# CHAPTER 3

# A LITERATURE REVIEW OF DISTANCE AND CONVENTIONAL EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION REVIEWED IN TERMS OF ACCESS, DELIVERY AND OUTPUT

## 3.1 Introduction

Chapter Three is a follow-up on the thoughts on education focused upon in the previous chapter, but concentrates on the South African context. A thorough literature review is made of available materials on the three indices under review, namely: *access*, *delivery* and *output*, and the chapter, presents a brief history of the development of South African higher education. This is then followed by a study of the status-quo of distance and conventional education, as it is today. This is imperative in understanding the background to this study and the relative importance of the three chosen indices. According to Elliot (2005:69), 'Few countries can rival South Africa in the complexity of its higher education system and the demands it currently faces for radical, long-term tertiary-sector reform'.

Also, a brief background of the University of Pretoria, South Africa, is given for the same purpose. Focus is placed on the current state of the Bachelor of Education (Hons) Education Management, Law and Policy program, which is presented as a dual-mode format. This enables one to place side-by-side the practices of this institution with the policy and practice of higher education in South Africa as a whole.

## 3.2 Distance and conventional education in South Africa: Policy and practice

### 3.2.1 Historical development of higher education in South Africa

According to Goduka (1999:2) '…no one can understand the present without a critical understanding of the past. Nor can we know what kind of future we are building without knowledge of the past and the present.' Tracing the historical development of higher education in South Africa will help one to understand the importance of the three indices of review for this study, namely: *access*, *delivery* and *output*. Cooper and Subotzky (2001:1) state that 'the history of higher education in South Africa is a very underdeveloped sub-field at present, and more in-depth studies are required before a full picture can emerge'. However, perusing through available literature one gets an impression of the major historical developments.

Before 1918, the University of the Cape of Good Hope (UCGH) was the only university that existed in South Africa. It served as the examining and degree-granting body for various university colleges (Behr, 1988; Cooper and Subotzky, 2001) Examples of such colleges at that time were the South African College in Cape Town; Victoria College of Stellenbosch; Natal University College; Grey College in Bloemfontein; University of South Africa (UNISA), which originally conducted examinations only (see Section 3.2.3) and Transvaal University College in Pretoria, to mention but a few. It is nevertheless interesting to note that degrees that were conferred were based on English models (University of

London) and according to Bocher (1973:62), 'It was, until Union, almost exclusively an English institution (for one of the major pre-requisites for its candidates was the ability to write in [the] English language). The Dutch language was for long an optional subject, placed at the Matriculation level on a par with French, German and Bantu languages'. However, between 1873 and 1918 various events happened locally and internationally that changed this picture and in time all these colleges became full-fledged universities.

Though segregation within South African higher education preceded 1948, Urch (1992:159) explains that the leadership of the National Party 'solidified through law what already had been put in place by the White minority'. This, according to Cooper and Subotzky (2001), gave rise to the *homelands* system, which had great influence on higher education. This, they explain, led to the Extension of University Education Act of 1959 which provided for the establishment of separate higher education for the Blacks, Colored and Indian groups. These were located in specific rural areas: the University College of the North (Xhosa and South Sotho); the Northern Transvaal (Sotho, Venda and Tsonga); the University College of Zululand (the Zulu and Swazi); the University College of the Western Cape (Colored) and the University College, Durban (Indians). All these colleges later became full-fledged universities and others were later added to their number, to make 21 universities in South Africa. This number, critics say, is the highest for any country in the world with the same population as South Africa.

The universities were separate from the technikons that emerged in the 1960s for both whites and blacks. Commenting on this emergence, Marcum (1982:216) states that 'this new form of advanced education is different from anything that has existed in South Africa before' and its difference lies in the fact that the 'technikons are mainly providing practically oriented education'.

According to Urch (1992:160), the goals of education were made clear by the Bantu Act of 1953, as it was meant 'to prepare the youth for life in a totally

separate community' and 'special higher educational institutions, including universities, were to be established that would prepare a small group of Africans for service and leadership roles in their own community'. This, according to Herman (1998:41), gave the whites 'privileged access to a free and compulsory schooling system, in addition, many were able to afford prestigious private schooling' for decades and its effect became reflected in the high past rate in exams and the number of matriculants that entered the higher institutions at that time.

Lamenting on this, Goduka (1999:86) states that as expected 'inequalities in the education system have resulted in degrees of educational disadvantage'. Complementing this is the fact sheet released by the South African Race Relations on a survey that reveals that in 1992 the matriculation pass rate of Africans was 42%; Colored, 86%; Indians, 95% and 98% for the Whites. Reasons for this are diverse and Goduka (1999) gives the teacher–pupil ratio as being better in the white schools, and better-qualified teachers as some of the examples to support these differences. Corroborating this, Herman (1998:41) gives '… poor teaching conditions, under-qualified teachers, inadequate facilities and no compulsory education system, coupled with educational boycotts and revolts in black education as having contributed to poor matriculation results for students …' Hence, according to Mncwabe (1999) higher education faces three facets of crisis, which are: credibility, relevance and provision.

It was to this scene that the new democratic government in South Africa came in 1994. It is no wonder that some of the largest and most challenging issues in South African education and training are equity, access inclusion and quality (King, 1988). Therefore, the new government was saddled with the responsibility of redressing the situation. At the commissioning a National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE), Nelson Mandela, the first truly democratically elected President of the Republic of South Africa, challenged this committee to 'preserve

what is valuable and to address what is defective and requires transformation' (NCHE: 1996:1).

In relation to this study, the above events over the decades have helped to create a large educational gulf between the whites and other races in South Africa, thus leading to inequality in every area of life. If distance education has been identified as one of the tools to bridge this educational divide, it suffices to say interest should be focused on identifying gaps in practices that may be responsible for it still not being accorded the same respect as conventional education. The researcher hopes this study will proffer suggestions for the lapses identified in distance education in order to enhance the quality of the delivery. In other words, the focus of this study goes beyond identifying which mode is better, an aspect of criticism already levied against such studies (Section 1: 2).

### 3.2.2 Conventional education in South Africa: policy and practice

Much literature abounds on the present efforts being made to normalize the previous situation of South African higher education. In the words of Sedgwick (2004), this is a situation 'which left scars … that run deep and which will take many years before they are fully healed'.

According to Jansen (2001:42), 'Until 1990 … the State maintained control of education policy in ways that were bureaucratically centralized, racially exclusive and politically authoritarian'. In support of this, Badat (2005) states that, 'In South Africa, social inequalities were and are deeply embedded in and reflected in every area of social life. The higher education *system* was fragmented, and institutions were differentiated along the lines of race and ethnicity, which led to …serious contemporary under-representation of [the] black …' Painting this gloomy picture, Pretorius and Lemmer (1998:viii) further explain that '… South Africa has probably the most developed and well-supplied system of education and training in Africa …' while its teeming black adult populace 'are functionally

illiterate and… [the] majority of learners attend school in circumstances that can be compared to the most impoverished on this continent'.

From the report of the National Commission on Higher Education established in 1995, it was acknowledged that the system as it was then is limited in its ability to meet the demands of the new South Africa. Therefore, a transformation of the higher education system was proposed (SAIDE, 1996), and higher education in White Paper 3 1997 *'A Program for Higher Education Transformation'* has as one of its purposes:

> *'…to meet the learning needs and aspirations of individuals through the development of their intellectual abilities and aptitudes throughout their lives.' (DoE, 1997: 7)*

Higher education was identified as 'a key allocator of life chances … for achieving equity in the distribution of opportunity …' (DoE, 1997:7) It was identified that educational institutions were required to focus on 'increased and broadened participation, responsiveness to societal interest and needs, and co-operation and partnership in governance.' (DoE, 1997:10)

Consequently, two goals of education are:

- To improve the quality of teaching and learning throughout the system.
- To promote the development of a flexible learning system, including distance education and resource-based learning system on [an] open learning principle (DoE, 1997:13–14)

Against this background, a program-based definition of higher education was given:

> *'Higher education comprises all learning programs leading to qualification higher than the proposed Further Education and Training Certificate or the current Standard 10 (grade 12 – researcher's comment) Certificate.' (SAIDE, 1996:17)*

Presently, according to Sedgwick (2004), there are twenty-one universities in South Africa, which comprise the traditional universities, universities of technology and comprehensive universities, and there are fourteen (14) approved private institutions. Various bodies such as the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), National Qualifications Framework (NQF), Education and Training Quality Assurance Bodies (ETQAs) and the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), all play major roles in overseeing and implementing the country's policies on higher education.

### 3.2.3 Distance education in South Africa: policy and practice

The University of South Africa (UNISA) is regarded as the 'first full-fledged autonomous distance teaching institution in the world' Guri-Rosenblit (1999:4). Its roots can be traced back to the University of Cape of Good Hope, established in 1873 (SAIDE, 1995) but it originally conducted examinations only (Peters, 1998). By 1946 it commenced work in distance education and was officially established in 1962 (Holmberg, 1995) as a full-fledged correspondence university (SAIDE, 1995). It is important to note that during the apartheid era in South Africa, UNISA remained as an open university to all races, which gave the first democratic elected President Nelson Mandela (while in prison) the opportunity to study Law at the university through the distance mode. With the largest number of students in South Africa, it is presently laboring to adapt its practices to modern trends in all areas (Peters, 1998).

In addition to this, residential universities and technikons, such as University of Natal, the then Rand Afrikaans University and University of Pretoria operate as dual-mode institutions. As in other African countries, the teaching profession has also benefited from distance education in South Africa. For instance according to the Department of Education (1996), about '130 000 students (nearly one third of South Africa's teachers) were enrolled in teaching at a distance in 1995', and the number has never ceased increasing. Buttressing this, Latchem and Robinson

(2002:29) state that, 'Distance education and training is widely used around the world, in both small and large countries and in a variety of contexts'.

From as early as 1906 the private sector has also participated in the provision of distance education, with some institutions operating as dual–mode institutions or purely as correspondence colleges (SAIDE, 1994). Though 'many domestic private institutions have entered into partnerships with international counterparts to offer their programs in South Africa', the government moved to stop this practice in order to protect the 'public institutions from international competition', a move that has been described as unfortunate (Gordon, 2005).

There are also other corporate distance education providers such as ABSA Bank Training Centre, First National Bank Staff College, and AGN Power Matric sponsored by SANLAM, etc. (SAIDE, 1996). Presently in South Africa, according to Daves et al. (2004), there are 'over 65 institutions providing distance learning in higher education'.

In South Africa, distance education and open learning have been identified as the only feasible means of meeting the needs of the vast numbers of people denied equal educational opportunity under the repressive regime (SAIDE, 1996:8). It has also been identified as having the possibility of being instrumental in 'addressing the enormous imbalances in skills and experience between different sectors in the community' (Bosman & Frost, 1996). Furthermore, it has been concluded that, 'Distance education is clearly emerging as an important vehicle for skills development' (Gordon, 2005).

Hence, all higher education institutions were encouraged by the government to also employ distance education, to increase public access to an education. Though 'earlier legislation allocated a *seat* or geographical area which limits their area of activities' this was changed because of the need to remove constraints on the universities and to meet the expected explosion in the number of students

wishing to enroll at institutions of higher learning. (UP, 2002). However, the expected increase never came, and this helped create great competition between the universities. Consequently, government saw the need to protect institutions that are solely distance teaching in nature by restricting subsidies for distance education programs in other institutions. Therefore, it was decided to regulate the provision of distance education in conventional education institutions by stating that, 'no new programs would be approved unless they address identified national and/or regional needs or overlap with programs offered by the distance education institution …' (DoE, 2001)

Daves, et al. (2004) in criticizing the move of the government are of the opinion that this is contradictory as this has 'limited the growth of innovative distance education.' For instance, Bosman and Frost (1996), state that UNISA's correspondence model 'has received criticism that the curricula focus on teaching rather than on learning and that students learn to pass an examination, rather than to acquire the competencies needed to be effective in their work.' This is because 'the heightened need for distance education comes at a time when the nation's traditional distance education model is being recognized as outmoded, but also when advances in technology present tremendous opportunities for creating better replacement models for distance learning'; therefore, 'the Department of Education will first have to determine internally what the government's position is on distance learning and their recommended distance education model before it can attempt to develop a comprehensive plan and set of actions for the nation' (Daves et al. 2004).

Currently, the face of distance education in South Africa reflects the changing pattern of the modes of delivery. According to Daves et al. (2004), 'the new model incorporates the provision of learner support through a variety of mechanisms, including learning centers with audio-visual and computer assisted support'. This change, according to them, is due to the following factors:

- The developments in Information Technology (IT), which allow for different modes of delivery;
- The need for greater cost-efficiency to deal with increased enrolments without having to increase staff or build infrastructure;
- Competition from private higher education providers and
- The government's public stance that distance education has a crucial role to play in expanding access, diversifying the body of learners in South Africa and enhancing the quality of instruction within economic constrains.

Challenges facing distance education in South Africa have also been identified. South Africa Global Distance Education [SAGDEN] (2001) observed that there is still a problem in the area of distance education curriculum, which is reflected more in the area of '… the quality of course design and the quality of instruction, than on technology itself'. Commenting on this, the Department of Education (DoE, 2001:61-62) laments that:

- These programs are often based on poorly designed materials and rely on a single mode of delivery that is inappropriate to the student.
- A number of programs have been developed and used on the Internet that are no more than e-mail versions of poorly written correspondence texts. Emphasis has always been on minimizing costs rather than developing a quality program.
- There is little evidence of creative use of multi-media modes of delivery or research-based approach to curriculum design, development and delivery.
- A lack of research into the needs and contexts of students, appropriate modes of delivery and new methods of assessment undermine the quality of the programs.
- The relevance of programs is open to question. In most cases, a small range of programs are on offer because and are largely chosen for their profitability rather than because they meet the needs of the students and develop the knowledge and skills required by employers.

Other challenges identified by Daves et al. (2004), include 'limited infrastructure and resources along with the problems of learner preparedness, antiquated learning systems… and access which are all critical barriers to the effective growth of distance education'. Thus, concerns on quality by government, learner support services, cost-efficiency and effectiveness of programs become more understandable. Government has since instituted quality assurance and benchmarking mechanisms in order to ensure quality in higher education (DoE, 2000).

## 3.3 Brief historical development of the University of Pretoria

According to the University of Pretoria (2002a), 'the Pretoria branch of the Transvaal University College (TUC) was the forerunner of the University of Pretoria'. Coetzee and Geggus (1980) and Cooper and Subotzky (2001) shedding light on this, explain this college was one of the various University Colleges that examined and granted degrees through the University of the Cape of Good Hope, which later became affiliated to University of South Africa (UNISA). In 1902, the Normal College for the training of teachers was established in Pretoria and it adopted a new name – the Transvaal University College (TUC) (UP, 2006e). As a university college, it commenced its activities in 1908 with classes in the Arts and Sciences as part of the TUC with its seat in Johannesburg (UP, 2006e). However, on 4 March 1908, it became officially known as the Pretoria Centre for of the Transvaal University College, and according to Coetzee and Geggus (1980:21) was later 'incorporated as the University of Pretoria by Act No. 13 of 1930', an independent institution apart from the Johannesburg institute (UP, 2006e).

In 1931 the newly constituted University of Pretoria resumed classes with 65% of the student body being Afrikaans speaking and 32% of the classes offered were conducted in Afrikaans, though it was only in September 1932 that it began operating as a university that served white Afrikaners exclusively (Boucher, 1973; UP, 2006e). This status quo of serving the few privileged of such race persisted

until the wind of political change blew on the country. Commenting on this, Pistorius (2002b) explains that the constitutional changes in South Africa had immense effect on all tertiary institutions, with no exception to this university. Shedding further light on this, Smit (2002b:2) states that, 'The changes that the University of Pretoria faces and its endeavor to search for solutions cannot…be dissociated from national and international trends'.

However, according to Pistorius (2002b:*i*), 'the university purposefully strove towards serving the country and all its inhabitants and to equip them for the future'. Therefore, one could say, presently it is confident of its ability to adapt and contribute innovatively to the future of higher education in the country (Smit, 2002b).

## 3.4 Access issues in South African higher education

### 3.4.1 Access in distance and conventional education in South Africa

Various scholars have tried to define the term *access* and it can generally be assumed to mean '*opening opportunities for people to attend college who were once excluded'* (Herman & Mandell 1999:16; Holmberg, 2002:81). This exclusion depends on a number of reasons, such as an inability to afford the cost and because circumstances do not permit students to attend studies full-time, which was previously the characteristic of conventional education.

Equally, Holmberg (2002:81) sees it as giving a second-chance to its clients. A trend towards massification of higher education due to an increase in population, increased demand for skilled work in the labour market and an increase in the political power of ordinary people, are reasons that have been given to explain the need for increased access to learners (SAIDE, 1996:32; Braimoh, 2003:3). In the words of Gourley (1999:85) factors such as 'economic necessity or democratic principle, …changes in the labour market accompanying a trend away from goods production to service, and a rise in educational requirements

for jobs in key sectors of a developing global economy' all influence the need for access.

According to De Vuyst (1999:100), 'Education throughout the centuries has been a system controlled by the ruling groups in the society'. Gourley (1999:90) in agreement with this view stresses that universities, for many years, have been 'the elite institutions – bearers of a particular canon and reproducers of a particular class or meritocracy in the society'. Such was the situation in South Africa before the advent of democracy that put blacks, who are in the majority, in power. 'During apartheid, South Africa maintained disparate higher education systems organized along racial lines, with vastly inferior institutions catering to black students' (Sedgwick, 2004).

Van Onselen (1997:14), a popular South African historian, giving a deeper insight into the South African situation states that:

> *'When these two…facts – the preponderance of young people and their social commitment to the extended family – are inserted into context of acute rural poverty, low economic growth, unemployment rate of 35 percent, large – scale underemployment, and a rapidly changing education system, there are consequences which extend well beyond the mere quantitative dimensions envisaged in proposed 'massification' of tertiary education… For thousands of South Africans, access to tertiary education has become the difference between having a roof over your head and being homeless, between being fed half of the year or starving, between owning some clothing and being decked out in rags, and between social commitments by sending home small amounts of cash to your family, or joining ranks of those who are fully unemployed.'*

Even though views on this comment differ, Gourley (1999:89) feels that his arguments 'point to a cluster of problems related to access that will continue to beset universities, especially in Second and Third World countries…' Sharing this view, the National Plan for Higher Education (2001) states that '…education is pivotal to economic prosperity, assisting South Africans – personally and

collectively – to escape the *poverty trap* characterizing many of our communities'. Buttressing this further, the Human Sciences Research Council (HRSC, 2000), explains that graduate unemployment is low in South Africa and that graduates with a bachelor's degree earn 125% more than those with only a matriculation result.

Gourley continues 'The view that educational attainment has a major influence on a person's life chances lies behind many post–World War II efforts to increase access to universities and to make universities more reflective of the demographies of their catchment's areas'. Hence, the continual challenge to transform the South Africa higher education system by increasing 'access for the country's black citizens, who represent a majority of the nation's population, but a minority of those who attend and graduate from university' (Daves et al. 2004). The Education White Paper 3 (1997) buttressed by the National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa (2001) promises to:

> *'Promote equity of access and fair chance of success to all who are seeking to realize their potential through higher education, while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress for past inequalities.'*

In view of this, conventional education institutions in South Africa, according to CHE (2004) 'have for the last ten years – and in some cases longer – addressed themselves to admission strategies…that widen access to higher education and facilitate the academic development of students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds'. These, according to CHE, include *special* or *alternative* admission requirements as well as recognition of prior learning (RPL).To this list Herman (1998:43) adds 'work-study programs and special loan scheme for those who cannot normally afford to pay for tuition; academic support programs and bridging courses (especially in science) for those who entered university with marginal matriculation results or who have problems with language proficiency in English;

while some universities run summer and winter schools for matriculants and offer career counseling services'.

However, citing Gelderbloem (1996:16), he laments that 'these initiatives are costly and limited in range, and solutions to the problems of access and equity do not lie solely at the door of the university'. Hence, he identifies three major controversies and paradoxes concerning the issue of access and equity in the country:

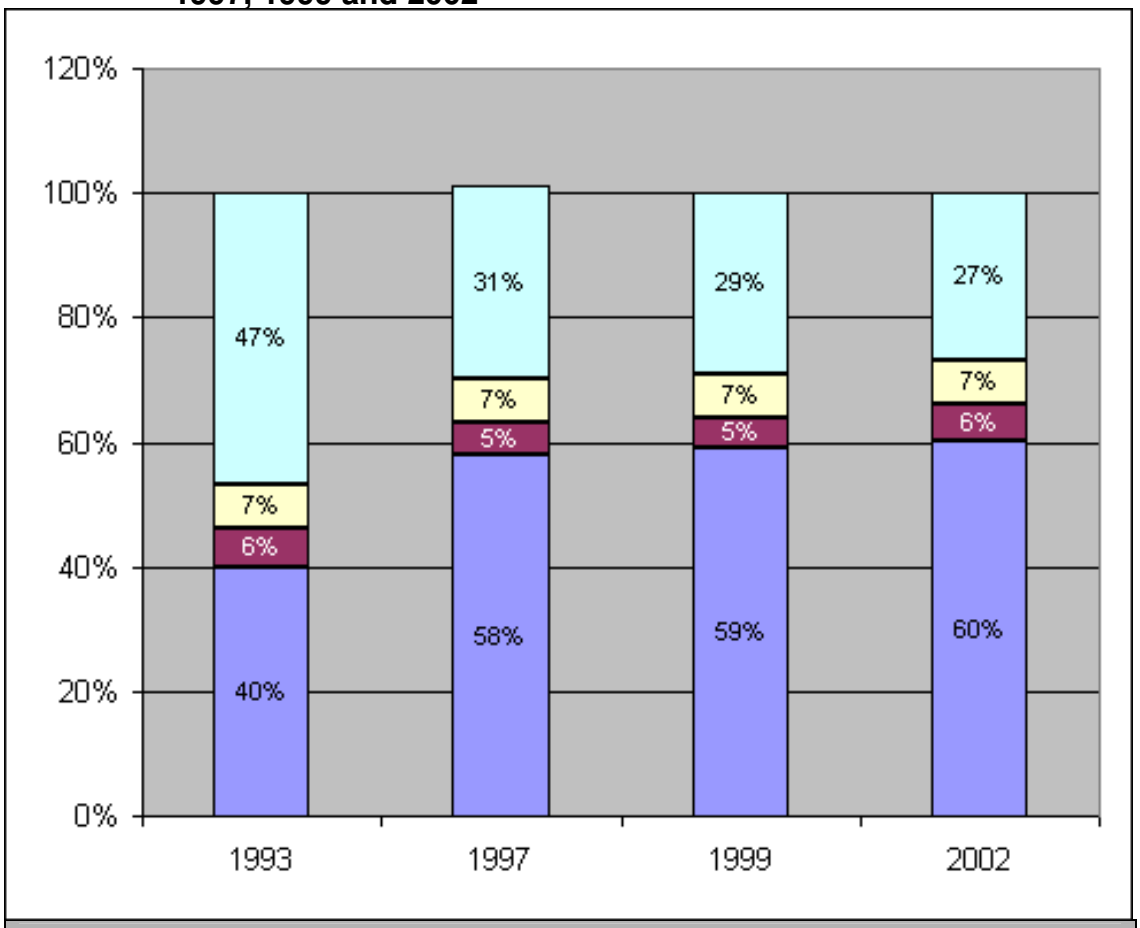
- The unlikelihood of the state providing for large capital funds needed to sustain programs geared towards admitting more students from disadvantaged backgrounds;
- Due to the issue of relevance, Gelderbloem fears that laying greater emphasis on science and technology might be at the cost of the human sciences, where most of the disadvantaged students are concerned;
- If universities are supposed to maintain excellence, then lack of selection will affect this.

Efforts are also being made in these areas with regard to distance education. A collaborative body called the Confederation of Open Learning Institutions of South Africa (COLISA) and other distance learning partners, according to Daves et al. (2004) '…have launched two projects of particular note…' targeted at providing '…distance learning tools in areas where no university or technikon exists'. A potential already identified to redress the question of access in South Africa is distance education. Thus, it has given the educational opportunity to several people who remain outside the walls of the conventional classroom (Guri-Rosenblit, 1999:20). Furthermore, one cannot but agree with Daves et al. (2004) who state that, 'distance education … provides for the enrolment of large numbers of students …' a vital factor 'to the new group of tertiary level students in South Africa'.

What has made distance education become a force to be reckoned with are the changes taking place globally, which are affecting information and communications technology. According to the National Plan for Higher Education (2001a), at the centre of these changes is the notion that in the 21st Century, knowledge and the processing of information will be the key driving forces for wealth creation and thus social and economic development. These have caused a situation where the delivery of both distance and conventional education are compared to each other, to establish a redress and refining process within their respective delivery. Consequently, convergence of distance and conventional education is believed to 'encourage increased access as there will be a range of modes of study (Garrison, 1993:239; Tait & Mills, 1999:4). Also, learners will be able to change from full-time to part-time, class-based to home-base study.

Presently, it would appear that the changes within higher education in South Africa are beginning to reflect the goal of the government in this regard to some extent (Cloete & Bunting, 1999; National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa, 2001a) as Figure 3.1 below suggests:

**Figure 3.1: Gross participation rates in public higher education in 1993, 1997, 1999 and 2002**




| Percentage distribution of the head count enrolment by population group | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Year | | | |
| | | 1993 | 1997 | 1999 | 2002 |
| Percentage | African | 40% | 58% | 59% | 60% |
| | Coloured | 6% | 5% | 5% | 6% |
| | Indian | 7% | 7% | 7% | 7% |
| | White | 47% | 31% | 29% | 27% |

Sources: Adapted from Cloete and Bunting (2001); DoE (2004)

From the figure above, it can be noted there has been a sharp increase in the participation rate of African learners from 40% in 1993 (before the advent of democracy) to 60% in 2002. However, the sharp decline in White learner participation in public higher education should not go unnoticed, which decreased from 47% in 1993 to 29% in 2002. Various reasons have been given for this, among which is the White learner movement to overseas or private institutions

(Cloete & Bunting, 2001). Also, it can be noted there is no change in the percentage distribution of both Colored and Indian learners.

Buttressing the facts mentioned above, the Department of Education (D0E, 2001) notes that 'African student enrolments increased from 191 000 to 343 000 between 1993 and 1999 i.e. by 152 000 (or 80%). Thus in 1999, African students constituted 59% of the total head count enrolments in higher education'. SAQA (2004) reveals that by 2001 almost 60% of all graduates were Black learners. This, according to Cooper and Subotzky (2001) is revolutionary. Citing the example of the University of Port Elizabeth, which changed from being 62% White in 1995 to being 87% Black in 1999 Cloete (2002) proposes that, 'these demographic changes must be some of the most remarkable in the world during the 1990s'.

Though it is the goal of the South African government to redress the imbalances of the past, the researcher still tends to lean toward the caution expressed by Herman (1998:41) that 'it is necessary to proceed with caution and realism when planning to remove past disparities' because 'uncoordinated open admission and affirmative action policies could lead to massive enrolments of educationally disadvantaged students, which may create unforeseen problems if the needs of students cannot be addressed in the teaching and learning programs of universities'.

Herman and Mandell, (1999:17) have brought another wrinkle to the *access debate* by claiming that increasing access has more than numerical consequences. Both argue that 'making educational opportunities more accessible to those it excluded, does not ultimately make the system fair' (Herman & Mandell, 1999:19). Although increased access is the goal (Daniel, 1996) education will have then become 'diminished and commoditized services of corporate agendas' (Reading, 1997; Shumar 1997). Therefore access shows two faces: invitation and exclusion (Herman & Mandell, 1999:22). The term *Mega*

*University* has been used to refer to large universities behaving like businesses because they operate in entrepreneurial and competitive ways (Tait & Mills, 1999:3; Daniel, 1996). This may eventually deny several people access to higher education.

Quality is another issue that has been raised on the question of access and equity in South African higher education. As earlier alluded to, Herman (1995) sees universities as being left in the cold and facing some dilemmas which are:

- The tendency to relegate institutions of higher learning that admit a majority of the disadvantaged students to a lower status; and
- The rapid increase in the enrolments of black students have led to large class sizes, leading to the question of quality as resources are being stretched beyond limits.

Gamede (2005:6-7), in a recent study reveals that 'increased access to education has not resulted in quality output'. Echoing this view, the Minister of Education, Pandor (2005), stresses that 'higher education is further challenged to promote equity without compromising quality' because 'indeed, quality is central to any redress or equity strategy'.

In other words, access is not only limited to greater increase in the number of students. An important question should be: How many students really have access to technology? (A question that is particularly relevant to studies through distance education.) (Skilbeck, 2001) The next question to ask is: At whose expense does access come? (Chambers, 1997) This depicts that those who are being given access, may eventually be locked out of the system (Rumble, 2001). To this researcher this is a major issue that must be continually addressed, if there is to be sincerity about increased learner access. In the next chapter the issue of quality will be focused on, to discover the South African policy on these issues is, and the extent to which this policy is being implemented.

### 3.4.2 Access in distance and conventional education at the University of Pretoria

At present the student profile at the University of Pretoria reflects that many changes have been implemented in relation to learner access – in view of the fact that the institution was formerly 'a mainly white Afrikaans university' (UP, 2005). In other words, these changes have made it 'a national university in the true sense of the word, accessible to all South Africans' (UP, 2005).

Presently, the university's 'student profile places it in a unique position as… one of the largest Black residential universities in the country' (UP, 2005). Besides this, 'more than 29 000 students – of whom 95% were black – were enrolled in the university's distance education programs, (and most of them can be found mostly) in the Faculty of Education' (UP, 2005) According to Melck (2002), the Distance Education Unit at the university, through its programmes 'provide [an] access route to the university for students who would otherwise not have been able to enrol'.

The table below shows a summary of student numbers that were registered at University of Pretoria between 1994 and 2006, as per race group:

**Table 3.1: Race profile of students at the University of Pretoria 1994 – 2006**

| | WHITE | | COLORED | | INDIAN | | AFRICAN | | TOTAL | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1994** | 21 500 | 89.06% | 218 | 0.9% | 160 | 0.7% | 2261 | 9.36% | 24139 | 100% |
| **1995** | 21 119 | 81.49% | 236 | 0.91% | 321 | 1.23% | 4239 | 16.4% | 25915 | 100% |
| **1996** | 20 041 | 77.19% | 256 | 0.98% | 397 | 1.52% | 5266 | 20.3% | 25960 | 100% |
| **1997** | 19 494 | 74.96% | 246 | 0.94% | 547 | 2.10% | 5717 | 22% | 26004 | 100% |
| **1998** | 19 370 | 72.59% | 274 | 1.02% | 684 | 2.56% | 6356 | 23.9 | 26684 | 100% |
| **1999** | 19 145 | 71.64% | 270 | 1.01% | 866 | 3.24% | 6442 | 24.1% | 26723 | 100% |
| **2000** | 20 032 | 71.30% | 325 | 1.15% | 1031 | 3.66% | 6705 | 23.9% | 28093 | 100% |
| **2001** | 20 862 | 68.91% | 408 | 1.34% | 1235 | 4.07% | 7767 | 25.7% | 30272 | 100% |
| **2002** | 21 848 | 67.92% | 472 | 1.46% | 1395 | 4.33% | 8448 | 26.3% | 32163 | 100% |
| **2003** | 22 464 | 66% | 502 | 1% | 1625 | 5% | 9605 | 28% | 34 196 | 100% |
| **2004** | 22 977 | 59% | 589 | 2% | 1683 | 4% | 13714 | 35% | 38 963 | 100% |
| **2005** | 22 960 | 60% | 646 | 2% | 1 708 | 4% | 13185 | 34% | 38 499 | 100% |
| **2006** | 23 060 | 60% | 684 | 2% | 1 684 | 4% | 12961 | 34% | 38 389 | 100% |

Source: University of Pretoria (2005d; 2006d)

The above table indicates that since 1994, the year when South Africa entered a new phase in its political history, there has been a steady growth in the number of enrolments of the African students (Blacks) and other races. This is in view that the University of Pretoria was, historically, a *White* institution. There is a change in the former race-pattern. For instance, the headcount of the total student enrolment of African students in 1994, was 2 261 (or 9.36%) of 24139 students. However, by 2002 this figure had risen to 8 448 (or 26.26%) of 32 163 students and by 2006 this figure had risen still further, to 12 961 (34%) of 38 389 students. Also, it is interesting to note a continual drop in the enrolment of White students. In 1994, the total of White students was 21 500 (or 89.06%) of 24 139 students. However, by 2006 this figure had dropped to 23 060 (60%) of 38 389 students.

Though this trend may be attributed to the efforts of government as achieved through its revised policy regarding student access to education, to Cloete and Bunting (2000:20), 'the system will be an equitable one only if [black student] performances match those of other students'.

## 3.5 Delivery in South African higher education

### 3.5.1 Delivery in distance and conventional education in South Africa

Cloete (1998) predicts that higher education in South Africa will face a demand for greater flexibility in modes of delivery. The three driving forces identified for this by Morrison and Oblinger (2002) are technology, diversity of students and learning. Jansen (2004:1), who proposes that one of the ten 'most important changes in higher education' is 'the changing models of delivery…' corroborated this.

Previously in South Africa, the conventional education institutions delivered instruction mainly through face-to-face contact, largely depending on print as a mode of delivery. According to Burke (2002) the print medium is the most

common form of delivery not only at the conventional institutions, but also in traditional distance education. In the latter it serves as *correspondence courses* (DEC, 2004; Jansen, 2004), while it serves as lecture/tutorial notes in the former.

Expatiating on this further, CHE (2004) states that 'the issue of teaching and learning delivery models is critically influenced by so-called *new media* (especially the Internet) and the opportunities and challenges these offer higher education'. Various scholars (DoE, 2001; CHE, 2004; Jansen, 2004) are of this same opinion, and explain that this has led to the convergence of distance and conventional education. According to Broere and Kruger (2004) 'Many higher education institutions in South Africa, have already progressed from traditional contact education to a mixed mode form of delivery, in which dynamic interaction occurs between ICT and *face-to-face* lecturing'. Buttressing this, Jansen (2004:14) states that the present situation in South Africa is that in which conventional institutions start to 'offer a range of alternative modes of delivery…' and '… create a complex of instructional opportunities and resources that complemented the formal lectures or seminars' that has led to various kinds of distance education.

Consequently, South Africa Global Distance Education (SAGDEN, 2001) states that, 'there are now a wide variety of technologies available, including broadcast radio and television; audio and video tape; interactive audio and video teleconferencing and computer and Internet technologies' being used by distance education providers. Added to this list by Jansen (2004:14) is the exploration of 'the potential of mobile phones', which are owned by many students. For instance, according to the Distance Education Unit of the University of Pretoria (2006), about 99% of the Distance Education students possess a cell phone. However, these changes should not be alarming. This is because 'developments in South African higher education have closely mirrored international trends' (CHE, 2005).

Daves et al. (2004) cite some institutions in South Africa that have effected changes in their modes of delivery. For instance,

- UNISA recently launched the first phase of its Internet based *Students On-line* service, which enables students who have Internet access to communicate with their lectures and fellow students using e-mail and have controlled access to records and library holdings.
- Some contact institutions have also designed distance education courses to supplement classroom instruction.

An example of this, according to Broere and Kruger (2004:4), is the University of Johannesburg – formerly known as Rand Afrikaans University – where the driving forces that have led to changes in the delivery in higher education have brought about the development of an 'integrated multi-modal teaching and learning strategy'.

With this *blurring* of the demarcation between the delivery of both distance and conventional education, comes the idea of *multi-modal teaching and learning* or *blended learning*. Blended learning, according to DEC (2004), refers to 'the use of more than one delivery method in a single course'. In the view of Jansen (2004), the '*pure* institution of types of the 1980s, are a thing of the past'. Thus, he has predicted that 'the changing demands on institutions and the new opportunities offered by technology might eventually erode the certainties of institutional typologies in the coming decades'. However, there may not be cause for alarm since in South Africa 'the key issue is to ensure that all graduates are equipped with the skills and competencies necessary to function in modern society, in particular, computer literacy, information management, communication and analytical skills' (DoE, 2002:2). Previously echoing this are Wilkinson, Wilkinson and Guilluame (2000) who state that 'there…seems to be agreement that higher education institutions will need to make adjustments to their academic structures, to their methods of teaching, and to the systems by which they deliver

their courses in order to meet new challenges'. Presently in South Africa there is hardly any higher institution that is not offering the multi-modal approach of delivery.

However, according to CHE (2004:100), views on the rush to implement information and communication technology (ICT) differ. Some feel this has to do with *profit motives*; others are of the opinion 'that ICT is the tool of a *network society*' which will be used to 'accelerate the production of knowledge' and with which 'South Africa should be seeking to narrow the digital divide between itself and other nations and…widen access to higher education; while those who stand aside have been warned that they *will find it harder to survive*'.

As pleasing as all these developments are, problems have been identified with the advent of improvement in information communication and technology. For example, Burke (2002) warns that 'Low income, minority and underrepresented students are likely to be among those who may not have access to the technology or have the technological experience necessary to take advantage of the education courses'. And he asks the question: 'Will these circumstances create a divide between the *technology rich* and the *technology poor*?' Also echoing this fear is Wills (1999:10), who feels that 'If the digital divide is not tackled it will entrench existing exclusion for generations'.

The above becomes important in view that South Africa as a nation is in the process of redressing inequalities and injustices of the past, is faced with the dilemma of the socio-economic status of its teeming Black population, which it seeks to empower through educational opportunities.

### 3.5.2 Delivery in distance and conventional education at University of Pretoria

One of the goals of the University of Pretoria is striving to create 'flexible life-long learning opportunities…through developing [students'] ability to adapt to the rapidly changing environments of the information era' (UP, 2003:1). Hence, programs are developed, teaching methods applied and student learning stimulated in such a way that 'information (retrieval and processing) and computer literacy skills, for example, the ability to use and integrate computer technology and solutions in an efficient and effective way' (UP, 2003:2) are developed.

As expected, paradigm shifts that have taken place in higher education have impacted on the education policy of the university and these, according to its Education Policy – Discussion Document (UP, 2003:5), include shifts from reproductive learning to productive learning; behaviorism to constructivism; teacher-centered to student-centered; teaching-centered to learning-centered; conveying content to facilitating learning; content-based to outcomes-based and content-based evaluation to outcomes-based assessment. These have serious implications for all aspects of the teaching activities at the university. However, it should be borne in mind that these have also been influenced by two key factors, which are:

- The increasing availability and development of technology (whereby the limitations of place and time for study are eliminated) and
- The need of learners to take greater control over their own learning environments, while at the same time being in a position to exercise greater freedom of choice, in respect of the teaching-learning environment in which they prefer to study.

These, according to the discussion document, imply 'flexible delivery systems that can make provision for … contact tuition, paper-based tuition, technology-

supported tuition, resource-driven learning, so called *open learning* and different combinations thereof' (UP, 2004:7). Therefore, the framework for its education model divides the teaching-learning environment into four broad categories:

- An education environment primarily characterized by contact tuition;
- A study environment primarily characterized by paper-based study support;
- A technology-supported teaching-learning environment and
- An environment where the nature of the program demands that the student receives specialized and centralized practical training in a contact environment.

Of all the above, the unit of study for this research, the BEd (Hons) Education Management, Law and Policy, generally focuses on contact tuition and the paper-based study support. As at the time of this investigation, only the Faculty of Education, Distance Education Unit of the university was offering this mode.

For the last few years, however, the education model the university employs has striven to bring about an innovative integration of all the delivery in a flexible learning environment, whenever possible. Its facilitation of learning, among others, 'provides appropriate academic and administrative support, which includes: quality facilitation of learning by lecturers, tutors and teaching assistants, academic information services, properly developed outcomes-based study material and tutor support' (UP, 2003:11).

## 3.6 Output in South African higher education

### 3.6.1 Output in conventional and distance education in South Africa

In South Africa it is an established fact that there is high attrition rate in higher education. The first table below reflects the rates of completion of distance and conventional education at the University of South Africa (UNISA), (SAIDE,

1994:7-8; Perraton 2000: 101) in the 1980's, while the second table (DoE, 2005) reflects that this trend still persists:

**Table 3.2: Graduate Success Rates of Selected Programs in South Africa (1980s): UNISA**

| Degree | Enrolled | Graduated by 1992 | Graduate % |
|---|---|---|---|
| **B.Com 1984 enrolments** | 4160 | 465 | 11 |
| **B. Com 1985 enrolments** | 4658 | 418 | 9 |
| **B.Sc 1984 enrolments.** | 1139 | 54 | 5 |
| **B.Sc 1985** | 1319 | 68 | 5 |
| **Graduated after 5 years:** | | | |
| **B.Ed 1984 enrolments** | 379 | 139 | 36 |
| **B.Ed 1985 enrolments** | 615 | 224 | 36 |

Sources: SAIDE (1994: 7-8); Perraton (2000)

**Table 3.3: Graduate % at conventional universities in South African universities (2002)**

| Universities | Percentage |
|---|---|
| **Historically Black Universities** | 12 |
| **Historically White Universities** | 21 |
| **Normative efficient throughput** | 20 – 30 |

Source: Department of Education (DoE, 2004)

The first table above reflects the graduate rates of students studying at UNISA, the highest being 11% for the distant education courses, and 5% for its lowest. The second table above reflects the graduate rates of students studying through conventional education, which has 21% as the highest, and 12% as the lowest. And further buttresses the fact that there is a higher attrition rate among students studying through distance education.

A recent report released by the Department of Education (DoE, 2005:37) reflects that this trend still persists, as reflected in the table below:

**Table 3.4: Summaries of key graduation rates in public higher education (2002)**

| INSTITUTIONS | Undergraduate And Diplomas | Master's Degrees | Doctoral Degrees |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Historically Black Universities** | 12% | 12% | 11% |
| **Historically White Universities** | 19% | 20% | 13% |
| **UNISA** | 19% | 20% | 13% |
| **Averages for Universities** | **15%** | **18%** | **13%** |

Adapted from DoE (2004:38)

The table above reflects that the average graduation rate for the undergraduates in public higher education in 2002 was 15%, for master degrees the average graduation rate was 18% and for doctorate degrees the average graduation rate was 13%. However, contrary to the pictures presented above, the Department of Education (DoE, 2004:38), states that the benchmark in the National Plan of

Education expects 'at least 75% of any cohort of students entering a program to complete …' their studies.

However, the high attrition rate in South African higher education (Perraton, 2000; Killen, Marais & Loedolff, 2003), is not peculiar to the country. According to Mckenzie and Schweitzer (2001), it is a popular phenomenon in countries that have refocused their higher education 'from elitism to mass opportunity'. Goduka (1996:27) in attempting to give reasons for this in South Africa cites a diversity of abilities, attributes and backgrounds that give students a variety of expectations, needs and academic potential. Buttressing this, Wood (1998); Paras (2001); Tait, Van Eeden and Tait (2002); Killen, Marais and Loedolff (2002) explain that many students are ill-prepared for study at university or are unable to cope with its demands and a significant number never graduate. In support of this, Ravhudzulo (2003) in a recent study in Limpopo, the Northern Province discovers that most of the teachers enrolled in a professional development course through distance education dropped out of the programme. Reasons given for this, among others, include 'the planning and organisation of the distance education institution, the tutorial package, the availability and provision of sufficient support and resources, and time required for the study'. On the other hand, Ntshoe (2002:7) gives the long-term plan of the government to increase the participation rate in higher education from 15% to 20% as another reason for high attrition in distance education.

According to the National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa (2001), 'though it is an undisputable fact that the demographic composition of the student body is changing and is beginning to reflect the composition of the population … [the] high attrition rate is still a source of concern'. This is more so among the black students. Lamenting on this, the Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor (2005) stresses that 'In particular, the success and graduation rates of Black students are still lower than their counterparts…' Shedding further light on this, the South African Institute of Race Relations – SAIRR (2001) emphasizes that '…

graduate outputs are dropping…as 120 000 students drop out each year, *wasting* R1 3 billion in taxpayer subsidies…' According to the National Plan for Higher Education (2001a:31) 'these funds would go a long way not only in financing the expansion of the higher education system, but also in providing the much-needed funds for redressing the inequalities of the past'. To the government 'Increased access is meaningless if students do not succeed in their studies' (DoE, 2001:43).

Hence, many higher institutions are improving their teaching and learning strategies which, according to CHE (2004:100-101), include 'bridging, foundation or extended curriculum programs that facilitate a special focus on building skills for academic study, expanded tutorial systems, and other forms of support such as mentoring'. Punching a hole in the debate, Killen and Fraser (2002:1) assert that, 'to knowingly admit students who, for whatever reason, have no chance of academic success would be immoral'. However, the Council for Higher Education (2005) in a recent report encourages higher institutions to '… continually strive to design curricula that enable students from poor learning backgrounds to realize their potential, while also identifying early those who will not succeed in higher education, and providing them with meaningful exit points'.

Therefore, the policy framework has as one of its goals to 'promote…fair chances of success to all who are seeking to realize their potential through higher education…' It is the aim of the government to 'increase the number of graduates by at least 10 000 a year over the next five years, i.e. from 90 000 to 100 000' (SAIRR, 2001), hence Killen, Marais and Loedolff (2003:147) 'highlight the need for universities to take a fresh look at why many of their students fail and what they can do to improve the chances of success of all students'.

According to Riggs and Riggs (1990), common predictive measures used for admitting students into higher education are school matriculation results and standardized tests, but Killen, Marais and Loedolff (2003:148) explain that they

seem to be limited in potential. Hence, Van Eeden, De Beer and Coetzee (2001:171) admit that forecasting students' performance in higher education is 'currently complicated by pressure to ensure that students represent the different racial groups in the country'.

Studies abound in South Africa on reasons for the high attrition rate in higher education and factors predicting the success and failure of students (Killen, 1994; Goduka, 1996; Amos & Fischer, 1998; Bargate, 1999; Paras, 2001; Van Eeden, De Beer & Coetzee, 2001; Fraser and Lombard, 2002; Killen and Fraser, 2002; Killen, Marais & Loedolff, 2003; Ravhudzulo, 2003; Fraser & Killen, 2005). These range from: motivation, students approach to studying, psychological factors, students academic literacy, students' time management, peer culture, students' belief in their own ability, student support system of each university, inappropriately designed study guides to lack of formative assessment.

In order to alleviate these problems, the government is ready to address the underlying factors that hinder success and is focusing on three areas: 'the funding of academic development programs, improving the quality of schooling and student financial aid' (DoE, 2001: 43). In addition to these, the government came up with institutional efficiency benchmarks with which all institutions are expected to comply. Table 3.5 below presents these benchmarks:

**Table 3.5: Benchmarks for graduation rates**

| QUALIFICATION TYPE | GRADUATION RATES | |
|---|---|---|
| | Contact | Distance |
| **Up to 3 – years: undergraduate** | 25% | 15% |
| **4 – years or more: undergraduate** | 20% | 10% |
| **Postgraduate: up to honors** | 60% | 30% |
| **Masters:** | 33% | 25% |
| **Doctoral:** | 20% | 20% |

Source: Department of Education (2001:23)

The benchmarks provided above reflect:

- Graduation rates of 25% for the contact education course, and 15% for the distance education course – for studies on the 3-year undergraduate level;
- Graduation rates of 20% for the contact education course, and 10% for the distance education course – for studies on the 4$^{-}$ year undergraduate level.
- Graduation rates of 60% and 30% respectively – for the studies on the Honours level;
- Graduation rates of 33% and 25% respectively – for studies on the Masters level;
- While a graduation rate of 20% is reflected for both study modes. – for studies on the Doctorial level.

From the above, it is clear that the *output issue* is an important aspect of any educational system. Even though redress of past inequalities in education is a main focus of the government, with increased access to education for the population becoming a reality, this aim will be defeated if students do not succeed in their studies. Further research is necessary, that focuses on improving the chances for student study success. This study will investigate what efforts are being made by this university to comply with these benchmarks.

### 3.6.2 Output in distance and conventional education at University of Pretoria

The output patterns at this university may not be different from that of the rest of South Africa, as presented above (Section 3.6.1). While interpreting the tables below, care should be taken to note of the following:

- Summary of student numbers takes each student into account once, irrespective of the number of courses registered for;
- Output in this context refers to only the graduation rates and does not consider the module score or the speed of progression of each student (see Section 2.4.4).

**Table 3.6: Student numbers per race group and graduate Success rates – University of Pretoria 2001 – 2005**

| Year | ENROLMENTS | | | | | GRADUATES | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | White | Colored | Indian | African | Total | White | Colored | Indian | African | Total |
| 2001 | 20 862 | 408 | 1235 | 7 767 | 30 272 | 5 153 | 86 | 269 | 3 888 | 9 396 |
| 2002 | 21 848 | 472 | 1395 | 8 448 | 32 163 | 5 320 | 110 | 313 | 4 136 | 9 879 |
| 2003 | 22 464 | 502 | 1625 | 9 605 | 34 196 | 5 702 | 105 | 396 | 3 062 | 9 265 |
| 2004 | 22 977 | 589 | 1683 | 13 714 | 38 963 | 5 548 | 112 | 387 | 4 628 | 10 675 |
| 2005 | 22 960 | 646 | 1708 | 13 185 | 38 499 | 5 727 | 164 | 421 | 5 302 | 11 614 |

Source: University of Pretoria (2006d)

**Table 3.7: Graduate success rates (%) – University of Pretoria 2001 - 2005**

| Year | Enrolment | Graduate Rate | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| **2001** | 30 272 | 9 396 | **31%** |
| **2002** | 32 163 | 9 879 | **31%** |
| **2003** | 34 196 | 9 265 | **27%** |
| **2004** | 38 963 | 10 675 | **27%** |
| **2005** | 38 499 | 11 614 | **30%** |

Source: Adapted from University of Pretoria (2006d)

From the Table 3.6 and 3.7 above, one will notice a gradual improvement in the number of enrolments of the African students, but despite this, Cloete and Bunting (2001) lament the state of output rates of African students in which serious inequities still exist. According to them, African students are not spread equally across programmes and their performance within programmes has not matched those of other students. On the other hand, their progressive graduate success rate should be noted. Also of importance are the (almost) fixed graduate success rate of the Colored and the Indian students. According to the South Africa University Vice-Chancellor Association (SAUVCA, 2004 – now HESA), the low throughput rate is a national concern.

However – when considering the benchmarks set by the government, which could be assumed to be 26% – based on all programs (see Section 3.6. above), the University of Pretoria could be regarded as fairing well in its output rate. But the question still remains, what percentage of the graduates are African students, clustered in distance education programs (most of which are in the humanities)? All these aspects considered and in view of the university's historical background, the researcher is of the opinion that credit should be given to this institution for progress already made in this regard; however, the situation can be further improved upon and, with the policy of continually making learning opportunities accessible to students, this will surely be realized.

## 3.7 Distance and conventional education at the University of Pretoria, South Africa

### 3.7.1 Introduction

The University of Pretoria is one of the traditional universities in South Africa and has progressed much in establishing itself as a leading institution of higher learning. Its vision is to develop:

> *'A world class, truly South African, centre for rational, critical and innovative scholarship in the basic and applied sciences, technology, economic sciences, humanities, arts and culture' (UP, 2005)*

In striving to achieve this ideal, the university provides holistic, quality education by:

- Creating intellectually stimulating flexible, long life learning opportunities;
- And employing innovative teaching methods. (UP, 2003:1)

Also, the institution is locally relevant in that it promotes '… equity, access, equal opportunities, redress, transformation and diversity' (UP, 2003:4).

Though the university has no intention of 'moving from the essentially residential nature…towards a distance teaching institution, it aims at developing flexible delivery modes using appropriate technologies so as to position the university's teaching activities…towards achieving maximum benefits' (UP, 2004). Shedding further light on distance education at the university, Melck (2002) explains that there is 'definitional differences made…between (paper-based) *distance education* and –electronically supported – *flexible learning,* due to the existing subsidy formula'. Hence, it is necessary to accentuate the fact that the focus of this study is on the former, which as earlier said was as at the time of this investigation, was only offered by the Faculty of Education, Distance Education Unit. However, same scholars argue that 'there are currently no hard definitions

with which one can categorize courses unambiguously as *paper-based distance education* as all courses use some paper-based materials (books)'.

The university formerly offered distance education through three initiatives: Satellite Campuses, the Tele-teaching Project and the National Colleges Project (SAIDE, 1994:33-34). The first initiative had the aim of bringing educational opportunities closer to the communities using distance education, with occasional face-to-face tuition; the second initiative reached out to schools with the focus of preparing them for Matriculation examinations – telephone lines were combined with this. And through the last initiative the university provided students with a wide-range of university-accredited courses (SAIDE, 1996:113). However, the agreement with the National Private Colleges was discontinued due to the fact that the university did not have control of the programs. Thus, the University of Pretoria was faced with the dilemma of either discontinuing distance education or creating a new policy on the programme (Hendrikz, 2004). It chose the latter course of action, and the Distance Education Unit was born in the Faculty of Education in April 2002, with the emphasis on quality in education (SAIDE, 2006).

As the Department of Education suggested (White Paper on Education 3, 1997), the University of Pretoria, with the aid of 'faculties that are potentially involved in distance education', identified niche areas of concern. Therefore, in order to meet the requirements of the new National Qualification Framework for Higher Education, the university (UP, 2005) developed three new world-class programmes:

- The *Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE)* in Education Management and *Special Needs Education* – these replaced the Further Diploma in Education (FDE). These qualifications serve as an admission qualification for the other program.

- *B.Ed. (Hons) in Education Management, Law and Policy*; a postgraduate qualification and students, after obtaining this qualification, can enroll for the Masters degree in Education.

Distance education at University of Pretoria is limited to these few courses that are administered by the Faculty of Education, which is currently the largest contact education campus in South Africa, with more than 16,000 students (UP, 2005). In addition, it is interesting to note that 'no other Faculties currently use distance education methods', even though the university has a flexible delivery mode with many on-line programs based on WebCt. The postgraduate course, the focus of this study, is being run concurrently with the same programme for the conventional students.

### 3.7.2 The BEd (Hons) education management, law and policy study programme

#### 3.7.2.1 Introduction

One of the courses run concurrently by the Faculty of Education as a distance and conventional course is the 'Bachelor of Education' (BEd). However, the program 'Bachelor of Education Honours – BEd (Hons) – was implemented in 2003 as a postgraduate study program (UP: 2004a and 2004b).

#### 3.7.2.2 Its Purpose

According to the university's Programs brochure (2004b:15), 'it aims at equipping the teaching staff and education managers at all levels of education, education management, education policy, and education law.'

#### 3.7.2.3 Admission

The minimum admission requirements into both the distance and conventional modes of this course are the same and should be one of the following:

- A Bachelor's degree and a teacher's Diploma;
- A four-year composite degree in Education;
- An M + 4 teacher's Diploma or an M + 3 teacher's Diploma and a Further Diploma in Education (FDE) or an Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) or
- Another academic qualification considered by the Dean to be sufficient for admission to a specific package. However, it will not be recognised for educational purpose. (UP, 2004a: 40-41; 2004b:15)

However, admission into the distance education study program is open to some extent because students can 'enrol at anytime during the year as the date of enrolment is determined by the academic cycle' (UP, 2004b:7). Another point of difference is the administration of each, which is run by different staff units.

#### 3.7.2.4 Duration

According to the Regulations and Syllabi (2004a:41), 'the program extends over a period of at least two semesters full-time or four semesters part-time (i.e. the distance mode)'. However, study must be completed within eight semesters. For the distance education, the program has been divided into four blocks each of three modules, and students may complete it in a minimum of four years and maximum of five years (UP, 2006).

#### 3.7.2.5 Curriculum

The curricula for both distance and conventional modes of the course are the same. It is made up of three modules, which are the *Fundamental*, *Core* and *Elective* modules. Each module is made up of twelve (12) courses totalling 60 Credits.

### 3.7.3 Special features of the Bachelor of Education (Hons) Education Management, Law and Policy study programme, at University of Pretoria

Certain special features of both modes of education to be found at the University of Pretoria are expanded upon below:

#### 3.7.3.1 Student support

The university places high priority on student support services as 'a philosophy of pre-care and post-care forms the foundation of student support and development, as well as guidance programmes which comprises an annual academic orientation programme for first-year students; extended programmes that make provision for learning development where necessary and tutor and mentor support', (UP, 2003:14) among others. It is important to note that student support has been identified as a supreme quality assurance mechanism in distance education (SAIDE, 1996; Johnson, 1999; Carnwell, 1999, 2000; LaPadula, 2003).

Hence, the Distance Education Unit developed tutorial letters as a means of support through which communication with the students is maintained. According to its Tutorial Booklet (UP, 2006c:3), 'these letters provide academic information regarding study methods, assignments and guidelines on how to complete assignments, preparation for contact sessions and specific guidelines for answering examination questions'. Other learner support interventions include SMS messages, an academic enquiry service (Section 3.7.3.4) and correspondence (UP, 2004, 2006).

#### 3.7.3.2 Contact sessions/discussion classes

The facilitation of learning for the conventional form of the *BEd (Hons) Education Management, Law and Policy* is contact tuition, as students are physically present to receive lectures. This is often 'supported by study material (preferably electronic)' (UP, 2003:6). Conversely, venues for contact tuition with distance learners are scattered all over the *educational catchment area* of the institution.

These lecture tours are presented during the first two weeks of January and the June/July school holidays, as these specific students are educators. These contact sessions, according to the Tutorial Booklet (UP, 2006c), are meant to give the students an opportunity to meet their lecturers, enrich their learning experiences and enable them to ask questions. Though attendance is not be compulsory, the students are encouraged to attend, as history has proven that these sessions have a positive effect on their studies.

#### 3.7.3.3 Tutorial letters/study guides and readers

It is of interest to note that students from both modes of delivery use the same learning materials (the implications of this in relation to the quality of the program will be discussed in the course of this study). At least two letters are sent to the distance education students per module before an examination, aimed at directing, guiding and assisting the students in their studies (UP, 2006c). This also applies to the contact modules where study guides form part of the tutorial package.

#### 3.7.3.4 Short Message Service (SMS)

The use of Short Message Service Technology (SMS) is well developed at this university, and according to the Annual Review (2005c:111), 'Students of the University of Pretoria can now also receive their examination results via an SMS service…' However, this service is especially relevant to the distance education students, as the majority of them are far removed from the university campus. It is used to communicate to the students, important information as well as encouraging them in their studies. This service has been implemented in partnership with MTN (SAIDE, 2006). Conversely, the conventional students have direct access to the facilities of the university but may also make enquiry over the telephone.

#### 3.7.3.5 Administrative letters

The different administrative units of both modes of delivery use administrative letters to 'inform students extensively about administrative and logistic issues' (UP, 2004). According to the Admin Booklet (UP, 2006b), its purpose to the distance education students is to provide them with all the administrative information needed for the program and this may include: the academic cycle and how it works, important dates, learning materials, tutorial booklets, assignments, contact sessions, examinations and website information. Also, administrative enquiries can be made by post, telephone and fax (UP, 2006b).

#### 3.7.3.6 Examinations

Various examination options exist at the university, which can be in the form of open- or closed-book, among others. All conventional students for the programme sit for their examination at the school campus in June and November (except for unique reasons) (UP, 2004a). However, their distance education counterparts sit for theirs in March/April and September/October in about 80 examination centres, scattered throughout the country, to 'enable students to write at a venue near their home' (UP, 2004b) because the enrolled students, who happened to be mostly educators, would then be on holidays.

It is important to note that 'an examination centre assumes responsibility for the arrangements in respect of supervisors during examinations, the occupation and utilisation of examination halls and the handling of students' question papers and examination scripts on the main campus, as well as all alternative venues/examination points' (UP, 2003:10-11). According to the discussion document on the Framework Assessment Policy (2005:3), 'opportunity is created for main examinations, supplementary, re-examinations…and other extraordinary examinations as are required from time to time'.

#### 3.7.3.7 Assessment

The University of Pretoria is committed to Outcomes-based Education; hence, assessment at the university is based on the *continuous assessment* approach, wherein 'students are assessed regularly during the teaching phase'. Its nature '…is usually formative', but with '…summative dimensions' (2005:1). It also includes self-assessment by students.

According to the Instructional Policy – Draft (2003:10), 'assessment practices at the university are aimed at promoting student learning' by helping to:

- Determine whether the student has achieved the learning outcome.
- Guide students' learning in the desired direction (educational impact).
- Certify competence in the light of social responsibility. (UP, 2005:1)

Therefore, it is based on the following guidelines, among others:

- They are subject to internal and external validation and moderation.
- Students are fully informed of all the requirements regarding their assessment in the context of the programme. Clear guidelines are provided in the study guides.
- Students receive constructive feedback on conclusion of assessment opportunities. They have the right of access to their marked question papers and the right to appeal.

Students are fully informed of all the requirements regarding their assessment in the context of the programme. Clear guidelines are provided in the study guides. For instance, the distance education students' formative assessment is often based on the assignment format which 'is compulsory and it is a pre-requisite to write the examination. Students who do not do the assignments will not only lose 30% of their final examination mark, but will not be allowed to write examinations…' (UP, 2004b:2). Assessment serves as confirmation of the

degree to which students have achieved their learning outcomes and students receive constructive feedback on conclusion of assessment opportunities. (UP, 2003:11)

#### 3.7.3.8 Quality assurance

In order to ensure and promote quality education, the Instructional Policy – Draft (UP, 2003:14-15) *strategic benchmarking criteria*, which include Quality assurance and its role players, forms the University of Pretoria's education model and recognition of prior learning and work experience (RPL) among others are used continually by the university. These 'are continually adapted towards education excellence and are continually monitored by line managers with a view to the identification of deficiencies, trends and strengths'. Due to its importance to this study, Chapter Four will focus only on quality issues, as they relate to higher education and the practices at the university, for both modes of delivery (See Section 4.2.3).

#### 3.7.3.9 Learning materials/ tutorial materials

As previously mentioned (Section 3.7.3.3), students from both modes of delivery use the same learning materials. However, to assist the distance education students, any learning materials sent to them contain the complete content of the program and there is no need to purchase any additional textbooks, as extracts from referenced textbooks are provided with the learning materials (UP, 2004). However, according to the Tutorial Booklet (2006), students are advised to purchase one or two of the reference books mentioned in their study guides, since they may need to refer to them in their educational practices. On the other hand, distance education students who live close enough to the university campus, like their contact education counterparts, have access to the campus library.

#### 3.7.3.10 Electronic version of learning materials and study information

With effect from '2004…all registered distance education students are' able to access all learning materials on the university's website. The information includes 'tutorial letters, learning guides, administrative letters and examination information.' (UP, 2004).

#### 3.7.3.11 Library services and computer laboratories

Though the available written material on distance education is notably silent on the aspects of how library services and computer laboratories can be made available to distance education students, the researcher is interested in discovering the methods distance education students, who live a distance from the university, may also have their needs in these respects catered for. For instance, the Department of Information Technology on the main campus of the university controls the centralised computer laboratory centre on Groenkloof Campus – where the Distance Education Unit which is the focus of this study is situated. This centre makes many computers available to the conventional students on an ongoing basis, while the distance education students have access to them only during the two periods of contact tuition, held during January and June/July. This becomes important when considering the question of quality in distance educational study programmes.

With this postgraduate course being offered as it is the University of Pretoria becomes a dual-mode institution that offers full-time residential academic programmes and distance education academic programmes (Reddy, 1993:240; Braimoh, 2003:21). Attitudes toward institutions having *mixed mode* or *dual mode* differ, because some view such institutions as being weak in policy and quality (Tait & Roger, 1999:2).

All the above have serious implications for this research, as past studies into such situations have revealed that resistance to distance education is mostly in regard to the quality of many activities performed in the name of distance

education (NEA, 2000). Therefore, the scrutiny of the quality assurance in higher education as related to South Africa, in general, and this Distance Education Unit, in particular, become important. The researcher hopes that findings from this study will expose gap(s), as the two study programmes are placed side-by-side, for scrutiny, and that this will better direct the efforts made by the Distance Education Unit of this university in bridging identified problems.

## 3.8 Summary

Chapter Three discusses the literature review of distance and conventional education as presently found in the South African higher education system, which is assessed in terms of three indices, namely: *access*, *delivery* and *output*. This is done while mindful of the implications of the literature review of the international perspectives already discussed in Chapter Two (Section 2) of this study.

Finally, Chapter Four will focus on the issue of quality assurance in higher education, which will then serve as the criteria of assessment for the investigation and findings of this study.

# CHAPTER 4

# A REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON QUALITY ASSURANCE IN DISTANCE AND CONVENTIONAL EDUCATION IN RELATION TO ACCESS, DELIVERY AND OUTPUT

## 4.1 Introduction

The notion of quality is as old as creation itself, in the sense that human beings are rationale beings that can place value on things as it suits them. Therefore, defining this term could prove difficult and elusive (Sahney, Banwet & Karunes, 2004). Within higher education, in the words of Barnett (1992:1), '… quality is one of the three central issues, alongside those of access (how can we get more students into the system?), and funding (how can we pay for them, if we do?)'. This became an issue in the 1960s and 1970s when some governments adopted the view that although education had expanded to reach more people, it had not led to wealth and social equality (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 1989). This dilemma has, according to scholars (Arcaro,

1995; Avdjieva & Wilson, 2002; Bornman, 2004; Sahney, Banwet & Karunes, 2004; Telford & Masson, 2005; Firdaus, 2006), evolved to become the single most important issue in education, business and government today. Therefore Chapter Four is devoted to defining what the terms *Quality* and *Quality Assurance* imply in relation to higher education, thereby arriving at a working definition of these terms for the purposes of this study.

Quality, as it relates to *access*, *delivery* and *output* – the three chosen indices of assessment for this study – is elucidated, while linking this to the conceptual framework of education in South Africa today. Additionally, a definition of quality assurance as it applies to both distance and conventional higher education, in general, and South Africa, in particular, is also provided. This then leads on to a review of quality assurance as it exists at the University of Pretoria, for both distance and conventional education.

Lastly, the overall purpose of considering this theoretical evidence is to arrive at a definition of the parameters that determine quality in higher education. (This chapter must be read in conjunction with Chapter Two (Sections 2.2 and 2.3), in which the distinctive features and practices of higher education in both distance and conventional education have been highlighted.) It is the researcher's aim to compare the practices followed in the BEd (Hons) Education Management, Law and Policy programme of the University of Pretoria with the parameters identified through this study. This will then lead to a comparison of the practices in the two modes of education, determining to what extent distance education complements the practices of conventional education at this institution.

## 4.2 The concept of quality in relation to this study

### 4.2.1 "What the Hell is Quality?" (Ball, 1985)

The above question, though asked over two decades ago, is still relevant today. The question of quality in higher education is not new (Green, 1994) and it is a general concern not limited to a specific part of the world. The review of literature (Ball, 1985; Gibson, 1986; De Weert, 1990; Berdahl, Moodie & Spitzberg, 1991; Bradley, 1993; Harvey & Green, 1993; Green, 1994; Riley, 1994; Arcaro, 1995; Brennan & Shah, 2000; Welch, 2000; Saleh, 2001; Williams, 2003; Bornman, 2004) reveals that there is no consensus among many on the definition of quality in terms of education.

According to Harvey & Green (1993:10), 'Quality, like *liberty*, *equality*, *freedom* or *justice*, is a slippery concept.' To Steyn (2000) 'it seems to be an enigmatic concept' while to Riley (1994) the definitions are maybe *illusory*. In fact, we all have an idea of what it is, but we may not be able to define it. A major reason for this, according to Welch (2000:5), is because '… notions of quality are inextricable from the dominant set of values and form of culture in a society – which means that constructions of quality are socially indexed – they change over time, and vary according to political and cultural context'. Reiterating this, Ibtisam (2000:64) cites the words of the Palestinian spokesperson, Hanan Mikhail-Ashrawi, to show what quality means to them (the Palestinians):

> *'Unequivocally, in our dictionary there is no quality under occupation except in the quality of our resistance to it and active rejection of all its imperatives and implications.'*

Also writing on the question of quality in education in China, Price (2000:100) states that '… *Quality* education has been, and still is, seen in narrow class terms, in the privileging of particular subjects; in Europe, until recently, the

languages and (reconstructed) cultures of ancient Greece and Rome'. According to Little (2000:223), in the Papua New Guinea context '… *Quality* has tended to be equated to *Standard* or the outcome of a cycle of education as measured by performance on national examinations'. Hence, in the comments of Harvey and Green (1993:11) '… linking an activity to quality may serve to validate or justify it irrespective of what the notion of quality might mean'. In its relative term, this means that quality can imply anything as long as it suits its users – which can be dangerous. Therefore, one is tempted to conclude that the definition of the term is multi-faceted, and what appears to be quality to one person may not necessarily be quality to another. Does the idea of quality in education equate with the adage that 'One man's meat is another man's poison'?

In an attempt to explain the traditional concepts of quality as it relates to education Astin (1985:25-59) uses the term *excellence*, which may refer to *reputation*, resources, outcomes, and content. Commenting on this later, Dooris and Mortimer (1991:98) explain that 'the ultimate test of how well an institution performs would, by this definition, depend not on the characteristics of the students *admitted*, but rather on their intellectual and personal development *while* they are students'.

Writing on the same issue Green (1994:13) states that 'the traditional concept of quality is, firstly, associated with the notion of providing a product or service that is distinctive and special, and which confers a status on the owner or user'. In other words, many resources are expended on it, thus making it elitist in nature (Barnett, 1992). Secondly, according to (Green, 1994:13) '… there is the notion of quality as a conformance to a specification or standard …' which is a yardstick for measurement.

The researcher thinks an understanding of these traditional concepts helps one to appreciate the shifts earlier noted in higher education by Barnett (1992:5), which are:

- A shift from a system enjoyed by the few to a system in which a large proportion participates and in which an even larger proportion of the population now feels it has claims;
- A shift from higher education which has been essentially part of the cultural apparatus of society, so relegating its finishing-school aspects as it has become a force of production in its own right;
- A shift from higher education being a personal and positional good, to being more of a wider social good, having a general societal value;
- A shift from higher education being valued for its intrinsic properties, to its being an instrumental good, especially for economic survival amidst expanding world markets;
- A shift from the culture characterized by the formation of personal life-world projects, to one dominated by the formation of public and strategic policies, so displacing what we might term the educational project of higher education.

All these points mentioned above reflect our diverse conceptions of higher education, which may be viewed as *the production of qualified manpower* – whereby students are seen as the output; as *a training for a research career* – in which the definition of higher education is given by the academia; as *the efficient management of teaching provision* and as *a matter of extending life chances* – which in turn show our different approaches to the idea of quality.

In addition to this, Barnett (1992) looks into two approaches: the philosophical and the sociological approach. The first can be said to lean towards the 'emotive theory', which reflects the attachment of the term to something that evokes positive feeling. (To this definition the researcher feels inclined to add '…in its

user', as there may be disagreement on what is positive or negative.) The second approach reflects some social forces that lead to rival definitions of quality.

Another defining attempt to note is Green (1994:15-16), who identifies the following definition as having been adopted by the users in higher education: quality as *fitness for purpose*; quality as *effectiveness in achieving institutional goals*; and quality as *meeting customer's stated or implied needs*.

It can be argued that all the above has one stymied in the attempt to define quality, and Frazer (1994:103) notes that 'It is strange that, although there is clearly a consensus that quality in higher education is important, there is no agreement either between, or within countries about what is meant by quality'. Segers and Dochy (1996) also support this view. According to De Weert (1990), 'increasing debate in enhancing quality in higher education has not kept pace with a better understanding of this concept'. Steyn (2000:9) writes 'a literature survey indicates that the majority of authors define quality as *continuously meeting and exceeding the needs of customers'*. Unfortunately, according to scholars (Vroeijenstijn, 2001; Sahney et al. 2004), in higher education there is no consensus on whether *the customer* is the institution, the student, the future employer, or the society. On the other hand, Dickson, Pollock and Troy (1995:63) observe that 'Education may be unique in the sense that it is difficult for the customer to assess the quality and relevance of the service' – this is more so for the students.

Hence, Barnett (1992:7) argues for the term *quality* by identifying its two dominant and rival concepts, which are communicative and instrumental, that have stemmed from two concepts of higher education as something of '… value and propriety in the academic world, wherein the attitude of the academic is … self-justificatory ...', and as '… the issuing of products, with inputs and outputs'.

The communicative concept Barnett (1992:7) sees as deficient, in that it 'focuses only on the interests of academics as researchers and not as educators'. Commenting on this, Zemsky, Barblan and Green (1993) explain that the university sees itself as a kind of 'veto-organisation'; while Ajayi, Goma and Johnson (1996:172) argue in support of the idea that it is not possible for a university to be 'a republic of sovereign faculties'. Though universities must enjoy some degree of autonomy Frazer (1994:102) is of the opinion that they '… must be accountable (not merely financially) to society, to employers, to students, and to each other … as they exist to generate new knowledge and to safeguard and transmit the cultural heritage'.

Citing Mayor (1993), Ajayi, Goma and Johnson (1996:172) lament that 'it should not be surprising that, unless the universities themselves introduce an effective quality control mechanism, others will be tempted to do it for them'. However, as noted by Williams (2003:14), 'like any major producer of goods or services, higher education institutions must obviously take account of their customers' wishes, but they must also be prepared to promote their own vision of what customers, individually and collectively, will appreciate from a longer term perspective'.

The second concept – the instrumental concept – according to Barnett (1992:8), 'takes [as] its point of departure the values and interests of the external world, both as to the purposes of higher education and as to the means by which its quality ought to be assessed and improved'. But, unfortunately, the internal nature of higher education is neglected. However, as implied by several authors (Barnett, 1992; Williams, 2003) and in the researcher's opinion, the two concepts should be complementary.

From the forgoing, one can identify the protagonists in the quality debate as the government, the academia, the students, together with their parents, the taxpayers and the employers of labour (Bornman, 2004; Sirvanci, 2004; Telford &

Masson, 2005). All these now play a major role in defining what quality education is and signal several quarters from which concern for quality emanate (Frazer, 1994; Green, 1994; Stubbs, 1994; Sahney et al. 2004; Sirvanci, 2004).

Thus, in Britain and in most parts of the world, according to Williams (2003:1), 'the idea that institutions subsidized by government must carry out certain functions led to a rapid growth of *enterprise* and *entrepreneurialism* as universities … learned the art of survival in this new world'. In the opinion of Guskin and Marcy (2003:29), 'higher education has come under close scrutiny for its use of financial resources…because it is a huge business which costs taxpayers and students immense amounts of money, and in part because its product – student learning – has been questioned by employers and governing bodies, and it is not subject to systematic outcome measures'. In William's (2003:4) words: 'to be enterprising has undertones of boldness, resourcefulness, originality, creativity and imagination …' However, views on the university operating as an enterprise differ and much attention on the implications of this for this study has been dealt with in Chapter Two (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.2.2.).

Taking all into consideration, there is no gainsaying the fact that quality is very important in higher education (Firdaus, 2006). Corroborating this Wilkinson, Wilkinson and Guilluame (2000) explain that there '… seems to be agreement that higher education institutions will need to make adjustments to their academic structures, to their methods of teaching and to the systems by which they deliver their courses in order to meet new challenges' of which quality seems to be a major one. Ljosa (1995) concludes by expressing the view that rigidity and lack of innovation on the part of any teaching institution will have a serious impact on the quality of their teaching.

### 4.2.2 Working definition of *quality* in relation to this study

The main focus of this study, as already elucidated in the introduction (Chapter 1, Section 1), is to focus on the issues of *access*, delivery, and *output* as they relate to both distance and conventional education. Therefore, a working definition of quality for this study should embrace these three indices.

A review of all the definitions given in this study presents these major trends in the definitions of quality:

- The development of the human talent (Astin, 1985);
- The embracing of both communicative and instrumental views (Barnett, 1992);
- A conformance to a specification or standard (Green, 1994);
- The goals, process and extent of achievement of an institution (Baume, 1990; Frazer, 1994; Segers & Dochy, 1996) and
- Complete goal fulfilment that involves process and input factors leading to visualized outcome (De Weert, 1990; Sahney et al. 2004) and
- Continuously meeting and exceeding customers' needs (Steyn, 2002).

Having perused available literature on the concept, the researcher is of the opinion that each scholar should try to come up with a framework on what quality should mean, which will be governed by the purpose of the study – a view also supported by scholars (Green, 1994; Bornman, 2004).

Hence, quality in relation to this study implies:

> *'The conformance of an institution's goals, process and input factors, and evaluation systems to the needs specified by their clients (the government, the students, the financiers and the employers of labour) in relation to what the institution too deems fit as relevant to the specified needs'.*

Hence, from this definition, all the indices namely: *access*, *delivery* and *output* – can be deduced.

Firstly, an educational institution should not exist if it cannot align itself with the major aims of the country's government of the day. For instance, higher education has moved from the *elitist* system into a *mass* system, thereby opening up access to many people who have previously been denied educational opportunities. However, the institutions should not be silent on insisting that quality in education be maintained, thereby ensuring that the government also live up to their responsibility of sufficiently supporting the system financially, to safeguard this. This will involve the government supplying input factors which, according to De Weert (1990:59), '… usually refer to resources necessary for institutions to carry out their functions: financial, qualified staff, technical and administrative equipment'. There is still the unsettled question of 'Who pays for the education, after the doors to learning have been opened wider than before?' Academics are troubled about the standard of education falling should the available resources – which formerly were meant to be used by fewer students – now be spread out to the maximum, to facilitate the learning of the masses.

Secondly, the students' needs as determined by the employer of labour, must also be taken into consideration. There is no point in offering programmes that will not attract students. The appropriate phrase suggested by many scholars, when defining the term *quality,* is *fitness-for-use* (Steyn, 2002). In addition to this is the aspect of student participation in determining how best the institution can help them meet their (i.e. the students') goals, in relation to the process of education itself (Bornman, 2004; Lomas, 2004). According to Omachonu, Ross and Swift (2004), all the processes in any organisation determine how customers see quality.

The third consideration is that of the financier of the education who, according to Weller and McElwee (1997), expects a return on investment.

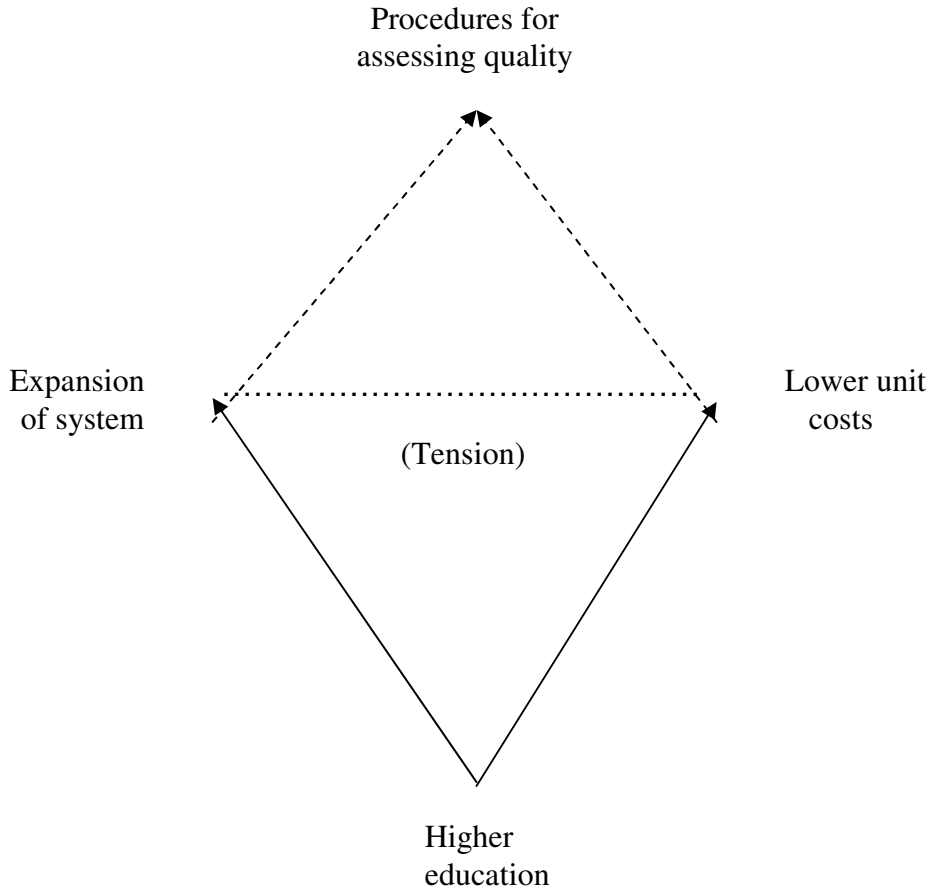
The three points mentioned above highlight the need for quality in access and, which invariably affect the quality of students' output.

### 4.2.3 Quality in relation to the three indices of assessment in this study

#### 4.2.3.1 Quality and access issues in higher education

A major trend that has contributed to growing governmental interest in establishing policy mechanisms to ensure quality and accountability in higher education is mass higher education (El-Khawas, De-Pietro & Holm-Nielsen, 1998). For instance, in South African higher education, there has been a chronic tension between widening participation, and quality and standards, which has continuously been a key developmental dilemma (Scott, 2003). According to Barnett (1992:1) 'there is … a possible conflict of interest between expansion and diminishing unit costs', and this he represents in Figure 4.1, shown below:

**Figure 4.1 The quality gap in higher education**




Source: Barnett (1992: 2)

Figure 4.1 depicts the idea that as educational resources are being stretched in the directions of expansion – to serve a higher student number – and the *squeezing* of resources – to lower unit costs – doubts about the quality of the products delivered by the system emerge (Barnett, 1992; Green, 1994). It is generally believed that the same resources are being expended on an increased number of students, since the government is continually faced with dwindling available finances to expend on education.

However, access to higher education might not necessarily mean having access to equal quality opportunities. To Astin (1985:80) such a definition is inadequate and 'any adequate definition must take into consideration the quality of the opportunity itself'. Therefore, to Astin (1985:82), 'equality of access relates to the number of available places' and also extends to the question of whether '… students have equal access to the best opportunities [for them] regardless of race, gender, income, social class, or other personal qualities'. For instance, Eisemon and Holm-Nielsen (1995) present an irony in the case of Brazil, where 'the private universities … have become the government's instrument for expanding access' (where approximately 72% of the higher education students are enrolled), but they generally are provided a lower quality of education. According to Riley (1994:3,15) 'quantity and equality are interconnected: not separate entities but inseparable features of any good education provision', hence '…the notion of quality should also embrace a concept of equal opportunities, which is focused not just on outcomes but on processes – how students experience and participate in the education system'. Echoing this, Ajayi, Goma and Johnson (1996:205) explain that 'equality of educational opportunity must mean being provided with the necessary tools to develop one's own special talents to the point of excellence'.

Conversely, focus can be placed on the many implications inherent in the issues of access and quality. Some of these include the social background of parents – which could negatively affect students' performance – and choice of institutions and/or courses. This has led to what some people have tagged 'the under-prepared student' (Astin, 1985) who, if correctly assisted, has the potential to succeed (Clark & Plooy, 2003). Examples of such successes are to be found in the remedial courses organised by universities. In support of this Berdahl and Spitzberg (1991:165) explain that another way of judging quality is what is known as *value-added,* which means that 'an institution that admits students who are of lower academic qualification, but helps them to gain in knowledge and skills' will be regarded as an institution of quality. But are institutions accepting of all

students and is such assistance provided free of charge? Therefore, the question arises: even in cases where students have access to schooling – do they really have access to knowledge?

According to Morrow (1993/4), physical access is not the same as epistemological access. Echoing this view, Millard (1991:67) laments that even 'though legislation can mandate affirmative action; can impose penalty for discrimination in admission, hiring and promotion; and most important can provide assistance for students who need it', yet '… the way students are treated in classrooms, are counselled, are encouraged to persist, and are made to feel an integral part of the programme and institution cannot be legislated'. Of relevance here is the issue of student support services, which have been identified as a key to success in distance education, but which in most cases the student is often far removed from.

Another burning issue is that of the student loan scheme, which has received much criticism, based on the fact that students are indebted even before they even find employment, when such employment is not assured. Therefore, attitudes toward the question of access to equal quality education differ, as some view it is utopian – which will be too expensive to attain (Astin, 1985).

On the issue of technology in education, Clark and Plooy (2003), citing the expression, *Everyone is invited* – the slogan of Samsung, a computer and equipment manufacturing giant – lament that many students (both of distance and conventional education) are prevented from participating in equal quality educational opportunities as a result of the non-availability of technology to them. According to Lelliot, Pendlebury and Enslin (2000), the promises of information and communications technology (ICT), though 'come couched in the language of access and equity' and is 'appealing both to social justice and to efficiency … [but they] are both false and misleading…because the prerequisites for an

educationally sound and inclusive access to ICT can be met by very few African countries at present'.

Lastly, Zirkle (2004) advises that there is the need for institutions to 'continually evaluate non-instructional areas such as registration, advising library and media resources, and technical support, to determine if barriers exist that may keep students from accessing courses and programs'. These thoughts are even more applicable to students in distance education study programmes.

#### 4.2.3.2 Quality and delivery in higher education

Delivery in higher education have previously been influenced by the form, which the particular institution or the course it is running (be it distance or conventional education). However, with the advent of technology, there has been a *blurring* in the modes of delivery, as there is a *borrowing* between the systems – especially from distance education to conventional education. According to Ragan (1999), gone are the days when time, location and pace of study were the measuring indicators for quality of education. However, there is the need to ensure the quality of the education provided irrespective of the form.

Clark and Plooy (2003), while commenting on the use of technology in higher education, emphasize that 'technology on its own is not sufficient to create an effective learning environment' as 'the human factor is still needed to provide an opportunity for learners to critically engage with the course material'. Hence, Chickering and Gamson (1991:5) propose the following principles for good educational practice:

- Encouragement of student-faculty contact;
- Encouragement of co-operation among students;
- Encouragement of active learning;
- Gives prompt feedback;
- Emphasizes time-management on task;

- Communicates high expectations and
- Respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

Commenting on these principles, Clark (2003) explains that the above listed set 'is generally accepted as the most succinct and comprehensive and is based on research of teaching in higher education institutions'. Therefore, irrespective of the mode of education and the facilities of technology, lecturers must be well trained in pedagogical matters (Christie, 2001; Zirkle, 2004), as these go a long way in determining the quality of the delivery.

Another important issue noted by scholars (Ramsden & Dodds, 1989; Van Niekerk & Herman, 1996) is that evaluation of the quality of a learning programme must not rest solely on feedback from the lecturers, but must involve the learners, as the recipients and cause for the study programme.

#### 4.2.3.3 Quality and output in higher education

An important element in *output*, in relation to quality, is the performance of students or the achievement of students. However, an element of output should also extend to include the non-completion rate of students, as many drop out of the educational system before they complete their courses. In the words of Ramsden and Dodds (1989:13), 'data concerning the outcomes and processes of student learning are possibly the most significant type of evaluation data and there can be no substitute for this type of information'. According to Yorke (1999:1) the non-completion issue in higher education – an evasive concept – is sometimes political as 'there is a general international perception that economies are best served by maximizing non-completion …'

According to Scott (2003:45), in South Africa 'there are major concerns about the differentials in quality and standard across the sector and whether graduates are acquiring appropriate skills [and] in the absence of a mature national quality

assurance system, deficiencies and prejudices cannot be addressed, to the detriment of equity and development'.

Citing various research findings, Yorke (1999) groups reasons for student non-completion of courses as: course factors, institutional factors, study environmental factors, personal blame and motivational factors. Expatiating on these further, the following are given:

- Poor quality of teaching;
- Unsupportive academic culture;
- Financial difficulty;
- The demands of other commitments;
- Being a working-class student;
- Low-academic entrance qualification;
- Students' lack of interest or commitment;
- Wrong choice of programmes; and
- Unmet students' expectations.

It is fascinating to note that the reasons given above may lead to both failure and non-completion of study programmes. Buttressing most of the factors expressed above, Scott (2003:49) laments that 'educational development work in South Africa has produced substantial evidence that the generally poor performance of students from disadvantaged groups is not due to shortage of talent, but has to do with the incapacity of the existing higher education structures and approaches to cater for diverse educational background'.

Also commenting on this, Antony and Gnanam (2004) explain that what becomes important, especially in relation to distance education, in which physical classrooms may not necessarily be important, is the access of students to the supportive and intellectual input of counsellors, among others. However, according to Yorke (1999:110), improving access has its implication – which is:

'the opening-up of higher education cannot be accomplished without risk of non-completion'. Suggestions that have been given on correcting this challenge include: improvement of teaching and learning by institutions, enacted policies for higher education, student application through their own commitment and improving advice to prospective students (Yorke, 1999; Telford & Masson, 2005).

Another interesting aspect to the debate, which is of importance to the issue of quality, is that even pass rates of students may not necessarily prove the quality of learning of students. According to Ramsden and Dodds (1989:52), 'evidence from research into tertiary student learning strongly suggests that inappropriate assessment encourages students to adopt learning strategies aimed narrowly at anticipated examination questions' and it is not surprising that 'students may graduate with fundamental misconceptions of physical and social phenomena'. Therefore, quality assessment has been advised.

From the above, there is no gainsaying the fact that, the quality level of the delivery, as it relates to their processes, contributes greatly in determining the performances and overall achievements of students.

## 4.3 Conceptual framework: the move from situational to transactional

McMillan and Schumacher (1984:11) define theory, as an 'explanation, a systematic account of relationships among phenomena'. Expatiating further, Garrison (2000:3) states that, it is a 'coherent and systematic ordering of ideas, concepts and models with the purpose of constructing meaning to explain, interpret and shape practice'. Though the theoretical field of distance education is just developing, attempts have been made by scholars to provide some theories. Major ones are: Independent Study (Wedemeyer, 1971); Industrial Production Model (Peters, 1993); Guided Didactic Conversation (Holmberg, 1989);

Transactional Distance Theory – TDT (Moore, 1990); Concept of Control (Garrison, 1989) and Collaborative Educational Perspective (Henri, 1992).

Interestingly, the majority of these have been modified to reflect the continual changes within the practical application of distance education, while many require further research. Giving one of the major reasons for this shift, Garrison (2000:2) explains that previously emphasis in distance education was on 'structural constraints (geographical distance)', but is now shifted to 'transactional issues (teaching and learning)'.

However, the Transactional Distance Theory (TDT) is of particular interest to this study. Reasons for this are:

Firstly, according to Peters (1998:29) 'the concept…is a significant contribution to distance education pedagogies' as it again proposes that the essential distance in distance education is transactional, and not spatial or temporal (Gorsky & Caspi, 2005).

Secondly, it goes a long way to determine the quality of the delivery applied to teaching and learning. With the move to the constructivist approach (Fraser & Lombard, 2002; Garrison, 1996), the student assumes the responsibility of constructing knowledge and the more this is aided, the better for students. As a result of this, constructivists, with the aim of improving the quality of education, have suggested the term *transactional distance* and studies have revealed that it 'applies not just to distance education, but to any educational setting' (Bischoff et al. 1996). This is all the more relevant as the differences between both forms of education are *blurred* with the advent of technology.

Moore was the first to moot the idea of *transactional distance* in 1972, but did not *tag it* to education as such till 1980 (Stirling, 1997). According to Moore (1996), the term '*transactional* has its roots in John Dewey and he (Dewey, 1938:43)

states that, 'An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and…his environment…The environment…is whatever conditions interact with personal needs…to create the experience …'. In support of this Stirling (1997) refers to it as denoting 'the special nature of the relationship between the learner and the instructor during learning'.

In an attempt to explain the concept, Moore (1993) defines it in relation to interaction in an instructional program, 'as a function of dialogue, structure, and learner's autonomy'. According to him (Moore, 1993), it is pedagogical, not geographic, and necessitates 'special organizations and teaching procedures'. Since then, several authors have lent their voices to its definition. Peters (1998:28) refers to it as 'communication of mental distance'; Boyd and Apps (1980) cited by Moore (1996:22) explain that, 'it connotes the interplay among the environment, the individuals and the patterns of behaviours in a situation'. And above all, Rumble (1986), cited by Moore (1996) and Mueller, (1997) explains that, 'in any educational programme, even in face-to-face education, there is some *transactional distance*' (TD). Moore (1996), on his part, indicates that *transactional distance* is a continuous and relative variable because it exists in varying degrees.

Transactional distance is related to teaching and learning, and it involves three variables: Dialogue, Structure and Learner's Autonomy. Dialogue, according to Moore (1996:23), 'is developed by teachers and learners in the course of the interactions that occur when one gives instruction and the other responds'. But he makes a distinction between *dialogue* and *interaction*, which are sometimes used interchangeably - only the former has the positive qualities. Therefore, the relationship becomes 'purposeful, constructive and valued by each party'. It is worthy to note that the nature of the medium of delivery has a direct effect on the extent and quality of the dialogue, and 'transactional distance will be overcome depending on the extent of this variable'. Young and Marks-Maran (1999), in their

studies, add that when dialogue is neglected attention becomes shifted on the 'one who knows (the teacher)' from the 'one who does not know (the learner)'.

On the other hand, 'Structure' refers to the ways in which the teaching programme is designed, and it usually reflects 'the rigidity or flexibility of the programme's educational objectives, teaching strategies and evaluation methods which in turn determines to what extent each learner's differences is taken into consideration' (Mueller, 1997). In support of this, Garrison, (2000) states that it 'reflects the course's design and is largely a function of the teaching organization and communication media'. Therefore, as dialogue increases, structure decreases, and this is given as:

*- S + D  Less distant*

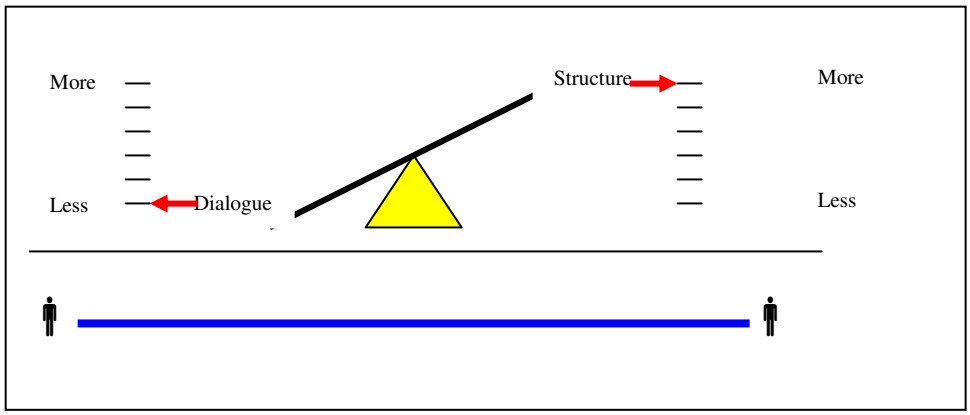
*- D + S  More distant*

Where 'S' depicts Structure and 'D' dialogue

(Moore, 1996; Stirling, 1997)

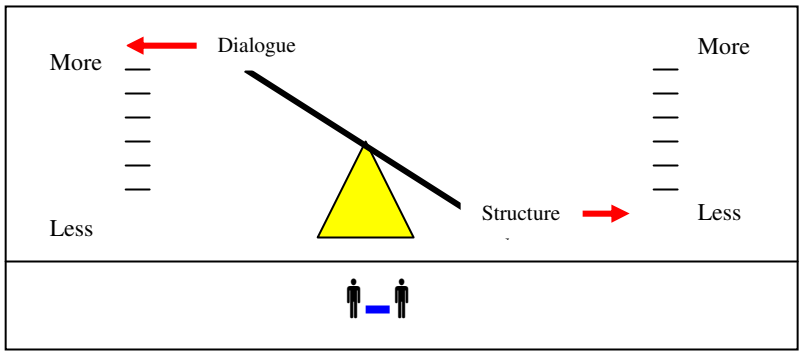
The figures below explain this concept:

**Figure 4.2: More structure, less dialogue**




Source: Encyclopaedia of Educational Technology (2004)

**Figure 4.3: More dialogue, less structure**




Source: Encyclopaedia of Educational Technology (2004)

The Third dimension is the Learner's Autonomy, which Peters (1998:48) refers to as 'a state of affairs in which a person is no longer the object of educational guidance, influences, effects and obligation, but the subject of his or her own education'. However, because learners have been trained to be dependent on the school system, autonomy becomes difficult and teachers are obligated to assist learners to attain this (Moore, 1996). Therefore, according to Moore (1991:5) 'the greater the transactional distance (TD), the more autonomy the learner has to exercise'. As said by Mueller (1997), 'the interactive nature of the medium is the major determinant of dialogue in the teaching-learning environment, and by manipulating the communications media, dialogue can be increased, and thus transactional distance reduced'. However, Garrison (2004:9) is of the opinion that there is a need to clarify the confusion around whether structure and dialogue are variables, clusters or dimensions.

Attempts have been made to verify the concept *transactional distance* (TD) by Saba (1998), who later added the dimensions of the variables of learner and instructor control (Saba & Shearer, 1994). Their findings revealed that there are patterned relations between transactional distance, dialogue and structure. Transactional distance increases when dialogue decreases and structure increases (Sterling, 1997). Bischoff et al. (1996) concurs by acknowledging that electronic mail has effect on transactional distance, which reduces when dialogue

is increased. Further evidence comes from Amundsen (1996:64) that 'the hypothesis that the more distant the programme, the more autonomous the learners who will choose to participate was tested… and found to have some positive effects'. Even though Gorsky and Caspi (2005:9) are of the opinion that the theory 'was never a valid scientific theory', but suggest it could be approached philosophically, still, Garrison (2004:9) states that 'clearly, Moore's work remains one of the most appealing and well known theories of distance education … even though more macro level theoretical work is required …'

Finally, this concept in its essence highlights the importance of the quality of the in distance education. The unit of study for this research is wholly based on the *print* mode of delivery (Section 3.5.2). Hence, it is part of the focus of this study to investigate the transactional quality inherent in this, at this institution. According to Garrison (2004:12), 'while distance education has relied heavily on print, only recently have distance education theorists begun to recognize the unique characteristics of text-based communication and realize that such communication may impact the facilitation of learning outcomes in different ways'.

## 4.4 Ensuring quality in higher education

'We are all responsible for quality.' (Barnett, 1992:117)

Since quality has become a great issue in higher education, then ensuring it becomes imperative. For instance, in the United Kingdom, funding of higher education is attached to quality as being one of its criteria. This is, however, not just limited to the western world, but has spread to other parts of the world (Williams, 2003: Thune, 2005). Therefore, according to Segers and Dochy (1996:116), 'the university, unlike before, is required to justify itself, its purposes, its methods of attaining those purposes, its allocation of precious resources, its priorities and its responsibilities to the individual and to the society'. However, according to Pond (2002), though technology and dissolution of educational

hierarchy have led to 'accessibility, flexibility and in some cases, [reduced] cost, it also creates further challenges for quality assurance and accreditation'. Nevertheless, there is no consensus on its definition. But another aspect brought to the debate is by Saleh (2001), who is of the opinion that 'quality control and quality assurance, together with the assessment of quality system (that is, the monitoring evaluation and audit of procedures) are overlapping functions in regulating how an organization or venture works'.

Several attempts have been made to define the term *Quality Assurance*. Segers and Dochy (1996:119) define the concept in educational settings as '… the intention and activities planned to assure quality'. In the same vein, Lim (2001:13) defines it as 'all the policies and processes directed to ensuring the maintenance and enhancement of quality'. The Centre for Quality Assurance (CQA), Malaysia (2002), when regarding quality assurance in higher education, refers to it as 'the totality of systems, resources and information devoted to maintaining and improving the quality and standards of teaching, scholarship and research as well as students' learning experience'. Citing Smit, Wilkinson and Buchner (1999:2), Wilkinson, Wilkinson and Guilluame (2000:2), give the amalgamated definition of quality assurance compiled from a number of different sources in this table:

**Table 4.1: Amalgamated definition of quality assurance**

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Policies | that will | ensure | That the quality of | Teaching | Is | Maintained |
| Attitudes | | assure | | Scholarship | | Enhanced |
| Means / Actions | | confirm | | Education | | |
| Procedures | | guarantee | | | | |
| A system | | demonstrate | | | | |
| Attention | | certify | | | | |

Source: Wilkinson, Wilkinson and Guilluame (2000:2)

For quality to be ensured in any setting there is the need for it to be integrated into the system. According to Prasad and Antony (2004), institutionalizing and internalizing the quality assurance processes is the key to sustenance of the system. This has led to the term *Total Quality* (Lewis & Smith, 1994) with various synonyms: *Total Continuous Improvement* (Horwitz, 1990) and *Total Quality Care* (Barnett, 1992), to give few examples. In an attempt to clarify this definition, Lewis and Smith (1994:29) refer to *Total Quality* as '… a set of philosophies by which management systems can direct the efficient achievement of the objectives of the organisation to ensure customer satisfaction and maximise stakeholder value … [thereby becoming] a way of life for doing business for the entire organisation'. Also, Barnett (1992:117) refers to *Total Quality Management* (TQM) as '… an attempt, a strategy, to produce an institution-wide commitment to quality assurance'. On the other hand, Scurr (1990:17) sees, *Total Quality Management* (TQM) as 'continuously meeting agreed customer requirements at the lowest cost by releasing the potential of all employees'. According to Steyn (2000:11) 'quality management focuses on the continuous improvement of all

processes on all levels and views no process as perfect', hence, 'achieving quality is a journey and not a destination'.

In the words of Steyn (2000:8-9), 'literature reveals that there is a growing interest in the application of quality management (QM) philosophy to the education sector' and this 'can constitute a significant part of an initiative to restructure and continuously improve all education processes for the benefit of all stakeholders in general and learners in particular' because quality, according to McIlroy and Walker (1996:134), is defined under the circumstance 'by the expectations and the perceptions of the end users'. Hence the statement: 'we are all responsible for quality' – from the porter, to the most senior person in the institution. This, according to Wilkinson, Wilkinson and Guilluame (2000) implies that there is a measure of control involved in quality assurance. Nonetheless, McIlroy and Walker (1998:133) are of the opinion that '… application of business solutions to educational problems is contentious', as some believe that *business* has *no business* in education while others claim there are some benefits (Thune, 2005).

Purposes of assuring quality, which can be assessed both externally and internally, as given by Brennan and Shah (2000), are accountability and improvement. While commenting on this, Lomas (2004:158) is of the view that the 'two major approaches to quality improvement are quality assurance and quality enhancement', but he also asserts that 'in order to embed quality, quality enhancement rather than quality assurance provides a surer way forward'. Therefore, several countries now have standards for both internal and external quality assurance. For instance, according to Thune (2005:6), the European standards for quality assurance within higher education institutions include 'policy and procedures for quality assurance; approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards; assessment of students; quality assurance of teaching staff; learning resources and student support; information systems and public information'.

However, Wilkinson, Wilkinson and Guilluame (2000:2) lament that 'it is not easy to find universally accepted criteria, and it is likely that there will be differences of view among countries…and even within countries …' which may be determined by ascertaining from which perspective the quality is being determined. Corroborating this, El-Khawas, DePietro-Jurand and Holm-Nielsen (1998:s.a.) explain that:

> *'There are wide differences among countries in their approaches to quality… Argentina, for example, has introduced quality assurance mechanisms that depend on an enhanced information and evaluation system and new rules for funding the universities. Many countries have developed accreditation systems, while others have established evaluation committees or centres that carry out cycles of external review. In many countries, independent bodies have been established, often a single national agency but sometimes, as in the Netherlands, Mexico, or Romania, separate agencies are responsible for different types of institutions, regions or purposes'*.

Buttressing this is the experience of India in 1994, as narrated by Prasad and Antony (2004), which established '… the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), as an autonomous body to assess and accredit institutions of higher education and its unit thereof …'

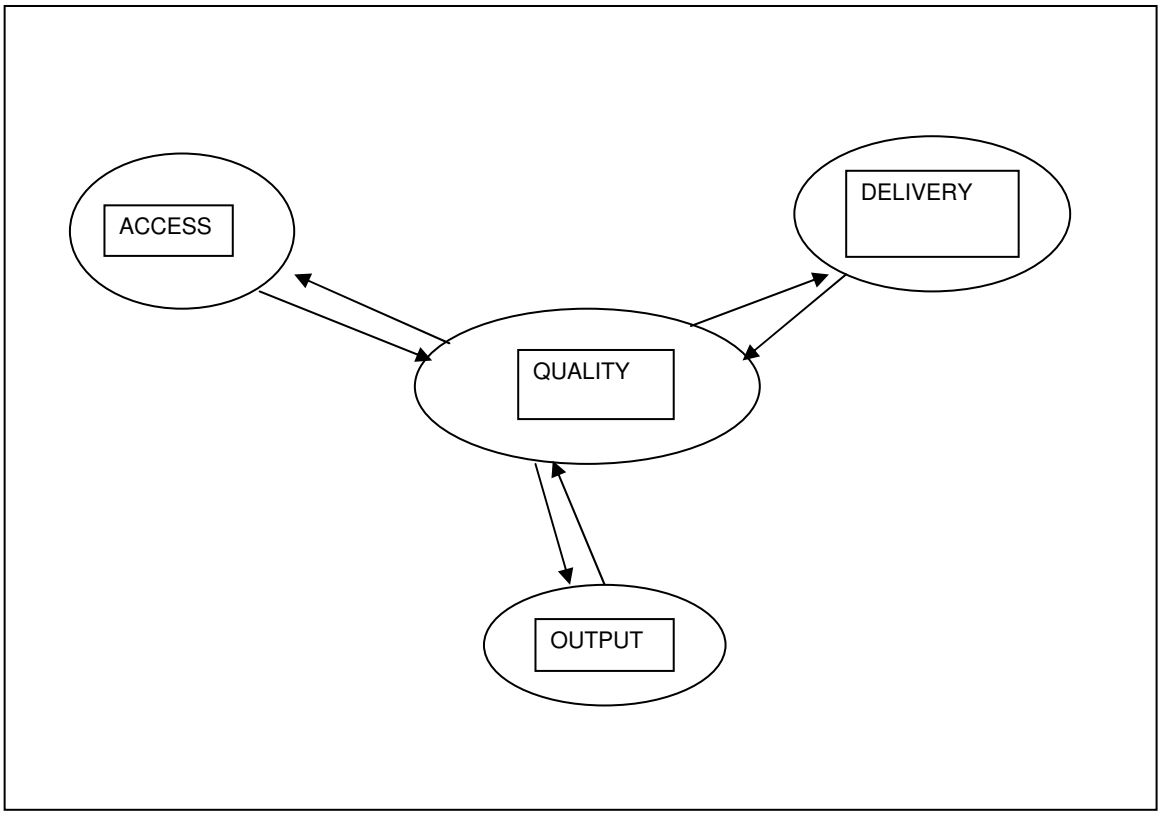
Though debates on the forms of quality assurance rage on in international settings and within individual countries (El-Khawas, DePietro-Jurand & Holm-Nielsen, 1998), Barnett (1992) identifies three approaches which clash – these are: Peer Review, Performance Indicators and Judgements of the Market. Nonetheless, it is of interest to note that in spite of all the hullabaloos on quality assurance, there have started to emerge areas of consensus, which El-Khawas, DePietro-Jurand and Holm-Nielsen (1998) refer to as *consensus elements of quality assurance*, which are as a result of 'wide-scale cultural borrowing among countries'. Some of these are semi-autonomous agencies; explicit standards and expectations, self-study by institutions; external review and public reporting.

### 4.4.1 Rationale for 'quality assurance

It is obvious Africa, most especially, has not been spared the crisis in higher education which, according to Ajayi, Goma and Johnson (1996:145), '… includes diminishing financial resources, stagnation and deterioration of physical resources with their debilitating impact on human resources (deficient teaching staff and brain drain)'. Supporting this, El-Khawas, DePietro-Jurand and Holm-Nielsen (1998:s.a.), lament '… the fiscal constraints faced by many countries, coupled with increasing demand, [that] has led to overcrowding, deteriorating infrastructure, lack of resources for non-salary expenditures, such as textbooks and laboratory equipment, and a decline in the quality of teaching and research activities'. However, at the centre of all these is the issue of quality which directly impacts on the issues of access, and output.

All over the world there is tension between government concern to make higher education more accessible to their people, and the funding of such. According to Barnett (1992) higher education is capital-intensive, thereby leading to *the squeezing of resources*, which eventually lead to the question of educational quality. This is because inputs (such as staff, library facilities, research, etc) are affected, which will in turn determine the state of the delivery modes, and eventually, student dropout and completion rates, and the eventual output. Therefore, it can be deduced that at the centre of these three indices of assessment is the issue of quality, as represented in Figure 4.4. below:

**Figure 4.4: The impacting nature of quality on access, delivery and output**




In this figure, quality is depicted as being central to the issues of access, delivery modes and output. In a society where the extension of access to higher education for the general population is the norm, the governmental policy for such access will be reflected in the policies of the institutions of higher learning. Of additional interest is the level of 'epistemological access, in which one is interested in finding out the access of the students to quality learning which is influenced by a number of factors depending on the level of development of such countries: the qualification of academic staff members, such being employed in only one full-time job; the presence of adequate physical, electronic and administrative support services; appointment and promotion of staff is based on academic merit and not on political or social connections; and the presence of a

fair degree of academic freedom' (Lim, 2001). All these are major issues, especially in developing countries.

Lastly, is the question of the quality of the, which should reflect the goals of the institution and the process followed to attain those goals, which in turn affect student output. Hence, the inclusion of quality as a determining factor to test the end product of the educational process. There is thus interplay between quality and the three chosen modes of assessment for this research study.

## 4.5 Understanding quality assurance in higher education

### 4.5.1 Introduction

According to Brennan and Shah (2000:2) the concept of 'quality in higher education was not invented in the 1990s and it [higher education] has always possessed the mechanisms for this', which include: 'the qualifications necessary for students to gain admission…and subsequently get a degree; the qualifications necessary to be appointed to an academic post or to achieve promotion to professor…and evaluation through peer review of research and publications' to mention, but a few. If these factors had not always been present, how could it have been possible for universities, over the past one and a half centuries, to have produced much research and scholarship, and trained and educated people? (Trow, 1994) Therefore, in this section, a cursory glance will be taken at quality assurance across the globe and its operation in South African higher education, in general, and at the University of Pretoria, specifically.

### 4.5.2 A global view of quality assurance in distance and conventional education

According to Pond (2002), the traditional mainstays of quality assurance have been 'physical attendance, contact hours, proctored testing, formal academic credentials for instructors/trainers, library holdings, and other factors [which] are often impractical or simply irrational in today's educational reality'. However, society is dynamic and, as a result, institutions of higher learning are incessantly called to question as to their relevance to the society and the need for accountability. In the words of El-Khawas, De-Pietro-Jurand and Holm-Nielsen (1998), 'complex questions about how to measure educational quality are gaining new urgency because of two recent developments: the widening use of educational technology and the burgeoning interest in global delivery of educational services' – therefore, the need to scrutinize teaching methods in higher institutions.

According to Antony and Gnanam (2004:154) 'the indicators of quality and good practices for the traditional institutions are generally well understood and accepted', which as earlier said involves different efforts by diverse countries. In support of this, the Centre for Quality Assurance (CQA), Malaysia (2002), explains that universities have traditionally used several mechanisms to ensure the quality of their programs. Also, in India, Antony and Gnanam (2004:15) elaborate that:

> *'The National Assessment and Accreditation Council – the national quality assurance agency – promotes good practices that are generally accepted by academia. In the Indian context, computer facility with easy access to even non-computer science students is seen as a mark of 'quality learning resources' in a traditional institution. The open access system in the library with on-line library facilities is considered a good practice under the management of learning resources. A traditional quality institution is expected to have a functioning counselling centre and a placement office. Student seminars and projects are aspects to be encouraged under avenues of learning.'*

In addition to this in the United Kingdom, according to Williams (2005), once approved, higher education institutions 'have unlimited powers to award own degrees and other qualifications' as such 'there is no programme accreditation system' because they are self-accrediting. Going further on this, Williams (2005) explains that presently, the new quality assurance landscape in the United Kingdom, 'puts responsibility for assuring quality and standards clearly within institutions; places certain obligations on institutions and requires institutions to publish full, accurate and verifiable information about quality and standards for students and others (not just put out a prospectus)'.

Equally, in the United States, Eaton (2001:10-11) explains that 'the government accepts the principle of self-regulation in the determination of higher education quality – and the related principle of institutional autonomy – while the higher education community undertakes to assure the government that federal higher education funds (for student aid and other purposes) are expended effectively and accountably'.

Another example is the Romanian higher education, which has as its focus institutional management as a means to quality, and according to the World Bank (1996) its 1995 Education Law, has given rise to *buffer organizations* that are semi-autonomous. These are the National Council on Accreditation and Academic Evaluation, the National Council on Academic Titles and Degrees, the Higher Education Financing Council and the University Research Council. All these mechanisms are being strengthened through periodic review of programs, standards and procedures and competitive grants as incentives for research, among others.

Nonetheless, even though the issue of quality has always been important to educators, according to McIlroy and Walker (1996), '… pedagogical issues have tended to take precedence over the broader institutional and economic systems

within which education occurs', thereby leading to a narrow focus which separates pedagogy '… from the systems within which learning takes place'. Therefore, it has been advised that ensuring quality in higher education should involve the whole process.

It can be said that ensuring quality in higher education is a dynamic process because of the various changes that have been identified as encompassing society, which invariably affects institutions of higher learning. Some of these have been identified by the Centre for Quality Assurance [CQA] (2002) as 'mass education, … democratization of higher education which has led to a higher number of students and institutions, increased internationalization of the labour market, international mobility of teachers, researchers, students and competitive educational programs…' Buttressing these, Brennan and Shah (2000) identify the expansion of higher education systems, its diversification – which have led to further arrays of institutions, programmes and students – and the internationalization of higher education, now involving greater student and staff mobility. These suffice to say that further changes are expected which will enable higher education to be relevant to any situation it meets, since society is not static.

On the other hand, according to Saleh (2001), quality is often used in open and distance learning 'in relation to course materials and services to indicate their *fitness for the purpose intended*', which, he laments, is contentious, as there are many stakeholders with diverse interests to be satisfied in distance education. As well, Clarke et al. (2004) identified three equally important areas: curriculum and its assessment; handling of coursework and assignments; and liaison with students. However, whatever this term may refer to in distance education, the concern for quality becomes important in view that this mode of education is still the singularly most important means of making education accessible to millions, who for one reason or the other have been formerly denied access.

According to UNESCO, the Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau for Education (2004), 'Quality assurance in open and distance learning is essential because in some countries, the distance mode of learning has not been fully accepted'. This is a major motive for this study. Also, Black (1992) explains that there is ample evidence to show that lack of faculty support for distance education has been largely due to the question of quality. Hence, UNESCO (1998) and Alsunbul (2002) suggest that it is high time distance education moved from focusing on its importance and justification, to encompassing quality.

However, Antony and Gnanam (2004:149) are optimistic that 'with technological developments and adequate awareness about ensuring quality there is a growing consensus that distance education can be made very effective'. On the latter, applying the Total Quality Management (TQM) approach to distance education according to McIlroy and Gnanam (1996) will lead to better focus on the learners; *customer satisfaction*; better retention rates; fewer customer defections; increased staff morale; attract others to the quality service of the institution; help to re-define *academic freedom* as *academic responsibility*; and encourages potential savings in costs. These, in essence, enhance the educational objectives of any institution. According to Wolcott (1995:41), a constant danger in distance education is that students – the unseen, who Steyn (2000:8) describes as *faceless* – may become invisible to the instructor. In the words of Steyn (2000:9) these faceless students are a most important category of customer. This is because their subjective views are very important information (Van Niekerk & Herman, 1996; Bornman, 2004; Lomas, 2004; Sahney et al. 2004) and as a result, continual and conscious efforts must be made to improve the learning process, the quality of experience and the way it is delivered (Greenwood & Gaunt, 1994; Wolcott, 1995; Steyn, 2000; Telford & Masson, 2005).

Going further on the issue of quality assurance in distance education, the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau for Education (2004) says that though

the debate of '… whether quality assurance measures for distance education institutions need to be more stringent than that of traditional schools' still rages on, providers of distance education should not be treated with *kid's gloves*. This is because they may then never receive the respect they so much desire.

However, it can be said that there is no consensus on what criteria should be used to determine quality in distance education, though Antony and Gnanam (2004:151) are of the opinion that there appears to be a growing consensus on using the same basic methodology for both traditional and distance education. Nevertheless, there is disagreement on the extent of modification needed (Antony & Gnanam, 2004). Therefore, each country often comes up with various criteria guiding the practices of distance education in its locality. All over the world, research shows that quality is ensured through either external or internal control or both, as determined by each country (SAIDE, 1996; National Association of Distance Education Organisations of South Africa (NADEOSA), 2003; CHE, 2004).

Of relevance to this study, is the review of literature commissioned by The American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association (NEA), and carried out by The Institute for Higher Education Policy on Distance Education, that reveals many gaps in education, especially in the area of quality (Antony & Gnanam, 2004). Some of these are:

- The unidentified significant administrative issues affecting quality in distance education;
- The notion of access and how to define quality of access in distance education;
- The best ways to improve the access and the quality of access;
- The definition of good learning experience defined and with reference to whom and what;

- The issue of technology replacing human contact without significant loss of quality and
- The view of quality assurance agencies on the distinction between traditional programs and the distance education programs.

According to Antony and Gnanam (2004:150-158) 'These questions … are not as simple as they look … and they indicate that even after many decades of pilot projects, deliberations and field experience in distance education, assuring the quality of distance education is an uncharted area for many quality assurance agencies'. In fact today, it appears as if research addressing quality in distance education is still inconclusive, as there is still much to be done (NEA, 2000b).

Nevertheless, the UNESCO Pacific-Asia Regional Bureau (2004) is of the opinion that even though '… there are aspects of distance education that need special attention in terms of quality assurance', still 'the general mechanisms for assuring quality in conventional higher education are applicable to distance learning institutions'. In support of this, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education [QAA] in the United Kingdom (1999) identifies the following areas of importance:

- System design;
- Program design, approval and review;
- The management of program delivery;
- Student development and support;
- Student communication and representation;
- Student assessment.

Corroborating this, a study by the National Education Association (NEA) (2000b), identified about 45 benchmarks in literature, and some selected institutions, and

these were narrowed down to seven – as most were often overlapping. These are:

- Institutional support;
- Course development;
- Teaching/learning process;
- Course structure;
- Student support;
- Faculty support; and
- Evaluation and assessment.

Also, writing on this in an earlier report, Perraton and Hulsmann (1998) suggest the following aspects of quality assurance: 'Policy development and management', 'Staff development', 'Service provision', and the 'Process of distance education'.

A synthesis of all of the above reveals that benchmarks for quality in distance education focus on the same issues, though emphasis on each may differ from institution to institution and from country to country.

Another area of interest, is that questions posed concerning distance education now test and raise fundamental issues on the hitherto nature of higher education (Eaton, 2001; UNESCO Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, 2004; Antony & Gnanam, 2004). As a result, Eaton (2001:9, 11) has predicted that these challenges can 'alter the traditional faculty role, what we mean by *higher education institutions* and what we mean by a college degree', while politically it challenges agreement about 'safe delivery of student aid, what counts as higher education quality and the effectiveness of self-regulation'.

While comparing distance and conventional learning quality assurance strategies in the United States, Phipps, Wellman and Merisotis (1998) in their report explain that 'what seems to be strikingly different is the process for quality review in

distance learning programs…' this reveals emphasis on the administration less than the faculty. Thus, 'the quality assurance process…appears to be less process-driven, where there is a high value placed on consultation, consensus building and dialogue, and more oriented to *bottom-line* or market-oriented results'.

Furthermore, El-Khawas, De-Pietro-Jurand and Holm-Nielsen (1998) have predicted that 'over the next decade, an increased number of institutions can be expected to offer distance learning, and with much higher numbers of students enrolled'. These in turn will pose serious implications for quality assurance agencies as 'a greater number of providers of distance learning must be monitored…and an increasing number of students will be seeking recognition for distance-based courses to fit a greater variety of study objectives'. Adding another dimension to this is Pond (2002), who argues that at the end of the day there may be the need to focus also on the 'instructor rather than the institution'.

To aid in accreditation and quality assurance in higher education, irrespective of the mode of delivery, Pond (2002) summarises the identified new paradigms in comparison to the old, as depicted in Table 4.3 below:

**Table 4.2: Old versus new paradigms for accreditation and quality assurance**

| Old Paradigm | New Paradigm |
|---|---|
| Teacher/Institution Centred | Learner Centred |
| Centralized | Local |
| Hegemonistic | Deferential |
| One Size Fits All | Tailored |
| Closed | Open |
| Us Versus Them | Collaborative |
| Quantitative | Qualitative |
| Prescriptive | Flexible |
| Time as Constant/Learning as Variable | Learning as Constant/Time as Variable |
| Teacher Credentials | Teacher Skills |
| Consolidated Experience | Aggregated Experience |
| Regional/National | International/Global |
| Static | Dynamic |
| Single Delivery Model | Distributed Delivery Model |
| Process | Outcomes |
| Infrastructure | Services |

Source: Pond (2002)

In conclusion, one can deduce that a persistent problem to be focused on for the general acceptability of distance education is strongly related to the issue of quality. If as already argued by Antony and Gnanam (2004) that the advent of technology will go a long way to solve the problem of quality in distance education, the present state of technology information in Africa raises several questions as to how quality can still be ensured. For instance, in regard to the whole of the African continent, South Africa is the only country that is advanced in computer technology. Wilkinson and Guilluame (2000) submit that '…cyber education will not pass the test…' However, in relation to the Distance Education

Unit – the focus of this study – which is purely paper-based in nature, one should be interested in assessing what qualifies for a quality paper-based distance education, in relation to conventional education. It is hoped and believed that the findings from this study will aid in drawing attention to the issue of quality in distance education, thereby adding positively to the body of literature in this regard.

### 4.5.3 Quality assurance in distance and conventional education in South Africa

> *'The fact that we work and live in the Third World does not mean that we must settle for a Third World education' (Jansen, 2004).*

One of the increasing challenges faced by higher education all over the world is that of quality assurance (Weir, Kulski & Wright, 2005). Unfortunately, the pressure for this is extreme in African countries because, according to the Independent Task Force inaugurated by the UNESCO and the World Bank (World Bank, 2000:10),

> *'Higher education systems in the developing countries are under great strain. They are chronically under-funded, but face escalating demand – approximately half of today's higher education students live in the developing world. Faculty is often under-qualified, lack motivation, and is poorly rewarded. Students are poorly taught and curricula underdeveloped…Quite simply, many developing countries will need to work much harder just to maintain their position, let alone catch up.'*

All the issues raised above hinge on quality in higher education. According to Brennan and Shah (2000:36) 'traditionally, universities have emphasized self-collegial-accountability and self-improvement'. Hence, quality is associated with excellence and striving for perfection (Pretorius, 2003). Little wonder that South African higher education institutions, according to Smout and Stephenson (2001:2), have a long history of '*trying to do things properly*, of being concerned that graduates should be of high quality', however, 'modern quality assurance…

is a relatively new concept …' Staying on this topic, Smout and Stephenson (2001:2) explain that 'traditional approaches to ensuring *appropriate* standards relied heavily on comment from peers and was applied mainly to the content of courses, in the external review of examination papers (normally at first degree level and upwards) and in the use of external examiners for masters and doctoral theses'.

Describing the nature of this period, which is also corroborated by Education White Paper 3 (DoE, 1997) and Wilkinson, Wilkinson and Guilluame (2000), Smout and Stephenson (2001:2) state that 'wide variations in quality characterized the higher education sector and doubtless there were also variations in quality within institutions'. For instance, the older institutions known today as the *historically white* or *historically advantaged* institutions are well established with standards that can compare favorably with other institutions of higher learning of the world. In comparison to this, the *historically black* institutions are backward in terms of resources that would have aided the building up of their reputation (Smout & Stephenson, 2001). This occurred despite opposition to the idea of establishing separate higher education facilities for Whites and Blacks by many (Smout & Stephenson, 2001) but this state of affairs did not start changing until the advent of democracy.

In South Africa, the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE, 1996:9) identifies that 'A key challenge for higher education is to enhance the quality of higher education programs'. Even though this country has been identified as the most developed African country in terms of educational development, it is yet being faced with its own challenges. This is because, according to Fourie (2002:3), economically 'South Africa is in the danger of losing all credibility in terms of world-class competitiveness and is currently ranked only seventh in Africa and 37$^{th}$ in a listing of 56 countries worldwide'. Buttressing this, the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2004c:18), on its tenth anniversary states that, 'It has been eminently clear to policy-makers that an inability to compete globally will

increasingly marginalize the South African economy, have profound effects on its rate of growth, and negative consequences for the social well-being and stability of South African society'. Therefore, Weir et al. (2005), explains that 'responses in terms of quality assurance are essential' as higher education has been identified to play a major role in economic development.

Reasons for the demand for quality in higher education in South Africa are not different from those in other parts of the world. However, according to Pretorius (2003:129), '… a further dimension is added by the climate of political and social change …' As expected, the dawning of democracy initiated many changes in the country, from which the education sector was not exempt.

In the words of Hall et al. (2001:4), 'developments in quality assurance in South Africa have followed general trends while avoiding – for the most part – the excesses of a compliance regime'. Prior to 2001, attempts had been made to formalize quality assurance. An example is the Certificate Council of Technikon Education (SERTEC) set up in 1986 to oversee the issue of quality assurance in the technikons. Though the Committee of University Principals (CUP) have long been concerned with enhancing quality in universities, according to the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2004c:144), '… quality standards remained fully within the autonomous ambit of individual universities'. Later, in 1996, the South Africa Universities Vice-Chancellors (SAUVCA – now HESA) set up the Quality Promotion Unit (QPU). However, in 1999, this unit was disbanded to make room for the establishment of the Higher Education Qualifications Committee (HEQC, 2005).

According to Education White Paper 3 (DoE, 1997:28) qualification structures for higher education have been previously separate and parallel, and these 'have hindered articulation and transfer within institutions and programs, both horizontally and vertically' thus, the need for 'a single National Qualifications Framework (NQF), for all educational settings' (Van Huyssteen, 2002). The

South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) – responsible for overseeing the establishment of the NQF – was established in 1996, and it has two arms: the National Standards Bodies (NSBs) – which are in turn responsible for establishing Standards Generating Bodies (SGBs) – and Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies (ETQAs) – which are responsible for defining standards in education. The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) is also expected to register with SAQA as the Education and Training Quality Assuror for higher education (SAIDE, 1996).

A cursory look at all the important documents concerning education, issued by the government through its relevant bodies, expose emphasis on quality as a major focus on the transforming higher education:

**The National Qualifications Framework Bill**

The National Qualifications Framework Bill, which was passed by parliament in 1995, has, among others, this main objective:

- To enhance the *quality* of education and training (1995:3).

**White Paper on Education and Training (1995)**

The objectives of the White Paper on Education and Training (1995) have, among others, as their focus to 'contribute to the advancement of all forms of knowledge and scholarship, and in particular address the diverse problems and demands of the local, national, Southern African and African contexts, and uphold vigorous *standards of academic quality*' (White Paper 1:14).

**National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE, 2001)**

Drawing from the above, the National Plan for Higher Education has as part of its priorities to:

- Link improvements in efficiency to improvements in *quality*. (DoE, 2001:16)

Consequently, White Paper 1 on Education and Training (1995:21) defines the principle of quality in terms of 'maintaining and applying academic and educational standards, both in the sense of specific expectations and requirements that should be complied with, and in the sense of ideals of excellence that should be aimed at'. Continuing on this, the National Plan for Higher Education (DoE, 2001a:26) explains that pursuance of quality by the nation cannot be divorced from what is uppermost in the South African higher education: the issues of redress and equity, as quality is central to these issues. According to the Council on Higher Education (2004c:148), in spite of '… the efforts made by SERTEC, the QPU, and professional bodies and the advent of SAQA, a gap still existed between the broad intentions of national policy on quality issues … and the individual quality approaches of higher education institutions as they had taken shape – or failed to take shape – in the course of years, and in the absence of congruent quality assurance frameworks'. Hence, the reason for the establishment of a national quality agency in 2001, known as the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), by the Council on Higher Education (CHE), which defines quality as fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation (HEQC, 2001), with emphasis on the former. It has as its focus the promotion of quality, auditing its mechanisms, and accrediting higher education programs (CHE, 2005).

Even though this body may not necessarily replicate what happens in education in other parts of the world (due to social differences), it is not too different from them. However, considering the focus of the HEQC, it becomes clear that the South African higher education quality is based on two elements: accountability and improvement (Pretorius, 2003). Commenting on the definition of quality by the HEQC, Pretorius (2003:132) is of the opinion that the 'focus on fitness for purpose jeopardizes the intentions of the new system' because 'higher education no longer has the luxury to adopt such limiting quality definitions'. The reason for this, according to Biggs (2001:222), is that 'the definition implies retrospective

quality assurance, which makes a summative judgment on what has already been done and makes a summative judgment against external standards' that amounts to an accountability exercise, with a managerial agenda, which may eventually damage teaching (Bowden & Marton, 1998). Continuing on this, Pretorius (2003:132), likening the situation in South Africa to what happens in other parts of the world, laments that 'the new system…is limiting in that it considers the quality of the services provided – but not the institutions in totality'. Therefore, institutions may be lured to adopt a piecemeal approach to quality.

However, writing from a contrary view, Botha (2000:11) is of the opinion that a more detailed analysis of two reports, the Report of the National Higher Education Commission on Higher Education (NCHE, 1996) and White Paper 3, '… reveals a strong emphasis on quality as value for money', and not 'quality as transformation', which is ironical in view of the transformation which the country's higher education is passing through. Therefore, commenting on Singh's (2000), exploration of the eventual optimal symbiosis for South Africa, Botha (2000:11) insists that 'it will remain a major challenge to find an optimal *symbiosis* … in the system between the need for excellence and the need for redress and equity'.

Even though the government, through various documents and subsequent establishment of various bodies, reveals its commitment to *quality*, it was made clear from the onset that the responsibility for ensuring quality, lies solely on the institutions, as the various bodies are only meant to help ensure quality (CHE, 2000b; CHE, 2004c). Therefore, the South African University Vice-Chancellors Association (SAUVCA – now HESA) came up with proposals. Commenting on these proposals, the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2000a:23) states that:

> *'Much of what was proposed was in accordance with international trends. The South African University Vice-Chancellors Association (SAUVCA) was of the view that ownership of the quality assurance system should rest with the universities rather than with the government or an independent body in order to gain acceptance by the universities and credibility with the stakeholders'. (CHE, 2000a:23)*

However, with the establishment of the HEQC, it is expected that all these frictions will to be eliminated. While commenting on the roles expected of this body in gaining credibility, Smout and Stephenson (2001:10) suggest that, it must

> *'Take action quickly and sensitively…develop a unified approach across the sector and to ensure adequate and on-going funding for its activities. The HEQC should be seen to be useful, helpful and developmental. It must demonstrate the benefits of quality assurance clearly and simply, and strive to develop capacity within institutions. Above all, it must not be seen as a policeman… program accreditation should be secondary priority as it is more important to get quality-assurance systems in place at the institutional level and give these a chance to take effect '.*

Also, Pretorius (2003:134) advises that this body not just to emphasize 'fitness for purpose' but to rather 'emphasize quality improvement throughout all facets of institutions and…aim to resolve quality problems in an integrated way'. Going beyond this, Botha (2000) sees as challenging, the need for this body to conceptualize and implement the symbiosis (that is the need for excellence and the need for redress and equity) in the creation of an effective and appropriate higher education quality assurance system.

However, the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2004c:237) identifies the following as critical issues and challenges confronting higher education in South Africa:

- Effective and operational links between planning, funding and quality assurance;
- Determining quality standards in a system in flux;
- Guarding quality assurance against *checklist compliance*;
- Engaging academics and students in the quality assurance process; and
- Institutionalizing quality management and continuous improvement in higher education institutions.

But, it is important to note that currently, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) is developing a quality assurance framework and criteria based on:

- Fitness of purpose based on national goals, priorities and targets;
- Fitness for purpose in relation to specified mission within a national framework that encompasses differentiation and diversity;
- Value for money judged in relation to the full range of higher education purposes set out in the White Paper; and
- Transformation in the sense of enhancing capabilities of individual learners for personal development, as well as the requirements of social development, and economic and employment growth. (CHE, 2005)

Also, not to be left out of the quality issue, are the private providers of higher education. For instance, the World Education News and Reviews (2003) reports that 'The Council on Higher Education (CHE) has recently issued new regulations on quality assurance standards and registration requirements for private institutions of higher education and training to legally operate in the country'. As a result of this, many institutions that are operating under international benchmarks have been forced to close down.

However, of great importance, which has not yet surfaced in the South African quality debate, is the issue of student perception of quality. According to Lewis (2002:9), students are being sensitized to this in the United Kingdom as 'they are making use of publicly available information on quality … and are making more demands once they are enrolled'. Furthermore, Lomas (2004) asserts that there is merit in asking students what they think of the academic service that is being provided and whether they consider it to be of a high quality. Therefore, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (2002) has recommended the results of such surveys to be a prime source of information on the quality and standards of higher education.

On the other hand, there is not much gainsaying the fact that distance education can improve the quality of educational provision, but the quality of much distance education programme is a source for concern (CHE, 2004d). According to Du Plessis and Van Der Merwe (2005) even though much of the distance between the lecturer and the student in distance education has disappeared, 'the suspicion that distance education is inevitably of lower quality still lingered on'. This statement, made currently, can help one to understand the reason why a decade ago the Department of Education identified the need for a project to investigate norms and standards for distance education.

According to the Council on Higher Education (2004:142), 'In 1994, there was only one legal mechanism to regulate distance provision'. The Correspondence Colleges Act (Section 2 of Act No 59, of 1965) made provision for the establishment of a Correspondence College Council and was intended to maintain the integrity of private correspondence tuition'. Unfortunately, the Act was not relevant to the majority of distance education provided by the dedicated distance education institutions (CHE, 2004d). Unfortunately this Act was not relevant to the majority of distance education provided by the dedicated distance education institutions (CHE, 2004d).

Describing the state of distance education in the country in 1994, the International Commission on Open Learning and Distance Education used this expression:

> *'What in South Africa is called distance education is essentially correspondence education. With very little assistance other than from study materials, extra-mural students sit an institution's examination and, depending on their success, proceed toward the completion of certificates, diplomas, or degrees. Considered as distance teaching, virtually everything depends on the quality of the study materials prepared by lecturers in each institution for student use'. (SAIDE, 1995:xxi)*

Corroborating this, a report by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA 1996:1), states that 'Distance education in South Africa is characterized by rapid expansion, inadequate provision of infrastructure and support for students, and rapidly growing interest from overseas providers of distance education in running their programs in South Africa'. In addition to these, the National Council on Higher Education (NCHE) observed that there are the problems of low throughput rates, lack of tutorial and learner support systems (DoE, 1996). Most of these allegations were also corroborated by Badat (2005). Hence, the Ministry of Education concludes that 'there is much work to do to re-focus institutional missions, modernize courseware, improve students support, and to undertake essential efficiency reforms and cost effective planning so that quality of provision is improved' (DoE, 1997:27). Therefore in 1996, the Centre for Educational Technology and Distance Education in the department of Education contracted a research team to develop a document titled *A Distance Education Quality Standard Framework for South Africa,* with the aim of correcting observed anomalies (CHE, 2004d).

While commenting on the state of things, Badat (2005b:200) laments that they 'made a strong case for transformation of all distance institutions in South Africa away from current practices of inaccessible texts with little or no student support towards more pedagogically sound approaches'. Thus, with the establishment of SAQA, various bodies that have related functions to distance education began to emerge. Some of these are:

**The National Association of Distance Education Organizations (NADEOSA)**

This association has as its main aim to 'provide a forum of South African Organizations who are committed to an affordable, cost effective and quality learning environment in which learners are empowered to become self-sufficient members of society' (SAIDE, 1996:25).

**National Open Learning Agency (NOLA)**

This agency is currently located within the Department of Education, as an institute for 'research and development activities as they relate to the promotion of a lifelong, open learning development' (SAIDE, 1996:25).

**Confederation of Open Learning Institutions in South Africa (COLISA)**

This confederation, according to SAIDE (1996:25-26) is 'a confederal structure meant to serve as a basis for collaborative ventures in a number of areas, including: finance and resource applications; academic development; technology application; and the provision of joint core programs and courses'.

According to SAIDE (1996:56), the format chosen to express standards for distance education in South Africa was borrowed from the Scottish Vocational Educational Council (SCOTVEC) with aspects drawn from various elements of standards. It is expected that further indicators would be adapted and developed on each element, in order to make them relevant to different institutions and programs. As a result, both the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), and the Council on Higher Education advised the 'review of the quality of distance education programs in contact institutions as a matter of priority' (DoE, 2001a:68), and the 'development of a clear policy directive, including conditions and criteria for the continued provision of large-scale distance education programs by traditionally contact institutions' (CHE, 2000:44). Interestingly, by October 2001, the distance education criteria were adapted for all education and training provision by the South African Qualifications Authority (NADEOSA, 2003).

In closing, mention must be made that, according to NADEOSA (2003), the changes in distance education both in South Africa and internationally, the combining of much research into this, and the emphasis which the HEQC places on quality, have necessitated a review of many criteria with regard to distance education. Even though the criteria remain essentially the same, and are not

entirely different from quality assurance processes across the world (see Section 4.5.3), they are now more comprehensive and represent criteria as agreed upon by the South African distance education community (NADEOSA, 2003). These criteria (see Appendix 3) are what providers of higher education in South Africa are guided by and the University of Pretoria (where the Distance Education Unit which is the focus of this study is to be found) is no exception. In conclusion, all the instruments (see Chapter 5, Section 5 and Appendixes 4-12) used for this study were geared towards ascertaining the extent the practices of distance education at this university conform to the revised criteria.

### 4.5.4 Quality assurance in distance and conventional education at the University of Pretoria

Interestingly, a cursory look at the status quo of quality assurance in South African universities reveals each university having in place its own Quality Promotion Unit (QPU), with explicit quality assurance policies, mechanisms and practices being overseen by dedicated offices, and even making these public. Policy statements of various universities in South Africa can be accessed on the Internet. In support of this approach, Alt (1998:8-9), advises that 'self-evaluation is the cornerstone of quality assurance in higher education … [and] a rewarding culture of striving for improvement will be encouraged if [this] becomes a natural way of life'.

Subsequently, and according to the website, the University of Pretoria (UP, 2005a) 'is committed to delivering education of a *superior quality*' hence, it has as elements of its mission statement to:

- Provide *excellent* education in a wide spectrum of academic disciplines; and
- Be committed to *effective, efficient, caring* and innovative approaches to teaching, research and community service; client-centered management and administration; and good governance.

Therefore, in pursuance of these lofty goals, in 2000 a unit for Quality Assurance was established 'to monitor the different processes at the university as a means of ensuring the quality and relevance of the academic offering on the one hand, and the promotion of standards of service provision on the other' (UP, 2005a). This is in contrast to its former approach. According to Hall et al. (2000), formerly quality assurance rested in the office of the Vice-Chancellor with a 'system of departmental self-evaluation that began in 1993, and which was revised in 1999'. Each faculty had a committee, while an academic staff member represented each department.

However, presently, the Unit for Quality Assurance has two broad functions and these are to liaise with both national and international bodies. For instance, 'it is responsible for liaising with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), the Board for Higher Education, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) and the sub-committees of the South African Universities Vice-Chancellors Association (SAUVCA – now HESA) …' On the other hand 'its activities include curriculum development, education innovation, modular outcomes-based program development, validation processes for new programs, department self-evaluation processes, the external evaluation of departments, external examination and student feedback regarding modules…and directs the project to identify and plan current and future research focus areas at the university' (UP, 2005a).

However, it is of interest to note that some of its functions are delegated to academic environments, and 'at this level, the quality of programs is regularly benchmarked against the programs of leading institutions in the educational field, while departments and faculties also perform self-evaluation' (UP, 2005a).

Even though all the university's programs were registered with the Unit for Quality Assurance by June 2000, nevertheless, presently, 'a comprehensive

survey has commenced to determine the scope of additional national and international accreditations for this university's qualifications'.

As earlier discussed in Chapter 3 (Section 3.7.1), the University of Pretoria previously offered distance education study programmes in partnership with National Private Colleges but this relationship was later discontinued, as the university felt it had no control of the programmes. This is because the university is focusing on providing the same quality of learning for distance education as that of conventional education. Therefore, according to the university's Regulation and Syllabi (UP, 2004), the Distance Education Unit was established within the Faculty of Education. It is believed that distance education study programmes will be well managed by this unit.

In relation to this concern by the faculty, the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE), in a draft report released in 2002, observed that there was 'currently very little quality assurance carried out in the faculty' (SAIDE, 2002:22). Therefore, this Institute explained that there was an urgent need to establish quality criteria for:

- Course materials;
- Materials development processes;
- Course delivery; and
- Assessment processes and products.

This, according to SAIDE (2006:55), the university fulfilled by having in place 'an annual review instrument used by the unit to review the overall quality of its programs … which are based on the quality criteria for distance education …' as earlier discussed in Section 4.5.2, to continually assess the current state of distance education within the unit, and plan for the future. Presently, through its Distance Education Unit, the university ensures quality by focusing on: effective student support systems, providing adequate contact sessions and effective use

of assignments, tutorial letters, Short Message Service (SMS), administrative letters, and providing better student assessments and learning materials.

To close, mention must be made that during the course of this study and in the words of SAIDE (2006:1), the Institute received an e-mail request from the Manager of the Distance Education study programme, requesting them to assist the unit 'with the conducting of a quality assurance audit of the non-academic operations' of the program 'with a particular focus on student support administration'. The task of the panel encompassed: the reviewing of available documentation, interviewing relevant stakeholders, and observing processes and facilities with a view to evaluating against national and international standards (SAIDE, 2006) already discussed in Section 4.5.5. It is the researcher's hope to compare the findings and the recommendations of this panel – relevant to this study – to research findings in the latter part of this work.

From the foregoing, it is clear that even though quality in higher education in South Africa has improved considerably, judging from its past, there is no gainsaying the fact that there is still much room for improvement. One can be tempted to agree with Smout and Stephenson (2001:11) that 'the end of quality has certainly not been reached in South African higher education … indeed, it could be said that it is merely beginning'. In the same vein, Badat (2005:202) states that 'unless serious attention is paid to the quality of distance education provision and programs, equity of opportunity and outcomes of historically disadvantaged South Africans will be compromised as students graduate with underdeveloped knowledge, competencies and skills'. Who knows whether in time it will be possible to have students at the main campus of a university, who – having seen the quality of the distance education study programme offered at their institution – will rather opt for it? (Du Plessis & Van Der Merwe, 2005)

### 4.5.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, even though there is no agreement on the concepts *quality* and *quality assurance*, there appears to be a growing consensus on using the same basic methodology for ensuring quality in both modes of delivery. However, each country has its own criteria and various bodies responsible for ensuring quality, and in South Africa, as in most parts of the world, the responsibility of having quality mechanisms in place has become the sole responsibility of institutions of higher learning.

## 4.6 Summary

In this chapter, an in-depth study was made of the issue of quality assurance in distance and conventional education in higher education. This was done with special attention to the three indices of assessment chosen for this study, namely: *access*, *delivery* and *output*, and the conceptual framework in which this study is grounded. This is followed by a more detailed study of the present issues concerning quality in South African higher education, in general, and the state of these matters at the University of Pretoria, within the distance and conventional education study units, in particular.

In Chapter Five the research design and the methodology employed for this study will be discussed.