Chapter 1: Background and research problem

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1.1. Introduction

Jessica Knight (Woolworths inthebag) stated that:

> *The real challenge for successful new-economy strategies is to harness the power of technology in a way that meets the customers' needs and overcomes real-world constraints, such as physical fulfilment, whilst still driving long-term value* (Loewen, 2001:I).

The context of this study is set within the words of Jessica Knight. Within this new-economy eLearning, as a technological solution, also has to find a way in which to meet the customer's needs and to overcome real-world constraints like bandwidth, whilst still contributing evidently to business value.

The context of the study is further defined within Absa. Absa is a financial institution tasked with providing banking services to the South African population. Absa consists of 44 Business Units that each have a specific focus and objective towards servicing Absa's clients.

Absa as a business is faced with challenges that could include technological advancement, varying customer needs or creating shareholder value in changing market conditions. Absa Business Units act upon these challenges in different ways, for example:

- Redesigning the business unit strategy;
- Implementing tactical strategies to meet customer demands;
- Changing policies and procedures;
- Re-engineering operational inefficiencies;
- Implementing cultures that will sustain the company in the future; and/or
- Implementing learning solutions that will sustain the skills development necessary for the future (Absa Task Team, 2002).

The Absa Learning and Development Department focuses on delivering learning solutions to Business Units within the Absa environment. One of the delivery mechanisms implemented by them is eLearning. This Department is however, constantly faced with feedback from the Business Units that their needs are not met and questioned as to what value an eLearning solution has.

The question being asked by Business Units is:

How does eLearning improve business performance?

In order to explore this question, the meaning of value needs to be considered. "Depending on the purpose of the valuation, or the context within the valuation, one definition [meaning] of valuation may be more appropriate than another." (Burkert, 2004). Therefore, in considering the value of an eLearning solution, there seems to be not only one answer, but a collection of conversations and debates around the purpose and context of value.

In this chapter the research study is outlined by providing a context for the research problem and explaining the reasons for adopting Systems Thinking as an approach in identifying the **leverage point**[1]. The purpose and objectives of the study are stated, and the research process that was applied to generate and collect data for answering the research questions, is outlined. The research philosophy, approach and strategy, and the subjects from whom information was elicited, are described. The criteria for judging the quality of the research are listed and the potential value of the study is defined.

The rationale for the study provides the context for the research problem. The research problem is grounded within the literature.

1.2. The rationale for the study

A number of studies indicate that eLearning is implemented to improve business performance (Pope, 2001; McGuire & Goldwasser, 2001; Arnold 2001; Sanders, 2001). However, these studies also indicate there are various expensive lessons to be learnt. These lessons span over various disciplines and examples are listed below.

- Bad design of content.
- Lack of skills of the target population.
- Lack of technology availability and stability.
- No **clear line of sight between learning results and business results** (Pope, 2001; McGuire & Goldwasser, 2001; Arnold 2001; Sanders, 2001).

From a Business[2] point of view, the inability to interpret learning results, in relation to company performance, is problematic.

Systems Thinking is introduced to this study to provide an **alternative perspective** for understanding and learning about the underlying structures of the research problem rather than addressing the effects of the problem. The

[1] A leverage point (or points) presents a place to pursue business goals in a way that takes advantage of, instead of working against, the systemic structures that support them (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross & Smith, 1994).

[2] In this study the word **'Business'** refers to the eChannels: Contact Centre Division. It implies that the following stakeholders are part of the grouping – operational management responsible for business results, team leaders, and the employees (also referred to as learners). A detailed description of this sample is available in Chapter 3.

process ultimately leads to the identification of a leverage point. The **leverage point** will allow Business and the Learning and Development Department to focus their efforts in utilising eLearning to improve business performance.

1.2.1. The position of the study

The introduction of Systems Thinking brings a certain worldview to the study. The Systems Thinking lens shows the world and humans as **living organisms part of a systemic whole** (Wheatley, 2001). Within the systemic whole, people are social actors that respond humanly to different situations. The systemic whole consists of multiple realities and versions of the truth. Different people see different aspects of the same phenomenon.

The **assumptions and beliefs of people** about a specific phenomenon – in this case eLearning contributing to business performance – are at the heart of the study. In the phenomenological[3] approach these assumptions and beliefs are seen as part of the creation of meaning in a specific context of the bigger world.

From an **ontological[4]** perspective the research is about people and how they perceive a specific phenomenon from their worldview. From an **epistemological[5]** perspective, the sources representing legitimate knowledge are seen as workable conversations between people voicing their assumptions and beliefs, the non-verbal interactions between the people and the written feedback provided by the

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[3] "Phenomenology, a 20th-century philosophical movement, is dedicated to describing the structures of experience as they present themselves to consciousness, without recourse to theory, deduction, or assumptions from other disciplines such as the natural sciences." (Phenomenology Homepage, 2004).

[4] The **ontological perspective** describes **what** the research is about in a fundamental way. It requires the researcher to position herself and to understand how **her worldview influences the research carried out** (Mason, 2002).

[5] According to Mason (2002:16) the **epistemological perspective** debate is about what might "… represent knowledge or evidence of the entities or social 'reality' that I … investigate".

participants about the deeper structure of the phenomenon. Another source of knowledge is feedback from the participants about their experience during the research process.

The position of the researcher had a significant influence on positioning the study.

1.2.2. The researcher's position in the study

The researcher is a Project Manager for the Absa People Management Division. The People Management Division is based in South Africa. The key focus as a Project Manager is to provide integrated, cost-effective people management solutions to Business Units. This includes all disciplines of the people management field, for example: learning and development, organisational development, talent management and industrial relations.

The researcher is **biased** towards believing that eLearning does add value to business performance. Furthermore she has strong opinions about how Absa should go about linking eLearning and business performance.

The researcher **deferred bias** through the actions listed below.

- Focus groups were allowed to gather and generate data and do the data analysis.
- A moderator was appointed to independently guide the data generation and analysis workshops.
- Observers were appointed to comment on the process followed throughout the study, to reflect on the behaviour of the focus group participants and to ensure that the researcher did not unduly influence the process and outcome of the study.
- Colleagues and verifiers were allowed to comment on the outcome of the study.

1.3. The research problem

The visionaries of eLearning see the **utopia of eLearning** … (Pope, 2001).

Technologies are moving towards an integrated platform, quality content is delivered seamlessly, is effectively implemented and tracked effortlessly. This results in organisations becoming learning enablers (Pope, 2001).

The described world of eLearning seems to provide an answer in terms of business performance required by eLearning. The debate however becomes heated when the contribution of eLearning to business performance has to be proved.

The **practical problem** that this study addresses is the misalignment between the views of the Learning and Development Department and Business regarding the contribution or value-add of eLearning to business performance. While the Learning and Development Department believes that they are following world-class processes, they are constantly requested to justify how eLearning adds value to the business results.

The **core problem of the study** is to determine how eLearning can contribute to the improvement of business performance. This debate seems to be an industry issue where eLearning specialists are on a constant quest to provide evidence that they are adding value to business performance (ASTD, 2004; Phillips, 2004; Corporate Leadership Council, 2001c; Corporate Leadership Council, 2000; PrimeLearning, Inc., 2001). The study will therefore focus on the **creation of knowledge about how the contribution of eLearning to business performance can be improved.**

In the process of knowledge creation, the study will focus on identifying the point of value creation between Business and an eLearning intervention. This **point of value creation** represents a shared space that is created between the learners, their management and the Learning and Development Department so that these role-players can agree in advance on where and how an eLearning intervention must make a difference. They must therefore have a common understanding of exactly where the point of value creation is.

In this study, it is proposed that this **point of value creation** can be seen as a **leverage** point. Systems Thinking is suggested as a process to attempt to delve deeper into the structure of the problem in order to uncover alternative structures, events, trends and patterns resulting in a focus or leverage point (Strumpher, 2001; Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross & Smith, 2001).

Due to this debate – the contribution of eLearning to business performance – Business Units design and develop their own traditional training. This is specifically true in the case of the eChannels: Contact Centre division. This has a **negative impact** on Absa as a whole as it results in:

- duplication of resources developing learning material;
- duplication in the costs arising from the design, development and implementation of the learning material;
- the negation of the image and credibility of the Learning and Development Department;
- expensive, unutilised eLearning infrastructure; and
- a negative impact on business performance as it takes longer to train the relevant frontline staff as this Division does not have the relevant infrastructure to train employees at the same rate that Absa is launching new products to prospective clients. The clients are then in some cases more informed than staff members.
- In some cases **no training** happens due to time constraints which can lead to sub-standard services provided to Absa clients.

The research problem sets the scene for the purpose and the objectives of the study.

1.4. The purpose and objectives of the study

The **purpose** of this research project is to identify leverage point/s that will improve business performance through eLearning.

Given the purpose, the **objectives**[6] are to:

- identify the **driver problem**[7] that prevents eLearning from improving business performance.
- design a **systems dynamic model** that represents the driver problem.
- identify the **leverage point** within the systems dynamic model.
- reflect[8] on the **effect** that the **behaviour** of the individuals, participating in the research process, has on the research inquiry.

The research objectives were designed to generate and collect data to answer the research question.

1.5. The research question

Based on the purpose of the research and the research objectives, the main research question can be phrased as:

What is the leverage point that will improve business performance through eLearning?

The research question and Systems Thinking create the context for the following subsidiary questions to be answered in the study:

- What are the **problems** related to improving business performance through eLearning?
- What is the **key driver/s** of the identified problems?
- What is the **system in focus**?
- Who are the **main stakeholders** influencing the system in focus?
- How can the system in focus be presented **systemically**?
- What is the **leverage point** related to the system in focus?

[6] The colour coding of the research objectives are used throughout the study to indicate the content belonging to a specific research objective.

[7] The driver problem is the leverage point in a system of problems. It is therefore the problem that influences the system in focus the most.

[8] Reflection includes the observation of the behaviour of the focus group participants and the attempt to understand the effect of these behaviours on the outcome of the study.

- How does the **behaviour** of the individuals participating in the research process influence the research inquiry?

Table 1.1 summarises the research question, research objectives and the subsidiary questions. The subsidiary questions are also described in more detail.

Table 1.1: The research question, research objectives and subsidiary questions

Research question	Research Objectives	Subsidiary questions
What is the leverage point that will improve business performance through eLearning?	1. To identify the driver problem that prevents eLearning from improving business performance.	What are the problems related to improving business performance through eLearning? How can the problems be grouped together as themes? How do each of the themes influence each other? What is the driver problem?
	2. To design the systems dynamic model that represents the driver problem.	What is the system in focus? Who are the stakeholders in the system in focus? How can the influence of the stakeholders be described in terms of power and satisfaction? What are the measures of performance? What are the co-producers for each of the measures of performance? How can the elements of the system in focus systemically be represented?
	3. To identify the leverage point within the systems dynamic model.	Which of the co-producers influence the systems dynamic model the most?
	4. To reflect on the effect that the behaviour of the individuals, participating in the research process, has on the research inquiry.	How does the behaviour of the individuals participating in the research process influence the research inquiry? What effect does the process have on the individuals participating in the research inquiry?

The **research process** is defined through the research philosophy, approach, strategy, time horizon and data collection methods. In this study the research philosophy was categorised as **phenomenological** and framed within the Systems Thinking context. The research approach was seen as both

abductive[9] and **inductive**[10], allowing for repeats of data generation and sense making.

The **qualitative case study** was employed as the research design providing rich and thick data about the specific phenomena. The implementation of the research design was conducted over a **short period of time** (June – July 2003), allowing only a snapshot into the thoughts of people with regards to eLearning and business performance. The time horizon of the study is therefore **cross sectional**. Four data collection methods were used namely interviews, focus groups, observation and a survey.

The research process was influenced by the scope of the study.

1.6. The scope of the study

The study was conducted in South Africa in the Gauteng province. The content of the eLearning project was contained within the financial sector, specifically Absa Bank. Two specific Business Units within Absa Bank were involved:

1. eChannels: Contact Centre Division; and the
2. Group People Management: Learning and Development Department.

The influence of the external environment on the Absa system[11] was briefly taken into account in terms of the international trends and how the Absa system reacts upon these trends.

Figure 1.1 is a diagrammatic representation of the systemic influence in the scope of the study. The figure presents the external world having an interaction with Absa as a company. The external pressure results in the Business Units reacting in different ways such as a change in the strategy of

[9] Blaikie (2000:25) describes the "**abductive research strategy**" as the process of moving between everyday concepts and meanings, lay accounts and social science explanations.
10 Saunders et al. (2000:91) states that the inductive approach emphasises gaining access to understanding of meaning humans attach to events, a close understanding of the research context, the collection of qualitative data and less concern with the need to generalise.
[11] The 'system' referrers to all the Business Units in Absa.

the Business or the launch of a new product. Another reaction could be a **request for learning**.

Pressure on cost has also leaded the Learning and Development Department to implement new cost-effective ways to deliver learning solutions. Due to the cost efficiency and availability of the Absa eLearning infrastructure, an eLearning solution is designed. At the point of value creation where the eLearning solution is implemented in the Business environment, **the practical problem originates**. In order to eliminate the misalignment between the Business Unit and the Learning and Development Department, it is proposed that a leverage point is determined by both parties that will ensure that eLearning will contribute to the improvement of business performance.

Figure 1.1: Diagrammatic representation of the systemic aspects in the study

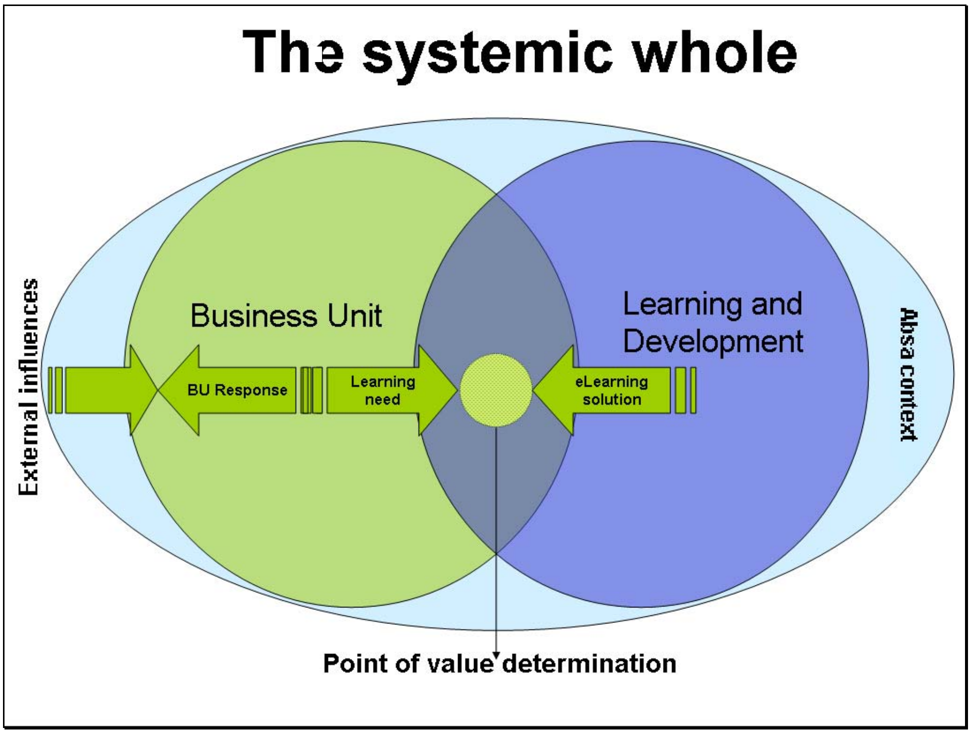


Figure 1.1 further illustrates that certain aspects are excluded from the study as well as that there are clear boundaries and limitations to the study. The boundaries of the study are discussed below.

1.6.1. What is excluded from the study?

Although the outcome of the study will have practical implications for all the role-players involved, the **actual implementation of the results is excluded** from this report. The boundary for this study is the identification of a leverage point. The implementation of solutions is therefore beyond the scope of this study. Further to this, the study will not be generalised to include other financial institutions. The intent of this study is to define rich and thick data in the context of a real-life case study. The generalisation of the outcome of the study is therefore not a major focus.

Executive Management displays a positive attitude towards eLearning. **Operational Management** however displays open animosity towards eLearning as a learning solution. A decision was made to exclude the Executive Management based on their positive attitude as well as the influence that they would have on the results produced by the focus group participants. All effort was made to include the opposing views of the Operational Managers. The Executive Management was however included in the verification sessions[12], as this allowed them to give maximum input in a limited time frame.

1.6.2. What are the limitations to the study?

The availability of resources to participate in the study was limited. The study was contained within the Absa environment. Two specific Business Units were selected to participate – the Learning and Development Department and the eChannels: Contact Centre. These Business Units were selected due to their active implementation of eLearning. Some of the other Business Units in Absa are still in the process of rolling out eLearning as a learning delivery solution.

The resources available for the study were limited to the employees from the above mentioned departments who were exposed to specific eLearning interventions and who accepted the invitation to participate in the study. The exclusion of Executive Management from the focus

[12] All the data that was generated and analysed by the focus group participants was verified by three members at an executive management level.

groups, also limits the study to the opinions and thoughts of the Operational Managers, their colleagues, the employees (learners) and the members of the design and support teams.

Although Absa offers a wide range of learning delivery mechanisms, this study was limited to exploring eLearning as a delivery mechanism. This was done in order to understand the effect of eLearning as a separate entity on business performance.

In terms of literature, the National Qualifications Framework and the South African Qualification Authority's models and theories are seen as outside the scope of the study, as the relevance of these models and theories are of limited importance within the boundaries of the study.

Based on the research purpose, objectives and scope of the study, a research design emerged to collect evidence for each of the subsidiary research questions.

1.7. The research design

The research design for this study was formulated according to the perspectives listed below.

- Research strategy.
- Data collection methods.
- Data collection instruments or processes.
- Data sources.
- Timing in terms of when the instrument is administered.
- Qualitative vs. quantitative nature of the data.
- Trustworthiness and continuity of the data (Mason, 2002; Saunders *et al.* 2000; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1989).

A qualitative case study was selected as research strategy, as it could provide the required meaning in context, utilising human opinion to interpret the relations between business performance and learning. The data collection methods and instruments were carefully selected to ensure sensitivity to underlying meaning.

Interviews were used for collecting qualitative data about opinions of the colleagues of the focus group participants, the observers, the moderator and the verifiers. Focus group interviews were used to collect qualitative data about the opinions, assumptions and beliefs of the participants' about the phenomenon at hand. Observation was used to collect qualitative evidence about the influence of the behaviour of the focus group participants on the outcome of the study. Lastly, a survey was used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from the focus group participants about how they were influenced by the implemented research process.

The research design is summarised in Table 1.2, reflecting the research strategy, data collection methods and instruments, and data sources (including the subjects of the study).

Table 1.2: The research design

Research Strategy	Qualitative Case study						
Data collection methods	Interview			Focus group interview		Survey	
				Inquiry	Observation		
Data collection instrument/ process	Interview sheet	Post focus group discussion with moderator and two observers	Verification of focus group outputs with three eLearning experts	Systemic inquiry process	Observation report	Biographical information questionnaire (Part 1)	Post focus group questionnaire (Part 2)
Data source	Colleagues of focus group participants	Moderator Observers	Verifiers	Focus group participants	Focus group participants	Focus group participants	Focus group participants

The overall research design was a **qualitative case study**. This research strategy was selected based on the need to collect rich and thick data in a real-life scenario. Four data collection methods were implemented. These were:

1. interviews;
2. focus group interviews;
3. observation; and
4. a survey.

Each of the data collection methods was implemented through data collections instruments that were carefully designed to collect the required data. The instruments and their design are discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

The following role-players, who acted as data-sources in the study are listed below:

- focus group participants;
- colleagues of the focus group participants;
- the moderator;
- observers; and
- verifiers.

Further details on the role-players, who they were and the roles that were contracted with them are discussed in Chapter 3.

The research design was implemented in three phases – Preparation, Execution and Closure. Figure 1.2 reflects the activities per phase that were implemented.

Figure 1.2: The data collection and analysis process – Preparation, Execution and Closure

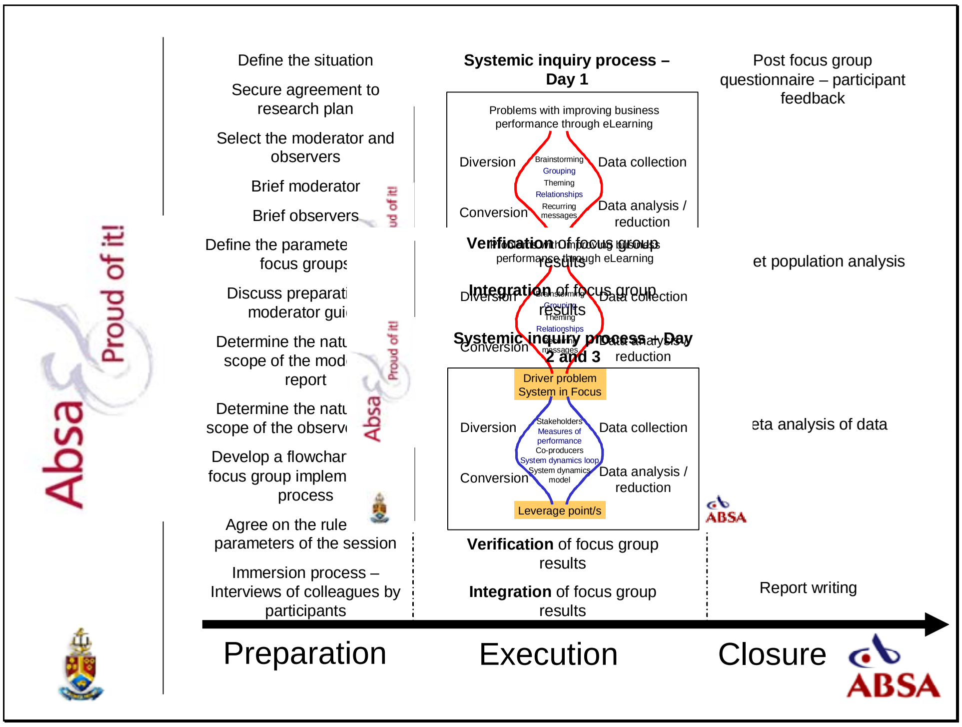


Figure 1.2 was designed from collective input from different sources (Strumpher, 2003; Goebert & Rosental, 2002; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Greenbaum, 1988; Morgan, 1988; Templeton, 1987; conversations with the verifiers Lawrence Mlotshwa, Dr. Beatrice Horne and Barry Vorster on 10 and 18 July; conversations with the observers Lee-Anne Deal and Sophia Nawrattel on 1 July; conversation with the moderator Christa Swart on 3 July; conversation with Johan Heroldt on 1 July).

From Figure 1.2 it can be seen that the preparation completed during the first phase provided significant input and context to the execution phase. It included resource allocation, process preparation and data collection by the focus group participants from their colleagues.

Various role-players enacted the research design. One set of role-players was the sample or the subjects of the study.

1.7.1. The subjects of this study

The significance of the wider universe from which the sample was drawn, is grounded in the broad ontological perspective of the study (Mason, 2002). The ontological perspective of this study frames people as being part of a wider holistic system which is constantly changing and renewing itself. It places the person and his/her personal values, assumptions and beliefs at the core of the study. Due to this, all the results of the study are only relevant in the specific context created by the boundaries of the qualitative case study within the bigger universe.

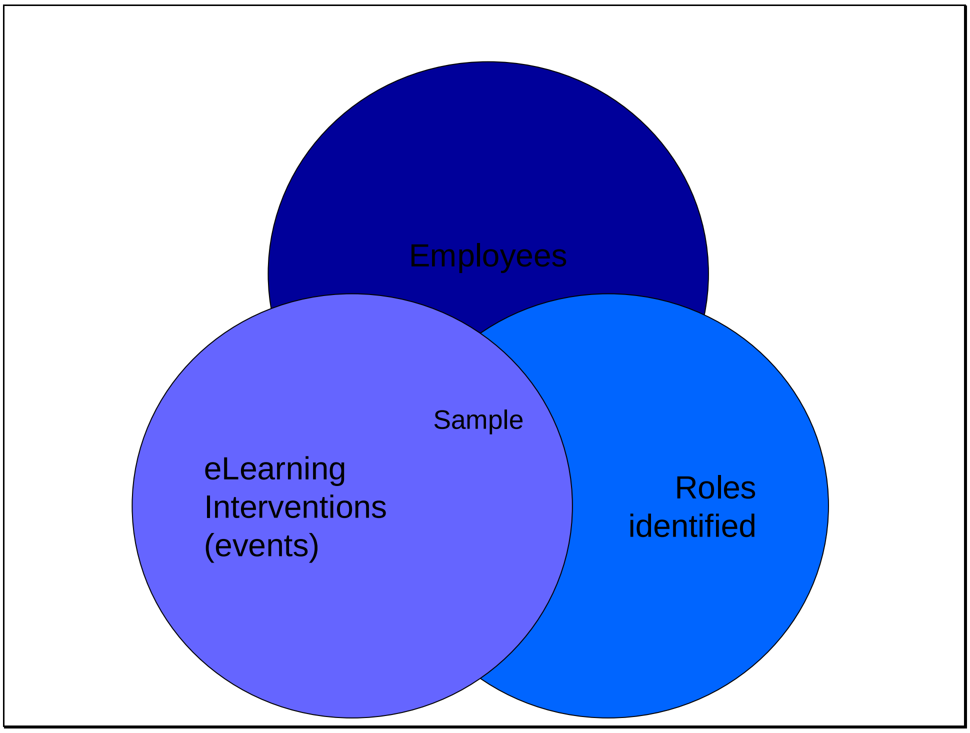
A **specific sample had to be selected as focus group participants**. The focus group participants in turn **selected a sample of colleagues** to broaden their perspective on how eLearning can improve business performance.

The focus group participant sample was selected from the Absa system. The specific environments involved were the Learning and Development Department and Group eChannels: Contact Centre. Further to the sample being part of this system, the individuals had to be exposed to specific events and happenings (Mason, 2002), in this case two eLearning interventions:

- eChannels Socialisation; and/or
- Fraud Awareness.

The selection of the sample was based on the involvement of the role-players in eLearning interventions and their willingness to participate in the study. The Learning and Development Department designs and develops eLearning and thus is an important role player. eChannels is one of the Business Units in Absa that participates actively in eLearning. The learners and managers participating in the eLearning program also seem very opiniated about eLearning and the value that it adds to business performance. eChannel's willingness to participate and to voice their opinions made them an ideal partner for the study. Figure 1.3 illustrates how the sample was selected by overlapping the target population, selection criteria and roles.

Figure 1.3: An integrated view of the sampling for the study representing whom was sampled according to specific criteria



The focus group participants sampled the **colleagues** that they interviewed based on their participation in the eLearning interventions. The timing of this interview was important as enough time needed to be allocated for conducting the interviews, but the knowledge gained by the focus group participants also needed to be recent enough to be of value in the systemic inquiry process. These interviews were therefore executed during the two weeks before the focus group sessions took place.

Each participant was requested to interview **five** colleagues, selecting them based on their own network and availability (convenience) of both the participant and the colleague.

During the design, development and execution of the research design, various ethical considerations were taken into account.

1.8. Ethical considerations for the study

Ethical considerations were critical during the conduct of this research project. These considerations were valid during the planning, executions and closure of the study. "In the context of research, ethics refers to the appropriateness of the researcher's behaviour in relation to the rights of those who become subject to the research, or are affected by it" (Saunders *et al.* 2000:130).

Some of the **general ethical issues** that influenced this study are listed below.

- The privacy of possible and actual participants.
- The voluntary nature of the participation of the selected participants who reserved the right to withdraw from the process.
- The consent and possible deceptions of participants.
- Maintenance of the data shared in confidentiality specifically during the semi-structured interviews and the focus groups.
- The reaction of the participants to the way in which the data is collected.
- Effects on the participants in the way that the data is analysed and reported.
- The behaviour and objectivity of the researcher (Saunders *et al.* 2000).
- Being honest with the participants and keeping them fully informed (Gibbs, 1997).

The ethical issues relevant to this study during the **design, initial access and data collection** stages are listed below.

- The nature of the participant consent that ranges from lack of consent to informed consent.
- The right of privacy of participants after agreeing to participate in the study.
- The objectivity of the researcher in relation to the data that is being collected.
- The behaviour of the researcher towards the participants, specifically during the implementation of the focus groups.
- The behaviour of the focus group participants towards their colleagues during the semi-structured interviews.
- The respect of privacy during the observation and to adhere to certain permissible boundaries (Saunders *et al.* 2000).

The ethical issues relevant to this study during the **analysis and reporting** stages are listed below.

- Maintenance of the researcher's objectivity was critical in this phase.
- Respecting the contracted confidentiality and anonymity of the participants in the study.
- The potential misinterpretation of the data and results in this study by decision makers – this is specifically important if the participants will be negatively impacted by the decisions (Saunders *et al.* 2000).

Saunders *et al.* (2000) suggests a checklist to anticipate and deal with ethical issues in a research project. This checklist was applied in this study. The actions that were put in place for each required checkpoint are listed in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3: A checklist to anticipate and deal with ethical issues

Checkpoint	Action taken in this study
Attempt to recognise potential ethical issues that affect the proposed research	Ethical issues for the research design, data collection methods and the general issues for the study were listed. The main points ensured were the privacy of the focus group participants, the objectivity of the researcher through appointing an independent moderator in the research process, and the accuracy of the data through checking the outcomes by verifiers.
Anticipate ethical issues during the design stage of the research	Ethical issues for the design stage of the study were listed. Informed consent was required from the focus group participants though a detailed invitation. The code of conduct was developed for the researcher, the moderator and the observers, depicting the behaviour required during the focus group session. Utmost care was taken to protect the privacy of the focus group participants and their names were in no way implied in the results of the study.
Respect others' rights to privacy	The researcher strove to align a high degree of integrity and transparency by continuously giving the participants feedback of what was done with the research results and what they would be used for. The utilisation of the results was negotiated before the individuals participated in the focus groups.
Maintain objectivity and quality in relation to the processes used to collect data	Expert verifiers created an audit trial of the data to contain the bias of the researcher and ensure the quality of the data in relation to the process used to collect the data. Third parties (in this case the focus group participants) did the data generation, collection and analysis in order to ensure that the researcher do not influence the outcome of the results.
Protect individual participants	The data that was collected, analysed and reported, went through a reworking process. The data was carefully represented in order to not implicate any specific individual.

Specific strategies were put in place to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the research.

1.9. Criteria for judging the quality of the research

The study supervisor, researcher, moderator, observers and verifiers all played a role in ensuring the quality of the research. These role-players ensured precision throughout the process, checking for bias, neglect or lack of precision, adding and removing content where necessary. The procedures implemented during the study and the decisions made were critically reviewed allowing for a positive knowledge building cycle (Mason, 2002).

Member checking was implemented to ensure that the researcher correctly interpreted the results of the focus group participants. Verifying that the design was built for action and that it could be implemented under reasonable circumstances, ensured the validity of the data (Mason, 2002).

The strategies ensuring the quality of the research can be summarised as collaborative research, peer examination, building an audit trial, declaring the researcher bias and triangulating data by using more than one data collection method (Mason, 2002).

Triangulation was realised through using four data collection methods – interviews, focus groups, observation and a survey. Multiple sources for collecting data were also used including:

- Absa employees exposed to eLearning;
- Colleagues of the focus group participants;
- Moderator;
- Observers; and
- Verifiers (Mason, 2002; Saunders *et al.* 2000).

Six data collection instruments were used to collect the data from the above sources, including an interview sheet, post focus group discussions, verification discussions, a moderator guide, observation sheets and an electronic survey (Mason, 2002; Saunders *et al.* 2000).

The research design was executed to add value to both the financial industry as well as the discipline of eLearning.

1.10. The value of the research

The **intended consequence** of the study was to identify the leverage point that would ensure that eLearning could noticeably contribute to business performance.

Several **unintended consequences** enriched the value of the study.

- It provided a different perspective for defining the **contribution of eLearning** to business results.
- It allowed for the execution of **problem solving** from an alternative view point – Systems Thinking.
- It provided an optional **research methodology** and **analysis technique** that could be generalised as a qualitative research approach.
- It allowed for the growth in understanding of the **value of a leverage point** for Business within the systemic approach.

The research was executed within a specific time frame.

1.11. The research timetable

The total study was conducted over a period of twenty-four months. The preparation and closure phases represented the bulk of the time spent conducting the research study. The study was executed during June – July 2003. Table 1.4 shows the milestones and actions in this project and the relevant end dates.

Table 1.4: Milestones, actions and end dates

Milestone	Actions	End date
1. Preparation for data collection	Design of the study	February 2003
	Contracting of the relevant people	April 2003
	Design of the focus groups	May 2003
	Design of the interview	June 2003
	Design of the observation	June 2003
	Design of the surveys	June 2003
2. Execution of data collection	Execution of the interviews	June 2003
	Execution of the focus groups	July 2003
	Execution of the verifying sessions	July 2003
	Consolidation of the data from the Focus Group Day 1 for an integrated **Digraph**.	Mid July 2003
	Consolidation of the data from the Focus Group Day 2 for an integrated **systems dynamic model**.	October 2003
3. Closure actions	Electronic survey sent out	August 2003
	Target population analysis	October 2003
4. Data-analysis	Report on the data per research question	January 2004
5. Closure	Comparison of research findings to literature research, focusing on recurring messages and differences. Writing of the research report.	August 2004

The construction of the research report including the results of the study was done in a specific way.

1.12. Overview of the research report

In this chapter the current problem regarding the recognition of the ability of eLearning to contribute to business performance was discussed. It further outlined the research approach and design and provided a summary overview of the sample participating in the study. The ethical considerations, quality of the research design and the value of the research were also discussed.

The remainder of this research report consists of four chapters. Chapter 2 provides the **literature review**, Chapter 3 outlines the **research**

methodology, Chapter 4 tables the **research results** and Chapter 5 provides the **conclusions and recommendations** of the study.

The literature review in **Chapter 2** examines: 1) the external environment influencing Business and eLearning; 2) Business and eLearning as separate entities; and 3) eLearning contributing to business performance. Each of the three topics is discussed in terms of their concepts and terminology, theoretical foundations, policies and current practice. The literature review is expanded to include Systems Thinking due to the context that this it creates in the design of the research objectives and subsidiary questions.

Chapter 3 reviews the research methodology used during the research project. The chapter further provides an outline of Systems Thinking implemented during the execution of the study. The chapter concludes with a detailed description of the sample participating in the study.

Chapter 4 includes a detailed description of the results of the focus group sessions, the observations and the post focus group survey.

Chapter 5 concludes the research project in terms of comparing literature and the results of the study, providing research insights and suggesting topics for further research.