and e-learning (ODL) for Namibia (2007). It noted the importance of “strengthening the immediate supply of middle to high skilled labour to meet market demands and support, overall national development, (Nolnet, 2007: 18). Furthermore they note that one of the elements in this policy is “commitment to maintaining academic quality standards across all programmes irrespective of the mode of delivery” and “commitment to sufficient financial resources and recognition of the need to maximize limited resources through collaboration” (Nolnet, 2007: 20).

To address the need to build the necessary health human resources, and to do so in flexible ways which maximize limited resources, UNAM, which is the only university in Namibia, developed a distance education department – the Centre for External Studies (CES) - to support this University's first five-year development plan (1995-1999).

UNAM has therefore initiated a distance education Bachelor of Nursing Science Degree to respond to the specific HR needs for Namibia which has the potential to enable health professionals such as nurses to be upskilled through distance education while remaining in employment, thus avoiding further negative effects on the country's health resources.

Alexander, Igumbor and Sanders (2009) have found that health professionals at the University of the Western Cape, School of Public Health have benefitted immensely by having their knowledge updated whilst following a distance education course. The authors assert that the success of the courses offered was in part due to adequate and effective support services and appropriate technology, which suggests that this is an area for further investigation at UNAM.

The aim of this study is therefore to explore the experiences of student support at the CES, University of Namibia and simultaneously evaluate the efficiency of the support services on the Central and Northern Campuses.

This study is situated at the University in Namibia (UNAM), a country with a population of 1,991,747 and a population growth rate of 1,8% (Kahuure, 2008). In spite of the size of its population, McCourt and Awases (2007) comment in their case study on the human resources and health crises, that the human development level is very low, i.e. 126th out of 177 countries worldwide in 2004. The authors reason that factors influencing this poor

performance could include the high level HIV/AIDS infection in the country, which has created challenges in health strategy and staffing levels, as well the inability of the training centres to produce adequate numbers of nurses to meet the health demands of the country.

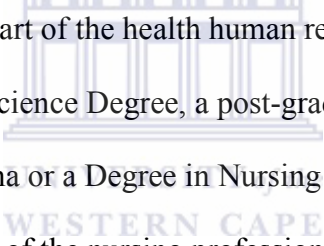
This study is centred in nurse education in the field of health human resources development with the focus on experiences of student support in the distance mode Bachelor of Nursing Science Degree at the University of Namibia.

Student support has been an important topic for decades in higher education environments, but in distance learning programmes, its significance is heightened. Many researchers have offered definitions of “student support” and many are in agreement that support for the student includes social, administrative and academic support. Tait (2004) refers to student support as having a pastoral dimension as well as a social democratic orientation. Jacklin and Le Riche (2009) suggest that in thinking about student support, a shift is needed amongst educationists towards a positive assessment of students, and should be viewed in terms of “how students achieve and the personal and institutional resources they deploy, rather than the negative or therapeutic question of what problems student face”. These two researchers and Sewart (1992) are in agreement that student support would also require an exploration of institutional factors, cultures, and context within which support operates. This understanding of student support as influenced by a specific context will be used in this study.

1.2 Study Setting

UNAM delivers its programmes via eight regional centres, with most students being served by the Central Campus and the Northern Campus. It is estimated that nearly half of UNAM’S population is served by the Northern Campus, (Frindt, 2005). The CES was

established to develop flexible and open learning methods that cater for the educational needs of people, who for a variety of reasons, cannot attend any of the University campuses full-time (UNAM, 1995). The mission statement of the CES, a sub-statement of that of the University, is to make quality higher education accessible to adult members of the community by open learning opportunities through distance and continuing education programmes. This initiative has enabled UNAM to feed into the country's human resources strategy: it has targeted Namibians from formerly disadvantaged communities scattered throughout the country, who were already in employment, but needed to upgrade their work skills without having to leave their jobs, by enrolling themselves as distance education students (UNAM, 1995).



One of the courses that has been part of the health human resources upgrade strategy since 1997 is the Bachelor of Nursing Science Degree, a post-graduate nursing qualification for students with a recognised Diploma or a Degree in Nursing and Midwifery Science, which has the aim of preparing members of the nursing profession for managerial positions (UNAM, 2011). The curriculum framework for this degree is appended as Annexure 1.

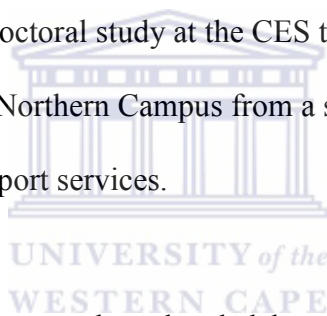
Since the University's foundation in 1996, more than 2 000 graduates have completed undergraduate diplomas in nursing and midwifery through the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences and are therefore potential candidates for this degree (UNAM, 1995). The Bachelor of Nursing Science degree programme is a five-year part-time degree taking a maximum of six (6) years, although this has been extended *ad hoc*. It is not offered anywhere else in Namibia, and is delivered through a mixture of contact sessions and distance learning.

These students only need to attend a one week summer vacation school in February and July. A one week skills workshop is also presented to these students in October but attendance at the vacation schools and skills workshop are not compulsory. Because these students are registered nurses and have many years of practical experience, many of them are exempted from *practica*, especially in the *Community Module and Health Science Management* module. The students who are not exempted from *practica* are those students who completed their basic nursing diploma on the old curriculum which did not include all the necessary practical experience to which students are now exposed. All students doing the *Nursing Education* module need to complete a compulsory *practicum* requirement.

The method of instruction is mainly through text-based study with posting of assignments, face-to-face tutorials, vacation schools, Skills Workshops at two campuses and video conferences. The CES places a strong emphasis on student support for its distance learners, and strives to adhere to the national policy for open, distance and e-learning (ODL) for Namibia, cited earlier (Nolnet, 2007: 20). The majority of students receive support from the Northern and Central Campus sites as support services are only provided at these two regional centres. The Northern Campus predominantly serves four northern regions, namely, Omusati, Ohangwena, Oshana and Oshikoto while Central Campus serves the southern part of Namibia.

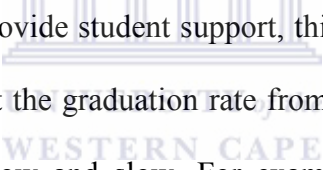
The CES conceptualizes support services as including both academic and administrative support which includes continuous assessment strategies, vacation schools, tutorials, video conferences, assignment feedback, peer support arrangements, and the materials distribution centre. Between the inception of the Bachelor of Nursing Science programme in 1997 and 2011, the CES has offered an evolving set of support services. From 1997-2004, the support

services comprised only of study materials and telephonic conversations between lecturer and student. In 2005, the then Director of the CES undertook a research study to describe the effectiveness and impact of video conferencing. The research focused on 38 Education Faculty students who in their final year, were informed that there was no study material available for their two subjects, *Teaching Methods of Business Studies* and *Teaching Methods of Economics*. A decision was made by the CES to present lectures to these students via video conferencing, as the majority of students lived close enough to the Northern Campus to attend; in this way they would prepare for the final year examinations (Frindt, 2005). The outcome of the study was that all these distance education students passed, 7 (seven) students obtained 80% and higher and 4 (four) out of the 22 full-time students failed the course. Mowes (2005) also conducted a doctoral study at the CES to evaluate the support services in open and distance learning at the Northern Campus from a student perspective noting that students placed high value on support services.



From 2005, support services were strengthened and elaborated to include organized telephone tutoring and video conferencing as well as short message services (sms) messages to students. As more students gained access to computers, email tutoring became a new means of communication between the CES students and lecturers (CES, 2008). In May 1998, when the Northern Campus was established, the following services were included in the system: a dispatch department from which study materials were sent to all regions in the north; a CES unit; a Nursing and Public Health unit; a Language Centre; an Open Learning and Research Unit and a Library and Information Resource Centre. In addition, a Communication and Marketing Department and Campus Administration and Infrastructure Unit was established (UNAM, 2009).

For the postgraduate nursing programme in particular, video-conferencing was initiated in 2006 to enhance student support services. Video conferencing was offered twice a year for students during the summer and winter vacation schools. Furthermore, from 2005-2009 the CES department arranged a mentor for the Bachelor of Nursing Science students at the Northern Campus on a part-time basis to supervise, mentor and support students. This mentor was a full-time nursing lecturer at the Northern Campus teaching *Community Nursing Science* on the under-graduate programme. She did not have fixed consultation hours but made herself available to the students on request or by appointments (Personal communication with mentor, 14 July 2011). She assisted students with their assignment preparation and any other support which they requested. She also sat in during video conferences and guided the students on any issues which were discussed during the sessions.



In spite of the CES's efforts to provide student support, this study has established, as part of the background investigation, that the graduation rate from the Bachelor of Nursing Science programme has been relatively low and slow. For example, from 2005-2008 (the period during which students could have graduated in four years), 1 030 nurses enrolled for the programme. During the same period 15% discontinued their studies and 9% graduated. Of the students from these cohorts who are still in the system, some are taking up to seven years to complete (CES, 2009). (See Tables 1 and 2 below).

Table 1: Number of Bachelor of Nursing Science Students who Graduated, Discontinued Studies and Exceeded Six Years across the Period 2005-2011

Year	Student total per year	Discontinued student totals	Graduation totals	Students who exceeded 6 years of study in this year
2005	336	35	36	30
2006	290	39	19	75
2007	157	44	20	56
2008	247	35	22	71
2009	227	60	23	40
2010	246	17	27	20
2011	149	not available	22	52

Table 2: Numbers of Students and Those who *Discontinued Their Studies on the Two Campuses**

Year	Students registered on Windhoek Campus	Windhoek Discontinued Students	Students Registered on Oshakati Campus	Oshakati Discontinued Students
2005	164	11	172	24
2006	140	14	150	25
2007	68	14	89	30
2008	102	12	145	23
2009	109	27	118	33
2010	105	7	141	10
2011	60	Not available**	89	Not available

*Discontinued studies: This implies that a student has left the program for their own reasons or because the university has excluded them from further registration. The status of students is merged because the data cannot be distinguished. The effect of personal decision to discontinue or exclusion is equally negative for human resource development.

** Not available because the Administrative incumbent left the University and these data have not been captured yet.

The University of Namibia student data system does not track cohort statistics, nor rates of graduation and attrition by cohort; rates could therefore not be established without quantitative research. However, even the numbers in the Tables 1 and 2 above raise concerns.

The data available showed that in 2005 there was a total of 336 students in the system. In that year 35 discontinued, 36 graduated and 30 were already in their 7th year of study. This was one year more than the maximum period allowed by the program rules. Three years later (by 2008), the number of enrolled students was 247: in that year, 35 discontinued their studies, 22 graduated and 71 students exceeded six (6) years of study. The years 2009 and 2011 show particularly high attrition (60 and 149 students respectively).

The increase in attrition to 60 students in 2009, from between 35-44 students per annum in the four (4) preceding years is a matter for concern. Furthermore in 2010, 20 students exceeded their years of study while in 2011, a total of 52 students had moved beyond six years of study. In 2011, the researcher enquired at the UNAM Administrative Department about this large number of students who were allowed to exceed their years of study, and was informed that this particular course, i.e. the Bachelor of Nursing Science (Advanced) Degree, will be phased out within the next two years. As a result, it had been decided that a larger number of students should be allowed to exceed their 6th or 7th year so as to complete this programme. In its place, a new Post-Basic Diploma for registered nurses will be introduced in 2014. Although

this raises questions regarding the value of the study, the issue of student support remains of significance to UNAM, as does the reasons that might underlie students' slow completion of this programme.

The student ratio on the two campuses has been approximately 40% on Central Campus and 60% on the Northern Campus. Graduation numbers were highest in 2005, and fluctuated between 19-27 in the remaining years.

To date, there has been no research into the reasons for this very slow progression and relatively high attrition. From this data no clear trends have been identified: it is however apparent that the numbers of students who discontinued studies at the Northern Campus was higher in every year although student numbers were about 10% higher



1.3 Problem Statement

Although the UNAM is trying to contribute to Namibia's health human resources development strategy by offering distance mode postgraduate training for nurses to prepare them for managerial or educator positions (the Bachelor of Nursing Science), graduation numbers have not been optimal, and a high percentage have discontinued their studies. Some students have also taken up to seven years to complete their studies.

Because student support is posited as an important part of student retention and success (Sewart, 1992), and because it is only through retention that UNAM can contribute to the health human resources needs of the country, this study seeks to throw light on how current students experience support services on their respective campuses, and whether there are any significant support challenges present for students on the different campuses.

1.4 Study Purpose

The purpose of this research is to elucidate how students have experienced support services received in the course of their Bachelor of Nursing Science degree over the past seven years, their perceptions of its value and their further support needs and recommendations. It is hoped that by understanding students' support needs, the CES will be able to enhance future support services and arrangements, thereby contributing to improving the student graduation rate and pace of completion. This study will therefore explore issues related to support within the constraints of the institution's operating environment. Out of this study, it is hoped that recommendations may be made on specific support that advanced nursing students require on the two campuses of UNAM.

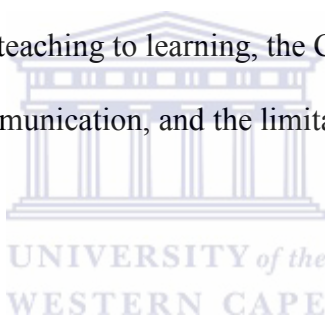
In the next chapter, relevant literature on the topic of student support is explored.



CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

A review of the literature was done to explore the following concepts of distance education and their student support programmes: distance education, open learning, student support and support strategies. Literature relating to how distance education is implemented in High Income and Lower and Middle Income countries, e.g. Namibia with its remote areas, and specifically within Sub-Saharan Countries, was explored. Issues of quality assurance and responses to a global crisis in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) were addressed. In addition, the paradigm shift from teaching to learning, the Constructivist approach with regard to computer-mediated communication, and the limitations of distance learning technologies were considered.



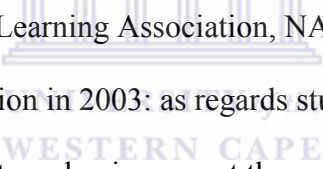
2.2 Distance Education and Distance Education Support

Haihuie (2006) asserts that the first generation of distance learning was already described as early as the 1840s by the Englishman Isaac Pitman where his teaching of short-hand was taught. By the end of the nineteenth century, new printing techniques and the railway system made possible the production and distribution of teaching materials in large quantities to geographically dispersed learner groups. Over the past century there has been a significant expansion in open learning and distance education with the potential to improve the quality of teaching and learning in higher education.

Nolnet (Namibian Open Learning Network Trust) (2007) refers to open and distance learning (ODL) as concepts which are widely used for education and training delivered to meet the

needs of people everywhere, whereas distance education provides the means to do so through the use of various media and technologies.

Distance Education (DE) has further been defined as a form of education in which there is normally a separation between teacher and learner and thus one in which other means of communication and teaching, e.g. the written word, the telephone, computer conferencing or teleconferencing, are used to bridge the physical gap (Spodick, 1996). Distance education learners are characteristically part-time students in full-time employment. Taylor (1992) argues that distance educators should therefore provide teaching-learning resources of high quality which could be used at a time and place convenient to each student, and which allow students to progress at their own pace. This in part is what is implied through Open Learning.



South Africa's National Distance Learning Association, NADEOSA, published a set of quality criteria for distance education in 2003: as regards student support, they note that care must be taken to provide sufficient academic support through “access or bridging courses”, additional units within courses, or increased face-to-face support for learners who may be under-prepared. Although their guidelines relate in particular to South Africa, this would for historical reasons also apply to Namibia. They further suggest that learner support should provide a range of opportunities for real two-way communication through various forms of technology, e.g. tutoring, assignment tutoring, mentoring where appropriate, counselling (both remote and face-to face) and the stimulation of peer support structures.

To elaborate on the functions of student support in the process of learning and ensuring cognitive stimulation, authors (Brindley, 1987; Tait, 2000) assert that students need text devices such as illustrations in learning materials and technological innovation as well as

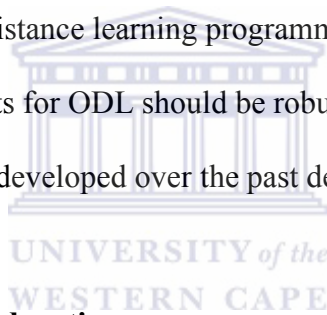
provision of information on how to manage their learning pace (King, Nugent, Russell & Lacy, 1999). This discussion will be continued below in the section on different strategies of student support.

In the *Nolnet Communique* (2005), a statement was made by a number of distance learning institutions within Namibia. The Namibian Open Learning Network Trust is a publicly funded trust, not for gain, charged with the responsibility of supporting open and distance learning centres scattered throughout Namibia. The partner institutions are the UNAM, (CES), Polytechnic of Namibia (Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning), the Namibian College of Open Learning, the National Institute for Educational Development (NIED) and the Ministry of Education. The group declared that they will strive towards collaboration and sharing resources within and between their different institutions in developing high quality and cost-effective ODL programmes. They also made a commitment to the Namibian Qualification Authority, to develop quality assurance mechanisms and criteria in order to be credible ODL providers in Namibia, ensuring quality education through ODL and developing programmes that will be relevant to learners' needs (Nolnet, 2005). Quality assurance mechanisms are necessary as distance education delivery in higher education is notorious for its low throughput, not only in Southern Africa (Diaz, 2002).

2.3 Crisis in Open and Distance Learning

Kanwar (2011) in her keynote address at the Symbiosis International Conference on ODL, in India in February 2011, alerted the members that in spite of its expansion, ODL appears to be in a crisis. She remarked that on the one hand, governments are establishing ODL institutions to enhance access to tertiary education and on the other hand, barriers are created in countries, for example China, where distance education is seen as a low priority for the

country. The Ethiopian government was also quoted as an example of a government who announced a ban on all distance education institutions in the country, stating that distance learning education was unnecessary at this stage in the development of their education sector. The ban was, however, lifted two months later with the introduction of a quality assurance system. She also referred to the Bangladesh Open University (BOU) which does not receive any regulatory and legal support from the Ministry of Education and which needs the support to ensure that its degrees are equivalent to those of the other universities in the country. Another reference was made to Nigeria where one of the Ministers announced in 2010 that if he had his way, he would close down the National Teacher's Institute, the only dedicated distance teacher training institution in the entire Commonwealth. Kanwar (2011) appealed to all educationists or providers of distance learning programmes to ensure with vigour that the quality assurance arrangements for ODL should be robust and rigorous to address the prejudice and cynicism that have developed over the past decade.



2.4 Challenges in Distance Education

The crisis in ODL is precipitated by factors which affect higher education in Lower and Middle Income countries, but have a potentially more dramatic effect in distance education contexts. Ramanujam (2002) refers to challenges in ODL especially in India, and argues convincingly that:

A large number of study centres which serve as academic contact points do not automatically guarantee better interaction because of constraints imposed by physical distance, travel, cost, inadequate staffing patterns at study centres, limited space available for storing books and equipment etc at the centres, and cultural barriers to independent and self-directed learning by individuals habituated to listening to the teachers rooted in strong oral traditions...

Galusha (1998) mentions that regardless of the medium, distance courses have common characteristics and also have similar problems. The advantage of distance education is that it gives the adult learners the greatest possible control over the time, place and pace of education, however, this does not happen without problems.

The barriers experienced by distance learners or in fact any learners, can be understood using Cross's (1981) model of barriers to learning in general, as "situational, institutional and dispositional". Cross (1981) refers to situational barriers as "obstacles which are the outcome of one's situation at a point in time" (Cross, 1981: 82). Examples that she gives include lack of time, lack of money, job and home responsibilities, transport issues, problems with child minding (Cross, 1981). Such problems are amplified when studying part-time, as is the case with many distance learning students: Siabi-Mensah, Badu-Nyarko, Torto (2009) discussing student support for part-time students at the University of Ghana, mention various obstacles which the students encountered such as lack of time, increased family responsibilities, pressure of work and tiredness as reasons for part-time students not meeting CES deadlines for assignments and not having enough time to access campus services. Lack of financial support is also noted as another major obstacle that faces part-time learners together with geographical remoteness and isolation which may affect the learning process.

Dispositional barriers are individual factors which hinder adult learning which can be due to psychological characteristics of the learner (Siabi-Mensah, Badu-Nyarko, & Torto, 2009). Dispositional barriers have been referred to by Cross as "... related to attitudes or self-perception" (Cross, 1981: 82). She gives examples such as adults with poor educational backgrounds, adults who lack interest in learning or lack the necessary confidence in their

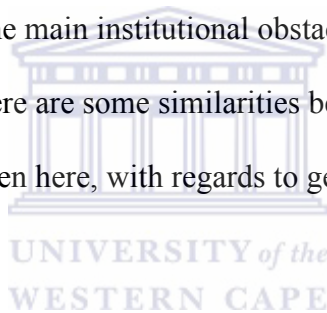
ability. Cross does not, however, specifically address academic preparedness, and many of her examples of institutional barriers would be better described as “lack of academic preparedness”. Lack of effective study skills is cited by Siabi-Mensah-Mensah , Badu-Nyarko and Torto (2009) as contributing to why learners are unable to express their thoughts on paper and lack the requisite reading skills that would enable them to read large volumes of material.

Malhotra, Sizoo and Chorvat (2007) argue that higher education institutions need to understand the obstacles to participation perceived by learners. These researchers studied barriers to participation in undergraduate education in adults over the age of 25 years residing in Hillsborough, Pinellas and Sarasota counties in the state of Florida, United States of America, who were attending small tuition-driven private colleges within these areas. The outcome of the study was that they experienced similar barriers, i.e. situational, institutional and dispositional as described by Cross (1981). They listed the following reasons why adults did not always choose to participate in higher education programmes - course offerings (an institutional reason), lack of resources or child care as common situational reasons, and bad experiences during their prior studies (dispositional reason). These barriers are real challenges for any adult in following a distance education programme. The authors conclude that their findings were not surprising as they matched with reasons well established in literature.

Using Cross’s conceptualisation of institutional barriers, Siabi-Mensah, Badu-Nyarko and Torto (2009) note the impact of poor availability of textbooks, library and lecture room facilities, suggesting that if these facilities are inadequate and not conducive to learning, it may impede the learning process. They cite as examples, poor organisation and

administration of examinations, examiners not known to students and standards for setting examination papers as potential obstacles for the part-time student (Siabi-Mensah, Badu-Nyarko & Torto, 2009).

Siabi-Mensah, Badu-Nyarko and Torto's findings (2009) with regard to support service barriers are comparable with those of Mbukusa (2009) who undertook a study of remote rural students doing the UNAM Bachelor of Education degree from the north of Namibia. The support services offered at UNAM were similar to those for distance students at the City Campus of the University in Ghana. Mbukusa (2009) describes the inaccessibility of support services arising from the geographic distance of students from campus facilities and notes that this was regarded as one of the main institutional obstacles faced by students in remote rural areas (Mbukusa, 2009). There are some similarities between Mbukusa's 2009 study and the study which is being undertaken here, with regards to geographical remoteness and its implications for student learning.



2.5 The Importance of Student Support in Distance Learning

In relation to the barriers in distance education, many authors in the field of distance learning argue the importance of support for distance learners. Holmberg (1983) argues that student support will develop student-motivation and promote learning pleasure and effectiveness if learners are engaged in discussions and decisions, and if the programmes provide for real and simulated communication to and from the students. This raises the question of the type and quality of student support envisaged.

The opening of the University of London in 1858 was an historical development where a range of programmes for external study was provided. This University has been termed the

first “Open University” and students all round the world were soon looking for tutorial support to supplement the bare syllabus they received on registration wherever they lived (Tait, 2003). Tait (2003) also refers to Briggs who did pioneering work at the London University Correspondence College in 1887 (also the founder of the College) in providing support to those studying with the University of London at a distance (Tait, 2003).

It was not until the establishment of the Open University in the United Kingdom (OU, UK) in 1969 that modern distance education was formed, by the development of a range of learning and teaching media along with an integrated student support system. Tait (2003) relates that it was asked of this university to recruit post-experience adult students who had not considered higher education, as opposed to the usual intake for universities of a small well-qualified cohort of school leavers. This is one of the priorities of ODL, that learner support should be an integral part of teaching and learning programmes and the needs and the environment of the individual must be taken into account (SAIDE, 2004). OU was thus expected to change the educational expectations of sectors of the population who had been excluded by the very limited opportunities for university education up to that time. This implied that this university had to offer places for undergraduate study without the barrier of former qualifications and had to build in the following characteristics into their learner support system (Tait, 2003):

- *Each student had to have a personal tutor in a group of 25 students, so as to allow for personal knowledge, support and understanding*
- *The tutor gave teaching feedback and the mark for work completed during the course*
- *All students were offered the opportunity but not the obligation to take part in face to face tutorials, more recently, computer-mediated tutorials, managed by their own tutor*

- *A network of 260 study centres were established throughout the UK in order to provide such tutorial opportunities supported by 13 Regional Centres, ensuring that the student felt “nearer” the university*
- *A limited amount of residential school experience on a conventional campus was essential, at a minimum one week*
- *From 1971-1997 all undergraduate students, had access to a personal tutor-counsellor who offered them support and advice throughout their career*

(Tait, 2003: 2).

Tait (2003) re-iterates the important role of the tutor which is seen as the heart of learner support. Since the 1980s, student support features more prominently in the literature as researchers were struggling to unpack this concept. Expressions regarding student support have shifted (Jacklin and Le Riche, 2009), and where it was previously believed that it was the student that was having the problem, it is now suggested that higher education institutions are responsible for providing that support. Jacklin and Le Riche (2007) extend the above concern in a study undertaken with five cohorts of undergraduate and postgraduate students at higher education institutions in the United Kingdom (UK), concluding that student support is a socially situated, complex and multifaceted concept, which should not be seen as essentially individualistic and problem-focused in its orientation. Many researchers now view student support differently. The thinking now is more towards how students can best achieve, and how the personal and institutional resources deployed can make study a more meaningful experience for them (Tait, 2004; Simpson, 2002; Jacklin and Le Riche, 2009).

The previously cited evaluation study by Mowes (2005) of student support services at the UNAM, focuses on second and third year Bachelor of Education students from the (Northern)

Campus of UNAM. The findings of this study were that students benefited from support services provided by the UNAM and that students affirmed the value of these support services; in particular they noted the importance of support related to getting started with their studies, 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 study groups (Mowes, 2005). Similar findings are evident in studies by Brindley (1987), SAIDE (1995) and Tait (2000). These authors suggest that effective support services will ensure that there is student-institution communication including regular contact with support staff, which contributes positive effects on student performance.

Other authors highlight the importance of student support in avoiding student attrition (Holmberg, 1983). The author last cited suggests that amongst the common factors which promote successful course completion are the use of course assignments, early submission of the first assignment, short-turn-around time for providing feedback, telephone tutorials, and reminders from tutors to complete work. Seeletso (2010) notes that the tutor should have an in-depth awareness concerning factors and obstacles which may affect student's ability to study and work at the same time, as well as knowledge of how to deal with these obstacles.

Sewart (1992) suggests that one of the major reasons for fairly high attrition rates in distance learning programmes is the lack of adequate learner support which can become critical when interaction between tutor and learner is not as constant as may be the case in face-to-face classes. These factors proposed by Sewart (1992) which are contributory to high attrition rates have been confirmed through a study done at the Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Australia 1995 by Thompson. The aim of the study was to determine to what extent demographic, academic and administrative variables were related to attrition and persistence

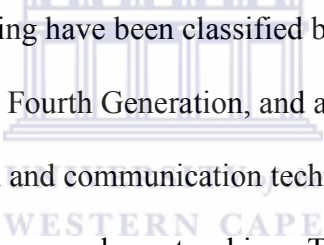
of external (distance) students who enrolled in the Fourth Year of the Bachelor of Education course. The outcome of this study was that students who withdrew from their studies were much less satisfied with the level of communication with the tutor, had less teaching experience, had completed fewer units and semesters of study and had lower averages than the students who continued. The majority of students who had discontinued indicated that work, family and study commitments were the main reasons for their withdrawal. A greater proportion of these students at the Edith Cowan University rated assignment feedback as very unsatisfactory (Thompson, 1996).

The recommendations of the study were aimed at improving the effectiveness and efficiency of services offered to external students, and by doing so, at reducing the attrition rate and providing educational benefits to those students continuing in their studies. Sewart (1992) argues that a supportive learning environment is essential and critical in distance learning and that it is vital that the tutor helps to bridge the gap between learners and their study material (SAIDE, 2004; Sewart, 1992).

2.6 Different Support Strategies

In assessing which technologies should be used in delivering distance education, it is essential to identify technologies which students themselves have access to, and secondly technologies that are available to the institution or organisation (Tait, 2000; Joynes, 2010). Tait (2003) further asserts that where there is difficulty in accessing post offices or where there is no access to railway delivery, other alternatives should be sought, e.g. delivery of materials by truck to remote villages should be considered. Tait (2003) argues that a proportion of students can be excluded from meaningful support services if an institution just assumes that students should use the telephone or email services; this is also relevant to

institutions seeking to use Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) where a considerable number of students can also be excluded; consideration needs to be given by the institution whether the majority will benefit by a certain support strategy before a decision is made. Nolnet (2007) takes a critical look at successes of ODL in Sub-Saharan Africa and particularly within Namibia: in relation to this evidence, they conclude that the successful graduation rates from ODL are depressingly low and the costs of successful graduates, as opposed to the cost per enrolment, are much less favourable; they note that this suggests the need for more discrimination with regard to choice of courses, target audiences and implementation of delivery methods. They propose that support strategies should be conducive to student-learning and accessible to students from their work place or from home.



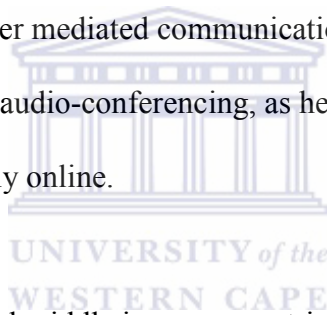
Four generations of distance learning have been classified by Nipper (1989) and Taylor (1994) as First, Second, Third and Fourth Generation, and are distinguished by their respective production, distribution and communication technologies. Another name for First Generation distance learning is correspondence teaching. The medium in this case is written or printed material (Nipper, 1989). Second Generation distance education is called multi-media distance teaching, and has been developed since the late 1960s with the integration of print, broadcast media, cassettes and to some degree, computers. Feedback processes included telephone counselling and some face-to-face tutorials. Communication with learners was marginal, and communication amongst the learners was almost non-existent (Nipper, 1989). This was due to one or two-way technologies. The Third Generation saw the advent of information technologies, including video conferencing, broadcast television/radio and audio-teleconferencing (Taylor, 1992). The Fourth Generation involves

the most sophisticated technology i.e. the Flexible Learning Model characterised by the high quality of the CD-ROM, interactive multi-media with enhanced interactivity

and access to an extensive range of teaching-learning resources offered by connection to the Internet (Taylor, 1992: 2).

This typology does not imply that earlier generations disappear with the advent of new ones; manifestations of all continue alongside each other, determined by availability, context and institutional choice.

Nipper (1989) suggests that the primary aim of implementing computer conferencing in adult learning is to overcome the problem of the social distance between learners and teachers, not just geographical distance. Nipper acknowledges the value of further supplementary social networks, over and above computer mediated communication, such as face-to-face meetings between learners and teachers, or audio-conferencing, as he sees it as unproductive to conduct distance education entirely online.



Joynes (2010) reasons that low and middle income countries will more often resort to traditional support media such as printed texts, pre-recorded audio or video items and telephone support. This has been the case at UNAM until 2007 (Joynes, 2010). In Namibia, solar panels and wind turbines have been used to generate electricity to support Internet services, computers and servers in rural areas.

Joynes (2012: 8) views E-learning as inaccessible and a potential barrier to distance learning students in remote areas; he elaborates on this by saying that “requisite investments in Information Communication Technologies (ICT) infrastructure and electricity are necessary for E-learning, and whilst it is an area of growth in low and middle income countries, questions need to be asked about the feasibility of using such technologies for teaching and

learning at a distance in low-resource settings”. He further argues that the choice of media and technology cannot be based on academic functionality but more by other criteria, such as relative accessibility, reliability, ease-of-use and cost, both to the institution and the learner (Joynes, 2010: 8).

He concludes by saying that “technology infrastructure and Internet bandwidth may limit the use and application of these in some low and middle income countries within the sub-Saharan Africa context, and mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure quality of content” (Joynes, 2010: 9). On the contrary, Kelly and Stevens (2012) of the Open University in the United Kingdom, support the value of E-learning for developed countries. Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell and Haag (1992) propose that information technology should be embraced, as students studying via distance education want the contact, but in ways convenient to them. The authors describe the Open University as not being an online university but rather “a networked university” in which students are linked to each other, their tutors, and faculties and to the information resources and services. This implies that distance education students can make full use of the resources offered at the OU and at the same time be in contact with their lecturers and other departments or faculties.

Technology such as web-based resources and participation in on-line conferences is a central element of E-learning that is gradually transforming the study experience of distance learners (Watts and Waraker, 2008). Frindt (2005) reported on a technology which forms part of the so-called Third Generation of distance learning – video conferencing – which was introduced as a trial for three groups of students who enrolled in Business Mathematics through the CES department, UNAM. Business Mathematics is a course on the Bachelor of Education programme that is offered both through open and distance learning and through conventional

full-time mode. Group A consisted of full-time students who would receive instruction through the conventional mode. Group B was taught through the means of distance education with designed study materials. The purpose of this trial was to evaluate the examination results and to describe the effectiveness and impact of video conferencing and other interactive strategies such as extra lecture notes and distance education designed study materials.

The outcome of Frindt's study (2005) was that all the distance education students passed, N=16, 18% of the students obtained 80% and higher. In contrast only nine (9%) percent of the 22, *full-time* students obtained 80% and higher and 18% failed the course. Frindt (2005) concluded that this case study revealed that teaching and studying at a distance can be as effective as traditional instruction, since the methods and technologies used were appropriate to the instructional tasks. She also notes that there were numerous occasions for interaction between student and lecturer as well as between the students themselves. Frindt (2005: 6) concludes that this study revealed that distance education compares well to the conventional face to face mode when suitable methods of instruction are used, and high interactivity levels are maintained between the learner and facilitator.

In summary, Tait (2000) proposes that the learner's needs, profile and situation need to be considered when student support is being considered or administered. Consideration needs to be given to how learner support impacts on the student's study life, student workload, on academic support, on space and study facilities available, and lastly how the student engages with the support services and study programme.

2.7 Using Technology for Effective Learning

Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell and Haag (1992) assert that in an effort to supplement or replace live face-to-face instruction, technology mediated distance learning very often simply replaced the ineffective methods that limit face-to-face classrooms. They say that very often interactive technologies are used to present one-way lectures to students in remote locations.

Constructivist educators on the contrary strive to create environments where learners are required to engage in processes, by analysing data, reflecting on previous understandings, and constructing their own meaning (Jonassen et al, 1992:11)

Rogers (2000) proposes that the most important step from teaching to learning, is moving from a teaching culture that ignores what is known about human learning to one that applies relevant knowledge to improve practice. He reminds the reader that it is not just technology that is important but also the learning methodologies used to employ the technology. He concludes by saying that the teacher's role is now alongside the student, facilitating and guiding with the necessary technology to bring out the best results in the learner (Rogers, 2000: 22).

2.8 Research Question

Not much explanation was found as to why, in spite of efforts to provide support at UNAM, and the CES's regular engagements in monitoring its services, the rate of discontinuation in the Bachelor of Nursing Science remains so high. This study will be guided by the following questions in order to explore the support needs and experiences of support services received by the Bachelor of Nursing Science students, from lecturers, administrators, the institution, peers, in the workplace and within their social setting. The questions being asked are: how

are existing support needs experienced and perceived by students on two different campuses, and how could support services be made more accessible and more appropriate to their needs?

2.9 Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study was to explore students' experiences and perceptions of administrative, social and academic support services provided by CES in the distance mode Bachelor of Nursing Science at UNAM.

The study sought to address these objectives:

- 1 To describe the conceptualization and resulting support services offered by UNAM on the two campuses between 2005-2011
- 2 To describe and compare needs and challenges of distance mode Bachelor of Nursing Science students on the two UNAM campuses.
- 3 To describe students' perceptions and experiences of support services received from the CES at UNAM.
- 4 To compare experiences of the Bachelor of Nursing Science students of the support services offered on the two UNAM campuses.
- 5 To record needs and recommendations of students enrolled for the Bachelor of Nursing Science programme.

In the next chapter the methodological approach that was applied in this qualitative study will be discussed.

CHAPTER 3 - STUDY METHODS

3.1 Methodology and Study Design

The design of this study was exploratory; qualitative methods were used to enable the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the perceptions and experiences of the Bachelor of Nursing Science students with regard to student support services; through the study, the researcher was able to identify challenges and enablers within the existing support services. The study had a comparative dimension between the two delivery sites of student support services, since they had varying rates of *discontinued students* across the years, and different support services.

A qualitative study was considered appropriate as it allowed the exploration of “lived experiences in a naturalistic environment” – a distance learning campus in this instance (Mertens, 1998:11). The reality (students’ support needs) which was studied included students’ subjective experiences. This is characteristic of the interpretive paradigm to which qualitative research belongs, which aims to explain the subjective reasons and meanings that lie behind the way students interact with, for example, various support services. The assumptions guiding the interpretive paradigm are that “knowledge is socially constructed by people active in the research setting, and that researchers should attempt to understand the ‘complex’ world of lived experience from the point of those who live it” (Mertens, 1998:11). This is also in keeping with designing educational support services, where understanding students’ needs is a critical element. In relation to the purpose of this study, Baum (1995) argues that qualitative research has the potential to assist the researcher in discovering unanticipated and anticipated findings and can even alter plans in response to the circumstances: the potential to supplement and improve support services in terms of students’

needs is part of the rationale for this approach, and in this sense the study has a qualitative evaluation dimension.

In order to “To describe the conceptualization and resulting support services offered by UNAM on the two campuses between 2005-2011”, document resources have been used as well as interviews with key informants. The researcher placed the people [students] and setting [Northern and Central Campus sites] into context, both socially and culturally which should enable readers to make decisions about the transferability of the study findings to other contexts (Malterud, 2001).

3.2 Population and Sample

The study population includes any students who have been enrolled for more than two years for the Bachelor of Nursing Science Degree during the period 2005-2011 and received support services from the Northern or Central Campuses. This criterion ensured that they have had sufficient time to be orientated and actively engaged in their studies and to make use of the CES support services; they would have also experienced a growing set of support services in the period of their enrolment; furthermore support services were likely to be more accessible for these students than for those from before 2005, and the selected population will be less subject to recollection bias. The population, however, also included students who started this qualification between 2005 - 2009 but discontinued their studies. Students from both campuses will be included for their differences and similarities.

The sample has been purposively selected to represent as wide a range of experience of support services as possible (a maximum variation sample). In this way, the researcher sought to obtain a broad scope of information and perspectives on the subject of study (Durrheim, 2007: 290). The sample included key dimensions of differences amongst students such as age, first language, years of study, year of enrolment where possible (Sweet, 1993). In this regard, students who had “discontinued” the programme (but who enrolled between 2005-

2009 at both campuses) were also included, to explore whether their experiences differed in any significant way. There were however, limitations of choice arising from willingness and availability to travel to the data collection event, particularly amongst those who had discontinued their studies.

The student sample was as follows:

a. Current Bachelor of Nursing Science students x 35	25 from Northern Campus; 10 from Central Campus;
b. Students who have discontinued their studies x 6	3 from Northern Campus; 3 from Central Campus.

Key informants were also part of the sample and included persons who have direct responsibility for the programme, and who have in some way played a role in conceptualising and delivering student support services. Through interacting with leadership and implementers at CES on the two campuses, the researcher explored and described the conceptualization and implementation of support services and the rationale for its arrangements. In addition, implementers offered valuable insights into how students used the services and perceptions of students' approach to using them, as well as the challenges they appeared to face.

The following seven Key Informants (KIs) were included:

a. Director of CES x 1	From Central Campus;
b. CES support staff x 2	1 from Northern Campus; 1 from Central Campus;
c. Nursing Science lecturers x 2	2 from Central Campus; No lecturers on the Northern Campus; Lecturers were selected who teach different modules;
d. Administrators x 2	1 from Northern Campus; 1 from Central Campus.

3.3 Sample Recruitment Procedure

The sample was recruited by verbal invitation initially at the vacation school in February 2011 on Central Campus. Later in the year during the winter vacation school in July at the Northern Campus, written invitations were handed out. Invitees were asked to respond to the invitations within five days indicating whether they would be willing to take part in the study. The participants were reminded of the date, place and time via short message service in advance of the study. The students on the Northern and Central Campuses also gave the names of students who had discontinued the programme. Initially it was difficult to get hold of some of the students who terminated their studies but eventually the researcher managed to find (6) six students who were willing to be interviewed.

3.4 Data Collection

Data from the students were gathered through focus group discussions, chosen for their capacity to obtain the participants' perceptions and interactions around an issue of common interest in a setting that is permissive and relaxed (Burns, 2005). Focus groups are reputed to give a sense of "safety" in numbers to those wary of researchers (Burns, 2005).

The researcher arranged four focus groups for this study, 10 students from Central Campus and 25 students from Northern Campus for current students and three (3) individual interviews on different campuses for students who discontinued their studies. The current and *discontinued* students were separated because of the likely sensitivities of the students who discontinued studies. With the individual in-depth interviews, the researcher tried to elicit the opinions, feelings, emotions and frustrations of the ex-students more easily. The focus group discussions were conducted on the Central Campus in October 2011 after lectures, when students from Northern and Central Campus came for the Skills Workshop. Focus groups for current students had between 8-10 members; for discontinued students the

researcher conducted individual in-depth interviews. The focus group discussions and interviews were conducted in English as all participants were quite familiar with this language and studying in English. Data collection for focus group discussions commenced with two central questions followed by probing. (See [Annexure 4](#)). Key informants were interviewed separately on both campus sites. (See [Annexure 5](#)).

The discussions were recorded with an audio recorder to provide the researcher with verbatim data and a record of the interaction without distracting the interviewees (Durrheim, 2007). A research assistant was trained to do the necessary recording which left the researcher free to focus, observe and listen more attentively to what was being said. The assistant also took field notes of the non-verbal interactions to supplement the information on the audiotape (Morse and Field, 1996). The researcher sensed awkwardness at the onset of the discussions but it improved with time when the researcher and participants were more at ease. The students did not respond well to the open-ended questions on what their experiences were of support at the University. The researcher had to re-phrase and ask about good experiences and negative experiences before they answered in a more spontaneous manner. Thereafter they seemed to want to talk more about the challenges than about the positive support experiences.

The students who terminated their studies were not so receptive especially on the Northern Campus and the researcher had to re-assure them that she mainly came to listen to what problems they had encountered and that these problems would be shared with the management of CES so that students could be better assisted in the future. A token of appreciation (an HIV badge) was given to each of these six (6) students at the beginning of the interview conducted in March 2012 in Windhoek and Oshakati, which made those who

were not so welcoming initially become more receptive and spontaneous in their responses. In preparation for analysis, audio recorded focus groups and interviews were transcribed.

3.5 Data Analysis

A process of thematic content analysis was undertaken, using the study objectives as a reference framework. The researcher immersed herself in the texts repeatedly, i.e. the field notes and transcripts to try and get into the “life world” of the respondents (Burnhard, 1991). Initial impressions of the trends in meaning were written down in a study journal. The researcher re-read the transcripts several times before categorization or coding of the data were started (Burnhard, Gill, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008). The process of coding involved identifying words and phrases (*codes*) which give meaning to certain feelings, perceptions, behaviour and / or concepts and noting down as many codes as necessary to describe all the aspects of the content (Morse, and Field, 1985). Codes were documented in the margins of the transcripts and text was colour coded according to the category into which it fits. Early in the process, several transcripts were shared with and coded by the supervisor and then compared with those of the researcher to check the reliability of interpretation of the researcher. The transcripts were re-read by the researcher and the codes were clustered and combined where appropriate to form sub-themes and finally themes under a wider category system (Burnhard, 1991; Durrheim, 2007, Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

These themes were then compared to identify commonalities and differences between campuses. The researcher attempted to ensure that the themes accounted for as much of the interview data as is pertinent to the research questions (Burnhard *et al*, 2008). Illustrative quotations from the transcripts were identified as evidence of the themes and sub-themes which are presented and described in the findings (Green & Thorogood, 2004).

3.6 Ensuring Validity and Trustworthiness in the Study

Rigour in qualitative research is the term that describes ensuring the validity and reliability of the study (Cresswell & Miller, 2000); it is implemented at multiple stages of the process.

To achieve rigour, Cresswell and Miller (2000) advocate ensuring credibility which describes how accurately the account represents participants' realities of the social phenomena under study. Credibility is also described by Cresswell and Miller (2000) as a conscious effort of the researcher to establish an accurate description and interpretation of the meaning of the given data. To achieve credibility, the researcher scrutinized all interviews and focus group discussions carefully and compared interpretations with a peer reviewer (the supervisor).

To increase credibility, Cresswell and Miller (2000) encourages reflexivity in researchers, meaning reporting on their own personal beliefs, values, and any biases which may interfere with data collection and interpretation of information. To achieve this, the researcher recorded her feelings about the topic in the research process. The researcher also kept a journal to record personal thoughts and feelings about the research process which increased the reflexivity.

A rich and "thick" description of the setting and data is regarded as assisting in a more vivid explanation giving a better understanding for the reader of context and making the research more credible. The researcher placed the people and setting within the study into context, both socially and culturally which will enable readers to make decisions about the transferability of the study findings to other contexts (Malterud, 2001).

3.7 Limitations

There are limitations to the study. *Discontinued* students were not easily located due to geographical relocation, and a few of these students did not want to participate in this study because of disappointment in their studies or other reasons. The sample of students who terminated their studies were not all the ideal sample whom the researcher wished to have interviewed, as two of those students terminated their studies to continue with Medicine and did not leave the programme due to problems or academic issues. The intended maximum variation of the sample was also affected by students' inability to travel to campus for the data collection event, and the nature of the sample was therefore carefully documented. Recollection bias also affected data from students who have been in the system since 2005.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Director of Centre for External Studies at UNAM (See Annexure 7) and has already been verbally negotiated with the Head of Department at this Unit. The study protocol was also approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Western Cape (See Annexure 6) which ensured that all ethical issues have been considered.

The study and its recommendations may benefit future students of University of Namibia and the Centre for External Studies, if it leads to greater understanding of student support needs. Recommendations that arise from the study and improvements in this regard could help to reduce attrition and therefore help to achieve UNAM's aim of increasing health workforce capacity for this country. The study is unlikely to have any negative impact on students or the institution except by making attrition rates public, which could result in a level of finger pointing at the CES staff.

When some negative review comments arose, the researcher considered carefully whether to anonymize the institution, but found that this detracted substantially from the contextual aspects of the study. The researcher sought advice from the management of the School of Public Health, UWC and was advised to obtain a letter of approval, stating that the name of the University, and the name of the Centre for External Studies, could be used in the study. This has been obtained and is attached as Annexure 7.

The anticipated risk that students might experience discriminatory practices if they reported negatively on services, and their identities were revealed was addressed by keeping contributions anonymous. Because of the small numbers of staff involved, negative commentary by students may reflect negatively on their efforts, but since the study attempts to improve their support, this should not be taken personally. However identities of all staff participants will also be kept anonymous. This should be seen in the context of one key informant's very apt description of CES's work and how their working systems operate:

“Here at CES, everything happens in a link and depends on many parts of a team participating equally.”

As a result challenges and problems cannot be attributed to any one person. Records of the participants and Informed Consent Forms (Annexure 3) will be kept confidential and locked away at all times and destroyed once the research is completed. All the participants were issued with a Participant Information Sheet (Annexure 2) informing them of the intention and process of the study and an Informed Consent Form. They were assured that they were under no obligation to participate and asked to sign the Consent Form indicating willingness to participate and for the researcher to use the data derived. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the process at any stage with no repercussions for doing so and that

all information would be presented anonymously. In focus group discussions, participants were asked to respect one another's views and opinions and assured that no one should feel pressurised to answer questions which they might feel uncomfortable to answer. A clear record of the research process was kept and any changes that occurred during the study were documented for transparency.

The following chapter will discuss students' experiences of the support received, the challenges of being matured students in a distance education programme as well as the key informant's understanding of support and how it can be improved at the University of Namibia, Centre for External Studies.



CHAPTER 4 – FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and key informant interviews that were conducted for the purposes of this research. In order to achieve the aim of the study, (to explore students' experiences and perceptions of administrative, social and academic support services provided by the CES in the distance mode Bachelor of Nursing Science at UNAM), the perceptions of participants in four focus group discussions, five key informants and six individual students who discontinued their studies were explored and analysed. Key themes with various sub-themes were developed from concepts derived from students' experiences and perceptions of support services they had received. The chapter commences by describing the participants in more detail, by way of context, and then presents a description of the CES envisaged student support services. Thereafter, the findings are arranged according to four main themes with sub-themes.

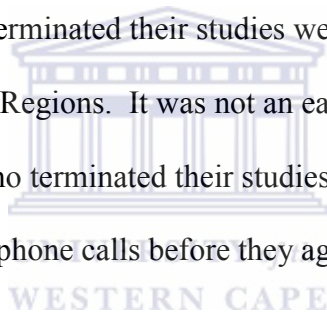
4.1.1 Demographic Description of Study Participants

In order to ensure at least one year of prior experience, participants were chosen from current 2nd and 3rd (final year) students from the Northern and Central Campuses. As registered nurses, they have been in charge of their wards for a minimum period of 3-4 years. Some were employed at maternity hospitals, while others were employed in primary health care centres, mental health institutions and private health care settings. The majority of them enrolled for the above-mentioned degree programme which will enable them to qualify for more senior positions at their workplaces either in the management or educational field. Many of these students have no other higher tertiary education besides their basic nursing

diploma which were in many instances completed 5-10 years ago. The majority of the students were adults with ages ranging between 30-55yrs.

As regards the student participants, six (6) in-depth interviews were undertaken, three (3) from the Northern Campus and three (3) from the Central Campus. Four (4) in-depth interviews were done with key informants at the Central Campus and one (1) in-depth interview was done at the Northern Campus with the despatch clerk at the materials distribution centre.

The interviews were done on the Central Campus when students attended the Skills Workshop and the students who terminated their studies were interviewed at their places of work in the Central and Northern Regions. It was not an easy task for the researcher to get the cooperation of the students who terminated their studies to be interviewed, and the researcher had to make many telephone calls before they agreed to be interviewed.



4.2 Support Services as Envisaged by the CES on the Two Campuses, 2005-2011

This introduction to the CES constitutes the findings for Objective one (1) where the researcher describes the conceptualisation and resulting support services offered by UNAM on the two campuses between 2005-2011 derived through document research and Key Informant interviews; the CES's vision for student support provides the context within which the evaluation takes place.

The CES was set up as part of the new University within Namibia in August 1992. UNAM created this Unit to ensure greater equity i.e access to the University, for many students with various educational backgrounds, especially those who were disadvantaged by poverty and remote rural settings (University Prospectus, 2011). This Unit caters for the educational

needs of people who for a variety of reasons cannot come full-time to any of the University campuses to further their studies. The Unit operates through three departments: the Department of Materials Development and Instructional Design, the Department of Student Support and the Department of Continuing Education which offers educational programmes not necessarily leading to qualifications (Global Distance Educationet, 1999).

In the UNAM Annual Report (2009) it was reported that student enrolment reached 10,101 in total. The CES manages eight Regional Centres and operates a larger office at the Northern Campus to support its programmes and students.

The Unit presently performs two functions, i.e. providing and handling of distance education courses leading to formal qualifications, and offering of a small programme of non-formal, non-certificated courses through a radio series and occasional seminars and workshops.

The Bachelors Degree in Nursing Science (Advanced Practice) is the same course as the existing 3-4 year degree taught in residential mode but it is taught externally over a five year period (Dodds, 1996). The medium of teaching for the distance programme is via vacation schools (contact sessions held at the Central Campus) and tutorials at the student's local campus. The lead medium is the distance learning materials (text-based) which are supplemented as necessary by the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences (Global Distance, Educationet, 1996).

The CES offers the following support services to students:

Tutor-markers

Assignments coming from students are used as a teaching tool and tutor-markers who are well trained, do not just mark in a conventional sense, but also give the necessary guidance

and encouragement on how students may improve and make progress toward being successful.

Telephone Tutoring

Marker-tutors are available for telephone tutoring and students are provided with a list of their tutors' telephone numbers as well as the times/hours that they will be available for this service.

Face-to-face Tutorials at Regional Centres

These tutorials are organized in the University's nine Regional Centres from time to time where the number of students registered for a particular course of study justifies this.

Attendance at tutorials is optional. The Student Support Officer at the regional centres provides notice of such tutorials to students. Tutorials are given by the educators of the Central Campus.

Vacation Schools

Vacation schools are offered twice a year, in February and July, at the Central Campus.

Attendance at vacation schools is optional but students are strongly advised to make use of this service because it is a valuable opportunity for students to meet their tutors and fellow students and to make use of library facilities. Small group tutorials are provided during vacation schools to allow for individual attention and discussion of problems.

Video Conferences

Video conferences (VCs) are presented once a year during the Winter break which is the first week in July. The video conferences are usually relayed from Central Campus. In 2005, it was relayed for the first time from Northern Campus to Central Campus. The purpose of the video conference is to discuss some of the content of students' modules especially in those areas where students are struggling; in addition, lecturers give feedback on the submitted assignments, give direction on the next assignment and answer any queries that students may

have. The video conference allows students and lecturers to meet participants from other regions and make connections between them; the lecturer can also guide students who are experiencing difficulties and emphasise the importance of reading material. The various educators for the different modules facilitate their own video conferences.

Library Services

The University's library services are available throughout the country at the Regional Centres. It should however be noted that there is a limited stock of library books available at these Centres. Books can also be ordered or loaned from Central Campus and it usually takes 1-2 days to arrive at the Northern Campus. Library services are available free of charge to all registered students of this University upon presentation of their current student cards.

Students are informed that prescribed textbooks in the library can only be used in situ although some can be borrowed on a short-term basis (i.e. on a 24 hour basis).

Payment of Tuition Fees

An important service offered to External Students is the staggered payment system for tuition fees. Students can pay the prescribed fees for each module as they take the module. These fees and registration will stay valid for the period they take to complete the course or module, provided it is within the maximum period allowed. Should a student fail a course, they need to re-register the following year and another payment needs to be made.

Assessment

CES assessment procedures are undertaken in two parts: continuous assessment in the form of assignments and/or tests, and the final examination. Each module provided to students has to be assessed in both forms. Marks gained for assignments and/or tests form part of the final assessment for the module. Assessment in all courses is based on a satisfactory continuous assessment mark and the results of a written examination. In each course, students are required to submit a specified number of assignments which are marked by tutors. If students

obtain the minimum 40% examination entry mark, the student can progress to write the examination and a special examination is allowed if the student obtains a marginal fail (45-49%) in their final mark. The examination will take place immediately following the regular examinations scheduled in June for first semester and November for second semester.

Quality Assurance

Under the supervision of the Tutorial and Student Support Unit, full-time staff at the CES are involved in the monitoring of assignments which are marked by part-time tutors. The monitoring involves looking at the quality of marking and is done by senior educators from this Unit. Feedback is given to the tutor-markers on their marking, and training is given on an on-going basis to new markers. Should a marker be found to be incompetent, a substitute is then found by this unit and the marker is required to vacate his/her post.

Recognition of Students' Problems

The CES also has definite rules concerning ill-health and students being absent from their work-place. A medical certificate needs to be submitted indicating number of days that a student will be absent and notifying CES of any illnesses which the student may have

This description of the envisioned support mechanisms is the basis for understanding the gaps between student's experiences and what was envisaged as student support. In the next section, the themes and sub-themes in the analysed data provided by students and Key Informants are presented.

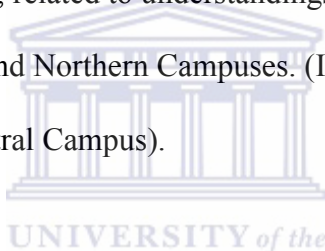
4.3 Overview of the Themes and Sub-themes Derived from this Study

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
4.4 Theme 1 - Understanding of Support	4.4.1 Social and Financial Support 4.4.2 Recognition and Reward in the Workplace 4.4.3 The Need for Academic Guidance 4.4.4 What is Needed from the Institution 4.4.5 The Need for Good Communication 4.4.6 Need for Academic Support 4.4.7 Need for Mentorship 4.4.8 Need for Follow-up System for Students 4.3.9 A Need for Rotation of Support Programmes at Regional Centres 4.3.10 Equipping Educators for Distance Education
4.5 Theme 2 - Being a Mature Working Part-Time Distance Education Student	4.5.1 Personal Experiences – Social Implications and Juggling of Roles 4.5.2 Ill-health and Subject Overload Extended Time Given by Institution 4.5.3 Financial Challenges
4.6 Theme 3 - Institutional Weaknesses in Programme Delivery	4.6.1 Late Materials 4.6.2 Always someone waiting for a book 4.6.3 Inadequate Resources for Exam Preparation
4.7 Theme 4 - Experiences of Institutional Support	4.7.1 Experiences of Lecturer Support 4.7.2 Access to Internet 4.7.3 Experiences of Video Conferences 4.7.4 Experiences of Skills Workshops

4.8 Theme 5 - Experiences of Social Support	4.8.1 Family Support 4.8.2 Employer Support
4.9 Theme 6 - Inherent Motivation	4.9.1 Inherent Motivation

4.4 Theme 1 – Understandings of Support

The participants discussed their needs and understanding as regards student support; this constitutes an expression of their needs as learners, in their respective regions. This is very important if one is to understand the lived experience of enrolled students, since their evaluatory remarks and concerns relate directly to their own understandings of what student support should be. These findings, related to understandings of support and student needs, have been described for Central and Northern Campuses. (In the attribution, N implies Northern Campus, C implies Central Campus).



4.4.1 Students' Expressed Needs: Social Support including Financial Support

The students understood support as feelings of acceptance and assistance within the family, the workplace and from friends. They experienced social support as extremely crucial over their study years since it enabled them to leave their household easier, attend vacation schools which very often were far distances away from their homes, spend hours at the library or work when necessary with their peers on their assignments or preparing themselves for the examinations.

I should get support, like from my family

Students from Northern Campus seemed to regard support in terms of the way family members enabled or facilitated more time for them to study, by taking over household chores and by providing financial assistance to enable studying. This sense of entitlement within the

family suggests that the choice to study is seen by the student as a benefit to the whole family; it is not solely an individual choice or personal career decision: the students imply that this sort of support is to be expected when one studies. This suggests that further study while working is recognised to be a taxing process, an undertaking which merits support, potentially because of the benefits it brings to the family or community. Support is therefore seen as a process of reducing their workload and responsibilities at home, and was expressed both by those who experienced it and those who missed it.

Perceptions of the need for social support from the family were very explicitly expressed as follows by students from Northern Campus including from one student who terminated her studies.

...maybe by giving you time to work on your assignments ... You feel they should free you at home from your household duties (DS2-N, P18).

... uhm, what I understand, I think [sigh] support for me as a student, I think, I should get support like from my family. Like whereby they have to support me financially and also to help me like if I'm busy, like to study for exams or give my assignments; at least if there's some house chores that I have to do, at least somebody should do it for me. They should support me, uh, sociologically, or, uh, or motivate me, or maybe friends, it can also be from friends, like if you see I'm failing, or uhm, if I'm losing motivation, at least somebody should help me. I'll just to go up [increase in motivation] again (FGD2-N, P5).

Support in this instance is seen as reducing daily demands on the student, but it also suggests a recognition that one may become despondent and need to be motivated. The social support

contributes to the students' feeling of motivation in contrast to guilt feelings which students often feel when having to neglect household duties and other family commitments.

4.4.2 Recognition or Reward in the Workplace for Being Engaged in Studies

Study leave was regarded as an essential element of support by the students of Northern Campus as it was always a struggle to get some time off for study. Students noted that preparation for examination was not always seen as a priority by supervisors or colleagues at work, which limited their time for intensive study. In practice, students received two study days prior to examinations from the Ministry of Health. They needed to apply to their employer (which was either the Ministry of Health or a Private Institution) for study leave in the year previous to commencing studies. Study leave permitted them to attend regional workshops, vacation schools, and to take time off for examination preparation. Study leave was limited to all members of staff (nursing and non-nursing) and is granted on a priority basis. Should the study programme have a duration of four years, the student is entitled to be granted this study leave over the four years. However, if a student failed a specific year, then study leave would be cancelled until the student passed again and a new application for study leave would have to be submitted.

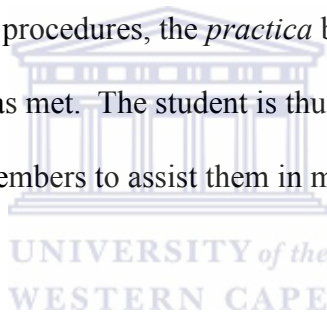
... They must provide us with more study leave

Many students experienced these difficulties (when failing) and the process of application for study leave and approval thereof became a tedious exercise, as the supervisor also needed to approve the leave application before this was submitted to the Ministry of Health. Very often supervisors were too busy to approve study leave due to staff shortages, and students were forced to use their vacation leave to attend classes, video conferences or write examinations.

...I think they must provide us with more study leave because we are struggling with it. We have been given two days before the exam which is not really enough (FGD3-N, P9).

I also need support from my ... from my, my work condition ...What do I need, uh procedures that I need to do, so they have to help me to practise and sign for me where it need be (FGD2, N,P9).

The student expressed the need to be supported by senior colleagues. The students are required to complete certain practical procedures under the supervision of a senior staff member. On completion of these procedures, the *practica* book must be signed and dated indicating that the requirement was met. The student is thus looking for understanding and accommodation by senior staff members to assist them in meeting their practical requirements.



They should at least provide money to pay for school fees

Students on the Northern Campus felt that they should at least receive some form of remuneration from the Ministry of Health and Social Services to assist them with payment for registration or for the course/modules. The only material benefits for studying this course are that they stand a better chance to be promoted to senior positions, but they do not receive an increase in salary after completion. Participants implied that financial support from the Ministry of Health would motivate them to do further studies.

...the support we need is from our employer, the Ministry of Health. At least if someone is studying, they should at least provide money to pay for school fees because after completion, your salary remains the same. You spend your money on

studying but nothing will change. This will motivate people to go and study (FGD3-N, P9).

If I just get a fund to study, I'll just leave my family behind.

In contrast to seeing only material benefits from studying, one of the students who terminated her studies at the Central Campus expressed a strong desire to continue with her studies should she receive funding from Ministry of Health. The need to upgrade qualifications was emphasised, even though this meant leaving one's family behind to study elsewhere.

...if I get an offer from Ministry of Education and get a fund to go and study then I will leave my family behind to go and study. I don't mind (DS3, C, P15).

4.4.3 The Need for Academic Guidance

A need for guidance from lecturers was expressed by the students on Northern Campus. This need could be greater on the Northern Campus because of greater separation of students and lecturers. More guidance was also requested via the tutorial letters and assignments from the students at the Northern Campus. Students expressed their need for lecturer support in the following ways:

[L]ecturers can guide you more

... if lecturers can guide you more on what we are supposed to do, it will be better (FGD1-N, P4).

... the inside of the assignment - the lecturer can say inside or guiding what I need to answer (FGD1-N, P4).

... I think it will help if we got more tutorial letters (FGD1-N, P4).

The amount of feedback given in assignments differed from lecturer to lecturer. The guidance on how to answer the assignment was usually done in a tutorial letter earlier in the year. Tutorial letters cannot always be sent out to students after assignments because of the full-time lecturing load which the distance educators for the Nursing degrees carry. It is expected of the students to contact the lecturers should they encounter any difficulties or to clarify any misunderstandings regarding assignments or regarding the content of their modules.

4.4.4 What is Needed from the Institution

The need for availability of resources and timeous despatching of study material was expressed by both Central and Northern students. Study materials are usually prepared in October of the previous year and should be ready for despatch by the beginning of February of the next year. Students noted that throughout their study years, there was difficulty in receiving their study material on time and that it affected them in submitting their assignments by due dates.

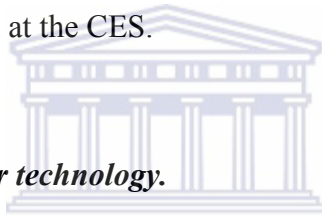
...Uhm, [clears throat] my suggestion is just that at least uh, uhm, [we should have our materials at the] beginning academic year when we have to register, at least they should have all materials, materials and assignment letters ready to enable us to do our assignments on time (FGD3-N, P9).

Timeous despatching of study materials to students is of the essence in a distance education institution. Students need time to consolidate the content needed to prepare for their assignments and when it arrives late; it impacts on their submitting their assignments on time and on the lecturers' ability to give them timely feedback.

The importance of timeous despatching study materials to students was acknowledged by a staff member who expressed it in the following way.

... there are many things which need to be in place - it does have an effect on efficiency as [the University] is offering a dual teaching mode, i.e. we offer same packages also to full-time students therefore we need to communicate timely (KIF1, C, P2).

Although the general sentiment expressed by the key informant is positive, that materials should be on time, there is an implication that it is because full-time students are also involved, the packages should be in time. This suggests that distance learners are potentially unconsciously under-valued, even at the CES.



Yes, we would like to improve our technology.

Improvement in technology, e.g. sending of text messages, online receiving and posting of assignments was also seen as an important need by a senior staff member at the CES.

Another key informant at the CES mentioned that it was envisaged for the near future to improve their communication with students.

... We would like to send assignments, tutorial letters via Internet. I would like to see the improvement of the SMS system where one can communicate with the student immediately (KIF1, C, P3).

4.4.5 The Need for Good Communication

The need for good, accurate and timeous communication with students was seen as an essential support service by the participants. For example, correct information is needed regarding attending video conferences, Skills Workshops or vacation schools, or assignment

due dates. It was also noted by one of the senior staff members at the CES that good communication and preparation of students is of the essence when they needed to attend the workshops and vacation schools in order for these events to hold any value for the student.

... Tutorial letters or activities should be sent out to students timeously so that they can prepare themselves and come prepared when the video conference or the vocational school starts (KIF4, C, P9).

This would also enable students to bring the correct study material when they attend Skills Workshops or vacation schools so as not to impede the learning process.

... When you get for workshop skills, video conference, you find you got the wrong material. Sometimes you find you wasted your time. You don't know whether the... people not communication well ... (FGD4-C, P14).

Another student noted that time-tables need to be set and not changed, as changes affect them attending these support programmes. Furthermore, time-table changes regarding workshops are not always communicated to students. This was very explicitly stated by one of the students on the Central Campus.

...I just want to comment on the Skills Workshop. For the [University] to be very careful when they put up the time-table. We put our leave date at work. Then sometimes you see the date change. You either decide to attend the class and be absent from work (FGD4-C, P12).

Poor communication with students does have an effect on effective time management and on adequate class preparation. Absenteeism at work could arise as result of re-scheduled time-tables which also results in heavier workloads for staff at various places of work.

4.4.6 A Need for Academic Support

Two of the educators expressed a concern that students were experiencing difficulty in comprehending and thinking critically as well as struggling with academic writing. Lecturers mentioned that students did not always have the necessary background knowledge in their basic training to comprehend some of the modules and this impacted on students understanding the assignments and even the examination questions.

... Academic writing is a problem but nothing is done. Most of the time they don't know how to interpret assignments. They often do not have skills to analyse, critical thinking. They do a course in academic writing but only in first year but that's insufficient (KIF2, C, P9).

The difficulty to comprehend the study material and examination instructions was verbalised by one of the students on the Northern Campus which made them “feel lost”, especially with the preparation of assignments.

... sometimes I understand the instruction really hard (FGD1-N, P3).

One of the distance educators re-affirmed that students also struggle with particular modules (e.g. *Nursing Education*), resulting in their having difficulty in passing these modules.

However, students' reluctance to read was also pointed to.

... interpretation, understanding of study material. If you take Nursing Education. They are not confronted everyday with education principles, they are in a practical situation; although there are opportunities, they do not have the background nor for research methodology. Older persons did not have this in their courses or curriculum development. They don't know this nor the theories. Lots of new terminology. No

understanding of the new content and of course lack of reading. They don't read (KIF3,C, P10).

One of the students on the Central Campus noted that non-nursing subjects were not always so easy to comprehend and many students struggled to understand these subjects.

... we know more about nursing. In [principle of management], I felt that the lecturer, we did not understand him well. It was a problem

The issue of unfamiliarity, of not being able to make conceptual links to a course was also noted by a student, referring to this module [*Principles of Management and Government Studies*].

... It's not a field we know, it's an unknown field to us, it more market-related (FGD4-C, P10).



One of the students who terminated her studies at Central Campus gave “difficulty in comprehending” as one of the reasons for not understanding a module and changed to another module (DS2, C, P17).

In summary, the lack of familiarity with the conceptual basis of a subject, a lack of critical thinking skills and academic writing ability had a negative impact on the students on both campuses. Those who terminated their studies were often “trained many years ago under the ‘old curriculum’” which very often did not prepare these students adequately for further higher tertiary education.

4.4.7 *The Need for Mentorship*

Mentoring of students is one of the strategies used in distance education to guide and counsel students and to assist them in overcoming challenges during the course of their study. A mentorship programme for the nursing students has always been on the agenda of the CES but has never been implemented due to financial constraints at UNAM. However, one of the full-time nursing lecturers on the Northern Campus made herself available for students should they encounter any problems with their assignments or examination preparation from 2005-2009 and had an informal agreement with the CES that she will guide the distance education students where needed. This was never formalised in writing and fewer students made use of her services over the past three years, as not everyone was aware that they could do so, another indication of the need for better communication.

One of the educators on Central Campus noted that money must be available if an effective mentor system is to be put into place; she noted that many students stay in remote areas and need a person to guide and direct these students.

... you can start a mentoring system for students in the far remote areas. But this is money. You can get someone to assist students far in the North with the social support but people want to be paid! Always a financial implication! Many students are in remote areas alone and this hampers support. For them to travel to [...] is money. They work shifts and you need a strong mentor to get these things going on the outreach points (KIF3, C, P10).

The second educator (Key Informant) felt that a mentor is also needed to motivate and encourage students, to be there as a life-line as she understands the “academic world with all its pressures and the struggles ... ” that students experience when working on their own.

... I think there should be a specific person to motivate the students to lift up their spirits. Lecturers give poor marks and a motivator needs to talk them through, who understands the academic issue, like a life line (KIF2, C, P8).

4.4.8 The Need for a Follow-up System for Students

A monitoring or follow up system where academic progression is reviewed to avoid termination of studies is not done regularly in a formal way by the lecturers, although end of year discussions are held to make decisions regarding progression of students or termination of their studies. As a result, termination of studies may be required when a student has not passed at least five modules in the first year, nine in second year, 13 in third year, or 22 in the 6th year or when maximum period of six years studying has been exceeded.

The administrative staff then process the student records on their system and only liaise with the educators if necessary; usually the progression of students is discussed prior to examination when their continuous assessment marks are presented at the Examination Committee. The need for timeous follow-up was expressed by one of the educators on Central Campus as lecturers often lose track of students if they do not hand in assignments or if they “terminate their studies” halfway through the year.

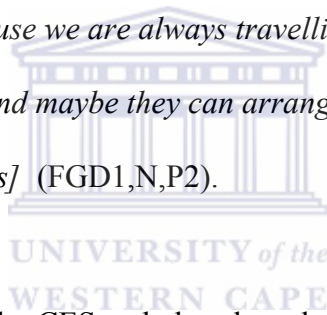
... follow-up is definitely lacking. Some students just fade away, you don't keep track. I don't keep a good system because you only realise when it is November and it is exam time. I'm lucky as I can recall certain students, so sometimes I do miss them. A follow up is necessary as you should keep track that where/when did this student drop out (KIF2, C, P9).

4.4.9 A Need for Rotation of Support Programmes at Regional Centre

Students from the Northern Campus spend time travelling to Central Campus to attend the Skills Workshop and sometimes the vacation school in mid July. Lots of travelling costs are involved as well as some time off from work. A few of the students expressed the need for lecturers to present the Skills Workshop on the Northern Campus and even suggested that it can be done on a rotational basis:

...why can't they send lecturers to [...] to do the Skills Workshop? Maybe this week is Keetmaanshoop next week is Oshakati then next time Windhoek (FGD1, N, P2).

... mine is concerning about the Skills Workshop if maybe they can arrange one day to come to the North because we are always travelling to [Central] because [Central] people never come to us and maybe they can arrange some refreshment for us even something to drink [laughs] (FGD1,N,P2).



This request has been considered by CES and plans have been made for programmes to be presented at other centres as stated by one of the key informants at the CES.

... to link up with last question, we are thinking of having more video conferencing to [at] other centres and not just [at Northern] and [another centre] (KIF1,C,P2).

This mainly refers to the vacation schools which takes place via video conferencing.

In conclusion, a need for rotation of support programmes at the various campus sites was expressed by mainly Northern Campus students and those that lived far away from the Central Campus, as they felt that they are the ones that were doing most of the travelling.

4.4.10 Equipping Educators for Distance Education

One of the senior staff members at the CES stated that the vision for the CES is ongoing development of educators for distance education. She mentioned that educators have been sent to some of the High Income Countries to attend conferences and courses to equip themselves more especially in the development of online course materials. This is particularly important for this University if they are to adhere to the mission of this particular distance education unit:

... we are thinking of developing course material that can be available on line as at the University of Nottingham in the U.K. One of our lecturers was sent to this University to see how online materials can be made available to students. We have also been in contact with the Open University of Tanzania to learn how short courses can be made available to students (KIF6, C, P9-10).

... we would like to bring our lecturers into Open Distance Learning (ODL) mode. We would like to offer more training for lecturers to be more efficient and competent for students on the distance mode of learning (KIF1, C, P4).

Lecturers at the CES have been attending conferences nationally and internationally and presenting papers on studies done at the University on various aspects of Distance Education. The nursing educators unfortunately have not always been part of this delegation to conferences due to their full-time workload at the School of Nursing and have missed these opportunities of being updated with the most recent trends and developments in distance education.

4.5 Theme 2 - Being a Mature Working Part-time Distance Student

This theme captures some of the positive experiences and challenges experienced by Registered Nurses studying the Bachelor of Nursing Science Degree; their expressed views on their study experiences also constitute evaluatory comments on the support received. Challenging factors on a personal side were social and financial implications which impeded their learning process. Institutional weaknesses included study materials which did not arrive on time and inadequate resources at the libraries, which both impacted on adequate preparation for assignments and even for examinations. Students on the Northern Campus seemed to have been more affected by social responsibilities whereas all the participants (Northern and Central Campuses) experienced the late arrival of study material as well as the inadequate resources at the libraries in a negative manner.

The positive experiences of support - personal and institutional, will be discussed in Themes 4 and 5. Some experiences differed in intensity due to their sense of separation by distance and other factors which will be described in more detail.

4.5.1 Personal Experiences – Social Implication and Juggling of Roles

Many of the participants mentioned that being a full time nurse, having small children, and being housewife at the same time, caused interference with their studies. Many felt guilty leaving their children at home when having to go to the library to study and while working on their assignments, many felt that they were neglecting their household. They found the juggling of the different roles which they had to take on as extremely difficult and challenging.

A number of participants from the Northern Campus said that having small children, limited their movement to the library or the campus and thus did not always allow them to spend the time needed on their studies or assignments.

... Because, I'm having small kids, when you want to go to the library or go out, they don't want you to go out (FGD1-N, P4).

One of the students from Central Campus who terminated her studies expressed that having a child, and having to do household chores, made studying more difficult. This became quite challenging with trying to cope with household demands and the demands of the study programme.

... at home, I have a small child. I have to do all the work at home (DS1-C, P10).

The juggling of roles was experienced as a personal challenge by a participant on the Central Campus as they are parents, wives, students, and this affects their time for studying.

... sometimes you know, part-time is a difficult thing to do and we are adult, we are parents, we are working, we are wife and blah blah, we have lot of things to do.

Sometimes we don't understand assignments or content of the thing (FGD4-C, P10).

4.5.2 Ill-health and Subject Overload

The Centre for External studies has their own specific rules for progression, and ill-health and pregnancy is accommodated on condition that the student does not exceed her extended time given to complete the programme. Students often take on additional subjects in order to complete their study programme sooner, sometimes over-estimating their own capacity. In addition, when social issues arise, e.g. marriage, then the demand of the programme becomes

too much. This was the reason for two students terminating their studies one on Central Campus and one on the Northern Campus.

Pregnancy and ill-health was the reason for one of the students at Central Campus to terminate her studies as this impacted on her progression to the next year/level.

... in 2011 when I came to register I put in more effort, but I got pregnant. By March 2011, I got sick. I got sick because of the pregnancy symptoms. I went to Ms....to say I became sick. I thought, let me tell her rather [than] to keep quiet, as I was in and out of hospital (DS3-C, P14).

It was however the impression of a Key Informant that some students do not always abide by the rules regarding illness or submit sick-certificates. Only near due dates for assignments or examinations, would they alert the lecturer or administrative assistant about illness. This was often too late to arrange for other alternatives for the student. The same issues applied to their places of work - that sick certificates must be submitted when there was a period of absence to notify their supervisors. If the student “plays these rules” then extra time to complete assignments can be obtained, or other arrangements regarding the examinations can be made, and more time to complete practica requirements at the workplace can be given.

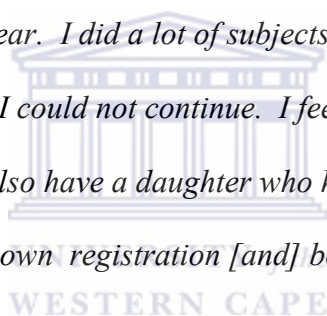
UNAM also had an examination rule that students could decide to either write the First Opportunity Examination or the Second Opportunity Examination. Many students opted for Second Opportunity which was written in early January of the next year. However, if the student only wrote the Second Opportunity examination, he/she forfeited a special examination. This rule has since been abolished (2011) and all students have now to sit for the First Opportunity Examination unless there are special circumstances preventing the student from doing so.

4.5.3 Financial Challenges

Financial Challenges were real challenges for many students on Central and Northern Campuses and some of the participants even had to terminate their studies because of lack of finance. A student who terminated her studies on Central Campus had other family financial responsibilities and found it difficult to pursue her course under this financial strain.

*... and again it was finance, it was a problem for me to carry on with my course ...
Even for me, I knew I was still paying for my two brothers who were at the university.
It was tough for me (DS1,C, P10).*

... [It was] quite a busy year. I did a lot of subjects. I only managed to pass two subjects. For that reason I could not continue. I feel like it was a waste of my time and a waste of money. I also have a daughter who has just entered the university so I can't afford to pay for my own registration [and] both of our tuition (DS1-N, P16).



When priorities were weighed up against each other, the student from Central Campus chose to give her younger siblings an opportunity to study and stand back for a while.

... I planned to start again. I need to pay \$7000 but my brother also need to register at the same time and therefore I cannot do both (DS1-C, P10).

The price of prescribed reference books as well as the registration fees compounded other financial responsibilities that students had to face, especially if they had a family to support. The challenge of buying books was a very real challenge that students were struggling with. This was noted amongst the students who discontinued the programme (participants from both Northern and Central Campuses).

... books are very costly. In first year, the cost of my books totalled to \$2000. There was just one reference book for students doing [Nursing] Education I. [one of the major subjects]. I quit August last year as I failed two subjects, Applied Psychology and [Nursing] Education 11 (DS3-N, P19).

... the price of books [was] very high. Books always \$500 whether 500 or 100 pages. We always pay the same price [at the UNAM bookstore] (FGD1-N, P2).

4.6 Theme 3 - Institutional Weaknesses in Programme Delivery

4.6.1 Our materials always late

Late delivery of materials was a recurring theme which dominated the interview sessions throughout. Despite the researcher trying to steer the discussion in allowing them to share their experiences of the quality of supplementary support strategies, they had this urgency of wanting to talk about the weaknesses they encountered in the delivery of the programme itself.

Since the lead medium of this distance programme is text, students should receive their text-based materials at the regional centres or by post at latest end of February, in order to study to meet the first module assignment deadline in mid March. Although materials revision begins in October of the previous year, many interviewees reported that they received their materials late.

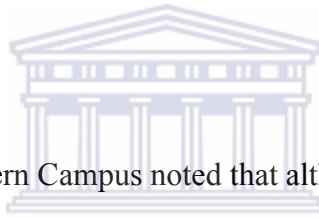
... I just want to comment on the materials. They come late, very, very late especially in [Northern Campus]. You find the assignment is end of March and so far you are in the middle of March and there are no study materials (FGD4- N, P12).

This is very late for the start of any academic course, and more so a distance course where ideally the academic year should be extended. A student from Northern Campus commented:

... what I experienced this year is a lack of study materials at our campus. They reaching late and the due date are started. Then it is very difficult for me to complete my assignment on time (FGD3-N,P7).

Another student commented that this situation arises because they are far from the Central Campus, implying a perception of comparative disadvantage as a result of where they are located.

... us in remote areas. Our materials always late. I'm 30km from [Northern Campus] (FGD1- N-P1).



The same respondent from Northern Campus noted that although she arranged telephonically to fetch her materials, the materials were not available when she arrived. This implies a wasted trip and wasted time taken by a working person as well as travel costs. It also implies that distance students are not valued as clients by their institution, and that their time and financial constraints are neither understood nor taken into account.

... when you come, never there. If next week, still not there... (FGD1-N, P1).

Students felt that the institution had “disappointed them” or let them down by not supplying the study material timeously as promised, and that their own levels of anxiety were heightened, as they were not able to meet due dates of their assignments. This was particularly prominent amongst the students at the Northern Campus and also notable among the students who had terminated their studies.

... that was always a problem. You register for a course then no material arrives for a while and you have to wait. I remedied this myself. I just copied the study material from the previous years. But late study materials do have an impact on submitting assignments timeously (DS3, N, P19).

One of the educators was in agreement that students in general complain of study materials being late and are also left unsure of due dates for submission of assignments, which was a cause of concern and irritation to her.

... Generally they complain that they cannot meet the due dates of assignments (KIF2,C, P9).

[H]ere everything happens in a link

In response to the study material being distributed late, one of the senior staff members acknowledged that the fault lies with the CES since “early despatching of study materials” is part of the policy of the Unit: study material was reported to be issued late by the Dispatch Department because institutional dispatch timelines for regional centres are not adhered to.

... here everything happens in a link, e.g. if distribution is late, students receive assignments and modules late. This affects them negatively as they comprehend the assignment late and submit late (KIF1,C, P2).

4.6.2 *There's always someone waiting for the book*

The challenge of accessing study material was compounded by difficulties with accessing prescribed books at the libraries. The availability of prescribed books was limited for students on both campuses and students felt restricted by time limits on usage. There was “always another student waiting for the book” according to a student on the Central Campus. It is notable that students seem reluctant to purchase prescribed books, and depended on the library which could not meet the demand.

...we also get difficult to get the prescribed books. Most of the prescribed books is reserved - can only keep it for 12 hours. There's always someone waiting for the book, otherwise you need to buy the book (FGD1-C, P1).

The reluctance of students to buy books was often the result of financial constraints as has been previously stated; some also expressed an attitude that the CES should provide most of the reading materials, an attitude of entitlement amongst students which was confirmed by one of the educators:

... There are factors which hinder/influence adequacy. Money, distances, literacy of students. Many things that influence this, e.g. you give them info on study guides and prescribed books. They don't have money to buy prescribed books, when you tell them to buy them, which influence quality of support system (KIF3, C, P10).

In addition, outdated library resources at the University were described as one of the leading factors that caused one of the students to terminate her studies:

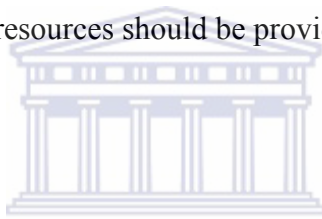
... first time I started in 2001. I was based in rural area and the resource which we used at specific library. The lecturer indicated it was old resources and there was no

way that I was able to find other resources with my assignment so I dropped (DS2,C, P9).

Even when a student from Central Campus had tried to buy the book, it was not to be found at the campus bookshop.

... Then you drive all the way ... only to find it's out. You go to ... [the University] bookshop, you find there's no book (FGD4-C, P14).

Such descriptions of frustrated expectations reflect poor communication between the institution and bookshop and shows that students' expectations are not being adequately met; whether their expectation that all resources should be provided as part of the package of materials, is questionable.



Certain reference books were not always available at Northern Campus but were reserved for use at Central Campus; thus distance also impacted on students (from Northern Campus) who could not always access some of the reference books available centrally. This problem seems however to have been experienced on both campuses.

... That reference book is only one. You find that book is not in at [Central Campus], ... perhaps only in [at Northern Campus] (FGD4, C, P14).

... some of us that are from different regions that are not based at [regional centre] libraries, they not having enough resources at all. Sometimes you try to surf on the Internet, there's not enough information on the Internet. Then when you try to search for the books that are prescribed, there's nowhere to get those books (FGD2-N, P2).

4.6.3 Inadequate Resources for Exam Preparation

Students referred to resources in the library as inadequate when they could not access old exam papers or when examination papers are available but are not the most recent ones. The majority of students seem to have a dependency on old examination papers which they used to study from or to prepare themselves for examination. A student at the Central Campus felt that the past exam paper resources at the Library was also “out-dated” and not always accessible. This left her with a feeling of “despondency” and “uncertainty” with regards to the structure of examination papers.

... you don't have access to past question papers. The library apparently have a site, you go to the library and sit there whole night you can't access that site. It just says it can't open. If there's papers, it's from "Toeka se tyd" [ancient times] [and] even that papers is not opening up. You need to know how the questions are being asked then you go in blank. It's not that you want the questions it's just that you want to know how they ask the questions (FGD4-C, P11).

It appears that students do not always ask for assistance at the Library to access the different websites of the University or particularly the Portal site which offers many learning materials for students, and this could be due to computer illiteracy, lack of information or sometimes embarrassment on their part for not being able to access the various sites.

4.7 Theme 4 - Experiences of Institutional Support

Participants did not distinguish between programme delivery strategies and support mechanisms such as the video-conferencing, but in this section the focus will mainly be on

their views of support mechanisms which were: the support from educators, access to the Internet, and support received from the video conferences (vacation schools) and Skills Workshop. The students following the Bachelor of Nursing Science Degree do not make use of all the support services being offered, e.g. telephone tutoring, face-to-face tutorials, as most of them are from the Northern Campus where telephone access is very often problematic. Coming to a regional centre for a face-to-face session is not always possible, as the educators are delivering full-time lectures to the residential students and a telephone tutorial is not always possible. The students often only make use of the library services and the Internet on campus, and communicate only with the lecturer should they encounter problems with their assignments.



4.7.1 Experiences of Lecturer Support

The participants viewed lecturer support as being available when contacted, or assisting them when they encountered any problems. Some experienced an improvement in their writing skills and credit was given to the lecturer for guiding and assisting them in this way.

Although academic writing has been expressed by one of the educators as a concern amongst students, some students experienced this as a positive acquisition and one of the students on the Central Campus expressed herself in the following way.

... what I experienced a lot, is that I learnt how to do, how to write in academic format (FGD4, C,P13.)

Furthermore, lecturer support and availability was appreciated more noticeably by the students on Central Campus as they found them to be available when they were contacted.

... also I get support from the lecturers and also from X. If you have any problem she will assist you (FGD4, C, P13).

... some of the lecturers are always available even if you do not find them in the office you can try the cellphone, you can talk, she can help you ... not all of them (FGD4-C,P10).

... The support is good. Some lecturers as she said is always available for some questions. If you send an email they reply (FGD4-C, P,14).

There were, on the other hand, a few students on the Northern Campus who were unhappy with the unavailability of some of the lecturers whom they would try to reach per telephone. This difference of experience could arise because students from Central Campus stay closer to their campus and seem to get hold of their lecturers more easily. A student from the Central Campus also experienced the educator in a positive way as the educator motivated her to continue with her studies which contributed to her succeeding and being now in her final year.

... I started in 2009 actually but the positive thing, the other lecturers motivated us to do further studies (FGD4, C, P10).

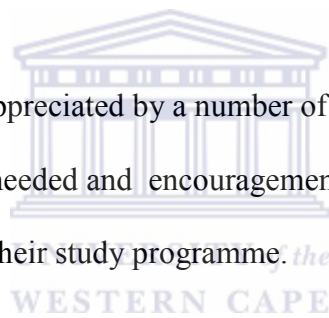
Similar experiences were shared by a student from Northern Campus, that the educator motivated her and sustained her throughout her studies.

... this I can say, [motivation] is really from both of the lecturers and the students and myself; sometimes lecturers have also encouraged me to do this study, not to quit and also some study materials have helped me a lot (FGD2-N, P2).

A mentor was appointed by the University on the Northern Campus between the periods (2005-2009) to assist the students with any difficulties they encountered with their assignments or studies. Not many students made use of her services but those who consulted her to assist them with their assignments found her quite useful. One student on the Northern Campus mentioned that she was not aware of the mentor that made herself available to students; instead she consulted her peers for assistance.

... mainly my support came from my colleagues because we have a study group that usually meet to discuss our assignments then we get a way how to approach the questions. I did not know about X [mentor]. I did not know she was available for us (FGD4- N, P13).

Educator support was therefore appreciated by a number of participants because of their availability and assistance when needed and encouragement to pursue their studies which sustained many of them through their study programme.



4.7.2 Access to the Internet

The University offers free access to the Internet to all students on Central and Northern Campus. This service seemed to have been utilized effectively by many participants. The Internet was also regarded as a positive means of support by the students especially on the Northern Campus; it was also noted by one student who terminated her studies. Students found the Internet particularly useful when study material was not available in time.

... I used all options and even the Internet provided on campus as well as my cellphone (DS3-N, Pg, 19).

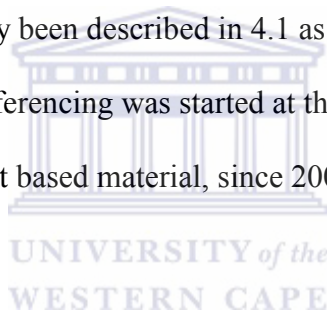
... ok, the support like what really support me during my study is the Internet. Because at our study centre, there's no study material most of the time you just using the Internet. So it really support me like doing my assignment or anything I'm just searching through the Internet. And sometimes then if you don't have money because you have to buy some of the things from the Internet (FGD2-, N, P6).

... yes, I made use of Internet and found it quite useful. I made use of Internet at [the University] campus (DS3-N, P14).

4.7.3 Experiences of Video Conferencing

The Video Conference has already been described in 4.1 as a key support strategy.

As has been discussed, video conferencing was started at the CES as a means of student support and to supplement the text based material, since 2005. The video conferencing is transmitted from both campuses.



Transmitting video conferences presented many technical challenges, e.g. poor imaging causing difficulty in concentration for the student, interruptions due to technical problems especially for the people on the Northern Campus resulting in lectures not always being “fully understood” or “heard” at times. The students on Central Campus watched the video conferencing live while it was relayed to the Northern Campus. There are times that educators travel to the Northern Campus where students experience the live video conference but this happened only every 2nd year due to financial constraints of the University. No complaints were raised from the Central Campus students as the video conference was relayed from the main campus. However the students from the Northern Campus expressed difficulties with them.

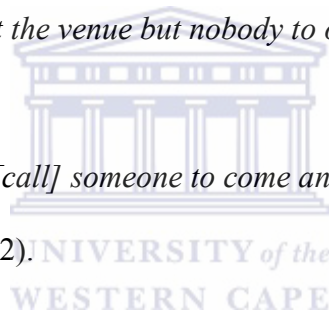
... most of the lecturers come in front of camera but otherwise you can't always see them (FGD1-N, P1).

... image always poor which affect the concentration (FGD1-N, P1).

The participants at the Northern Campus also complained that very often there was no technical person around when technical difficulties arose leaving them to scout around the campus for someone, which resulted in missing the greater part of the lecture. Provision is being made at each campus for a technical person to be on stand-by but it appears as if this is not well organised on the Northern Campus,

... they let the student in at the venue but nobody to operate the video (FGD1-N, P2).

...you need to go back to [call] someone to come and manage but then you miss part of the lecture (FGD1-N, P2).



...I like to comment on the video conferencing and vacation school. Most of the time you [the Central Campus lecturer] are the one giving the lecture [which is relayed to the Northern Campus]. Most of the time there is a video failure. Sometimes an hour goes past then there's no connection, so you miss out a lot (FGD4-N, P12).

On the other hand, the video conferences have also been acknowledged as useful by students mainly at the Northern Campus; this was corroborated by one of the students who terminated her studies.

This has also been affirmed by one of the staff members at the CES.

... let me be honest with you and say that you may have the best of technology at hand but if little preparation or none is made prior to the video conferencing then the best type of technology is not worthwhile. My opinion is that the educator should prepare his/her students well in advance before the video conference takes place. Tutorial letters or activities should be sent out to students timeously so that they can prepare themselves and come prepared ... (KIF4, C, P9).

... Sometimes the video conference is also good. It is also a face-to-face, you ask questions. Sometimes there is a technical problem about it (FGD3-N, P8).

... then, if we, uh, we have uhm... if we have noticed that now we feel the due date that is been given, we cannot make it so we negotiate with the lecturers and they can change it through the video conference then at least we have time to finish off the assignment, it is very helpful (FGD2, N, P4).

... the video conference is very helpful because you get the chance, uhm, to, to, to ask questions ... and sometimes they give us hint on about the assignment, how you have to go about the assignment and when it is the due date and then if the due date have to be changed, they change it that time (FGD2, N, P4).

... yes, they [video conferences] helped us to do our assignments (DS2, N, P18).

In summary, the video conferencing appeared to have encountered many difficulties which could have been avoided by ensuring a technical person on standby while the video conferencing was in process. For many participants the video conferences were viewed as a

positive means of support since interaction can take place with the lecturer and uncertainties regarding subject content could be corrected or clarified.

4.7.4 Experiences of the Skills Workshops

The Skills Workshop is offered once a year usually in the first week of October. The aim of this workshop is to focus more on practical aspects of their selected specialisation as well as teaching students the skills to answer and interpret examination questions. Attendance at the workshop is optional but also very necessary, as the time for presentation of the workshop is close to the final examination; lots of guidance and direction is given to students. In addition, examination guidelines are discussed, and students have the opportunity to work out and discuss examination questions in their groups.

The emphasis of the Skills Workshop is to help students strengthen and refine the skills needed in the nursing profession. For example, the students doing Nursing Education get an opportunity to present a lecture in front of their peers and receive constructive criticism. Likewise for Community Nursing Science and Health Management Science they are given practical exercises or role plays to present; through this process, the lecturer can determine their level of understanding and correct where necessary. If they have to perform a skill, they are guided, and corrected, which benefits the student.

... both of this (Skills Workshop/video conference) are very important. I experienced a lot from it, especially from the workshop skills. I learnt a lot from it because more topics and different subjects elaborated more. You can ask questions, because you are given face to face with the lecturer (FGD3-C, P8).

The Skills Workshop seems to have been appreciated by students from both Central and Northern Campuses as they could experience the lecturer and peer interaction which they were missing, and could share some of their academic problems with the lecturer and the rest of the class.

... ok to me, the support is this vacation school [Skills Workshop]. It really helps us. You can go through the content and the assignment and you can ask questions. You meet with other colleagues and you can get their contact numbers which is supportive and I think this vacation school [Skills Workshop] is really supportive (FGD4-C, P15).

... lecturers teach us something at the same time (FGD1-N,P1)

The point that telephone numbers are only exchanged on this occasion in October suggests that the opportunity for better peer support is being overlooked.

... just at least if it is possible to have two Skills Workshop, one in the beginning of the year, one at the end of the year. Because some of the things are only becoming clearer now and in Skills Workshop a lot of the things are being elaborated. Our assignments are already done so it does not really help us prepare our assignments (FGD4-C, P15)

Students seemed especially to appreciate contact, referring in a number of instances to their sense of isolation as distance learners.

... unfortunately I haven't had my books with me but it was useful, good to see you face-to-face rather than sitting at home and working alone (FGD1-N, P2).

... I just want to add for the Skills Workshop. It's my first year that I attend Skills Workshop. I'm from Central Campus and from the private sector. The Skills Workshop is good. There's more interaction. This one is more personal. If things can be done like this, the pass rate could be better (FGD4-C, P12).

The lecturer support and video conferences seemed to have been appreciated especially by the students of the Northern Campus. The vacation school, Skills Workshop and lecturer support were more positively experienced by the participants from the Central Campus. It seems that students on Central Campus may have experienced fewer challenges because of their proximity to the city and their workplaces, enabling them to be back earlier at work than the students from the Northern Campus. Even the travelling costs would be comparatively much less for the students from the Central Campus.

4.8 Theme 5 - Experiences of Social Support

Social support was particularly valued by participants from the students on the Northern Campus. Students seem to regard support in terms of the way family members enabled or facilitated more time for them to study by taking over household and other social responsibilities. It was often the family members that encouraged the students to persist when they became despondent with the many challenges they had to face while studying, and it was family support that sustained many of them throughout their study programme.

4.8.1 *[My) greatest support was my family*

Students described their families as one of the greatest support structures; these were either their husbands or their children. It was also notable that studying as an adult was regarded as a status symbol, and an encouragement to study for the rest of the family members especially

the children. Students experienced real motivation from their family members especially if they felt like giving up. Not many comments were raised from students on Central Campus in this regard.

... I think my greatest support was my family. When I sit with my assignments, I don't have colleagues. I will talk to my family even my husband. Sometimes we will fight because he thinks I must write it this way (FGD4- N, P14).

In response to being asked what kept a student going, the student responded,

This is interesting...[laugh]. My children kept me going (FGD1- N, P4).

... being at school and looking at mummy studying, made them supportive. I can help them with their schoolwork encouragement "please mum, don't give up" (FGD1-N, P4).



... This thought I'm having. Time, when I wanted to drop they would say ... 'no mommy don't drop it' ...my husband also say... 'go on' (FGD1-N, P4).

... my husband and this lady (fellow student), she always say, huh-uh, you just go on (FGD1-N, P4).

Peer support was also a valued support element especially by students on the Northern Campus; they experienced other students as available to assist and support them with information when needed, which helped in doing their assignments and thus lessening the feelings of isolation and anxiety.

... you just try your best and do what you can do and try effort and ask information from your colleagues or people that have studied the course that you are doing - that at least they can help you somehow, somewhere (FGD2 – N, P3).

It was an interesting observation to note that the students from Central Campus did not respond to what their colleagues of the Northern Campus had experienced. It might have been that they were in agreement or it might have implied that it is a given that support should come from friends and family.

4.8.2 Support from the Employer

In spite of the difficulties and red tape discussed in terms of students' support needs from employers, some were very appreciative of the support they had received. Some participants noted that employers provided information for their studies, and accommodated them when they needed to change their shifts. Employers or supervisors were also reported as very accommodating especially amongst the students who terminated their studies on the Central and Northern Campuses.

... sometimes from the Medical Officer of Health (MOH), I had quite a lot of information. My marks were good (DS1-N, P17).

... I spoke to my supervisor and she says if you don't want night [duty] you just put in a request that you don't want night duty. But that was after everything went wrong (DS1-C, P10).

The above examples demonstrate that many students value support given to them at various levels and that they need to feel recognised in their study endeavours. They appreciated the

interaction and support received from various role players with whom they interacted in the workplace, the home and in the institution itself.

4.9 Theme 6 - Inherent Motivation as Source of Support

Students from both Central and Northern Campuses referred to their own “personal motivation” as a factor which enabled them to pursue or persevere in their studies. This kind of inherent motivation helped them to bridge the challenges they encountered and to strive towards their end goal. Students experienced that they gained knowledge over their years of study, that they could progress in spite of the challenges, and that they could upgrade their qualification which inspired them to continue studying. One of the participants mentioned that she learnt to balance her household chores with her studies which implied that she learnt the technique of effective time-management and self-directed study; others mentioned that what they learnt, they could also put into practise as working students. Two of the students (who discontinued their studies) said they wanted to continue studying in the field of Medicine.

... uhm, for me, I have experienced a lot because like through studying you get a lot of knowledge and that is what inspire you to go ahead and put in practise what you've learnt (FGD2-N, P3).

... you try your best and do what you can do and try effort (FGDS-N, P2).

... I also start in 2009 and hopefully going to complete this year. So far the study is going well. I learnt a lot actually, I'm up to date with more information. I know in practise I'm improving a lot. That's all I comment from now (FGD4-C, P14).

... the good experience is that I learnt a lot throughout those years therefore I did not drop school because I know it's beneficial for my future (FGD3-N, P7)

... during my course of study I learnt to divide my time and my tasks so that I can complete my study and also give a hand to my household (FGD3-N, P7).

One of the key informants (an educator) expressed that she hopes that personal growth and empowerment had taken place for students in their years of study.

... A study was not done. It's complicated. You have to see before/after. Hopefully it broadened their world view – [it was] supposed to improve their skills. I always say you must teach everywhere. Teach in your home, your work, your children and places where you teach patients. It empowers the person– [but it was] never measured. Hopefully they understand that. That empowers the person giving health information. There were trial studies to determine the performance but the responses were not good (KIF3 CES, P10).

Inherent motivation also served the purpose of making students want to continue their studies (as expressed by two students who discontinued their studies (Northern Campus).

... I already have my diploma and I need to upgrade although I do not get more money. I grow in the profession and become empowered which will help the Nursing Profession (DS1-N,P17).

... I discontinued as I want to further my studies [in the field of Y] (DS2-N, P18).

Not all students who discontinued their studies did so because of academic or social difficulties, poor results or lack of support. Instead, one student noted her dissatisfaction that the degree itself would not make any material difference to her conditions of work and salary; showing significant ambition, she had therefore decided to study Medicine through the University of China.

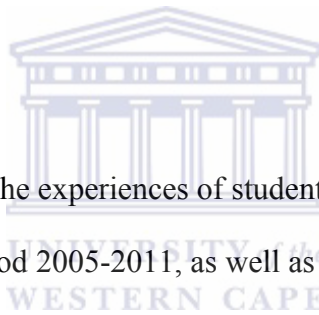
... no I want to study Medicine so I want to save some money as I want to study at the University of China. So I did not leave because of failure. I thought maybe it's a waste of time if I continue something that is not giving me anything extra in the pocket. In nursing if you complete your degree you don't get extra money. So therefore I decide to further my studies in Medicine (DS3-N, P19).

It appears, that academic failure was not always the reason for termination of studies but rather, it was a choice on the part of some participants to end their study programme so as to improve their future outlook. Inherent motivation enabled some of these participants to make better choices for themselves or their families even if it meant delay or taking longer to realise their goals. In Chapter 5 these Findings are discussed.

CHAPTER 5 - DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

This study is the first to be undertaken with a group of registered nurses doing the Postgraduate Bachelor of Nursing Science degree in the distance mode at the Centre for External Studies, University of Namibia. In preparation for this study, an analysis of the progression of the above-mentioned nursing students was undertaken, as well as the attrition rate between the year periods 2005-2009. This confirmed that the graduation rate from this programme has been relatively low and completion has been slow as can be seen in Tables 1 and 2 in Chapter 1.

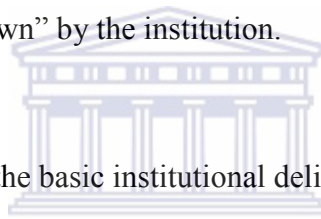


The findings of this study reflect the experiences of students of support received during the course of their study over the period 2005-2011, as well as their understandings of support. Some differences are apparent between experiences of students from Central and Northern Campuses. In addition, the study includes the experiences of support of six students who have discontinued their studies (three from Central Campus and three from Northern Campus). The findings that emerged from this exploration reflected many institutional weaknesses in programme delivery, and institutional support, as well as the challenges of being mature part-time distance students, but also highlighted students' positive experiences of social and institutional support.

5.2 Understandings of What Was Meant by *Support*

It was evident at an early stage of data collection that the students did not really respond well

to the open-ended question on what their experiences were of *support* at the University. The researcher had to re-phrase and ask what the good experiences were and what the negative experiences were before they answered in a more spontaneous manner. In other words, they did not separate the concept *support* from their experience of studying. They seemed to have wanted to talk more on the challenges than of the positive support experiences. The information gained from the FGDs and interviews is not exhaustive of even the sample's experiences due to time constraints of the sessions. Furthermore the students who terminated their studies were not so receptive especially on the Northern Campus and the interviews did not always flow spontaneously. The researcher could sense the despondency around a few of the students and even though they did not verbalise their feelings as much, they had that expression of having been "let down" by the institution.



Students perceived support to be the basic institutional delivery of the course rather than supplementary support services which should enable more effective study. Their focus was dominated by delivery of the programme timeously as an essential means of support. The mission statement of the CES is to make quality higher education accessible to adult members of the community by providing open learning opportunities through distance and continuing education programmes (University of Namibia, 1995). It is within this framework that the discussions are centred and comparisons made regarding their experiences of the support received from CES and other important support structures, their needs regarding support services and their challenges during their course of study.

5.3 Social Support from Home Context

Social support was found to be an important support base for many students especially for those on the Northern Campus. Many of them valued the support they received from their

husbands, children and peers since it helped them to persevere in their studies when they felt like “giving up”. They expressed value in getting contact numbers of their peers which unfortunately were only circulated very late in the year at the Skills Workshop.

In addition, lack of social support was also experienced as a barrier to learning by some participants. Some students admitted that having young children limited their movements to the library and were often the reason for not having enough time to spend on their assignments or studies. One of the students that terminated her studies said household responsibilities and child minding, i.e. the juggling of roles, became too challenging and she was unable to cope with the demands of her studies, which is an issue evident in the literature (Watts & Waraker, 2008; Thompson, 1997). Students in the programme may not have been sufficiently guided not to take on too many responsibilities when they are in full-time employment. Support arrangements with family members or friends regarding child-minding and other responsibilities are vital prior deciding to study in the distance mode. Effective time management seems also to have been lacking amongst these students but with an unstable calendar and changing institutional deadlines, this would have been difficult to manage. Students needed to be made conscious by the institution that planning of their time and “giving certain responsibilities away” is essential in order to give the quality time to their assignments or studies as needed.

Cross (1981) refers to the effect of lack of time, home responsibilities, problems with child minding which impede the learning process and discourage students from pursuing their studies as “situational barriers”. Lecturer support or lack thereof was experienced as personal support which was needed but not met for many of the students on the Oshakati Campus.

Le Riche and Jacklin (2009) highlight the significance of social contexts and social support, especially that which comes from family and other students. Mowes (2005) also suggests that understanding student support requires an exploration of the cultures and contexts within which the support operates. Tait (2000) further underpins the importance of the living conditions wherein the student finds him/herself and states that it is important to take the needs of the learner into account who stays in overcrowded or undesirable conditions, and not just assume that learners have space and quietness where they can pursue their studies (Mkubusa, 2009).

5.4 Social Support from the Workplace

Very often students had practical requirements which needed to be completed under supervision of senior colleagues and they expressed a need for understanding and for accommodating these needs (Watts & Waraker, 2008). Students often have to work various shifts especially night duty and workplace supervisors were accommodating in this respect. Here again employer support forms part of the supportive environment to which Tait (2000) refers. Where employers were supportive and were able to grant study leave, students were able to attend the various support programmes. A few students from the Northern Campus expressed the need for more study leave from their employers: many of them were not able to attend the various support programmes, e.g. video conferences or vacation schools as they did not have many “leave days”. Study leave in many cases was a privilege granted to them on merit and long in advance and this privilege was often forfeited in the event of failing a module which impeded in their learning process. The negative experience of failing was therefore compounded by having support withdrawn. These experiences also imply the need for a stable institutional calendar of events circulated far in advance.

Fewer students on the Central Campus seemed to experience this problem of attending the vacation schools and skills workshop as they could free themselves more easily to attend these sessions and get back to work should study leave not be granted. There were those however who experienced positive support from their employers who arranged shifts that suited their programmes and this was surprisingly particularly expressed by students on Northern and Central campuses who terminated their students. A need was expressed for financial support or bursaries from employers, e.g. to cover the costs of their books and study material as financial challenges were often the reason given why they could not pursue their studies.

Students in general expressed a need to be rewarded by their workplace since this degree did not guarantee them any automatic promotion or salary increase. On completion of a degree however, documentation can be submitted to the Nursing Council and an incentive payment from the Ministry of Health awarded. Many times however, documents are not completed or outstanding practical requirements have not been met, which delayed the remuneration process. Financial challenges are very real for these students but then again it is their responsibility to plan for the necessary funds prior commencing their studies or while they study. There is no policy in the Ministry of Health to assist students financially when they commence post-graduate or post- basic studies. Students can however apply for bursaries like any other student or make arrangements with family prior to commencement of the study year. The University of Namibia and the CES have faculty officers in place that will advise students on how many subjects to take and will be able to give the student the correct information regarding study fees and methods of payment.

5.5 Academic Support from the Institution or Lecturer

A need for academic guidance and academic support has been viewed as essential by both students and educators. Many studies on distance education and student support indicate that students want lecturer contact irrespective of new technologies because they are familiar with it (Thompson, 1997). Many participant students expressed a need for lecturers to guide them more with the feedback of assignments, or with more tutorial letters (Thompson, 1997; Mowes, 2005).

Siabi-Mensah and Torto (2009) note in their studies done with part-time students at the University of Ghana that an area of concern was the lack of effective study skills which students displayed. They felt that this could be the reason why some students are unable to express their thoughts on paper and lack the requisite reading skills that would enable them to read large volumes of material. The educators at the Centre for External Studies were in agreement that some students had a problem with academic writing and did not read enough, and did not have the necessary skills to analyse and think critically. Their view was that the course should offer more training in academic writing. Students admitted that with little reading they were not able to answer assignments or examination questions effectively; however some students mentioned that the lecturers assisted them to improve in this skill.

Mentorship for the students was identified as a useful support mechanism or strategy especially for those staying in rural areas where the feeling of isolation from the main campus is intensified. Mentorship has been accepted by many distance education centres as a vital support to sustain students during their course of study (Tait, 2000). The University of Namibia is presently addressing the implementation of a mentorship programme for the residential students which hopefully will spill over to the Centre for External Studies. Within

this programme, the full-time nursing lecturer who made herself available to assist the students on the Northern Campus provided an example of such mentorship services, but she has since discontinued her services as her post was never formalised in writing; because of poor communication, few students seemed to have made use of her services over the last two years.

This lack of lecturer support was noted when students tried to contact the lecturers but were not always successful; it was also established that lecturers had the responsibility of teaching to full-time students as well, and were therefore seldom found in their offices. This created a sense of isolation amongst the students as they felt that the contact from the lecturer which they needed so much was not available. These feelings of isolation were not verbalised as loudly by the students on the Central Campus which could have been due to the fact that they were more within reach of the campus. This kind of situation where the lecturer is not always available could be addressed by students leaving sms messages for their lecturer and arranging a time to discuss certain issues, but this would need to be built into the system because of the costs of returning calls. The participants did not verbalise that they left messages asking the lecturer to call back, so perhaps a better system of communication between the lecturer and the student should be sought. The separation in time and place of distance learners and lecturers is a well-known problem that needs to be overcome by specifying periods to students when after hours calls to lecturers are acceptable.

Lecturer support was viewed differently by Northern and Central Campus students. Students from the Northern Campus experienced feelings of isolation often because of lecturer unavailability when they had tried to make contact. Very often lecturers would give their contact numbers and even promise additional lecture notes to be sent to the Northern Campus; but notes did not arrive on many occasions and no alternative arrangements were

made to address these students' problems. Students on the Central Campus expressed fewer problems with the availability of lecturers probably because they were nearer to the Campus and when the lecturer was not available, they seemed to have been more successful in making another appointment to address their concerns.

Many published studies stress the importance of availability of lecturers for distance education students to promote interaction and lessen the feelings of isolation (Tait, 2000; Sewart, 1992). The mission and vision of the CES is to make quality higher education accessible to adult members of the community and to provide open learning opportunities and continuing distance education programmes. If CES is to adhere to its mission, then this Unit would need systems to relay student requests to the lecturers concerned when lecturers are unavailable.



5.6 Institutional Functionality as the Backbone of Student Academic Support

A dominant theme which recurred was the need for timeous despatch of study material: this was expressed by all the students from both campuses. This was not intended to be an issue for discussion nor was it asked during the interviews, but arose spontaneously out of focus groups when referring to their negative experiences of support. This “basic necessity” seems to be a common problem at Distance Learning Centres (Mowes, 2005; Ngoma, 2004; Mbukusa, 2009). Findings on a study done at the University of Ghana revealed that 81.5% of students doing the distance education programme complained of study material not being available (Siabi-Mensha & Torto, 2009). Mbukusa (2009) describes in the findings of his study at the University of Namibia, that the general complaints of students at the Northern campus were that of unavailability of study material, which affected the students negatively. This is something which could be rectified by the CES: lecturers could be given due dates to

submit all their tutorials and study material for the next year well in advance and this needs to be effectively supervised by the management of the CES. If late dispatch of study material is due to staff shortages then this is also a concern which needs to be addressed by the management of CES urgently so as to prevent late arrival of study materials to students in the following year. The CES management noted that it is due to lack of supervision of all persons involved in Materials Development and the Distribution Centre and is committed to attending to this problem.

5.7 Challenges of Students Who Terminated Their Studies

Park and Choi (2005) re-affirm that adult distance learners may drop out of the course due to increased workload, job change, and several external factors that are likely to interact with each other. The challenges that the students faced, especially those that terminated their studies, were that of subject overload plus a heavy workload which resulted in some of the students exceeding the extended period given to them by the institution. These factors contributed to the high attrition rates and many of the students had to terminate their studies as they had exceeded their required years of study (Ngoma, 2004; Thompson, 1997; Siabi-Mensha & Torto, 2009). Thompson (1997) also concluded in her study done at the Edith Cowan University, that one of the reasons for student drop out was “juggling of roles” experienced by her participants (external students who enrolled in the fourth year of Bachelor of Education course). The above authors reason that when learners have a heavy workload and little time to study, they are more likely to “drop out” of the course; they further suggest that if proper course design and technology are used, some external problems could be mitigated. The CES could ensure that there are faculty officers in place who can advise students of the optimum study load that should be taken to ensure to progress to the next

level. Reasons for terminating studies seemed to vary, but amongst them are financial challenges, social demands, illness and academic difficulties; in relation to the last, late arrival of study material could have had an impact on adequate preparation for assignments and examinations.

5.8 Communication as Institutional Functionality

A good communication system was requested by most participants and also viewed as a vital support service. Students complained that communication was often poor regarding dates for attendances at workshops, vacation schools and video conferences (Thompson, 1997).

Mowes (2005) identified better communication as essential if the University of Namibia wants to be efficient and true to its goals of striving towards excellence in the delivery of distance programmes. Poor communication was apparent in relation to so many events, including study materials, e.g. an instance when a student was told to travel to the Northern Campus to collect materials but they were not available. This suggests that there is also a need for an attitudinal shift in the UNAM/CES delivery staff towards service orientation and towards an increased awareness of the students' circumstances and the sacrifices they are making to study, in order that they strive towards making their services more conducive for student learning.

5.9 Shift to Institutional Functionality

The need for a follow up system for students was also verbalised by one of the educators. This would ensure that student progression or termination is monitored. An early warning system should be put in place for the administrative assistant and the educator to identify students who do not submit an assignment or who may need a second opportunity examination, so that necessary follow-up action can be implemented. The infrastructural problems experienced by the students were the following:

- Lack of Library Resources

Many students experienced the lack of an adequately resourced library. The CES should liaise with the librarians on the two Campuses to ensure that new books/journals etc be ordered and that adequate numbers of reference books should be made available to students

- Non-availability of reference books at the campus bookshop

Liaison of faculty officers with the local bookshops should be improved. Updated booklists are usually requested from educators by faculty officers on an annual basis. Faculty officers then liaise further with the bookshops giving them the total number of books which need to be made available for students.

- Changing of time-tables for Skills Workshop and Vacation Schools

This requires improved co-ordination by the management at CES. Students need to be informed timeously of any change in time-tables so that adequate preparation or arrangements can be made by the students at their workplaces and with their families.

- A need for mentorship for the students

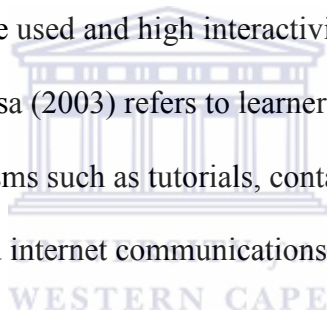
This need was proposed by the educators. CES should make provision and budget effectively so that an effective mentorship programme can be implemented for students on the Northern Campus. A mentorship system has already been considered for the full-time students. The distance learning students on the Northern Campus will benefit considerably from this system which will reduce their anxiety levels and feelings of isolation.

5.10 Positive Institutional Experiences of Students

When asked to discuss a service or a programme, participants tended towards complaint rather than positive feedback. However there were many positive responses to what was

perceived as support amongst students. Access to the internet on campuses, video conferencing and skills workshop were all very positively viewed, as was individual support provided by some lecturers.

The video conferences stand out on Northern Campus as highly valued events. Students experienced them as face to face interaction which was meaningful to them, as uncertainties could be clarified and theory could be reinforced: interestingly the “virtual face to face” seemed to have been the preferred medium of support by many of the participants. Frindt (2005) concludes in her study undertaken at the Centre for External Studies, University of Namibia, that distance education compared well to the conventional face to face mode when suitable methods of instruction are used and high interactivity levels are maintained between the learner and facilitator. Nadeosa (2003) refers to learner support as facilitation through a range of learner support mechanisms such as tutorials, contact sessions, support in the workplace (mentoring), email and internet communications.



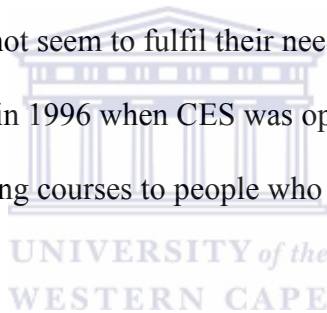
From this one might conclude that student support structures should be responsive to their particular environments and that the needs of students should be known in order to plan them effectively, however the way in which a medium is used can be variable: having the Northern Campus mentor present to mediate the process may have been critical to this experience. On-going evaluation of support services is therefore also essential for the University of Namibia and the Centre for External Studies in order to move towards effective support and to maintain it when circumstances change; however, it is also important to bear in mind that lecturers need to undergo a mind-shift in relation to their roles in becoming distance learning mentors and facilitators of learning for distance learners.

CHAPTER 6 - CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusions

The researcher will use the objectives of this study as a framework for the discussion of recommendations and conclusions.

The programme arrangements and support services on offer were not distinguished by students. Core programme delivery has therefore been discussed as part of support services, although this is not the norm in discussing distance education. In this sense, support services being offered to the students did not seem to fulfil their needs. UNAM's distance programmes came into existence in 1996 when CES was opened in response to UNAM's first five-year development plan offering courses to people who for a number of reasons could not study full-time.

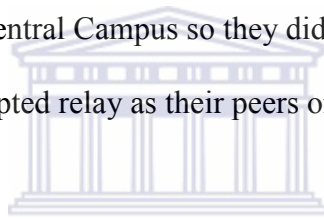


A range of support services were conceptualised and implemented, e.g. library services, internet access, tutor-marking, telephone tutoring, video conferences, and Skills Workshops presented via the vacation schools. Many of these support services seemed not to be accessible for students on the Northern Campus, e.g. internet access or library resources due to the distances that they stayed from Regional Offices or from the Northern Campus.

To some extent, there were different challenges and support needs expressed by students on the different campuses. Of concern was the disadvantage that geographical remoteness brought about for many of the students on the Northern Campus, as well as the strong sense of isolation which arose through failed attempts to contact lecturers. In addition, contact with

lecturers seemed to be strongly felt, particularly amongst those who lived in more remote areas. Video conferencing which was valued was sometimes negatively affected by technical difficulties on the Northern Campus.

In many ways, despite CES's efforts to avoid disadvantaging students furthest from Central Campus, Northern Campus students felt that they experience more disadvantages than Central students in terms of library resources, availability of lecturers for consultation, technical problems on video conferences and the need to travel more than those based in Windhoek. Many of the support structures seemed to have been differently experienced by the students on the Central Campus: the lecturers were more accessible to them; the video conferencing was relayed from Central Campus so they did not experience the same frustrations resulting from interrupted relay as their peers on the Northern Campus.



Students in general seemed to recognise and use some student support services, but the value of this experience could have been eroded by institutional dis-functionalities. In addition, since the students were found not to really understand what they could expect, they do not make substantial demands and did not seem to report problems. They simply wanted the basics of programme delivery to work, but they were also eager to have additional support when they needed it. In summary, their need seemed to be for UNAM to contribute to building an easier learning environment, and to be treated respectfully as service users.

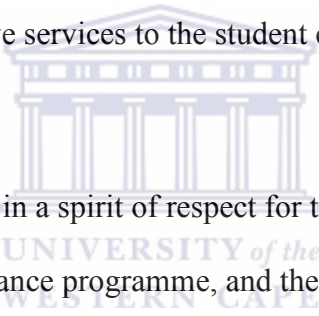
6.2 Recommendations

There is evidence that there are support structures in place but that they are not fully utilized by students due to inaccessibility and lack of information about them. This may result from separation of student and institution in time and place, and sometimes miscommunication

between students and the CES structures. The following recommendations are put forward to promote better use of support services by the student body:

- That the CES should explore better supervision and co-ordination in the preparation and delivery of study material.
- That an assessment be done in the North to determine the accessibility of electronic media for regular communication and the delivery of materials to students' places of work.
- That the CES seeks to improve communication with the campus bookshops to ensure the availability of prescribed books.
- That the libraries on both campuses be adequately resourced to meet the needs of the students which implies regular liaison with the chief librarian and the faculty officer of CES.
- That a schedule of assignment deadlines, workshops, video conferences and examinations be planned and issued before the programme starts and not changed if at all possible.
- That the CES and its educators devise an improved method and schedule for supportive consultation with students, and inform students of their availability times with their necessary contact numbers, well in advance of the programme starting.
- That an early warning information system be developed so that lecturers or mentors are aware when a student fails an assignment or does not submit one.
- That data related to cohort throughput would be an important monitoring tool for the CES.

- That the video conferencing on the Northern Campus be supervised effectively by the administrative management of the Northern Campus so that a technical person is available during video conferencing.
- That administrative and lecturing staff are provided refresher training on distance education from time to time, so that they remember the challenges of their students who work and study and travel long distances to fetch materials, etc.
- That a mentor system is investigated for distance students, particularly those who experience distance as a problem.
- That the CES continue with ongoing evaluation of student support services in order to render optimal and effective services to the student community.



These recommendations are made in a spirit of respect for the challenges involved in delivering and supporting any distance programme, and the achievements of the staff of the CES both in developing and delivering programmes for 16 years and their ongoing engagement in evaluating and improving their own services.

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ANNEXURES

ANNEXURE 1 - CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK OF THE BACHELOR OF NURSING SCIENCE (ADVANCED PRACTICE) 70 BNSC

MODULE	NQF LEVEL	CREDITS	PRE- OR CO-REQUISITE & CODE	PRE- OR CO-REQUISITE MODULE
YEAR 1				
English Communication & Study Skills	4	16	ULEG 2410	English for General purposes
Foundations of Sociology	5	16		
Introduction to Psychology	5	16		
Government Studies	5			
SEMESTER TWO				
English for Academic Purposes	4	16		
Social Problems	5	16		
Social Psychology	5	16		
Principles of Management	5	16		
SEMESTER ONE AND TWO				
Nursing Education 1 or Health Service Management 1	6	24		
YEAR 2 - SEMESTER ONE				
Public Policy	7	16		
SEMESTER TWO				
Orpiment	6	16		
Applied Psychology	7	16		
SEMESTER ONE & TWO				
Nursing Ethos and Prof Practice	7	24		

Scientific Foundations of Nursing	7	24		
Community Health Nursing III	7	24		
Nursing Education II or Health Service Management II	7	24		
YEAR 3 – SEMESTER ONE				
SEMESTER ONE				
Psychology of Work and Labor	717			
SEMESTER ONE & TWO				
Sociology of Health	8	16		All first and second year sociology modules
Community Health Nursing III	8	32		
Nursing Education III or Health Service Management III	8	32		
Research Methodology in Health Sciences	8	32		
Research Project	8	8		Research Methodology in Health Sciences



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ANNEXURE 2 - PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

PARTICIPANT FORM AND INFORMATION SHEET

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research. Below is an explanation of the research process and the role that you are asked to play as a potential participant. This research is being conducted by myself for a mini-thesis which is part of the requirements for completion of a Masters in Public Health. If you have any questions please ask me. My contact details and those of my supervisor are listed below.

Project Title: EXPERIENCES OF STUDENT SUPPORT IN THE DISTANCE MODE BACHELOR OF NURSING SCIENCE DEGREE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NAMIBIA, 2005-2011:

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study is to learn more about the perceptions and experiences of the students regarding student support and those recommendations could be made to UNAM on specific support that advanced nursing science students need.

Description of the study: You will be asked to participate in a focus group discussion with several other students on your campus. This will take place at a venue on campus. The discussion should take about an hour and a half of your time. The discussion will be informal and will be guided by myself.

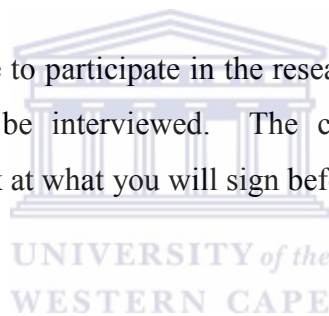
Anonymity: We will keep your personal information anonymous. To help protect your anonymity, you will be asked to sign a consent form if you agree to participate in the

research. Your name will not be used but a code or number will be assigned instead. I will keep your identity confidential at all times and destroy it once the research is complete.

Voluntary participation and withdrawal: You will be under no obligation to participate unless you are willing to do so. You will also be able to withdraw from the research process at any stage should you wish. You do not have to answer any question that you do not want to. If there is any question would rather not discuss, please say so.

Benefits and cost of research: There will be no direct benefit of this research to you and no cost as well. This research is not designed to help you personally, but the results may help the researcher learn more about your needs and wants regarding student support. We hope that, in the future, other students might benefit from this study through improved understanding of this issue and consequent improvements.

Informed consent: If you decide to participate in the research you will be required to sign a consent form before you will be interviewed. The consent form is attached to this information sheet so you can look at what you will sign before you decide to participate.



Questions

If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact

Mrs Denise Du Plessis

Student number: 264-2623

Cell: 00264813989928

Tel: 00264 61-269245

Email: denisedup@vgkwindhoek.com.na

My supervisor is Ms Lucy Alexander and her contact details are:

School of Public Health

University of the Western Cape

Private Bag X 17

Bellville 7535 Tel: (mobile) +27 2183 564 4519 (h) +2721-683-5265

Email: lalexander@uwc.ac.za



ANNEXURE 3 - INFORMED CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE
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• South Africa
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INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Title of Research: EXPERIENCES OF STUDENT SUPPORT IN THE DISTANCE MODE
BACHELOR OF NURSING SCIENCE DEGREE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NAMIBIA,
2005-2011: A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

As was mentioned in the Participant Information sheet, your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may stop at any time. You may choose not to answer particular questions that are asked in the study. If there is anything that you would prefer not to discuss please feel free to say so. The information collected in this study will be kept strictly confidential.

If you choose to participate in this research study your signed consent is required before I can proceed with the interview or focus group discussion with you

.....
I have read the information about this study on the participant information sheet. I have had the opportunity of ask questions about it and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this research and understand that I have the right to end the interview at any time, and to choose not to answer particular questions that are asked in the research.

My signature indicates that I am willing to participate in this research.

Participant's Name:

Participant's signature

Date:

Researcher Conducting Informed Consent:

Date:

Signature of researcher:



ANNEXURE 4 - STUDENT FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

<p>Question 1</p>	<p>Tell me about your experiences of studying the Bachelor of Nursing Science through the Oshakati [or Windhoek] Campus?</p> <p>(probe for specifics)</p> <p>Tell me about your feelings during these experiences?</p> <p>Did you experience any particular problems in your studies?</p> <p>What or who helped you in your studies?</p> <p>What sort of help did you need which you DID get? Did this change over time?</p> <p>What did you need that you did NOT get?</p>
<p>Question 2</p>	<p>Can you tell me about any support you received in the course of your studies at the centre?</p> <p>(probe for specifics)</p> <p>Did you attend all opportunities? Why not? What were they like?</p> <p>Can you say a little about the videoconferences?</p> <p>Can you talk a little about the support received for assignments?</p> <p>Could you ask for help when you needed it?</p>
<p>Question 3</p>	<p>Is there anything that you believe should change to improve student support arrangements?</p> <p>Other comments and suggestions</p>

ANNEXURE 5A - KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR ACADEMIC STAFF

Question 1	Tell me about your experiences or understanding of student support which you have given as a lecturer
Question 2	Do you regard the provision of student support services at CES as adequate Prompts: Are there any needs that you feel are not being met?
Question 3	What strategies do you use to assist the students
Question 4	Do you keep documentation when supporting a student in any way and do you follow up on a student's situation?
Question 5	What are the (common) issues that student normally needs assistance with? Prompts: What do you think the CES department should put in place for supporting students?

**ANNEXURE 5B - KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW GUIDE: FOR SUPPORT STAFF
AT DISPATCH CENTRE**

Question 1	Tell me about your experiences when issuing study materials to students?
Question 2	(probe for specifics)
Question 3	What suggestions do you have to improve this student support service? If adequate Motivate your reasons. If not adequate – give your reasons





ANNEXURE 6 - FOCUS GROUP CONFIDENTIALITY BINDING FORM

UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE

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Project Title: Experiences of Student Support in the Distance Mode Bachelor of Nursing Science Degree at the University of Namibia, 2005 – 2011.

This study has been described to me in a language that I understand and I freely and voluntarily agree to participate. My questions about the study have been answered. I understand that my identity will not be disclosed and that I may withdraw from the study without giving a reason at any time and this will not negatively affect me in any way. I agree to be audio-taped during my participation in the study. I also agree not to disclose any information that was discussed during the group discussion.

- **Participant's name:**

.....

- **Participant's signature:**

.....

- **Witness's name:**

.....

- **Witness's signature:**

.....

- **Date:**

Should you have any questions regarding this study or wish to report any problems you have experienced related to the study, please contact the researcher:

Researcher: Carol-Denise Du Plessis

P.O. Box 331 Windhoek

Namibia, 9000.

Telephone: (061) 269-245

Cell: 00264- 813989928

Email: denisedup@vgkwindhoek.com.na



**ANNEXURE 7 - LETTER OF PERMISSION FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF
NAMIBIA**

UNIVERSITY OF NAMIBIA

Private Bag 13301, 340 Mandume Ndemufayo Avenue, Pionierspark, Windhoek, Namibia



Dr R.M. Shikongo
Director: Centre for External Studies
University of Namibia

Dear Dr Shikongo,

Herewith information regarding my thesis and findings and requesting information to use the name of the University of Namibia in my thesis

I am presently studying at the University of Western Cape and am doing my Masters in Public Health and am at the end stages of my thesis. My topic is:

Experiences of student support in the Distance Mode, Bachelor of Nursing Science Degree at the University of Namibia, 2005-2011.

There were many positive and negative comments regarding their experiences of the support structures at CES. The purpose of this study is to share my results and recommendations of my findings with the Centre of External Studies so as to improve the learning experiences of students on distance education. My supervisor (Mrs Lucy Alexander) requested me to ask for a letter of permission from the Director of CES which will allow me to use the name of the University of Namibia/Centre for External Studies in my study.

I am very grateful to the Centre for External Study for allowing me to do this research as it was a very meaningful and enriching experience interviewing students and key informants at Central and Northern Campus and listening to their interesting stories.

I trust that my request will be favourably considered.

Yours sincerely

Denise Du Plessis

Approved Director CES

Shikongo
2/11/2012



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