CHAPTER 7

PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE QUALITATIVE RESULTS

7.1 Introduction

Chapter Seven reports the research findings of the qualitative aspect of this study. The method has been included in order to report the situation through the eyes of the participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000) thus, emphasizing words rather than numbers (Bryman, 2000). Therefore, the data were collected through structured one-on-one interviews with administrators, course presenters, and one-on-one telephone interviews with students who had discontinued their BEd (Hons) studies with the University of Pretoria (see Appendixes 5 – 10). Data was also collected through focus group interviews, with tutors and module coordinators (see Appendixes 11 - 12), all of which aided in eliciting diverse views on answers to the research questions.

Further, this study focused on the students because they have been identified as key role players in the education sector, and have been described as the inputs, processes and outputs of the educational program (Sahney, Banwet & Karunes, 2004). In addition, since they were involved in the programme under study – i.e. the BEd (Hons) Education Management, Law and Policy – they were in the best position to give relevant information needed for this study.

The findings of this chapter were complimented by the results of a questionnaire (see Appendix 4) that was completed by the students that contained questions formulated to highlight the three chosen indices of assessment of this study, namely: *access delivery* and *output* (see Chapter 6 for these findings). Therefore, these indices have been identified as major themes, from which other themes were developed, with corresponding sub-themes. Table 7.1, reflects the summary of the main themes, with their sub-themes:

Table 7.1: Summary of the main themes and sub-themes

MAIN THEMES	SUB-THEMES
1. Quality of access	➢ Opening up of equal opportunities for learners ➢ Selection of instructional technology for the programme ➢ Relevance of the technology ➢ Reasons for the choice of technology
2. Quality of delivery	➢ In-service training for both academic and administrative staff ➢ Approaches to delivery modes in the programme ➢ Permanent and part-time teaching staff recruitment ➢ Language policy and its suitability to students ➢ Learning materials ➢ Faculty and administrative support to students ➢ Learner-learner interaction ➢ Contact sessions and classes
3. Quality of Output	➢ Expectations of student performance ➢ Assessment methods for students ➢ Marking of scripts ➢ Length of feedback on assignments/exams ➢ Impression of learner performance

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	➢ Library facilities ➢ Accommodation during contact sessions and classes
4. Quality assurance process for conventional and distance education	➢ University's vision on quality and awareness by key role players ➢ Staff development ➢ Academic's involvement in distance education ➢ Incentives and rewards to academic staff involved in distance education ➢ Marketing of the programme under investigation ➢ Academic's involvement in Distance Education research and identified niche areas of research needs ➢ The university's commitment to Distance Education

Lastly, the focus of Chapter Seven is:

➢ An overview of the qualitative investigation applied in this study,

➢ A presentation, analysis and interpretation of the qualitative investigation and the results as they relate to each of the qualitative instruments used to collect the data.

➢ Lastly, the summary of these findings and the conclusion of this chapter, are given.

7.2   An overview

The main aim of this study is to investigate the extent to which Distance Education is inferior to Conventional Education, when assessed in terms of *access*, *delivery* and *output*. Therefore, focus was placed on defining the term *quality*, a 'slippery concept', but one which has been identified as the most important issue in education, and its benefit to society in relation to government expenditure, is continually questioned (El-Khawas, De-Pietro-Jurand & Holm-Nielsen, 1998; Guskin & Marcy, 2003). The protagonists of quality in higher education are the government, the academics, and students, with their parents, the taxpayers and the employers of labour.

Though, Distance Education has been accused of focusing on a narrow idea of quality, and having no consensus on its criteria (Antony & Gnanam, 2004), a synthesis of all definitions shows that benchmarks for quality assurance in both Distance and Contact Education focus essentially on the same issues, though emphasis on each well may differ. In South Africa, even though there are various bodies to ensure quality in higher education, ownership of this quality rests solely with the institutions (CHE, 2000a & b; CHE, 2004; HEQC, 2005). In view of this, the University of Pretoria, in its mission policy, is committed to delivering education of superior quality; hence, terms, such as *excellent*, *effective*, *efficient* and *caring*, are used in its mission statement (UP, 2005a). Consequently, the criteria of quality assurance, with their indices, as provided by National Association of Distance Education Organisations of South Africa [NADEOSA] (2003), guided the development of the instruments used in this study (see, Appendix 3 for the criteria and indices).

Subsequently, through the interviews, this study assessed the quality of access provided for the students and the extent to which the choice of technology adopted by the university extended this access to the respondents in the BEd (Hons) study programme. From literature conclusions were drawn in relation to *quality* as the indices of assessment for this study would be focusing on this term.

Furthermore, comparison was drawn between the quality of learning experience to which students from both Distance and Contact Education were exposed under the same study programme. Factors that may have contributed to possible divergences observable in the output rates of students on the study programme were probed. Lastly, included in this study was the quality assurance process adopted by the University of Pretoria, the extent to which members of staff and the students that formed part of this study were informed of this process and their possible involvement in it.

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All these were done with focus on the conceptual framework adopted for this study, which was the 'Transactional Distance Theory' (see Chapter 4, Section 4.2.4) that was first mooted by Moore in 1972 (Stirling, 1997), and according to Moore (1996) it has its roots in much of the work done by John Dewey (1938). Even though it is a distance education theory, the researcher used it because:

- ➢ Firstly, this study focuses essentially on distance education as a mode of delivery.
- ➢ Secondly, the theory greatly aids in determining the quality of delivery applied to teaching and learning, and with the move to the constructivist approach (Fraser & Lombard, 2002; Garrison, 1996), the researcher concurs that the students on the programme under investigation assume the responsibility of constructing knowledge and the greater the support for this, the better for the students.
- ➢ Thirdly, the program is purely paper-based for both modes of delivery.
- ➢ Fourthly, Bischoff et al. (1996) have suggested that the term *transactional distance*, 'applies not just to distance education, but to any educational setting'.
- ➢ And lastly, the researcher is of the opinion that this theory inevitably brings together the three indices of assessment chosen for this study, namely: *access*, *delivery* and *output*, because the quality of access provided for students would be reflected in the quality of the delivery, which would eventually affect the quality of the output.

However, in order to avoid *data overload* (Miles and Huberman, 1994), a computer programme – assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) – was used to manage and make sense of the data collected. This enabled the identification of relevant quotations in the interviewees' responses; formed codes from the question items; examined and compared concepts and themes that emerged from their responses; and established relationships among the codes

(Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Lastly, full transcripts of all interviews can be accessed on the CD attached to this thesis.

7.3 Presentation, analysis and interpretation of the qualitative investigation

7.3.1 Assessment of the quality of access and its extension to students from both modes of delivery

A literature review carried out for this study as related to the term *access* (Chapter 2, Section 2.4.2) revealed that:

> ➢ The view of *elitism* in education is no longer relevant all over the world, since the economic strength of a nation depends on how many of its citizenry have access to quality education, thereby having redemptive purposes, and promising social inclusion and cohesion (Gourley, 1999; Morley, 2000; Subotzky, 2001).
> ➢ It is evident that Distance Education is rooted in the language of *social justice* and *equity*, *access* and *educational opportunity* to previously disadvantaged people (Nuan, 1996), which was the case with many Black South Africans before the advent of its nascent democracy (Subotzky, 2001).
> ➢ Opening up of access may not necessarily connote giving access indeed, thus leading to various forms of access (Morrow, 1994; Jansen, 2001; Gamede, 2005; Cele & Brandt, c2005). Also, it has some implications, such as the ratio of educators to students (Singh, 2001); cost, and the technology divide (Lewis, 2002; Hellman, 2003).

Based on the issues raised above, the interviewees were requested to provide information on what instructional technology was selected for the BEd (Hons) study program, reasons for its choice, and its relevance to all the students on this

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program (see Sections 7.3.1.2 and 7.3.1.3). This deepened the insight on the historical background for opening up access to this programme for students (see Section 7.3.1.1).

7.3.1.1.1 Reasons for opening up access to the study programme for distance education students

According to Jansen (1990:3), South African educators have been 'educationally disempowered and politically marginalized to a very large extent'. Hence, to all the administrators, module coordinators and course presenters interviewed, this could best describe the main reason for the commencing with the BEd (Hons) study programme as a Distance Education study programme, at the University of Pretoria. As expected, the advent of democracy in South Africa led to a great call for *access* to university education for people who were previously denied such access. However, it was obvious people could not leave their jobs and apply themselves to further education; hence the need to 'take the university to the student'. Secondly, according to Module Coordinator 1 (MC 1) during the focus group interview, there was the great need to upgrade the qualifications of educators. To this, MC 5 reported as follows:

> *'It's more of addressing the need …as it presented itself in terms of trying to uplift, probably the quality of educators in the far distant areas. And most of the problems that were noted then, I think were due to the matriculation pass rate. The pass rates were low'.* P22, 22:26 (36-37)

Third, MC (P22) quipped that,

> *'Also given the nine provinces, some of the provinces are not serviced by higher education. It's unreasonable to expect students from those provinces to attend contact education. We need to reach out to them …'* P22, 22:26 (26:32)

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[1] P22 refers to the 22nd interview (as P22 in Atlas.ti program); 22:26 refers to code 26 in the 22nd interview, while the subsequent figures refer to the line number of the verbatim quotation. This applies to every other page.

These quotes buttress, firstly, the fact earlier noted by Sedgwick (2004) that during the past political era, South Africa maintained disparate higher education systems for the different people groups, which forced the newly democratically elected government to open up access to include all people that had been previously denied (Education White Paper, 1997; National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa, 2001). Secondly, all academics support the view that past denial of access to education often leads to open access under a new political dispensation (Herman & Mandell, 1999; Holmberg, 2002; Braimoh, 2003).

Therefore, according to Participant 4, this influenced the development of a business plan, to establish a committee, to embark on a research project, to determine the needs in the education environment in South Africa. It was through this channel that the management of the University of Pretoria decided there was indeed a need, and established that there would be enough students interested in enrolling for the BEd (Hons) study programme to make the offering of this program viable. This, according to him, would enable the university to optimize economies of scale (Rumble, 2001).

However, according to the same interviewee, the university had been involved in distance education prior to 2002, but that it *'…was within a different model with an external service provider and that didn't go well for us in many ways'* PD 4, 4: 2 (6: 25). Therefore, the university authorities concluded that halting the provision of distance education totally, '… *would not solve the education crisis in S.A' if it only has… contact mode support for further training of teachers'* P4, 4:2 (6: 25). Thus in other words, the university authorities agreed with the principle that the government has identified distance education as a means of redressing past inequities (Daves et al. 2004). According to P4, the University of Pretoria then went through all the necessary, but tedious,

processes of course approval, to be in a position to implement the BEd (Hons) study program as a distance education course. (This process involved the specific course lecturers, the department, the faculty, the Senate, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), and finally to the Department of Education (P4).)

7.3.1.2   Facilitating 'access' to distance education students on the program and assessing the equality of the 'access' given to enrolled students from both modes

In order to facilitate access, the pre-requisite for the program according to Participants 1, 4 and 5 includes one of the following:

- ➢ M + 3 (which refers to a three-year teacher diploma + a further diploma);
- ➢ M + 4 (a four-year teacher diploma);
- ➢ B.A, Bachelor of Arts degree (a 4-year degree program); or
- ➢ An Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE).
- ➢ In addition to this, the university also admitted students in terms of the RPL (recognition of prior learning) policy. This according to participant 4, however, would have to be decided by a selection team, with the final decision resting with the Dean of the Faculty.

All the above requirements are in line with the guidelines given by the Department of Education and the National Plan for Higher Education (2001), on admission policy into the program.

Also, MC 3 in the focus group interview with module coordinators described the admission policy this way:

'In a certain sense, there's openness in enrolling students for ACE or Honors. In the preliminary requirements, there's no screening … It is an equity type of thing. Anybody can do it; once you meet the minimum requirements, you can try it. We do not look at how much did you get from the previous degree. It's a type of open degree …' P22, 22:30 (304:304)

Even though there is an element of openness inherent to the programme itself – since enrolled students had the opportunity to choose when to write the exams – students were expected to complete the study program within a reasonable time frame. And Participant 4 summarized it, as follows:

> *"Any institution with respect will not allow a student to continue infinitely to try and be successful. So we sat down and evaluated the program to check what is realistic with regard to the cut off date or the maximum period of time and when a student arrives at that point we communicate to him you are de-registered, you need to apply afresh if a student has done nothing in four years we will not allow him again because there is no proof and record that this student will stay serious, but if for an example you have a student who has passed four modules of the six but he could not finish in that time, we will tell him you register again and we will give you recognition of what you have done and you can continue with these two. So it is not an absolute cut off for everybody, for some it will be we will not host students that don't perform academically".* P4, 4:9 (63:64)

This appears to clarify the differences between distance education and open learning, which, according to scholars, enjoy a very high degree of flexibility (Rowntree, 1992; UNESCO, 2001; Holmberg, 2002; Commonwealth of Learning of Learning (COL), 2004). In support of this, Bates (2005) asserts that it is rare to find both openness and distance combined, and there is no teaching system that is completely open. This can also continue to suggest that there is equality in relation to the access provided for students, which is in relation to the admission policy of the institution, since as many prospective students as possible would be able to enroll for the study programme (Mabokela, 2006). Furthermore, Firdaus (2006) in a recent study suggests that students perceive *access* as the most important determinant of service quality in higher education, which may be connected with students' reasons for enrolling for the study programme (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.1.1-f).

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Another important aspect related to equality of access, is the language policy of the university, which must be in line with the Language-in-Education policy of the country (DoE, 1997). Describing language of learning at the University of Pretoria, Participant 3 described the BEd (Hons) study programme as a full English program, even though, according to the university's policy (see Chapter 3, Section 3.7), students were allowed to present assignments and write examination in Afrikaans.

Shedding further light on this, Participant 7 had this to say:

> *'Well, its okay. I mean that's the only language that could be reasonably practicable for all South Africans, especially in academic and especially, giving the history of South Africa. And it's expected and assumed that because of their status, probably, they are proficient in at least one of the official languages and one of them is English. Because I know for sure, they could be proficient in their mother tongue, but the material is not written in their mother tongue'.*
> P7, 7:9 (93:109)

Nonetheless, this has possible serious implications for the students, as described by Participant 10, when commenting on this

> *'No and Yes... I don't think so. If you talk to them, you can clearly see that they don't have the same background knowledge. And if I can be honest, and I think I must be honest with you, I can say that the rural people, they have a huge backlog in all skills - reading skills, skills that you need to…note-making skills, all that kind of skills. They really have a huge back-log. But the students from Pretoria, from Jo'burg or Durban, they really have an advantage'.*
> P10, 10:4 (21:37)

However, this did not rule out the fact that presenters of courses helped students who struggled with some concepts by speaking in the local language or calling on the help of other students to come to their aid (P13; P14). Reasons for this was explained by Participant 13

> *'Oh because with this distance education, since most of them are educators, at least they can communicate in English, however some are still struggling because you know that this system of moving from ACE to BEd., there is a big gap compared to those students who are really moving from junior degree to Honours from those who come from ACE to BEd; they struggle a lot'.* P13, 13:11 (93:109)

Unfortunately, this does not necessarily suggest a peculiar problem with the University of Pretoria, but presents the true picture of what struggles tertiary institutions are currently facing, bearing in mind the past political events of South Africa. Even though government policy encourages teaching in local languages, nonetheless, Granville et al. (1998) are of the opinion that this lofty goal has to wait for the future. Conversely, Mgqwashu (2004) is of the opinion the implications for the country in the global setting are so great that the country has much to lose, therefore making this wish sound a mirage.

When one considers the comments of Morrow (1993/4), Jansen (2001) and Gamede (2005), one cannot but agree with Herman and Mendel (1999), who said earlier that opening up access to all people, may not necessarily make the system fair. Consequently, Participant 11 (P11, 11:4 [15: 19]; P11, 11:3 [12:13]), citing the example of a module had this to say:

> *'I will say availability of a library is in my case very important because law is not education; it's not an easy subject and they don't have that opportunity in the rural areas…to go to the law library. You know law library differs from a normal library you can't go there and take a book away. They can't borrow the books from a law library because it is an expensive material and it's not available everywhere. You have to go and sit there, and work there. You can't take a law report home you can make a copy… that you can do. But they don't have that opportunity. And you know that is a very difficult problem to solve. That is because there is no law library in the rural areas. The opportunities are not equal that is for sure, not because of the university's fault but because of the non-availability of such in the rural areas'.*

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This in essence meant that there were some students that had an advantage over others; a fact attested to by Participant 12, considering the fact that some of them had exposure to computer technology, by the virtue of the locations of where they worked and lived. Buttressing this point, Participant 14 explained:

> *'To be honest they don't have equal access because some of them are staying far in the rural areas, whereby they travel kilometres to go and get an ordinary library, unlike those who are doing full time here at the campus. They have access to the media centre; they have access to the computers. They can search for information easily compared to those who are out there'.* P14

This goes on to confirm the Internet crisis faced by Africa because, according to Laaser (2006), Africa has approximately 1% of worldwide Internet users, with nearly half of them situated in South Africa, and 70% of these are mostly in the major cities.

7.3.1.3   Choice of instructional technology by the university, reasons for the choice and its relevance to enrolled students

According to Bates (2005:6), 'if an institution is deliberately selective in its students, it has more flexibility with regard to choice of technology'. This can best summarize course of action implemented at the University of Pretoria, as it targeted a specific group – before implementing the BEd (Hons) study program. Thus, all the administrators, course presenters and module coordinators interviewed for this study agreed that the main instructional technology selected for the programme was print-based.

However, during the contact sessions, this was supplemented with the use of transparencies (P13 – course presenter 8), handouts (P15 – course presenter 10) and group interaction (P13 – course presenter 8) among the students. Giving a reason for this choice, MC 1 explained that the target population of the BEd (Hons) study programme often did not have access to electronic materials, which

placed a new challenge on the efforts of the university. In support of this, some Course Presenters (P7, 9, 12 and 13) said that, '*Most of them are computer illiterate; they don't have access to the Internet. You can't tell them to go and do research on the Internet, in fact some don't know the Internet*' (P7, 7:4 (16:17)); '*Because all of them do not have access to it. We can't send them video or something because most of them won't be able to use that.*' (P9, 9:3 (12:13)); '*They can all read and it's a postgraduate course.*' [P10, 10: 4 (21: 37)]; '*Yeah this is relevant, I mean another problem is that most of the rural areas we are visiting don't have resources so the only thing accessible to them is the print; they are stuck with the print…*' (P12, 12:2 (12:13)); '*…in the certain group that I have now, I believe it does because there is visual, there is auditory, there is group interaction. I think it does cater for all of them*' (P13, 13:3 (26:13)).

All of these comments buttress what one of the administrators (Participant 4), said of the university, when analysing the audience before it decided on the instructional technology for the program, and according to Lewis (2000), this often enables providers to identify what kind of learning environment, they have and how they can meet the needs.

However, citing a module as an example, Course Presenter 6 (P11) is of the opinion that its relevance to especially the students from Distance Education was to a certain extent, and this was the way he explained it:

> '*I will definitely say they are relevant to the learners to a big extent. The only way they could not be relevant to the learners could be the distance. It would be much easier for a learner in Pretoria to go to the legal library and to have a legal report printed and to study that legal report in full. I only have an extract in my examples. Learners in the rural areas don't have that opportunity. I think they have a problem because if you talk about a law library they can't imagine. You can't even tell them you can go to the law library and see how it is with the system of getting law reports of each court case in South Africa. The learners here can go there, but they don't have that opportunity.*' P11, 11:3 (12:13)

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Nevertheless, *print* has been identified as one of the four most important media in higher education – in spite of the advancement of technology – and it lies within the *first generation* of delivery in Distance Education (Laurillard, 1993; Garrison and Archer, 2000; Holmberg, 2000; Taylor, 2001; Bates, 2005). Also, in view of the profile of the students registered for the BEd (Hons) study programme, there was, up till the present time, no alternate choice for the university to take, than to provide the technology already available to the students. Further, it would continue with seeking a solution to the problem of assisting the students, especially with the specific module mentioned.

7.3.2 Comparison between the quality of learning experience of students from both modes and its impact on possible divergences in their output rates

In their study on quality of learning experiences, Neumann and Neumann (1993) identified five components, which are resources, content, learning flexibility, student-faculty contact and involvement. Therefore, Bates (2005) suggests that opportunities for interaction have to be consciously designed in relation to distance education study programmes. This ranges from student-faculty contact to student-student contact. Also, according to McDonald (1996), 'the aim of delivering … high quality learning experiences for students is a central part of every university's mission, and its achievement is crucial to the success of the institution'. Therefore, interviewees were asked questions on the delivery to compare the quality of the learning experiences of students from Distance and Conventional Education.

7.3.2.1 Program adaptation to distance education, challenges faced by module coordinators and how they coped

As earlier explained in Section 7.3.2, the BEd (Hons) study program was implemented due to a number of reasons, which included the democratic winds of change that blew over South Africa and the national need to improve the level of teachers. However, according to the Module Coordinators, they had to cross a

number of hurdles to make this vision a reality, all which buttress the view of the Council on Higher Education (CHE 2004d) that the production of high quality learning resources is complex, time-consuming and expensive. For instance, Module Coordinator 6 (MC) (P21) gave the following insight, which was supported by MC 4:

> *'I think the biggest challenge with distance education is one of communication, in trying to simulate the contact situation in a distance mode. How do you communicate with the students, and how do they get hold of you? And in that regard, specifically, that touches on the whole field of distance education. In distance education, the essence is, how do you present your learning material in such a way that it is accessible to the students? How can the student respond to the material? Is the material interactive? But also a major challenge is to provide feedback on the work that the students have submitted, to be meaningful; and it's very difficult if you have a thousand students - to do so, on a one-on-one basis'.*
> P22, 22:4 (42:65)

In addition to this, MC 7 mentioned the limited influence she felt she had on course presenters, as it was impossible to be in several places simultaneously to monitor their presentation. Also, MC 6 highlighted the problem of language proficiency in English, which was not just a problem with students from Distance Education, but the entire student populace. This was also related to comprehension, academic and analytical reading. In addition to this, MC 3 and MC 6 emphasised the challenges (with support from the other MCs), and aired a compelling reason that in the old teacher training, students were not exposed to rigorous academic process, but only covered the school syllabus. Invariably, this signalled under preparedness of the students. According to Nash (2005), under-preparation of higher education students contributes to low throughput rates, which often characterizes distance education study programmes. Therefore, institutions have been advised to introduce generic skills and pre-orientation courses (Grayson, 1997; Carr, 2000; Tresman, 2002).

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Nevertheless, the module coordinators coped with their challenges in various ways. For example, one of the Module Coordinators (P21) described below how he and his colleagues handled the challenge concerning the study materials:

> '*The challenge of the study material we addressed by having people from outside to consult on these, and secondly, we had a system of critical readers. When the study materials were prepared they were sent out to at least two critical readers, who made comments and recommendations and then those are people, who are mostly experienced in distance education, and we tried to make our study materials student-friendly by having lay out and design experts to do that'.* P21, 21:5 (65:91)

On the language issue, another coordinator added

> '*The last one we are in the process for, for this contact session is in July on having language proficiency test for the ACE students, who are attending the contact sessions, and to see more or less at what level we are, and what type of language proficiency support we can provide for our students as part of the materials package sort of toolkit or something. There are number of issues that we can deal with within the context of language proficiency, but then, you must know what the average level of your students is.*' P21, 21:5 (65:91)

Also, during same interview, Module Coordinator 1 promised that this same gesture would be extended to the BEd (Hons) study programme. According to Herman (1998) and Nash (2005), one of the ways to assist students in this area is through the introduction of bridging courses.

In addition to all the above, the ten course presenters interviewed agreed that there was no difference between the modes of delivery except that the university lecturers had to transport overhead projectors, transparencies and handouts to different centres, in order to assist their presentation.

7.3.2.2 Assessment of learning packages sent to distance education students

Learning packages sent to Distance Education students included:

➢ Administrative booklets,

➢ Tutorial letters,

➢ Study guides, and

➢ Learning materials.

According to Participant 3 (an administrator), one of the ways that enrolled students from Distance Education were introduced to the University of Pretoria, was through the tutorial letter, which contained all information that students needed while on the study programme. Therefore, another administrator (Participant 6) felt that the letters and the learning materials acted as a support system for the students, and describing the learning materials, which interestingly were used by students from both modes, she said:

> '*It depends on what sort of learning material, what kind of pedagogy you want to follow in the way you have designed the material and the way you can go - more constructive or instructive - or whatever, depending on what is more appropriate. But with distance materials whatever theory you follow it must be interactive because the students has to take ownership of their own learning to a certain extent, even in an instructive model of teaching. And that ownership and independent learning has to be stimulated in the materials; that can be done in various ways'.* P6, 6:7 (57:61)

This was also corroborated by other administrators (P1 and P3). According to P1,

> *'It's an academic conversation between the lecturer who wrote the tutorial letters and the students. When you walk into the classroom for the very first time and you want to introduce the modules and yourself to your students, so what you do, we now write that in our first tutorial letter. We tell them about the assignment, we give them the assignment and you give them the due date for the assignment; you tell them about the contact sessions, you tell them on how to prepare for the contact session. And then the last tutorial letter they get is how to prepare for the exams; how to study and what is the format of the paper, how marks are allocated and types of questions that could possibly be asked. So it's a sort of academic support'.* P1, 1:4 (73:80)

According to one of the administrators (Participant 6), the learning materials were used by both Distance and Conventional Education students, due to their quality, as "… *we have been trying to look at the quality of the Distance Education materials. Yes, it is because in the distance materials, everything is documented, everything comes under the spotlight in a way; and in that case it's easier to lift the standards of things like the materials in Distance Education*" P6, 6:15 (128:144). Further reasons given by other administrators (P2 and P3) were that the same academics were the ones in charge of both study programmes and the same qualification would be earned by the students upon completion of their studies. In addition, the study materials were written by module coordinators, and were at times written by a single author and at other times co-authored between them, and they were given autonomy when writing the learning materials. Yet there was no gainsaying the fact that this was still controlled as according to an administrator, "*Autonomy has limits…when it is in the learning programme it's got to fit into the programme …*" P6, 6:5 (30:40).

Explaining further on how the materials were written, MC 4 said that

> '… *there is a home team for the distance education that is available to assist the staff to adapt the content which they know and which they can put together, to adapt this content to be interactive or to become reader friendly; to also cater for all language levels of the learners, and also to develop the materials in such a way that it is interactive. So you constantly provide the outcomes and assessment tasks for case studies so that they engage with the materials not only in a theoretical way, but also in a practical way with an implementation format'.* P2, 2:2 (9:16)

This process according to the interviewee involved coordinators coming together to decide what would be in each module, with assistance on language editing (P2). According to an administrator (P6, 6:18 [176:189]), the *look and feel* format, which had a certain benchmark, margin, font and icons had been chosen for writing the study guides used by the students. Buttressing this, Van Kierk (2004) is of the opinion that distance focus has shifted to the production of quality learning material.

Describing what audience analysis involved, the administrator continued that '[It meant] …*constantly getting more information about the students profile in terms of many things, because that informs you about who they are'* P6, 6:3 (15:25). She also affirmed that this was conducted and according to her, the process included a situation '… *where stakeholders or students or somebody informing the people who are writing the course what the needs are*' P6, 6:3 (15:25). According to CHE (2004d), there are no quick fixes and cheap options of developing quality learning materials as the process involves the provision of the necessary expertise, adequate financial resources, time and supportive organisational structure. However, according to the same interviewee, no attempts have yet been made on discovering the learning styles and learning preferences of students from the two educational modes. Ironically, scholars have stressed the importance of both, as this knowledge will enrich the effectiveness of learning materials (Goold & Rimmer, 2000; Logan & Thomas, 2002).

Interestingly, most of the Course Presenters, expressed their satisfaction and acceptance of the materials because, according to one, it was of '*a high standard as students had more than enough materials to work with*' (P8). Another said that it was '*clear, easy to understand and easy to follow*' (P9). In addition, some students who had discontinued their studies with the University of Pretoria indicated in the telephone interviews (P16, 17 and 19), that they were satisfied

with the language level of the learning materials. Despite this, the researcher persisted in asking other interviewees questions directly related to the relevance of the materials to the level of the enrolled students. For instance, mentioning two modules, an administrator (P6) confessed that the interactivity level of some modules might be found wanting. However, she – together with other Course Presenters – was of the opinion that the standard of the materials could still be improved (P6; P7; P11), while another Course Presenter (Participant 8) described her experience of this manner by adding:

> '… *Sitting in front of 50-60 odd learners and they are not even able to understand the study guide that we have issued them… So how do you go from a study guide, which is the least difficult part, because that's your information guide, how do you go from that to a textbook that not even master students can understand that well?*' P12, 12:6 (68:91)

Furthermore, two Course Presenters were of the opinion that the materials for the modules they present were due for revision (P10; P13). Interestingly, one of the administrators (Participant 6), who in an attempt to differentiate between the good and the bad study materials buttressed this:

> '*I think some are worse than others and others are better than others. Those that are worse will be revised in the instructional designing again. And what is wrong with them -I think is the one where particularly the students have a thick reader and the guide has minimal guidance… the guide has to take them through quite complicated readings using difficult language. I think the good ones are really very good between 7 or A, and they encourage the students to do innovative things.*' P6, 6:18 (176:189)

As a result, one of the Course Presenters (Participant 10) suggested that a cue should be taken from another university's material, as it was better on the particular module he referred to. This highlights the importance of collaboration, which has been suggested as a means for institutions to drastically reduce the cost of learning material production and producing of quality resources (CHE, 2004d).

In addition, Course Presenter 8 suggested that students wishing to be enrolled at the university should be required to join other prospective students 'on a pre-study course…' because, she thought, this should be a preliminary step to their admission as they would be better prepared for what to expect in the study programme. This supports Bornman's (2004) view that the country has a high illiteracy ratio, due to its political history. Furthermore, Mostert et al. (2004) has described the low academic level of students as a major contributing factor to students from distance education delivering poor output rates. In support of this, the module coordinators also indicated the problematic situation of the low academic level of the students before coming into the study programme (especially in this case, when one considers the case found in South Africa, where student teachers, under the apartheid system, were not exposed to scholastic work) (MC 6). This further supports what the instructional designer (P6) and course presenter 7 (P11) meant by referring to the low academic level of the students coming into the study programme, which could eventually lead to persistent failure of students. To buttress this, one of the students that had discontinued expressed her pain of failure as in this way:

> '*I started this program 2003… completing my modules, doing my assignments, and I used to get ninety something, sixty something percentages. But, but when writing the exams, I failed. I could only uh, afford to get only three modules out of the eleven that I did by 2004, hence I decided to deregister… Maybe they were difficult or maybe I've got a negative attitude or maybe when I'm writing the exams I become so nervous or what, I don't know*'. P19, 19:1 (4:54)

The last part of this statement buttresses Van Schoor et al.'s (2002) view on the role, which academic anxiety plays in students from Distance Education delivering low throughput rates.

In addition, one of the Course Presenters (P12) suggested that course presenters needed to be trained to teach students from rural back grounds, saying: '*the other thing might also be to have lecturers that are good in their*

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fields; they have to know their work, but they also have to have consideration for their students as well. I'm saying this with a lot of love to all my colleagues but many of them are brilliant in their fields. They are exceptional researchers of this or that, but some of them struggle to understand how to facilitate learning in the classroom' P12, 12:6 (68:91). This according to her was because students from the two delivery systems differed, which was fundamental in deciding the way to approach the two groups of students. According to her, the issues above became important in view of the enormous effects on both the presenters and students because, in her words '*It takes away my teaching time; the students become frustrated because the gap between where they are, what they have to learn is too big and not all the lecturers can actually facilitate that gap all too well. Even myself, I struggle with it. Maybe I don't know how they would feel about it, but I would like to understand a rural person's life even better*' P12, 12:6 (68:91). Nonetheless, this echoes Ravhudzulo's (2003) view on the need for academics to be familiar with and understand the process of student learning, especially in relation to Distance Education.

However, bringing another aspect to the discussion, Course Presenter 10 (P14) was of a different opinion, as he did not view the study materials to be as difficult to comprehend as students like to complain, but rather that students lacked commitment to their studies, as they did not often make enough time for this. This highlights the issue raised by Telford and Masson (2005:108) that, except students 'perform their participatory co-production roles effectively, the desired outcomes of the service provision are unlikely to be realized'. Another comment in support of this was made by a Course Presenter (Participant 7), who said that '*The language of the study materials is not too high; the thing is the level of the learners that is too low*' P7, 7:13 (118:137). Supporting this, one of the administrators (P6) explained that '*Our students' writing skills are probably poor in the nation*' P6, 6:13 (95:102).

Additionally, during the focus group interview with them, the tutors also identified this problem, and were of the opinion one of the roles they played was to act as a bridge between the module coordinators and the students, as one of them (Tutor 2) commented, '*I think there's also the language thing because lot of students, English is not their mother tongue. There's Zulu; there's Afrikaans; there's this and that. Because it's difficult if you can't understand what somebody is trying to say, and you're not a mother-tongue speaker. So it's very difficult because it's already a second language*'. P23, 23:13 (386:387). However, all the interviewees agreed that not all the students were at this level. Nevertheless, research shows that tutors play a major role in student success with their studies (Castles, 2004; Lentell & O'Rourke, 2004; McCracken, 2004).

According to an administrator (Participant 6), attempts were continually made to obtain feedback from the students on the learning materials – both formally and informally – and as a result a number of study guides had already been changed in line with requests from students (P6). Also, the programme '… *is going to go through some revision process, and when that happens… which is going to start this year then, there will be reinstruction designing mainly in this module so that there will be interactivity for that*' P6, 6:8 (63:67). In adding to this, the Module Coordinators (P22) commented that action would be implemented to rectify address this aspect.

Action was being implemented to assure the quality of the study guides and learning materials and, according to an administrator (Participant 6),

> '*When they are in the course development process, one of the steps I have mentioned is that they go to critical readers, which means, it is the subject matter experts in that field in Distance Education, but this is a formative evaluation. They then give us their feedback on what they think. Then very often they get piloted on the contact students, small group of contact students, before we finally use them in the final version. We have also taken some of our guides to the South African Institute for Distance Education, which have given us summative evaluation. So we have support for our guides*'. P6, 6:14 (104:126)

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Additionally, according to her, there must be continual formative evaluation and learning materials should be evaluated every five years.

Another area of interest on learning packages was the postal delivery time needed for these and other relevant information to be delivered to students. This highlighted the responsibilities of the administrative section, and, according to P5, the normal time span for this process was a maximum of twenty (20) days. The reason was because they had to go through the postal delivery system, which was not always reliable. For instance, a telephonic interviewee (P16), whose friend and she had both discontinued their studies with the university, lamented that

> '*There is yet another one; he also cancelled because on the day of writing exams. He went for the exam, and there was this confusion between, he did not receive examination papers or what, I don't remember what it was and then they said that he could not write on the day of the examination when he was to go in. They wanted a letter showing the confirmation, and he did not receive that letter and he could not be allowed to write. And so on the day he came back and then never followed up on the remaining two papers. And so he cancelled as a result*'. P16, 16:12 (236:252)

However, this may imply that blame should be shifted onto the Department of Administration, of the Distance Education Unit, which may be due to a number of factors, such as inadequate staffing. This is important as it has been identified as a major aspect of ensuring quality (NADEOSA, 2003; Mostert, 2006). But, Course Presenter 10 (P15) explained that

> '*I think some of the things are also the students, they contribute to a sum of problematic areas because you may find that there were some of the slips that they were supposed to reply to and post back to the universities, but they don't. That's the problem, some have relocated and they never inform the university. I think students contribute towards some of the logistical problems*'. P15, 15:25 (242:252)

This is in agreement with Telford and Masson's (2005) view earlier discussed (see Section 7.3.2.2).

7.3.2.3 Contact session and attendance during classes as a means of faculty-student support

A reason the university created contact sessions for students from Distance Education to attend, was to bring students from the two delivery systems to the same level upon completing the study programme. However, according to some administrators, attendance was not compulsory (P1, P4 and P5), and to Participant 8, the onus fell on the students to decide whether to attend these sessions.

According to the Course Presenters, the university changed the contact hours of distance education students from three sessions of two hours for each module, to 12.5 hours spread over five days – an arrangement that pleased the course presenters, as it presented opportunity to spend longer time with the students and on the modules. One of them (P7) was of the opinion that the university had '*gone the extra mile*' in providing the opportunity of contact sessions for the students from Distance Education, and that the decision to utilise this opportunity would be left with the student. However, according to one of the modal managers, there were no fixed rules with regard to the attendance of classes for students from Contact Education and the same rule applied to students from Distance Education attending contact sessions. Attendance was not compulsory (P4 & P21) and on attendance of the classes by contact students, which took place regularly on a bi-monthly basis (i.e. every second Friday), one of the administrators and a Module Coordinator (Participant 2) put it this way:

> '*For the contact students we don't have a policy which requires them for a certain percentage of attendance, because it's a post graduate degree. We first try to motivate them. And I must say that they are aware of the importance. So it's very seldom that you have students who miss more than one or at max 2 of the assignments. Yes, so they come and they know that if they don't come, it's difficult to catch up*'. P2, 2:11 (96:100)

She also had this to say on the distance students:

> '*The distance, because it's not compulsory for them to attend the contact sessions, they can choose not to attend. So we have about 65% of attendance to the contact sessions. For the other students, we have just completed the research project last year to find out why is it that some do not attend, and the reasons were varied. Some mentioned cost as they live far from the venues and they are scattered all over the country. They also mentioned family problems. In general the reasons were varied. So we could not pinpoint one reason for students not attending. But it is also interesting that the research didn't show huge differences between those who attended and those who did not attend in terms of final results/ performance'.*
> P2, 2:11 (96: 100)

Nevertheless, Course Presenter 2 (P7) felt that attendance at the contact sessions contributed positively to student performance – which research carried out by the unit almost at the end of this study confirmed. However, the manager cautioned that there might be other plausible reasons for this. On the other hand, one could say that this was a way of improving the faculty-student contact, which Labuschagne and Mashile (2005) described as part of the motivational factors for students from Distance Education. Nevertheless, one of the implications for this is that the financial burden rested on the students, which was the issue, raised by Chambers, (1997) and Rumble (2001) on who pays for the cost implications of opening up access.

Also, according to an administrator (Participant 2), the university often sought formal and informal feedback on the contact sessions, both of which the institution viewed as important. This was because, in her words:

> '*I get all the feedback from all the presenters because, like I said, my office is like a hub, so all the contract workers come to me when they have a problem, so I get all this from them, what happened and so it's informal feedback but we view it as very important feedback. So they come and tell me about the students, what were the problems there and among the presenters what were the problems'.*
> P2, 2:11 (198:199)

Above all, Participant 3 (expressing an impression supported by all the module coordinators) was of the opinion that the students from Distance Education had better opportunity when compared to their contact counterparts due to the increase in the number of contact hours during the contact sessions. This is in contrast to the generally accepted impression of what happens in distance education programmes. However, this was not without its drawbacks, as she described it below:

> '*I think the distance, at this moment the only disadvantage is that I would say during the contact time they not necessarily see their own lecturer, because we have to sub-contract to assist you with the contact, so although we have all the processes in place to quality assurance, students might still feel they don't see the real person. For the contact students they see the lecturers less hours but always they have permanent appointed lecturers*'. P3, 3:26 (176:183)

Related to this matter, one of the suggestions offered by certain students from Distance Education to improve the study programme was that some of them would appreciate new educational centres being created closer to their homes. However, P3 was of the opinion that students had the option to exercise and choose between studying through Distance or Contact Education.

7.3.2.4   The university's use of SMS technology as a means of support

Presently, according to Ramos (c2007), SMS technology has evolved from just being a communication symbol to being a means of educational intervention and, even though comprehensive research into the effectiveness of this technology as an educational aid has not been concluded in many countries, some educational institutions have begun using it for this purpose. In the case of enrolled students on this study programme, research shows that over 98% of them have access to this technology. According to one of the administrators (Participant 4), the Distance Education Unit, at the University of Pretoria, had started using SMS

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technology, and were presently further exploring its promise as an educational aid:

> '*What we do is we present available technology that students have, and that is cell-phone extensively in our program, and we use it via technology. We have integrated comprehensively SMS support for not just administrative purposes but also for academic purposes. We have a very specific private project running on that aspect. We are in a process to introduce now a new process where students can get additional reading materials from the library if they want, and the process works like this; the academics identify the important articles or part of a book that students can read as additional reading, if they want to and that can be ordered for and the students can order that from the library; they pay for them obviously and that is how we take the library to the students*'. P4, 4:23 (260:298)

Shedding further light on the SMS project and explaining further on the probability of its usage, further placing all students on par with one another, one of the administrators (Participant 6) explained that due to the limited technology profile of the students from Distance Education,

> '*… that's why we are looking at various things that we can do with cell-phones, which we are quite actively doing and quite actively finding out and testing. Also, all of them have it, and I am involved in a project at the moment in which we are looking at how we can go quite deep into academic interventions through cell phones. Again trying to make the learning environment more interactive as it can allow them to build their objectives; doing many of the things that perhaps one cannot do so easily with text, because it is a text-based programme. As for us, anything that is based on any kind of e-learning cannot work*'. P6, 6:9 (69:73); P6, 6:20 (203:204)

Furthermore, the technology had enabled the university to send messages to the students, which according to an administrator (P24) varied between reminder of assignments, confirmation of receipt and postage of assignments, informing them of the track number, and complimentary greetings. All these according to her were meant to motivate and support the students. Also, students from Distance Education made contact with the administrative staff mostly by phone,

as P24 explained, her department received about 20 000 calls per month. She concluded by explaining that all the necessary information for contacting the staff was contained in the administrative booklet. Nonetheless, Nash (2005) is of the opinion that these interactions can be time-consuming and difficult for faculty to sustain, especially with larger class sizes - which was the case with the student populace enrolled on the BEd (Hons) study programme.

Continuing with this thought, a Course Presenter (Participant 15) offered another example (relevant to students of the contact mode), which afforded the students regular interaction with the lecturers:

> '… as compared to the one I'm lecturing now, I feel this one was an advantage because you keep in contact with the lecturers, you write class tests, you are given assignments and you can even make an appointment to come and discuss some of the things face to face with the lecturer, the one who lectures and even designed the material and who also marks the examination. So, I think this one has an advantage, more than the distance one, because with the distance one normally you are very far from the university'. P15, 15:27 (278:294)

In support of this, Kelsey and D'souza (2004) have stressed the importance of interactions between faculty and students, which must be continually encouraged in Distance Education.

7.3.2.5   The use of learner-learner support mechanism

All the course presenters explained that they encouraged learner-learner interaction as the students had a lot to gain from such interaction. For instance, Participant 6 described how she went about encouraging learners, which was the practice with most of the course presenters:

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'Normally I make a point that in every session of those two hours, there is a group up. You have a group up before the end of the two hours, where I give them something on different books to work and brainstorm and come up with answers or citation, creative citation of solving problem. So I give them like twenty minutes to work as a group and then you give the group the pointer, who is the leader, now the group leader represents their decision and then when other groups – I normally divides them into five groups – when the other groups ask questions, now the whole group respond – not necessarily the group leader – so that one makes them interact with each other'. P6, 6:16 (148:149)

However, a Course Presenter (Participant 10) had a very different opinion about this class interaction, and explained he never did this, as he left students to use their own discretion. Another reason he gave was that, as the country has a large landscape, and students might be separated by hundreds of kilometers, this often made it difficult. Interestingly, even though much has been said about the possible positive effects of student-student interaction on student learning (Moore, 1989; Holmberg, 1995; Biner et al. 1997), research indicates its positive contributions to this matter, is presently inconclusive (Kelsey & D'souza, 2004).

7.3.2.6   Counseling facility as a means of support

However, it cannot be denied that students from Distance Education at times needed counseling, and this has been identified as a problem that some students from Distance Education struggle with (Qurashi, Morton & Antosz, 2002). According to an administrator (P3), the students from Contact Education, in comparison to students from Distance Education, had these facilities at their finger tips. Although, the same interviewee then explained that at times staff members who had a counseling function also traveled to some of the contact sessions. However, students were expected to phone in to the university to discuss their problems. But some students who had discontinued their studies lamented the cost of these telephone calls (P17 and P18), and the fact that no specific administrative staff member was attached to specific function (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.1-s) made it all the more difficult to find the necessary help.

This suggests that the University of Pretoria did not have a separate counseling department in place, for the assistance of the students from Distance Education. Earlier, LaPadula (2003:120) has observed that 'support readily available to on-campus students is lacking for distance learners and creating further isolation that can be discouraging and lead to failure'. And in support, Nash (2005) asserts that offering these services only if the student comes to campus is counterproductive to distance education.

7.3.3 Examination of other factors that may be responsible for possible divergences in the output rates of students

Even though the neglect of all the important issues raised above could lead to possible divergences in the output rates of students (which in this study refers to student performance and withdrawal from the study programme), from the two modes of delivery, nonetheless, there were other issues that were highlighted during the answering of the questionnaire by the students, and in the course of the interviews, the researcher finds difficult to exclude from this discussion. The major reasons are the following:

➢ Research has shown that poor output rate is more prevalent in distance education than in its conventional counterpart, and this has been the most singular reason why aspersion is still being cast on its quality (Fraser & Nieman, 1995; Parker, 1999; Aluko, 2000; Perraton, 2000; Braimoh, 2003; Louw, 2005).

➢ From available literature, one can conclude that though reasons for this trend in both modes are vast and diverse (Tinto, 1975, 1993, 1997; Saba, 1998; Diaz, 2000; Lahmers & Zulauf, 2000; Hu & St. John, 2001; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; Potgieter, 2002; McGivney, 2003; NADEOSA, 2003; Antony & Gnanam, 2004; HESA, 2005; Labuschagne & Mashile, 2005; Mostert, 2006; QAA, 2006; Raphael, 2006), they are not essentially different.

Therefore, this qualitative section was introduced into this study to present and discuss the in-depth responses from interviewees on possible reasons for divergences in the output rates of students from the two educational systems, and which ultimately lead to students discontinuing with the study programme.

7.3.3.1 Assessing non-provision of 'accommodation' during contact sessions

In view of what literature has revealed, as indicated above (7.3.3), some administrators were asked questions on the issue of *accommodation,* to probe further some of the suggestions offered by students from Distance Education, in answering the questionnaire, on how the BEd (Hons) study programme could be improved (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.1.5-b). In the course of the interview, an administrator (Participant 1) confirmed the plight of the distance education students during contact sessions:

> '*It's one of those issues that I am aware of and I know that they do have problems about it. But it's not one of the issues that, that we can supply them with'.* P1, 1:19 (209:222)

Also, according to another administrator (P1) – who was supported by P4 – it was not the policy of the university to provide accommodation for students from Distance Education during the contact sessions. However, university residences were available to willing students from Conventional Education, who wished to join the contact session – a statement that was supported by P3. However, most contact students on the BEd (Hons) study programme had no need of this support. The reason for this being that there was not much difference in the profile of the students on the two study programmes (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.1.1-b and Chapter 7, Section 7.3.1.3) as this study has already established that they were all working-class students, married and who had family and social obligations. Regardless of this, during the contact sessions some schools made private arrangements with the students, but unfortunately this option was not applicable to all students from Distance Education, as many venues could not cater for this possibility.

Further, during a follow-up interview with her on 21 January 2007, she (P1) confirmed that at the inception of the BEd (Hons) study programme, the university had offered to assist these students by making arrangement with nearby hotels. However, the practice was discontinued as students complained about the hike in prices, due to the added arrangements for a shuttle service from the hotel to the contact session venue.

In further explaining the university's position, Participants 1 and 4 said that many students were in the residences during the holidays, for practical work and summer school, while sometimes maintenance work was performed at these times. Moreover, the residences could only house less than 5 500 students, and there would always be students who could not afford to pay for accommodation for five days. As well, it was explained that there were also no premises in other locations to house students from Distance Education. Again, this boils down to the question raised by Rumble (2001) of who pays for the cost of opening up access. In addition to this, if student opinion about this was strong enough, there was the possibility of this resulting in their being lowly motivated during contact sessions.

7.3.3.2 Expectations and impression of students' performances by administrators, module coordinators and course presenters

According to Spady and Marshall (1991), Willis and Kissane (1997) and Killen (2002), there have been found to be a correlation between having high expectations of student performance, and sharing these expectations with them. Therefore, during the interviews, some of the Administrators, all the Module Coordinators and all Course Presenters were questioned on the expectations of the study programme and how well students were performing. In support of this, the entire corps of Course Presenters believed in motivating the students and part of what they did when dealing with the students was to share the high expectations they had of their performance.

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Also, according to an administrator (Participant 4), the programme was too young to pass comment on the overall performance of the students from Distance Education. The course was only implemented in 2002, but, he promised, some data would be available for assessment by October 2006 – and these have been included in the quantitative section of this study (see Chapter 6, Sections 6.3.2 and 6.3.3). Giving reasons for the unavailable data then, he said it was because the programme was flexible, and learners had four years in which to complete it. However, when further asked to comment on distance learners' performance, the interviewee said, *'But in any case the success rate is quite satisfactory and that is the truth'* P4, 4:25 (300:331).

However, views of the Course Presenters were diverse on this. For instance, one of them (Participant 10) explained that there was a huge difference between the performances of learners from the two modes, due to the fact that the students from Contact Education – as well as some of the students from Distance Education – who stayed in cities had better exposure to learning aids. Also, the issue of academic literacy was raised, and this has been described as one of the contributing factors to low output rates and eventual withdrawal of students from Distance Education (SAUVCA, 2001 – now HESA; Mostert, 2003). Supporting this, the interviewee attested to the fact that it had been discovered that those with the initial university degree often performed better than those without it, and this was also stressed by the Module Coordinators (P22).

In the same vein, literature indicates there is a link between student performance and withdrawal from a study programme, and its relevance to their jobs (Galusha, 1997). On this, the course presenters said that students sometimes gave feedback on their experiences of the relevance of their studies to their job situation. And one of them put it this way:

> *'Alright, that is something that differs in different position and we have found out that our students are doing Education Management qualification…they know about Management, they know how to do things, and they can impress people in the interview. So we have found out that many of our students, who have read Education Management and even in the BA (Honours) programs have been promoted; a large percent of teachers have been promoted … And we have some students doing their doctorate degree now'* P1, 1:31 (307:308)

All these are possible signs that relevance of the programme to students' learning often lead to strong motivation, as they can easily relate to what they are being taught, which is an essential part of adult education (CAEL, 2000).

7.3.3.3 Assessment method(s) employed by the university and length of feedback on assignments

According to Mostert, Makola and Munondi (2004), continual formative assessments help motivate students from Distance Education, and allow them to determine their preparedness to write the summative assessment. To this aim, at the University of Pretoria, a formative form of assessment was applied, in which students were expected to submit two assignments, (the topics of which were included in the tutorial letters; and these topics were periodically reviewed – P3), as part of the final year mark. In addition, the students were also allowed to carry out self-assessment. This was confirmed by all the Course Presenters as well as certain students (P16, P17, and P19) – who had discontinued their studies with the university – in telephone interviews. In addition to this, one of the administrators (P6) explained that initially the submission of assignments had not been compulsory, but that this had been changed to become necessary for gaining entry to the examination. While, according to another administrator (Participant 3), students did not need to obtain a pass mark for these assignments, nevertheless, the assignments amounted to 30% of the final year

mark, and students that did not do well in these assignments may struggle to pass the module.

In relation to this, according to an administrator, external markers – referred to as *contract workers* (P2) – were appointed at the University of Pretoria, who might not necessarily be Course Presenters for either the Distance or Conventional Education study programmes, and who could also be tutors (P4). This was also, confirmed by the Tutors during the focus group interview conducted with them (P23). One administrator mentioned that contract workers who were not working to rule had their contracts discontinued (P4). However, each module coordinator was expected to train them, and also work closely with them (administrators - P4; P5). According to another one (Participant 2), these were mostly educators, who possessed Masters or Doctorate degrees, and they could also be retired professors. In addition to this, they had to have a background in the field of Education Management.

Of interest too, was the process established for dealing with dissatisfaction in the assessment process, as students were free to request access to their scripts – a process that also applied to students from Contact Education (administrators - P2; P4).

In reply to a question based on student complaints on the length of time taken to provide feedback on assignments, one of the administrators (P1) explained that it normally took ten days to mark the scripts (claims also supported by P2, P3 and P10). However, she added, one could not actually predict the postal delivery system, so the students had to wait, and this has been described as *factors beyond the control of the institution* (Nash, 2005). Nevertheless, and as earlier mentioned, one of the administrators (Participant 4) went on to indicate that students could also share part of the blame for the late feedback, by explaining that they did not normally adhere to the assignment submission date.

Nevertheless, prompt feedback is seen as a great motivating factor for adult learners, more so for those that are a distance from the institution, and a factor in determining the quality of education given to students in general (Chickering & Ehrmann, 2003). Further, Bates (2005) describes it an important component of interaction, and the essence of the students receiving early feedback was to help them identify their mistakes before the examinations. In line with this, a course presenter (P8) explained, they dealt with this issue by sending students tutorial letters indicating common mistakes made by students. However, this might not solve this particular problem as well as the course presenters were hoping as students hinted they would still prefer to get feedback on their own work (see Chapter 6, Section 6.5.1.1.1-b).

What's more, during the course of the interviews, it was revealed that not all the course presenters were assignment markers (P10, 12 and 13) – and the impression of the course presenters in this regard was then sought. The reason for probing this matter more deeply was because students had already hinted in their response to the questionnaire that they were of the opinion that it was not their presenters that were the assignment markers (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.1.2-i.). However, the interviewees were also of the opinion it would be better for them to be involved in this aspect of their students learning process, and in their own words responded with, '*I know it would help me to get feedback from the learners*' (P11); '*I think it's a disadvantage to the distance learners*' (P12); '*It is problematic because some students come to complain' (P13); 'I won't feel happy if I'm not involved, because I won't know what is happening after my teaching*' (P14); '*It would enable us to directly see how our students are performing*' (P15). Continuing with the thought, the interviewee explained that the module coordinators trained and gave markers criteria to follow. They were also monitored by them. This was also supported by the Module Coordinators (P22). Therefore, it was expected that discrepancies should be drastically reduced, but at the same time, the views of the students could not be ignored.

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Another issue raised by students from Distance Education in responding to the questionnaire (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.1.1.5-b) was the request that the university authorities should allow them to write supplementary exams, just as their contact counterparts may do, and that the exam period for Distance Education should be changed to a time in the year, when they – as educators – were less busy with school activities (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.1.5-b). In response to this, an administrator (Participant 1) explained that it was not as if the students did not receive all relevant information on time but one just discovered it was impossible to satisfy everybody, as the complaints were so diverse. While acknowledging that she knew students from Distance Education had requested permission to write supplementary examinations, she stressed instead of this, the students were given opportunity to write examinations twice in a year as time was insufficient to issue the results for these students and still register them for supplementary examinations.

7.3.3.4 Provision of library facilities

According to the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL, 2004), it is expected that library facilities be extended to students, irrespective of their location. Therefore, library facilities were also extended to students from Distance Education who lived a great distance away from the University of Pretoria, to bring them on a par with those students that lived closer to the Faculty of Education, and their Conventional Education counterparts, who were in a position to visit the library at anytime, and an administrator (Participant 1) described it this way, '*Everything that they need, to be able to be successful, we provide them in their packages, and we will also have now a new system which is called the Library Collection Policy*' P1, 1:3 (55:71). According to her, the module coordinators would have to identify some articles or some chapters of a book that were relevant to studies in their module. Staff at the university would deal with the copyright issues, while the students would pay for these copies. This, according to another administrator (P4), would be in addition to the learning materials, that normally contained all the necessary information for any given

assignment, and an additional five books, that have been included with the cost of the study programme. However, this has cost implications for students, a point also stressed by P4, especially considering the fact that they did not have access to bursaries (see Section 7.3.3.5).

On a final note, though laudable attempts were being made by the institution, it would be wrong to disregard that at times students still want to visit the library, to do extra reading. For instance, a student that had discontinued her studies, during the telephone interview said, '*I used to come to Groenkloof library. I had to come for information hence my assignments were best because I used to go deeper. I liked to make good assignments*' P19, 19:6 (221:237).

7.3.3.5. Students' lack of funds as a possible contributing factor to low output rates

One of the most important factors that have been identified as a possible reason for discontinuation of students from distance education was lack of money (CAEL, 2000; SAUVCA, 2004; HESA, 2005). It was confirmed by one of the administrators (P4) that there was not enough funds available to cover all the students at the university as bursaries. Therefore, the students from Distance Education had the least chance of partaking in a study programme. This was despite the fact that information was given to these students in the tutorial letters on this that stated that they could apply for financial assistance. However, according to P4, the chance of them qualifying for such assistance remained very slim due to a couple of reasons:

➢ Firstly, there were many needy students among students from Conventional Education, whose needs often took priority; and
➢ Secondly, the academic achievement of students from Conventional Education was generally higher than that of students from Distance Education.

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Inevitably, students were forced to take an EDULOAN (see Section 6.3.1.1.4-b). According to one of the telephone interviewees (P15), the fees charged by the university were too high, which eventually forced them to apply for study loans. However, views on this among the students differed, as others were of the opinion the loan took care of the problem and only became an issue to certain students when repaying this loan (P18) – because of other financial commitments. In retrospect, it has become evident that cost implications are allied to most of the issues raised in other sections of this study.

7.3.3.6 Poor health of students

Another important reason highlighted by students for the discontinuation of their studies with the university, was the poor state of their health, as indicated by some of the responses from the telephone interviews: '*I had sugar diabetes. I had high blood pressure*' P17, 17:3 (74:87); '*It was difficult for me to study because from time to time I would be hospitalised*' P18, 18:1 (27:43); '*I withdrew because I was sick…throat problems*' P21, 21:1 (20:27). This, according to an interviewee, may well be connected with pressure of his job and his age, as he explained: '*Then I said no, the work is too much for me, never. I'm also a principal to the school. Then at school, I'm forced to manage and after I must go and read. Then I said I must stop. I am 53 years old*' P17, 17:3 (74:87). Another one added, '*I think there is nothing wrong with the University of Pretoria. The only problem I had was the overload. You know heading a school is not a child's play*' P17, 17:12 (181:195). It is the researcher's belief that all these excuses were connected with the age of the students (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.1.1-b).

In support of this, MC 1 added '*… the stark reality of this is in the latest statistics on the drop-out amongst our students. It's actually that the students who drop out, a very large percentage die. And the two main reasons are violence and violent crime and also HIV / AIDS*' P22, 22:20 (295:330). Unfortunately, HIV/AIDS related illnesses happen to be a national problem, as a media statement released by the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC, 2005) reveals that mortality

due to HIV-prevalence is common among educators in the country. Also, Du Plessis (2005) confirms that statistics on violent crime in the country is very disturbing.

7.3.3.7   The use of tutors for the modules under investigation

Furthermore, one of the administrators (P4), introducing the topic of the role of the tutors, which should be a normal practice for all the Distance Education modules in the study programme, and he explained:

> '*We have a tutor system and each module co-ordinator that is the academic head for a specific module in a programme must identify and select tutors for his programme and that is a tutor team that he builds. Whenever necessary they give academic support to students that are referred to them by the module co-ordinators*'. P4, 4:11 (72:92)

According to Galusha (1997) and Miller (2002), students from Distance Education need tutors to enable them to complete their courses on time. However, all the module coordinators (P22) for the 6 modules under investigation indicated they did not make use of this system. (In this regard, the researcher is of the opinion that there was a gap between what could be expected, and what the actual practice was.) However MC 3 and MC 4 explained that at times they experienced a problem in finding good students to serve as tutors, as – at that level – experience in the field of study was also required. Nevertheless, the Tutors – drawing on examples from when they were students – stressed the value of having tutors to turn to, while studying. In closing these comments, the tutors explained that many times their jobs went beyond the academic lives of the students.

Even though, the manager of the distance program later asserted that there were service providers available to the students (who happened to be the course

presenters). Nevertheless, the researcher is of the opinion that since these were only available during the contact sessions, they could not possibly have been able to fulfil the roles of tutors to the students.

Interestingly, a myriad of problems were added to this list, of which detailed discussion is not possible in this study, and according to Nash (2005), this is beyond the control of the institution. This includes, '*job promotion, new job responsibilities, pregnancy, parental responsibilities, divorce, traumatic experiences of life (e.g. death in the family and hijacking), students, who continually shopped because they did not take their degrees as academic degrees, but entered the program for esteemed values*'. P22, 22:20 (295:330). Others according to MC 2 might be '*one or two odd instances, where you have a problem with either bad mail delivery or communication mishap along the way and it cannot be resolved*', P22, 22:20 (295:330); an incidence, which is quite rare.

Finally, it can be noted that none of the ten students interviewed telephonically, that discontinued their studies, did so due to language level of their learning materials and lack of library facilities, as they said the learning materials and other books in their packages were sufficient for their assignments, while they were on the BEd (Hons) study programme (P16 and P17). This might go on to buttress what two of the administrators (P3 and P4) said on supplying the students with everything needed for their assignments. Also, none withdrew due to lack of family support or isolation.

7.3.4 Quality assurance at the university, awareness by members of staff (full-time and part-time) and students, and their involvement

In view of the stance taken on quality in education, by the University of Pretoria, and the newly accepted definition for what the concept of *quality* in a quality distance education study programme should mean for South Africa (see Appendix 3 and Section 7.2.1), the interviewees were questioned on how this

factor created awareness for all key players, in the extent of their involvement in the BEd (Hons) study programme. This becomes important in view of the fact that most research acknowledges that stakeholders have expectations and that these serve as a standard or reference point to evaluate the performance of an organisation (Abdullah, 2006).

7.3.4.1 Awareness of the quality stance of the university by all key players and their involvement

An important aspect in the quality assurance process is the management of a study programme creating quality awareness among the staff, and according to one of the administrators (Participant 1) everybody working on the programme was involved, as this aspect was well communicated to all and sundry. According to another administrator (Participant 4), the university had a holistic view of quality, as it affected everything the institution did, and he put it this way:

> '*The whole issue of quality assurance is not something like a product that you take off the shelf, and you use it and you put it back on the shelf again, until you think you need it again. It is part of a philosophy; it is part of a managerial style; it is part of a teaching style and administrative style. It is the way we do things. It's to deliver as far as possible a high quality service to the students*' P4, 4:4 (33:40).

According to him, this approach involved ensuring the quality of the learning materials and their delivery, the efficiency of the academic and administrative staff, the quality of the contact session and the examination centres. For instance, he hinted that the Department of Administration of the Distance Education Unit would be undergoing a major appraisal, which was due to be conducted by the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE), during the time of this investigation.

With regard to this matter, Course Presenters were asked if they were aware of the stance the university on quality in education. According to them, many of

them were aware because they were told about the importance of maintaining the university's image. However, a few course presenters were not sure how this worked (P9 & P14). Also, some course presenters were of the opinion they were not directly informed, but admitted that certain practices – for instance the evaluation forms given to them and the students at the end of each contact session (see the CD Rom for copies of these) – provided an idea of what this entailed (P11, 12 & 13). However, P11 suggested it might have been because they were not employed on a full-time basis at the institution, and indicated it would be a wonderful idea to really be involved in this aspect of university life. Conversely, some course presenters were of the opinion there was not enough feedback given to them by the university authorities (P13). On this, Avdjieva and Wilson (2002) suggest the development of feedback mechanisms based on continuous assessment and reflective evaluation.

In addition to this, it was indicated by an administrator (P4) and one of the Course Presenters (P13) that the university gave a feedback questionnaire to the students, as was confirmed by students (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.3.1-c and d). In this feedback questionnaire the students assessed each module, the performance of module coordinators and presenters at classes and generally commented on their impression of the each contact session. This means that students were involved in the evaluation process. This supports the remarks of Lomas (2004:163) that '*there is merit in asking the students what they think of the academic service that is being provided and whether they consider it to be of a high quality*'. Also, many of the staff interviewees felt the students were very poor in time management, as they have discovered that many never opened their materials before attending the contact sessions. Needless to say, Van Schoor, Mill and Potgieter (2002) and Mostert (2006) explain that poor time management often causes many students to be involved in only surface learning. Buttressing this, in Chapter 6 (Section 6.3.1.1.2-e), students had already hinted that they needed counselling in time management.

The researcher discovered that there was no student representative structure in place for students from Distance Education, as was the case with students from Conventional Education. On this, P1 (1:27 (277:287) explained, '*No, we don't have anything like that because we are part of the faculty, and the students are part of the student body of the faculty. So it means that the structures are all in place and because most of the students are so busy and so structured to do this. They are all full-time teachers that they don't want to have any other commitments*'. Another reason given by P3 was that students were scattered all over the country.

Even so, according to P1, some students from Distance Education had once been invited and sponsored to partake in a distance education review process. Nevertheless, a follow-up interview with the manager revealed that a plan was in the pipeline to allow students to choose representative(s) from each group, who would be meeting at various contact session centres. It is the belief of the researcher that this would go a long way in giving the much needed voice to the distance students.

Further, all the module coordinators were involved in a continual quality assurance process, which also involved reviews (MC 3). According to MC 1 and an administrator (P4), the process with the coordinators, involved having appropriate mechanisms in place, which included moderation of examination papers, giving necessary academic support to students, travelling to centres to present contact sessions, visiting examination centres and analysing examination results to identify and solve problems that may have occurred.

All the above supports Bornman's (2004) claim that self-evaluation is a basic component of quality assurance procedures. Despite this, it bothered the researcher that even though staff interviewees referred to how they were involved in ensuring quality in whatever activity they were involved in, they could

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not – except for management – say in particular what the vision on quality at the University of Pretoria is.

7.3.4.2   Staff development

In a study conducted by Avdjieva and Wilson in 2002, part of their findings revealed that professional development is an integral part of institutional planning. According to an administrator (Participant 4), members of the administrative staff were not spared constant upgrading in their specific field, as the institution employed extensive training sessions for staff members in various training programmes, which were funded by the university. These included Microsoft and Project Management, and this was approached in two ways: '*in the sense that a colleague can identity his own short-comings, or we can identity the short-fall of the staff member*' P4, 4:21 (227:249).

However, mention must be made that, even though Participant 1 asserted administrative staff members were coping with the workload of the Distance Education Unit, another administrator (Participant 5) confessed that they were labouring under great pressure, due to the ever increasing number of the Distance Education students on the BEd (Hons) study programme, and that the university, as at the time of this investigation, was in the process of employing more permanent administrative staff. A possible implication of this being that, at times, student enquiries were not promptly responded to, as explained by one of the students that had discontinued her studies with the university. Consequently, it was not really possible to assign specific duties to specific members of staff.

In addition to this, the development of permanent academic staff was also important to the university. On this score, one of the administrators (P3) (3.5, [30:34]) explained that all the staff members belonged to one association or the other, '*where they constantly attend conferences and workshops*' (P3), (3:5, 30-34). Related to this, was the training of the module coordinators in relation to their roles; which, according to P1 and P4, included, managing the modules and

training the course presenters to ensure that the same teaching would be conducted in all the centres, and in the writing of learning materials and study guides. Also in the words of P4 "*there are some of our colleagues that are much more experienced than others, so we actually have peer group training*" (P4), (4:18, 165:175).

However, one of the Course Presenters (Participant 13) brought in another dimension of training needed for academic staff members that would be involved in Distance Education:

> '*Maybe I don't know how they would feel about it, but I would like to understand a rural person's life even better. Even if they teach me a couple of Zulu words for certain English phrases, whatever it is. Because that gets the students going, if you go into their level and work with them, then they are with you'*. P13, 13:7 (84:91)

As could be expected, the twelve (12) academic staff (the module coordinators on the BEd (Hons) study programme) could not cope with the workload involved in Distance Education, because the centres were too many, and were wide-spread through the country (P3). Therefore, as already hinted at by Participant 1, course presenters were contracted and trained by the coordinators to lecture during contact sessions, and the drive to find suitable candidates who met the requirements, to be trained as course presenters was an ongoing phenomenon. The requirements included: a Master's or a Doctorate degree in Education Management and practical teaching experience – most course presenters were teachers and retired professors. Buttressing this, all course presenters confirmed the training they were exposed to, which occurred before presenting any contact sessions. Reasons for this, according to Participant 8, included that students differed, and the course presenters had to be updated on adjustments or improvement to learning materials.

Even though the majority of the ten (10) course presenters displayed an interest in Distance Education, some of them were thus involved because they had

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passion for their subject areas, not necessarily because they were interested in Distance Education as a mode of delivery. Therefore, Participant 10 with strong emphasis said:

> '*No…no…no, distance education is not my area of interest. For me it's not a very satisfying way of teaching because you see the students once for five days, and then you receive the assignments and you mark the assignments. And you send the assignments back, there's no narrow contact. There's no link between you and the students. You are seeing them, but you are not going to mark his assignment. Perhaps you are going to mark other venue's assignments*'. P10, 10:14 (117:127)

7.3.4.3 Academic's involvement in distance education

According to Wolcott and Betts (1999), one of the truisms of distance education is that teaching a Distance Education course involves a considerable amount of work, but, unfortunately, faculty support in distance education is most often limited to technical and instructional design support (Gates, 2000). In addition, research (Wolcott & Betts, 1999) indicates that faculty is often divided as their reasons for interest in the Distance Education differ. With this background information, Module Coordinators were then asked to explain how they got involved in Distance Education and whether they were at all interested in this mode of delivery. There was a long pause.

This signalled there may be some deeper issues involved with this aspect, which encouraged the researcher to probe further. Most of them then confirmed that, within the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria, if you were appointed as the coordinator for the Contact Education module, then you were automatically considered qualified to be drafted into the Distance Education teaching program, irrespective of your interest. For instance a coordinator said, '*It just landed in my lap*' (P22), 22:17 (203:223). Another coordinator (MC 5) at the interview wittingly said, '*Now, you want some politics*' (P22), 22:17 (203:223), which resulted in laughter from everybody.

Shedding more light on this issue, MC 2 explained that at the inception of the Distance Education Unit, there were discussions as to whether the department should be divided between the two delivery modes or operate as one unit. However, this matter was not further attended to and a solution never materialized. Furthermore, in responding to their attitudes concerning this matter, the coordinators (P22), 22:18 (225:257) engaged each other in the following dialogue, to suggest that there was no consensus on this:

MC 2

> 'If you say that, you definitely assume that there is such a big difference between contact and distance that we must make a choice. But I think in my case, the development of the material and the support that we have, and the type of students we have on campus are so much similar, that I don't treat them differently. I am using the same study materials and very much the same method of teaching'.

MC 3

> 'How the content is developed is a function of the university and you support academic, whether it's a contact teaching or a distance teaching as the need arises. You need for instance, the expertise for specific field. This is academic…and the mode of delivery is something you can give him orientation and training. That is the first thing. But there's a down-side in the sense that what happens then is your focus on the field of specialization in the research, for which you do not have a dedicated distance education unit in the university. The research needed in terms of distance education, it doesn't get the attention it should'.

MC 4

> 'To answer your question I can go with what MC 2 said. The university does provide us enough support, so your role is mainly coordinating the presenters, coordinating the marking. It is a little bit extra, but for the whole thing, you need to develop a module whether for distance or contact. So for myself coming also from a distance education institution, I don't think it really makes such a big difference, as long as you are able to manage your team effectively. Also, what MC 3 said is very true …'

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MC 6

'*For me there are two angles to your question. The one is the whole issue from the academic perspective and second, from a specialized field of distance education. I have been in distance education prior to joining the university, so I have an interest in that respect and one can see how the whole field evolved in South Africa, because you can't transfer the overseas module directly on the South Africa situation, it can't work. But something that I personally find fascinating is, to what extent in terms of your academic work, to what extent does your work in the distant education board, impact on the contact mode and vice versa?*'

The researcher observed that Coordinator 7 – who had earlier said that the mode of delivery just landed on her lap – was silent at this point, and had to be prompted for her answer to this question. According to her, the mode was not her area of interest, as she struggled with working round the administrative aspects, which were not necessarily administrative.

However, on this, a management member explained that

'*I think it's not any force to do something by distance education. I also have to do research. I don't have a choice; it's part and parcel of your job. When I said I accepted this job, I should have realized or should have been told that you are responsible for this before you accepted the post. So it's part and parcel of your job description as everything here. There are three issues which I think are important. First of all, you get the support to develop yourself, to develop yourself scholarly so to progress and it also helps you in your research in the sense that you have a wide sort of target group, which you could use in order to do some research. We also have the Distance Education Unit; they can order all the information all the statistics that you need in order to be able to do this research. And then, I think it is also something that to develop you professionally in the sense that if you have done this, you will be promotable because you have more expertise than somebody else*'. P1, 1:8 (116:123)

The impression the researcher deduced from this interaction was that there existed a gap between job expectations and job roles. This was because one of the administrators (P4) also then added '*It is the Head of Department that needs*

to make the necessary changes to job description so that it fits staff members'
P4, 4:20 (185:225).

7.3.4.4 Incentives and rewards to academics involved in distance education

McLean (2006) is of the opinion that there is little or no attention given to the totality of the experience of teaching at a distance, and what the impact is on a social or personal level from the faculty perspective. Nevertheless, giving incentives to academics is seen as a sort of direct motivation for the academe involved (Wolcott & Betts, 1999). Therefore, the views of module coordinators and relevant administrative staff were sought on what incentives and rewards they received at the university, and what their impression were. Firstly, all the module coordinators present at the focus group interview (P22) confirmed that there were no incentives for them, and diverse views were given by those concerned. For instance, P3 during a one-on-one interview said

'*We felt that in comparison with other universities that we are getting a bad deal because in other universities, lecturers are involved with contact session learners, you do your normal research work and you write your publications. But here you actually have two jobs, and there are no incentives'*. P3, 3:7 (45:58)

However, this had been brought to the notice of the university authorities, and the response had always been the same, as earlier explained by Participant 1, and Participant 4 shed more light on the university's stance:

'*It is a very sensitive and problematic area, though I don't necessarily agree with the university on this matter, but I understand its position. I think there are many staff members that feel that they need to get extra remuneration sort of for this work. We don't expect you to work more because we make additional staff available. So if we make more staff available, then the number of hours that you are supposed to work still needs to be within the framework of the labour law of South Africa. But if the university did not make any additional staff members available then one could have argued'*.P4, 4:20 (185:225)

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Suggesting possible reasons for this sort of feeling, MC 4 quipped

> '*I think the only time that people really think about a possible incentive, is when they use their family time in (January or whatever) to do the contact sessions, while other lecturers, who are not involved in distance education can then take leave. But I agree with MC 7. It's not about incentives. It is part of the job, but I think sometimes people think they have more duties than others that are not involved*'. P22, 22:19 (259:290)

This, in essence, may mean that the university authorities did not feel obligated to make incentives or rewards available for academics involved in Distance Education, but there are implications for this. For instance, MC 4 cited one of these as she said, '*What is happening is that lecturers spend too much time in distance education and therefore their academic careers and academic quality of research in their field gets less time because of involvement of the same lecturers in both worlds*' P22, 22:19 (259:290). Therefore, this staff interviewee was of the opinion that it was important the university began considering a change of stance on this matter.

In essence, one may want to conclude that lecturers from Contact Education saw themselves as being forced into a Distance Education work mode, as expressed by another coordinator '*I think in a way, people who are really working in distance education here, to my knowledge, they are really not interested in it. But they are being forced to do it*' P22, 22:19 (259:290). One of the serious implications of this could be academics having low morale (Wolcott & Betts, 1999), the result of which could affect the whole study programme.

7.3.4.5 Marketing

According to Snyder (2003), nothing should stop an institution that is searching for growth opportunities, especially if it possesses unique competencies in unique areas and offers study programmes in high-demand career areas, not to dabble into Distance Education. However, marketing plays a major role in advertising such programmes. For advertising the BEd (Hons) study programme, the

university contracted an organisation to inform prospective students about the programme. This was done throughout the country. However, course presenter 7 was of the opinion the University of Pretoria could improve on its efforts.

This aspect of improving the marketing strategies was also suggested by students from Distance Education while giving suggestions for the improvement of the BEd (Hons) study programme in responding to the questionnaire distributed to them, before the interviews were conducted, as they were of the opinion many prospective students were yet to be informed about this programme (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.15-b). Nevertheless, the distance education manager was of the opinion that the unit as at then did not want to offer less quality education to its clientele; therefore, extending its admission base would only be a plan for the future.

7.3.4.6 Academic's involvement in distance education research and identified niche areas of need

Views on the relationship between teaching and research are diverse (Lomas, 2004). Nonetheless, there is no gainsaying the fact that it exerts a positive influence on teaching (Andresen, 2000) and can also help develop a collaborative relationship between the lecturer and the student, and lead to the formation of a learning community (Lomas, 2004). It also helps to identify gaps that exist between theory and practice. Hence, the module coordinators and the presenters were taken up on their involvement in this important aspect of academic life.

According to the coordinators, only a small group of the academe had ever been or was presently involved in research in Distance Education as at the time of this investigation. For instance, MC 1 and MC 3 had done research on the motives for students registering for distance education studies with the university, the management aspect of the B.Ed (Hons) study programme and establishing

reasons for possible divergences in student performance. And according to P3, the reasons were varied. In addition, MC 6 was last involved in research in this field, six years ago. Additionally, of all ten (10) course presenters interviewed, only one person (P10) was once involved in distance education research, in which she assisted a module coordinator. On the other hand, two of them were of the opinion they never thought they could manage such a research project (P12 and P15).

From the response of the staff interviewees, it appeared that there was indeed a great need for research on Distance Education, at the University of Pretoria, which was confirmed by the coordinators. And the reason for this state of affairs was, as noted earlier, their workload being too heavy, especially with regard to their dual role as lecturers for both Distance and Conventional Education (MC 4). However, according to MC 3, there was a focus area of research for Distance Education, but it was in its developmental stage as at the time of this investigation (MC 3). Although some of the coordinators were involved with this committee, according to (MC 6), their involvement was minimal.

Adding to this, two major areas of research need were identified by the coordinators, not just to be limited to the university, but the country as a whole. And these were to understand how distance students interacted with their learning materials and the maintenance of their own academic reading.

7.3.4.7 University's commitment to distance education

The staff interviewees were asked to comment on their view of the level of commitment of the university authorities to Distance Education, especially in comparison to Conventional Education. All ten course presenters were of the opinion, based on visible signs, the university authorities were committed to Distance Education. For instance, Participant 10 noted that the increased hours for the contact sessions for students from Distance Education had placed these

students at an advantage over the students from Conventional Education – which would be contrary to people's impression. She also added that:

> '*If I see all the money that they spend… okay, they get a lot of money, but they also spend a lot of money on the Distance Education. Because they have to hire the venues; they have to buy airplane tickets to the different venues; they have to pay you as a lecturer. So it's a lot of money that's involved, and they don't want to throw that money into the waters*'. P10, 10:34 (313:314)

As at the time of this investigation, the Distance Education Unit was the fastest growing unit in the Faculty of Education, and P24 described it this way, '*We only started in 2000 with 800 students, but we have about 10 000 students and we are actually the biggest faculty of the university*' P24, 24:12 (52:56). Nevertheless, it seemed as if there was more work to be done in the area of sensitising the faculty members to this mode of delivery, as she added that '*sometimes if you talk to people on the campus about distance education, they look you in the eye and they don't know what you are talking about*' P24, 24:12 (52:56).

7.4   Summary and conclusion

In Chapter Seven, the three chosen indices of assessment – namely, *access*, *delivery* and *output* – against which the B.Ed. (Hons) study programme was assessed, along with corresponding sub-themes were discussed with relevant staff members (both part-time and full-time), and students that had discontinued their studies with the university. These discussions were conducted in response to the answers provided by the telephone interviewees, the interview schedules, and in relation to student responses to the research questionnaire (See Chapter 6, Section 6).

In this chapter it was also revealed that the University of Pretoria adapted the BEd (Hons) study programme in response to the call from government to provide equal educational opportunities to those who have been previously denied such access, and to aid in the upgrading of the educational level of school teachers in

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this country. Yet, it has been discovered that merely opening up such access does not necessarily make the system fair to all.

Further, in this chapter it was revealed that in spite of the special profile of the students enrolled for the BEd (Hons) study programme, and the need to balance the economics of scale, the University of Pretoria endeavoured to provide a quality learning experience for them. Nonetheless, there is still much to be explored and expanded upon in this regard, since an open market exists for this programme. However, there appears to be a gap between what the university's intentions and what was being practised within the Faculty of Education, especially in relation to the dreams and aspirations of the university. As well, there is the dire need for further research on Distance Education, in relation to the level of involvement by the academics and their interest in this field, and incentives and rewards for academe, that need serious attention.

And lastly, to close this study, in Chapter Eight, the findings of this study (i.e. both the quantitative and qualitative research processes) will be integrated, and recommendations for the implementation of the theory and practice gleaned from this study will be offered.

CHAPTER 8

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY – TOWARD THE CULTURE OF QUALITY DISTANCE EDUCATION IN DUAL-MODE INSTITUTION IN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT

8.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the summary of the main findings, conclusions, recommendations and implications of the study. The conclusions are based on the summary of the problem statement, research questions and aim of the study, its main findings, which are based on both quantitative and qualitative research instruments, and the main findings from the literature review. In this section, the main research findings will be discussed in the light of the conceptual framework adopted for this study, which is the Transactional Distance Theory, and *quality*, as research shows that the latter has been responsible for the aspersion still cast

on distance education – though there has been much improvement in this area (see Chapter 1, Section 1.2).

The researcher's main reasons for choosing the Transactional Distance Theory for this study are:

> ➢ firstly, it focuses on the relationship between three concepts in learning, which are *dialogue*, *structure* and *learner autonomy*, irrespective of the mode of delivery;
>
> ➢ secondly, the level of the interaction of these variables determines the quality of the delivery modes; and
>
> ➢ thirdly, though only a distance education theory, research shows that the theory is applicable to both distance and conventional education, since the move toward constructivism indicates that students take responsibility for the construction of knowledge, and according to Bates (2005), both students from Distance and Contact Education spend more time interacting with their learning materials, than with the lecturers (see Chapter 2, Section 2.3.4).

Therefore, it suffices to say, the number of relationships (between the earlier mentioned variables) built into the learning materials, used by students from the two delivery modes involved in this investigation would go a long way to determine, the quality of education the students were provided. All the research instruments are attached as Appendixes (4 - 12).

8.2 Summary of the problem statement, research questions, aim of the study, and other chapters

This section is referenced on **Chapter One** of this study, and a cursory look at literature revealed that Conventional Education is the universally accepted approach for knowledge acquisition (Tsolakidis, 2000). Similarly, Distance Education is nothing new to the world (Guri-Rosenblit, 1999:3-6; Holmberg,

2001:9), and is currently employed across the globe as a means to meet the ever escalating demand for higher education – and African countries are included in this drive – to which this study is particularly relevant (Bollag, 2001; Braimoh, 2003).

However, the latter has not been wholly accepted due to a number of allegations levied against it, which may include:

> ➤ 'Lack of contact with other students which can have a significant effect on learner's motivation' (Suen & Parkes, 2004) – the result of isolation caused by the student and teacher being separated by geographical distance (Barnes, 1995; George, 1999);
> ➤ 'Success in distance education requires [a greater] degree of self-motivation and self-discipline than is necessary for learning' which students are not adequately prepared for (Keen, 1999); among others.

Therefore, it is being regarded as a second best option (Mendels, 1998; Reich, 1999; Stencil, 1999; Aluko, 2000; Braimoh, 2003). This awakened a continual urge within the researcher to discover the reasons for this still being the case. And in investigating this burning issue, decided to focus this work on drawing a comparison between Distance Education, as a mode of delivery, and its contact counterpart; in terms of *access*, *delivery* and *output*. These three chosen indices of measurement are highly relevant to South Africa at this time, as efforts are being made to redress the past injustices in education, a legacy of apartheid, through democracy (Daves et al. 2004).

For this investigation, the researcher chose the mixed-method research approach, which is viewed as an element in a researcher's toolkit (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003), to develop an answer to the main research question:

What is the comparison between the impact of Distance and Conventional Education on the performances of learners in a postgraduate BEd (Hons) degree study program with specialization in Education Management, Law and Policy, when assessed in terms of access, delivery and output?

Emanating from this is the main aim of this study, which is to investigate and compare the impact of Distance and Conventional Education on the performance of learners in the BEd (Hons) programme - with specialization in Education Management, Law and Policy - which is a postgraduate programme, assessed in terms of *access*, *delivery* and *output* at the Faculty of Education, of the University of Pretoria. The Distance Education programme is administered concurrently with the Conventional Education programme, as a dual-mode programme.

In Chapter Two, literature is reviewed of Distance and Conventional Education in terms of access, delivery and output. This review revealed diverse views on the concepts under investigation, which caused the researcher to develop working definitions of these concepts for the purpose of this study. Further, the distinctive features, practices, achievements and drawbacks of both modes of delivery were highlighted. In addition, it also highlighted convergence issues in higher education and the implications of literature findings for the study. Furthermore, current practices in distance and conventional education revealed the move from instructivism to constructivism (Garrison, 1996; Fraser & Lombard, 2002) and situational to transactional (Moore, 1993, 1996). The researcher chose to focus on Moore's *Transactional Distance Theory,* as it is related to teaching and learning, and focuses on the relationship between *dialogue*, *structure* and *learner autonomy*. Research reveals that this theory is also applicable to conventional education (Mueller, 1997), as it determines the quality of the delivery modes and communication media (Young & Marks-Maran, 1999; Garrison, 2000).

In **Chapter Three** the literature review, begun in Chapter 2, is continued but is focused on the policy and practice in South African higher education, for distance and conventional education. This aided in highlighting the progress already made in correcting injustices in education in South Africa and the challenges facing both delivery modes, with emphasis on distance education. Also, attention was drawn to the three chosen indices of assessment of this study, namely: *access*, *delivery* and *output*, as they related to education within the country – in general - and the University of Pretoria – specifically. In supporting this, a brief historical development of the University of Pretoria was traced, as this had direct impact on the issue of access, as part of the focus of this study. Lastly, mention was made of the BEd (Hons) Education Management, Law and Policy programme, which was administered concurrently as a distance and conventional study programme, highlighting its special features.

Since *low quality* has been identified as the main reason for the lukewarm attitude many people have toward distance education, in **Chapter Four** the global, national and local issues with regards to quality assurance in both modes of delivery are discussed. Emphasis was also placed on *quality*, as it related to access, delivery and output. Even though literature findings revealed that quality has been tagged a *slippery concept*, thereby making a global acceptable definition impossible, the present pressure on higher education to shift from quantity to quality in education is forcing the system to be continually reviewed with regard its stance on this aspect. This study revealed that the University of Pretoria had not been left out of this race, thereby causing it to focus on holistic quality education, which also impacted on the BEd (Hons) programme, the focus of this investigation.

In **Chapter Five** the research design and the methods used to collect the needed data to answer the questions posed at the beginning of this study were explained. This involved the use of structured one-on-one interviews – some of which were conducted over the telephone, – focus group interviews and a questionnaire, which were first piloted before their final application, to ensure

their validity and reliability. The researcher also tested the possible divergences between performances, throughput and drop-out rates of students from both modes of delivery. The interviews were used to get insightful information from policy makers, managers and other relevant administrative staff, course presenters, module coordinators, tutors, and students who had discontinued their studies with the university. Further, the questionnaire was used to elicit information from students from Distance and Conventional Education. Field notes were kept to support the recorded information (see the CD-ROM submitted with this thesis). Also discussed was the data analysis process of each instrument.

In **Chapter Six** the analysis and interpretation of the quantitative data was presented. This was done with the help of tables (where applicable), and a descriptive analysis of each question item. Student response to the questionnaire elicited information on access to the BEd (Hons) programme, teaching and instructional strategies, student performance and the quality assurance process for students. Also, both chi-square and Fisher's exact tests were applied (where applicable) to student scores to test for possible divergences in the performance of students from both modes of delivery, while the effect sizes were reported through the application of the Phi coefficient. In addition, the throughput and drop-out rate of students from the two delivery modes were compared.

In **Chapter Seven** a detailed presentation, analysis and interpretation of the qualitative method was presented. The findings of the interviews were explained in relation to access, delivery and output. Information on the quality of the access provided for students – with reference to the relevance of the instructional technology adopted by the institution – and the quality of their learning experience – which invariably had direct influence on their output – was gathered. Lastly, the quality assurance stance of the university, the extent to which role players were encouraged to participate in this, and their involvement in its process was discussed.

Finally, in **Chapter Eight** a review of all the preceding chapters is highlighted, the main research findings in relation to the *transactional distance theory* are discussed, recommendations for future policy and practice, and suggestions for further research in relation to Distance Education are offered, and, finally, the methodology applied to this study and its contributions to the body of knowledge and its limitations are reflected upon.

8.3   Summary of the main findings from the literature review

According to Baker, Frisbie and Patrick (1993), definitions of conventional education are not particularly different from one another, as they essentially give the idea of a geographical location (Hagel, 2000; Lewis, 2002), thus making the teacher and the student present most of the time. However, Barnet (2002) is of the opinion that various factors such as the demographic nature of the student body and technology, among others, have to some extent changed the conception of *the university as a place*. This goes on to suggest that in most countries, universities are faced by unprecedented challenges of rapid technological and societal changes, volatile increases in the significance of distance education and open learning, chronic financial difficulties; and the quest for quality, to mention but a few (Peters, 2000). Nevertheless, concerning the future of the university, Pister (1999:236) submits that 'universities will continue to represent all three attributes of place, process and paradigm'. Therefore, the working definition of conventional education adopted for this study is *"The mode of education in which the teacher and the learners often meet face-to-face at the same time and place"* (see Chapter 2, Section 2.2.3).

But mention must be made of the fact that this mode of education is often regarded as superior to its distance counterpart (Tsolakidis, 2000). However, the disadvantages of conventional education highlighted by scholars include its conservative nature and reluctance to change (Evans & Nation, 2000) and its encouragement of passive learning, ignoring individual differences and learner needs (Johnson et al. 2000), which is as a result of lecture presentation to a large

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number of students (Garrison & Anderson, 2000), to mention but a few. These have caused Pister (1999) to submit that the conventional education delivery mode has not fitted all institutions.

In comparison, the distance education form of delivery is now a common phenomenon all over the world (Srivastava, 2002), which is described as the mode of transferring higher education to its recipients but which still benefits from the planning, guidance and tuition of tutorial organization (Holmberg, 1993; QAA, 1999; the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), 2004). However, to this definition, scholars have added the use of technology that mediates communication between students and facilitators (Holmberg, 2001; Taylor, 2001; Rekkedal & Qvist-Eriksen, 2003), which has led to the term *generations* of technology (Garrison, 1993; Garrison & Archer, 2000; Taylor, 2001, 2002). Of these, the *print* medium is the most common (Garrison & Archer, 2000).

According to Lewis (2002) distance education developed because the needs of certain groups of people (such as stay-at-home mothers, the disabled, prisoners, those with paid jobs, and even employers of labor) were not being recognized and met by conventional higher education methods. It is to this mode that African countries are forced to turn (Dlamini, 1998; UNESCO, 2001; Braimoh, 2003; Magagula & Ngwenya, 2004), chiefly in the light of the possibility of distance education providing educational opportunities to its teeming populations. From the above, distance education, for the purpose of this study, is defined as *"The mode of delivery in which the teacher is separated from the learners, thereby necessitating the use of artificial communication that encourages interaction among teacher/learners and learners/learners"*.

Nevertheless, despite these benefits, distance education has not been spared its share of criticism, which has stemmed from the fear people have of the system's inability to encourage deeper understanding of learning materials, the possible

irrelevance of the distance teaching mode to some courses, which thereby encourages a higher drop-out rate among these students, possible lack of academic and relational support for academics and students, the negative effects of non-availability of library services on studies, and its cost implications (Lowe, 1997; AFT, 2000; Hellman, 2003), which all depict aspects of *quality* in education. Nonetheless, Badat (2005) concludes that, 'high-quality distance higher education can be immensely valuable [for] public and social good'.

Further, mention must be made of the fact that changes taking place in higher education have established *paradigm shifts*, which are rooted in theoretical underpinnings that are affecting both modes of delivery (See Chapter 1, Section 1.2). Chiefly among these are the shift from the *instruction paradigm* to the *learning paradigm* (Gwyer, 1997; Barr & Tagg, 1995; Fraser & Lombard, 2002; Pacific Crest, 2004), and *access* – that has become a political issue (Herman & Mandell, 1999) because of the obvious effect of higher education on determining the wealth of a nation (Daves et al. 2004; Duderstadt, 2002a). All these have, to some extent, led to the convergence of distance and conventional education (Tait & Mills, 1999).

According to Duderstadt (2002a), 'since knowledge has become not only the wealth of nations, but the key to one's personal prosperity and quality of life, it has become the responsibility of democratic societies to provide their citizens with the education and training they need, throughout their lives, whenever, wherever, and however they desire it, at high quality and at an affordable cost'. This statement sums up the essence of this study, and the researcher's choice of the three indices of assessment, namely: *access*, *delivery* and *output*, against which distance and conventional education have been compared. Past research (Garrison, 1996; SAIDE, 1996; Perraton, 2000; Dhanarajan, 2001) reveals that the delivery mode of a form of education and its quality are directly related to access that invariably determines the throughput and output rates.

Further to this, according to Clark (1999), comparative research into contact education and its distance counterpart dated back to about seventy (70) years or more. Unfortunately, the acceptance of distance education has not changed much in spite of the work of 'three generations of educators and media specialists' (Clark, 1999:viii). However, the perusing of available literature reveals that *quality* (which is a slippery concept to define), was the main reason for the low acceptance of this mode of delivery (Black, 1992; Garrison, 1996; Jelfs, 2001; Aluko, 2000; Clarke et al. 2004). Hence, it has been advised that attention should be focused on quality, as it relates to distance education.

Reflecting this, gaps that have been identified in past comparative studies include failure to adequately define and differentiate between both forms of education, lack of taking into consideration other factors that affect the failure or success of students, lack of focus on the total academic study programme and inadequate explanation of reasons for the higher dropout rates of distance learners, and the quantitative nature of most research in this area, among others (Ehrmann, 1995; Saba, 1998; Phipps, 1999; Lockee, Moore & Burton, 2001; Diaz, 2000).

However, as earlier noted, it is not the interest of the researcher to focus on "Which method is better?" (Diaz, 2000), but on what possible discrepancies exist in distance education, when compared to its contact counterpart, which have resulted in an attitude of scepticism toward it. And what suggestions can be proffered on this.

8.4 Summary of the quantitative and the qualitative investigations

This section has been included to focus attention on the main findings of this study of the comparison of the BEd (Hons) Education Management, Law and Policy program in a dual-mode setting. Further, the findings in relation to the indices of assessment, as identified at the beginning of this study (see Chapter 1,

Section 1.2), were discussed. To follow are summaries of the findings from the application of the quantitative and qualitative research instruments:

8.4.1 Summary of the findings of the quantitative investigation

The following findings were identified based on the quantitative research instruments, which consisted of the questionnaire – that was given to students to be answered – and data provided by the university – on the enrolment, throughput and graduation rates (see Chapter 6) of BEd (Hons) study programme students, from Distance and Conventional Education.

8.4.1.1 Main findings from student responses to the questionnaire

8.4.1.1.1 Main findings in terms of access to the BEd (Hons) study programme and the university

In all, 275 students from Distance (230) and Conventional Education (45), who were all registered for the B. Ed. (Hons) study programme, responded to the research questionnaire. Analysis of these documents delivered the following information:

➢ The biographical information revealed that majority of the students (17,189) enrolled on the B. Ed. (Hons) study programme between 2003 and 2006 were *Blacks* [Africans] (16, 507 - 95%), who were mostly enrolled for the Distance Education programme. Also, the ages of most of the respondents that participated in this study (170) were within the early adulthood and mid adulthood (ages 35 – 39) range, and of these students 112 (66%) were female. In addition, 99% of these students were educators, while the remaining 1%, worked in related fields. Of the 170 students, 110 indicated that their choice of the University of Pretoria was determined by the *quality* of this programme. Furthermore, 36 students (22.5%) were university graduates, while 124 students (77.5%) were non-

graduates that possessed diplomas and Advanced Certificates in Education.

➢ As could be expected, students from Contact Education were presented an orientation programme, to introduce them to the B. Ed. (Hons) programme, while students from Distance Education had a tutorial booklet, which supplied all necessary information.

8.4.1.1.2 Main findings on the quality of the learning experiences of students from both modes of delivery

Further responses received from the students to the questionnaire revealed the following information:

➢ The media technology for Distance and Conventional Education was indicated as *print*. Most of the students registered for the BEd (Hons) programme were from the Distance Education group, and lived in areas far from any institution that could provide them access to higher education. Further, this accounted for most of the students from Distance Education receiving their tutorial materials by *post*.

➢ Further to this, most of the students from Distance Education indicated that the university did not provide non-instructional support (i.e. free-toll telephone support and counselling) over and above teaching. Consequently most students indicated this as an area of need. In contrast, most students from both groups indicated that academic advising services were provided, which they frequently made use of. Further, the students on this programme indicated diverse motivating factors for having made their choice of delivery mode.

➢ A large percentage of the students from Contact Education indicated they had the possibility of meeting with their facilitators as such need presented itself. However, most students from Distance Education, especially those living a great distance from the University of Pretoria (Education campus), did not have this opportunity, except during contact sessions. In addition to

this, certain of these students complained about the cost of phoning in to the university, to consult with their lecturers.

➤ All the students indicated they were provided the opportunity to appraise all aspects of the BEd (Hons) programme (which appraisal included course presenters, administration and the contact sessions), and most students were of the opinion the method of appraisal was *fairly good*.

➤ The majority of the students (56%) from Distance and Conventional Education indicated they had never completed any learning style or learning preference assessment questionnaire that was provided by the University of Pretoria. However, many of these students (77%) indicated they were already aware of their personal learning style (probably due to their profession – teaching).

➤ 120 students (75%) from Distance and Conventional Education affirmed that the formative assessment method of evaluation was applied at the University of Pretoria, as they had to complete assignments by pre-specified due dates. In relation to this, many students from Contact Education indicated a general 2-week wait for feedback on assignments, while the students from Distance Education indicated a general 4-week wait for feedback on assignments. In relation to this, 141 students (86.5%) from both delivery modes affirmed that the lecturers conveyed to them a high expectation of their performance, and 138 students (85.19%) were satisfied with this method of assessment. Nonetheless, the majority of the students still offered suggestions for improvement in this area.

➤ Mixed feelings were expressed by students from Distance and Conventional Education on the quality of some of their tutorial materials, and question items on these were based on the didactic qualities of the materials; their content, goals and objectives and achievement of cognitive skills. Further, the majority of the students specified that they mostly depended on these tutorial materials for study purposes.

➤ No provision of accommodation was made for students from Distance Education during the contact sessions; an aspect these students indicated

made the attendance to this part of the study programme tougher – a matter they hoped the university could assist them with. It was noted, however, attendance at these contact sessions was not compulsory. Conversely, most students from Conventional Education usually attended classes so did not need additional support through these contact sessions.

➤ The students from Conventional Education had access to library books, while their Distance Education counterparts received learning materials that contained sufficient information for their study purposes; however, they could borrow library books – for extra reading purpose - from the library, at their own cost.

➤ The majority of the students from both delivery groups rated the services rendered by the administrative staff of the university as *good* (82 - 54%); while 49 students (32%) indicated these as *excellent*; 16 students (10%) indicated *fair*, and a very number of low 6 students (4%), indicated *poor*. Additionally, other ratings included the flow of regular information, listing of specific time to contact administrative staff and availability of names and contact details of staff to students, in which student opinion varied.

➤ Lastly, 135 students (91%) indicated they were satisfied with the BEd (Hons) programme; nonetheless, there were still many unmet expectations, as could be deduced from the many suggestions provided by the students for the improvement of the programme (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.1.5-b).

8.4.1.1.3   Main findings in terms of other possible factors influencing student output

In relation to the above issues, further possible factors that might have affected student output are enlisted below:

➤ Most of the students regarded the educational services rendered at the University of Pretoria supportive of their learning. However, there were a few negative comments offered.

➢ Many of the students, who participated in this investigation, did not have access to financial aid – and many received financial assistance through EDULOAN, a system whereby the student repaid advance loans against their salary. The majority of these students indicated having difficulty with coping to cover the monthly repayment amount.

➢ While other commitments directly impacted student focus on their learning, many were of the opinion they were still committed to their studies, in spite of these. In addition, many of these students were of the opinion they had made the right choice of programme.

8.4.1.1.4 Main findings on student performance, the throughput and the dropout rate data collected from the university administration

➢ It was indicated in Chapter 6, Section 6.3.2 that performances of students from the two delivery modes were much the same, as there were instances where students from Distance Education performed as well as their contact counterparts.

➢ Comparison of the dropout rate of students from the two delivery modes indicated the rate from Distance Education was higher (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.3). However, there was an indication of a slight improvement in this rate for Distance Education, and – as the BEd (Hons) programme was still at its developmental stage – it was decided it was too early to judge this budding trend with certainty.

8.4.2 Summary of the findings from the qualitative investigation (see Chapter 7)

8.4.2.1 Main findings in terms of access to the BEd (Hons) programme and the University of Pretoria

➢ Upon receiving the policy statement of the government (see Chapter 3, Section 3.4.1) to extend access of learning opportunities to the teeming populace in South Africa, the Faculty of Education, at the University of

Pretoria, identified the BEd (Hons) Education Management, Law and Policy programme as one of the niche areas to develop and aid in meeting this need. In relation to this, findings of this study revealed that, even though this university – just a few short years prior to the time of this research study being conducted – was a predominantly White university, most students who enrolled for this programme were Black.

➢ Certain geographical areas of South Africa, which were not well served by other universities, were targeted by the University of Pretoria, thereby extending its student catchment area far and wide into rural areas, and even beyond the borders of the country. This decision determined the choice of instructional technology.

➢ The adopted instructional technology was *paper-based*, which was relevant to all enrolled students on the BEd (Hons) programme, thus bringing all students onto a par.

8.4.2.2 Main findings on the quality of the learning experiences of students

➢ The Distance Education programme was borne out of the Conventional Education programme; but the birthing process was not without its challenges, which the module coordinators coped with, with the aid of the Faculty of Education.

➢ Ultimately, the learning materials that were developed for the Distance Education Unit were also used by Conventional Education – the major reason for this was the *quality* of the newly developed learning materials.

➢ To enable the necessary support for the students from the Distance Education Unit the Faculty of Education introduced the conducting of contact sessions, the use of SMS technology, and encouraged learner-learner and faculty-student support. The module coordinators and the course presenters had high expectations of student performance that was communicated to the students, to motivate them.

➢ As the students from Distance Education did not have direct access to the library facilities at the University of Pretoria, as their contact counterparts did, the module coordinators enriched the readers that were to be used by these students, by attaching sufficient study material that students could use for completing the assignments. However, other options were made available to these students in the form of extra books being added to the learning package, and lists of articles and other books that they could order from the campus library – for a fee – and the option of visiting the campus libraries was still available to students who lived close enough to the university. Nonetheless, many of these students lived in remote areas of South Africa, where there were no universities nearby. And many also indicated they had no access to Internet facilities, and the modules could then not be supported using this technology.

➢ It was noted there was no provision made at the University of Pretoria for a separate counselling unit for the students from Distance Education, though they could access that which was available to their contact counterparts over the telephone. Some students were of the opinion that phoning was expensive and staff from the university admitted it would be impracticable for students to travel to the Faculty of Education for this purpose.

➢ Other factors among the findings that could impact on the performance rate for students from Distance Education were poor health, and the absence of tutors for the six modules under investigation.

8.4.2.3 Main findings in terms of the quality assurance process at the university

➢ The policy and attitude toward quality assurance adopted at the University of Pretoria was the holistic approach, and this was communicated to all involved in the process of delivering this study programme, as well as the stakeholders. Towards this aim, all staff members were developed. Additionally, students from Distance and Conventional Education indicated

quality of the BEd (Hons) programme as the main reason for their enrolling with the university in this course.

➢ All academics at the Faculty of Education who were involved in teaching the modules that formed part of the Conventional Education BEd (Hons) programme were automatically drafted into teaching the Distance Education programme, an additional task which some asserted they were not prepared for before accepting employment at the university. So, to an extent, these staff members felt compelled to be involved in the distance mode.

➢ Further to this aspect, there were no additional incentives or rewards for teaching staff being involved in Distance Education, which some lecturers felt was necessary, as was the case with other dual-mode institutions.

➢ There was an enormous need for further research in distance education. However, a committee had been instituted to investigate this need, but only a few of the module coordinators were involved in this committee, but only on a superficial level.

➢ Some student interviewees were of the opinion stronger attention could be focused by the University of Pretoria in the area of marketing the BEd (Hons) programme, as many potential students within the rural student catchment areas of the Faculty of Education, were still excluded from this programme, through ignorance of its possibilities.

➢ Lastly, all the course presenters involved in the BEd (Hons) study programme were of the opinion the University of Pretoria was strongly committed to all aspects of the Distance Education Unit, as reflected by the physical efforts and financial investment that went into the planning and implementation of this programme.

8.5 Analytical reflection on the main research findings: a synthesis of the indices of assessment

8.5.1 Introduction

The three chosen indices of assessment for this study are, namely: *access*, *delivery* and *output*. Prior to this section, these three aspects were investigated as separate entities (see Chapters 2 and 3.). However, in this section the researcher will be critically reflecting on them, to synthesize her findings. In addition, the interrelatedness of the roles they play when comparing Distance and Conventional Education will be highlighted and possible reasons that are the basis for the ever persistent view that many people have of the former mode of education being inferior to the latter will be discussed, or whether such thinking is based on a fallacy. This is more so because research has established the delivery mode of a form of education and its quality are directly related to access, which also impact on the throughput rates (Garrison, 1996; SAIDE, 1996; Perraton, 2000; Dhanarajan, 2001). Finally, certain aspects of the recommendations of the SAIDE (2006) – that reviewed the operational systems of the Distance Education Unit of the University of Pretoria – will be referred to toward the end of this report.

8.5.2 Towards a better understanding of *access*

While investigating the B. Ed. (Hons) programme, a major objective for the researcher was to determine the extent *access* to higher education is provided for many people that had been previously denied such access, as well as determine the *quality* of the access provided (see Chapter One, Sections 1.3 and 1.4). In regarding these aspects, focus was placed on three areas:

- ➢ The choice of instructional technology used by the University of Pretoria,
- ➢ The reasons for this choice, and
- ➢ The relevance of the instructional technology to the BEd (Hons) students.

However, this discussion will include other related factors that were highlighted during the course of this study.

Based on the findings from the quantitative and qualitative research instruments applied in this study, one could say that the call by government (Education White Paper (1997); National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa (2001)) to provide access for higher education for all South Africans, the majority of whom such access was previously denied, was gradually being yielded to (Cloete & Bunting, 1999; Sedgwick, 2004). Besides, the University of Pretoria (previously a University for Afrikaans speaking South Africans), together with other South African universities (CHE, 2004), is currently involved in this vision, as English is now the medium of lecturing and examining thousands of students.

According to scholars, higher education has moved from its former position of *elitism* to *massification* (Gourley, 1999; Pond, 2002), due to a number of factors:

- ➢ Firstly, it has opened up opportunities to mature students and has eased entry barriers (Smith & Webster, 1997).
- ➢ Secondly, it has increased the political power of ordinary citizens (Braimoh, 2003). And
- ➢ Thirdly, it does not only hold the key to one's personal prosperity and quality of life, but has been found to hold the key to the wealth of a nation (Duderstadt, 2002a; Morley, Unterhatler & Gold, 2003), among other reasons.

In relation to this, it has been discovered that distance education has come to stay, and according to Nuan (1996), it is unavoidably connected to the issues of social justice, involving equity for groups, and personal liberation. Therefore, in South Africa, it has been identified as being able to redress past inequities (Daves et al. 2004).

To buttress the facts above, this study revealed that the rural student catchment areas of the University of Pretoria – for the BEd (Hons) programme –stretched across South Africa. This was the result of a deliberate decision and the ensuing survey revealed areas of the country that were not yet provided with access to university education. In view of this, Bates (2005) is of the opinion that the university, in essence, has limited its choice of technology – which was, in this, case *print* – to provide equal access to students coming into the programme. Nevertheless, findings from this study reveal that these students, though, could identify with the choice of media, but there still existed some gaps, which Hellman (2003) referred to as the *digital divide*. This was despite the fact that the University of Pretoria, in playing its part fully, within the possible available means, of bringing all students to the same level, included all necessary information needed by the students from Distance Education to cope with their studies, in the tutorial materials (see Chapter 7, Section 7.3.2.2). Many module coordinators and course presenters were of the opinion there was a difference between students from the two delivery modes who had access to other technologies, from those who did not. Included in the more privileged group were:

➢ The students from Contact Education who had greater exposure to modern facilities, such as computer technology,
➢ Along with students from Distance Education who were privileged to work in schools that owned some of these facilities, and
➢ Students who could access libraries from other universities, as they lived closer to their campus (see Chapter 7, Section 7.3.3.4).

However, Smith and Webster (1997a) earlier warned that there might be paradoxes, which might lead to *the coexistence of greater inclusion alongside greater exclusion*. For instance, the findings of this study showed that there was equity in terms of the access provided for students, as admission into the BEd (Hons) programme was open to a large extent, which could be interpreted to mean *greater inclusion*. This was because diverse and the same entrance

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qualifications were recognized for the Distance and Conventional Education study modes, which also included recognition of prior learning (RPL). Nonetheless, shedding further light on the *greater exclusion*, Morrow, (1993/1994); Herman and Mandell (1999); Jansen (2001) and Gamede (2005) are of the opinion that opening up access, may not necessarily mean true access, since many factors have to be considered when it comes to the issue of access. This situation causes Morrow (1993/4); Jansen (2001) and Gamede (2005) to make a distinction between epistemological access and physical access, which go a long way to determine the quality of the access provided for learners.

Of importance among these factors are the availability of *non-instructional support* (which in this context, referred to toll-free telephone support and counselling), and *academic advising services* for enrolled students in any given study programme. Scholars (Carnwell, 1998; Johnson, 1999; Moreland & Carnwell, 2000; Harrington et al. 2001; HESA, 2005; Raphael, 2006) have continually stressed the importance of both, as their absence can have terrible consequences on students. Concerning these aspects, findings from this study revealed that only students from Conventional Education had access to non-instructional support, such as *counselling*, while the majority of students from Distance Education responded negatively to the questions concerning the availability of these services (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.1.2-c). Certain students identified areas of need for counselling, which included *career counselling, studying, time management, and how to write examinations and complete assignments*. Regrettably, these are already identified areas of challenges for students in distance education (Van Schoor, Mill & Potgieter, 2002; Mostert, 2006). Conversely, the majority of the students indicated that they had better access to *academic advising services*, which resulted in them being better motivated within their studies (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.1.2-e). However, in this instance, the students from Distance Education were expected to phone in to the university, which meant additional expenses for – a cost some

of them complained about. Subsequently, they rarely phoned for academic advising (see Chapter 7, Section 7.3.2.6).

For this reason, scholars (Grayson, 1997; Carr, 2000; Mantetjie, 2001; Tresman, 2002) suggest putting some structures in place, which include:

- ➢ Academic development,
- ➢ Diagnostic assessment,
- ➢ Effective learner support systems,
- ➢ Work-study programs,
- ➢ Special loan scheme, and
- ➢ Bridging courses for those with marginal matriculation results, and
- ➢ Those students who have problems with language proficiency in English, among others.

As at the time of this investigation, the University of Pretoria had not fully explored all these aspects. Unfortunately, Gelderbloem (1996) laments, these initiatives are expensive and more funding will be needed for sustainability of the institution, which will have to be geared towards admitting more students from a disadvantaged background, and, as lack of selection may affect the maintaining of excellence at universities, thereby making the quality of the access given to students become questionable.

In relation to this, is that prospective students that were unemployed, and who then could not pay the tuition fees, were not admitted into the programme. This, in a way, indicates that access to the programme was restricted to only those that could afford the payment of fees. Supporting this, Pityana (2006) – in an address at the official launch of the Joint Initiative for Priority Skills Acquisition (JIPSA) on 27 March – praised the great improvement in the area of access to higher education for all, though he laments that many South Africans are still excluded from the higher education loop. Related to this, the picture on the international

scene is not entirely different. For instance, USA Funds (2007) expresses the fear that 'despite the enormous investment of public resources, financial barriers to higher learning persist for many academically qualified low-income students', a state that 'remains at approximately the same level it was more than 30 years ago'.

This leads to the issue of EDULOAN, a loan scheme which many enrolled students applied for. Findings from this study (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.1.4-b) revealed that out of 152 students from the two delivery modes, 85 students (56%) were struggling with financial difficulties related to their studies. (This is in contrast to the other 67 students that did not indicate such difficulties despite being on the same loan scheme). Further, only 10 students had access to bursary funding, while only 2 students could afford the payment of their study fees. (From this one can see that in a sense students were forced to make use of the loan scheme.) This situation caused Pityana (2006) to assert that one of the consequences of low funding 'is that students' fees have increased in order to match the funding shortage'. Unfortunately, responses of students to the questionnaire indicated complaints about high study fees (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.1.5-b). This, among other factors, according to USA Funds (2006) often signals the lower probability of students completing their studies, and low motivation to study (Qurashi, Morton & Antosz, 2002).

Finally, the tutorial packages especially developed and compiled to suit their extraordinary needs (with extra textbooks included), were sent to students from Distance Education, as described by one of the administrators (see Chapter 7, Section 7.3.2.2), who suggested that because of this extra service, this group of students paid higher tuition fees – as the university endeavored to encourage parity between the two delivery modes, despite the physical and digital divide, as far as was possible. And in reviewing all these statements, the researcher joins forces with Chambers (1997) to ask the question, 'Who pays for the cost of opening up access?'

According to Cele and Brandt (c2005) and Scott (2003), there must be way to get round increasing access to education for all people, while not losing credibility in the face of financial *stinginess* on the part of government. Though the financial budget of the South African government for 2007 reflects that the lion share has been allocated for education purposes, and, according to the Finance Minister (South Africa Information, 2007), R700 million of this budget has been set aside for bursaries – to encourage young people to train as teachers – however, little or nothing has been mentioned about the positive contribution Distance Education could lend to this situation. It is hoped that the government, when apportioning the budget monies allocated for education, would look into these critical issues.

8.5.3 The quality of student learning experience in relation to the *delivery*

Another objective of this study was to compare the quality of the learning experience of students from Distance and Conventional Education. On this issue, the application of both quantitative and qualitative research instruments revealed that students from both delivery modes used the same learning materials, which were initially developed for the use of the Distance Education programme. According to one of the staff interviewees, the main reason for this decision by management included the quality of the newly developed learning materials. The module coordinators were responsible for both delivery modes, and the students would be writing the same examination, and would later be awarded the same certificates upon completion of their studies. The researcher's opinion on this is that the decision signifies assent to the quality of the learning materials used on this programme. This buttresses Van Kierk (2004) who noted that attention in distance education has shifted to the production of quality materials. In addition, while writing on the real quality measure for learning materials, Duval (2005) asserted that 'quality is not so much a characteristic of a learning object, but rather a characteristic of how that subject is used in a particular context …'

Further investigation revealed that apart from the learning materials, tutorial letters, study guides, and relevant articles and textbooks were also sent to

students from Distance Education as part of their learning package. For these students, the tutorial letters served as their orientation to the University of Pretoria and the BEd (Hons) programme – as they contained all necessary information and could be likened to the orientation programme of the students from Conventional Education. According to Raphael (2006), orientation programmes are necessary to familiarize students with study programmes. On this matter, the researcher thinks there is a need for the institution to become more creative in conveying this aspect to students from Distance Education. This is necessary inasmuch as many course presenters noted that most students from Distance Education sometimes never opened their learning materials before arriving for contact sessions, which could suggest that these students had little or no knowledge about the expectations of the BEd (Hons) programme (see Chapter 7, Section 7.3.2.2). Thus, it has been suggested by scholars (Grayson (1997); Carr (2000); Tresman (2002) that universities could introduce pre-orientation courses. Conversely, the researcher concurs with Telford and Masson (2005) that except students also play their expected roles within the educational system, it will be difficult to realize the goals of a programme, no matter the efforts of the institution concerned.

As earlier noted, the University of Pretoria, after its initial survey, settled for *print* as the medium of delivery for the BEd (Hons) programme (see Chapter 7, Section 7.3.1.3), and after this decision, the medium was suitable to provide access (Bates, 1995; Lambert & Williams, 1999) to all students from both Distance and Conventional Education, irrespective of where they lived. As maintained by Diaz and Cartnal (1999) and Goold and Rimmer (2000), one of the ways to make learning materials more effective is to discover the learning styles and learning preferences of students, and to take these into consideration when designing the learning materials. However, findings from this study indicated that the University of Pretoria was yet to assess these important aspects (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.3.1-e and Chapter 7, Section 7.3.2.2). According to Logan and Thomas (2002), individual differences should be of particular interest

to providers of distance education because there is usually no teacher readily available to explain, adapt or tailor the materials to an individual's need, as the need arises.

In addition, even though the majority of the course presenters indicated their satisfaction with the quality of the learning materials, there were, nonetheless, mixed attitudes toward this (see Chapter 7, Section 7.3.2.2), which was due to inadequate interactivity, and the language difficulty level of some of the materials. Corroborating this, response of students to the questionnaire revealed the same impression (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.3.1-l & m), and this should be a major source of concern because the majority of students from the two delivery modes mainly depended on these materials for their learning (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.3.1-n). In the opinion of Curtis (1997:10), 'quality in teaching and learning in higher education depends substantially on making learning resources and activities as interactive as possible'. Though, the plans were being formulated at the university for the review of the learning material (a step also confirmed by the review committee (SAIDE, 2006), Tam (2000) emphasizes that 'it is no longer sufficient to provide distance learners with pre-packaged self-instructional materials where there is very little opportunity for student choice and interaction'.

Allied to this matter, another possible source of assistance could be the collaboration among universities with similar teaching programmes, which has been recommended for the purpose of managing production cost and improving the quality of such materials (Rockwell, Furgason & Marx, 2000; CHE, 2004d). Nevertheless, according to the conceptual framework that guided this study – the Transactional Distance Theory (see Chapter 4, Section 4.2.4), the more students are concerned about the quality of their tutorial materials, the more alienated they will feel, thus increasing the *transactional distance* between them and the lecturers (Moore, 1991, 1996; Saba,1998; Young & Marks-Maran, 1999).

Of relevance, are the organizational issues, among which are the *administrative structures* that Lambert and Williams (1999) regard as being critical to the long-term success of any given study programme. Though students rated the administrative services at the Faculty of Education as *good*, they felt there were areas needing serious attention. An example is the late delivery of tutorial packages and other necessary information to students from Distance Education due to delays in the postal delivery system, (which the staff viewed as beyond their control), yet there is no gainsaying that there is the need for the provision of adequate staffing, to then assign specific staff to specific roles, to for instance, efficiently attend to the 20,000 calls per month received by the office (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.3.1-j and Chapter 7, Section 7.3.2.4; SAIDE, 2006). Unfortunately, provision of adequate staffing is closely allied to the *quality* of a study programme (NADEOSA, 2003; Nash, 2005). However, one must acknowledge the possible impact of these matters on students, since they were expected to have received their tutorial packages in good time and at times there might be no prompt response to student enquiries.

Part of what defines a *quality* learning experience is the support structure which an institution has in place. Apart from the non-instructional and non-academic support services earlier discussed, it was revealed that the Distance Education Unit, of the University of Pretoria, made use of Short Message Service (SMS) technology, contact sessions and library services to enhance the learning support provided for students. The use of SMS technology to augment education is not new in the academic world (Ramos, c2007; Pabiaco, 2000; Mariano & De LA Rosa, 2004; Nonyongo, Mabusela & Monene, 2005; Riordan & Traxler, 2005; Mbarika & Mbarika, 2006; Kajumbula, 2007).

For instance, it has been found to enhance communication between students and the university, and scholars are exploring its benefits still further, with no exception to the University of Pretoria. Statistics as at the time of this investigation revealed that 98% (see Chapter 7, Section 7.3.2.4) of the BEd

(Hons) students possessed mobile phones (even though the majority of them lived in rural areas of South Africa). Citing one of the advantages of this technology, and referring to the university as a point of reference for others to emulate, Nix, Russell and Keegan (2007) gave the example of the university, in which in 2002, 58% of enrolled students responded to a reminder for registration as opposed to the normal expected percentage of below 40%. Likewise, findings of a recent study on the effectiveness of SMS technology at Makerere University, Uganda, revealed that students who participated in the study were of the opinion there was improved communication between them and the university, and, as a result, they felt connected to the institution (Kajumbula, 2007). However, still of great concern here, is the Internet crisis faced by Africa, as only 1% of the worldwide Internet users are on this continent, while half of this percentage are in South Africa, with 70% found mostly in the major cities of the country Laaser (2006). In contrast to this, as at December 2005, European countries are fast approaching the 100% range (Nix, Russell & Keegan, 2007).

Further supporting the university's teaching efforts, contact sessions at the University of Pretoria have come to be regarded as an integral means of learning support for students from Distance Education. According to scholars (Holmberg, 1995; Kelsey & D'souza, 2004; Labuschagne & Mashile, 2005), faculty-student contact is regarded as a major part of the motivational factor for distance education students, and this should be as solid as that of the contact mode (Thompson & McGrath, 1999; Nixon & Leftwich, 1999; Fender, 2001). Buttressing this is a study conducted in 2002 by Fender on student and faculty issues, which revealed that a concern of faculty members was 'lack of interaction with students'. Sadly, investigation of this situation for the BEd (Hons) students revealed that the students from Contact Education availed themselves more of this opportunity than their Distance Education counterparts. Research conducted through the Distance Education Unit, of the Faculty of Education, is inconclusive – at this stage – as to whether students that attended the contact sessions performed better than those who did not (see Chapter 7, Section 7.3.2.3), but it

was later confirmed that this had positive effects on students' performances during a follow-up interview with the manager of the program. However, I think one might be cautious in drawing a conclusion that this was the sole reason why such students performed better. Mention must be made here that a possible reason for students from Distance Education being reluctant to attend the contact sessions was the non-provision of accommodation during the contact session period, a need students had, but which the faculty could not meet – for logistic reasons (see Chapter 7, Section 7. 3.3.1).

In relation to this is the attitude toward learner-learner support, on which research on its impact on students from distance education is inconclusive, as scholars are divided on this (Moore, 1989; Holmberg, 1995; Biner et al. 1997; Kelsey & D'souza, 2004). Nonetheless, this was an important aspect identified by the B. Ed (Hons) students from the Distance Education Unit, as most often they could not make contact with other students – thereby forcing them to struggle alone with, for example, the completing of assignments (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.1.3-s).

In addition, scholars have identified tutoring as another way to encourage students from distance education to finish their programs on time (Galusha, 1997; Miller 2002). But findings from the investigation for this study indicated no tutors (for both modes) had been identified for any of the six modules under investigation (see Chapter 7, Section 7.3.3.7). However, it appeared that the service providers (i.e. the course presenters) employed by the Distance Education Unit seemed to be playing this role, but to the researcher, this could not have been as effective since majority of them had contact with the students mainly during the contact sessions. As indicated by Moore and Kearsley (2005), it helps provide students with individualized instruction, improves their completion rates and achievement, although these would depend on the nature of the course, the tutor and the student. Though module coordinators expressed doubts at locating suitable candidates to appoint to this position for each module, due to

the experience required at this level, but the researcher is of the opinion that the Faculty of Education should establish a process of training to *grow* the required tutors (Moore, 2005).

The last support mechanism to be mentioned here is the library facility provided by the university. According to Buchanan (2000) and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL, 2004), it is the responsibility of universities to go the extra mile to meet the needs of distance education students. Though this study revealed that efforts at the University of Pretoria were extended to meet this need – by including in tutorial packages destined for use by students from Distance Education all that was regarded as necessary for success in their studies – nevertheless, one cannot overlook that the students from Contact Education, along with certain of the students from Distance Education, that had access to libraries would be at an advantage over the others. A particular instance relevant to this study was the incapacity of students from Distance Education to access a library of law, a facility not located in the rural areas. And to complicate the issue, most of them also had no access to the Internet (see Chapter 7, Section 7.3.1.2). The researcher is of the opinion the time is right for the University of Pretoria to consider ways to diversify in this area.

Findings from this study revealed the University of Pretoria adopted three forms of assessment: self-assessment; formative and summative methods, in which students were given assignments, and the marks were part of the final mark. On this, Mostert, Makola and Munondi (2004), are of the opinion that this motivates distance education students, and prepares them for writing the summative assessment. However, according to Clarke et al. (2004), assessment at a distance can be problematic. This becomes clearer, if one remembers that, due to the special nature of the students from Distance Education that participated in this investigation (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.1.1-e. and Chapter 7, Section 7.3.1.3), the aid of electronic assessment software could not be made use of by the Faculty of Education, since most of these students had no access to the

Internet, which could have been instrumental in combating the problem of late delivery of submitted assignments to the administration of the faculty and late feedback on assignments to students because of erratic delivery of the general postal system (a factor that was beyond the university's control). An implication of this situation was that students may not receive feedback on their assignments in good time to prepare for examination. To combat the effect of this situation, Module Coordinators indicated they attached comments, highlighting general problems students experienced in answering the assignments, to tutorial letters. To this Dindsdag, Armstrong and Neil (2000) emphasize it is more encouraging for students when they receive feedback on their own work.

An advantage of using assessment software when grading student assignments is *consistency*, in that it erases the inherent problem with having different markers (Dindsdag et al. 2004). Unfortunately, this research application revealed students were of the opinion there was a difference between those who taught them and marked their assignments – which might well have been the result of inconsistency on the part of the markers (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.1.2-i), who were usually employed by the University of Pretoria on a contract basis, and were also trained by the Module Coordinators (see Chapter 7, Section 7.3.3.3). Course Presenters that participated in this study all wished they could be involved in the marking of the scripts, since this would place them in a position to identify the areas of weakness of their students. Furthermore, Clarke et al. (2004) advise that is advantageous when the same marker is used to mark assignments for both full-time and part-time students, though caution the burden on these individuals could be significant.

8.5.4 *Output* in relation to student performance, throughput and drop-out rates

Connected to the entire discussion above, are the performance of students from Distance and Conventional Education, their throughput and drop-out rates. Interestingly, the SAIDE (2006) committee also recommended that the Distance

Education Unit of the Faculty of Education, at the University of Pretoria, evaluate the academic performance of students from both delivery modes. In this study, a number of factors were considered under the *output* rate of students from both modes, which included: *student performance in the six modules under investigation*, and their *enrolment, throughput and dropout rates* (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4.4 and Chapter 6, Sections 6.3.2 and 6.3.3). There is no gainsaying there is still the general impression that conventional education – as opposed to distance education – is automatically of a better quality, which happens to be the main motive for this study (see Chapter 1, Section 1.2). However, this research effort highlighted interesting facts from the quantitative section of this study – in spite of all the challenges already mentioned above, some of which are still so because of the African setting of this country.

Findings from the comparison of student performance indicated that the performances were mixed, as there were instances where students from Distance Education performed as well as their Conventional Education counterparts. Also, each, in turn, performed better than the other in some cases (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.2). The fact that the students from Distance Education can perform better (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.2; Tables 6.35, 6.38, 6.46, 6.49 and 6.50), confirms past research on this (Shachar & Neuman, 2003; Bernard, 2004). However, according to literature on such comparative studies, the conclusion had mostly been of the order of *no significant difference* (Nielsen & Totto, 1993; Russell, 1999; Carr, 2000; Meyer, 2002; Magagula & Ngwenya, 2004; Zhao et al. 2004), indicating distance education student performance can be on par with their contact education counterparts.

Findings from this study also support research (Spady & Marshall, 1991; Fraser & Nieman, 1995; Willis & Kissane, 1997; Killen, 2002; Chickering & Ehrmann, 2003; McGivney, 2003; Shachar & Neuman, 2003; Bernard, 2004; Bornman, 2004; Mostert 2004; Magagula & Ngwenya, 2004; Bates, 2005) on the following

aspects as possible reasons for better performance of distance education students:

- ➢ Better academic support,
- ➢ Quality learning materials,
- ➢ Good assessment method,
- ➢ High expectations of student performance shared with them,
- ➢ Motivation by supportive family or partner, and
- ➢ Constant communication between the university and the students, amongst others (see Chapter 7, Section 7.3.3.2).

Looking into the future, scholars are of the opinion this situation would even be further improved upon with time (Machtmes & Asher, 2000; Zhao et al. 2004). Conversely, reasons for a poor performance rate of distance education students are similar to the reasons for a higher drop-out rate, as mentioned below.

On this matter, findings revealed an expected situation (Subotzky, 2003; Leppel, 2004), in which the drop-out rates of students from Distance Education were higher than their contact counterparts (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.3). As earlier indicated (see Chapter 1, Section 1.2), this situation has been used by many people to determine the *quality* of a programme, thereby becoming the main reason why aspersion is still cast on this mode of delivery. Perusing available literature indicates there are diverse reasons for this (Fraser & Nieman, 1995; Sherry, 1996; Galusha, 1997; SAUVCA, 2001 – now HESA; Scalese, 2001; Van Schoor et al. 2002; McGivney, 2003; Mostert, 2003; Mostert, 2004; Mostert, 2006).

Further, findings from this study, confirm the following as possible reasons for this continuing trend:

- ➢ Low level of preparation of students coming into a given programme,

➢ The problem of language proficiency,

➢ Poor time management that results in surface learning,

➢ Lack of motivation,

➢ Ill health (which is in line with the age brackets of distance learners, and HIV/AIDS scourge and its related illnesses, which are rampant among educators in this country),

➢ Lack of funds,

➢ The level of crime, and

➢ The status of distance learners in society (job promotion, new job responsibilities, pregnancy and family commitments)

(See Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.1.2-e and Chapter 7, Sections 7.3.2 – 7.3.3).

Notwithstanding, and in agreeing with Tucker (2001), the researcher is of the opinion that the higher drop-out rate of students from distance education should not be taken out of context, but must be interpreted in line with other factors, some of which have been cited above – a gap in literature that acted as a strong motivation for this study (see Chapter 1, Section 1.2).

8.5.5 Critical reflection on the main research findings on the quality assurance process at the university

Finally, justice would not be done to this reflection without mentioning what quality assurance process the University of Pretoria had already put in place. According to Harman (2001:1), quality assurance refers to 'systematic management and assessment procedures adopted by higher education institutions and systems in order to monitor performance against objectives, and to ensure achievement of quality outputs and quality improvements'. Therefore, Abdullah (2006) is of the opinion that key role players in higher education have expectations that should serve as standards or a reference point to evaluate the performance of institutions. Of utmost importance is how far awareness is being created on this, and the extent to which the stakeholders are involved in this.

Firstly, this investigation revealed that the university had instituted a staff-student appraisal system, through which all students had the opportunity of assessing both administrative and academic structures (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1.1.2-c). On this, Lomas (2004) asserts that it is very advantageous as it serves as a way of allowing students a voice, while helping the institution to be accountable toward its clients. In addition, it exposes areas in need of improvement, which was the case in this study, as many changes have been made based on past evaluation (see Chapter 7, Section 7.3.4.1). However, some of the contract staff (Course Presenters) were of the opinion this process should also involve them, and should involve feedback mechanisms, which – Avdjieva and Wilson (2002) suggest – should be continuous and evaluative. In addition, the module coordinators were involved in the quality review process that included moderation of exam papers, giving necessary academic support to students, going to centres during contact sessions, visiting examination centres and analysing examination results, to identify and solve problems that might have occurred in the examination (see Chapter 7, Section 7.3.4.1). In support of this Bornman (2004) asserts that self-evaluation is a basic component of quality assurance procedures.

Secondly, the university encouraged staff development, in which both academic and administrative staffs were continually kept abreast of relevant happenings in their various job roles; and contract staff members were not excluded from this policy. This has been identified by Avdjieva and Wilson (2002) as an integral part of institutional planning. However, in a Delphi study conducted amongst distance educators by Rockwell, Furgason and Marx in 2001, it was revealed that distance education teacher competencies are a great concern, as research that identifies effective teacher competencies, teacher training needs, and the types of support instructors need, is very high. Supporting this, there is a clarion call for further training of course presenters, not only in andragogy, but also in adjustment to rural living, where most of them were sent for contact sessions (see Chapter 7,

Section 7.3.4.2). This becomes important as distance education often causes the role of the faculty to change (Beaudoin, 1998; Berge, 1998; Schifter, 2000).

Strongly linked to this, is whether distance education is really an area of interest of those involved in it. According to Wolcott and Betts (1999), there is often no consensus on reasons for faculty involvement in distance education, and there is insufficient research into this (Schifter, 2000). For instance, this study showed that the majority of the Course Presenters were involved, not necessarily because they had a passion for distance education, but rather for their modules, while some saw it as an opportunity to make extra income (see Section 7.3.4.2). In addition, there appeared to be a gap between job expectations during appointment interviews and actual job roles (see Chapter 7, Section 7.3.4.3). This could encourage academics involved in distance education see themselves as being coerced in this, which could result in low motivation, hence keeping them from giving their best efforts to the work at hand (Wolcott & Betts, 1999).

Shedding further light on this, McLean (2006) is of the opinion that more attention should be given to the totality of the experience of teaching at a distance, and what the impact is on a social or personal level from the faculty perspective. Therefore, scholars (Olcott & Wright, 1995; Wolcott, 1997; Schifter, 2000) have dabbled into *research on reward* systems of institutions, which Wolcott (1997) emphasizes would depend on faculty culture. However, findings from this study revealed that module coordinators felt that the institution should emulate other universities in the area of reward systems on their involvement in distance education (see Chapter 7, Section 7.3.4.4). Unfortunately, according to Schifter (2000), one of the major barriers reported in the literature on faculty members wanting to participate in distance education has been inadequate compensation.

Flowing from this chain of thought is the involvement of the academics in research. Firstly, attention should be drawn to the large number of part-time teaching staff who did not participate in research. And secondly, since, there was

a gap between job expectations and job roles of the full-time staff, many of the module coordinators were of the opinion they were being torn between two worlds. This was because they had no time for research in their own fields, and consequently, creating a dearth in distance education research. According to Lomas (2004), there is no consensus on the symbiotic relationship between teaching and research. Nevertheless, its benefits cannot be denied, which include collaborative relationship between lecturers and learners, and the development of a learning community (Andresen, 2000; Lomas, 2004). Therefore, some of the area needs for distance education identified by the module coordinators were student interaction with learning materials, and academic reading (see Chapter 7, Section 7.3.4.6).

8.5.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, many of the staff participants in this research study were of the opinion the university was seriously committed to Distance Education, in view of the amount of money continually invested in it, and the expansion within the Faculty of Education (See Chapter 7, Section 7.3.4.7). Nevertheless, there are areas that need serious attention, which cannot be neglected. Most of these could be deduced from the reflection already done above, and additional suggestions made by all participants, which included firstly, more aggressive marketing strategies, as there was a ready market waiting for the university to be exploited (although this, according to the manager during a follow-up interview, might be impossible for now, as the university would always want to provide quality education, thus limiting its coverage to what it could properly look after); and secondly, creating more awareness among faculty members on the presence of the Distance Education Unit within the Faculty of Education, which happened to be the largest faculty in the University of Pretoria (see Chapter 7, Section 7.3.4.7).

In the next section, suggestions are proffered and recommendations made based on a reflection of finding noted in this section.

8.6 Suggestions, recommendations, and implications of this study regarding equity of access, student learning experiences from distance and conventional education, and student output

The following suggestions and recommendations are made based on the findings of this study:

8.6.1 Recommendations and implications for policy and practice

8.6.1.1 Ensuring equity of access to distance and conventional education

Firstly, *equity in access*, which the government of South Africa is currently advocating, by encouraging access of higher learning to people previously denied such access, would be meaningless to most people, if certain pertinent issues are not attended to. Therefore, in this study the following recommendations are advocated:

> ➢ *The screening of prospective candidates for admission to studies should be carried out, not to disqualify them, but to ascertain what recommendations should be made in regard to modules that could best assist them – especially for those that do not have their first degree, as these students have been found to be struggling the most in their studies. It is expected that this would further help the university to identify possible students at low-risk of completing their studies.*

> ➢ *Attention should promptly be focused on generic study courses that would assist in bridging the gap between present student performance and the performance expected of them for this postgraduate level course.*

> ➢ *The present decision of the government to introduce bursaries into teacher education is laudable, as this aspect has been identified as being at crisis*

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point in the country. However, this gesture should also be extended to distance education. This is especially in view of the expenses involved in upgrading their qualifications, which many teachers currently have to bear through their salaries.

However, the implication of these recommendations is that:

➢ Firstly, the government must increase the subsidies allocated to distance education teacher study programmes, also making bursaries available to these students, as is done for their contact education counterparts. This would reduce the financial burden of these students and even though there is a government loan scheme in place, repaying the loan out their salary is difficult.

➢ Secondly, on the part of the University of Pretoria, there is a need to develop generic study courses – in certain identified areas, to assist certain students – to bridge the educational gap, so that all students who complete the BEd (Hons) programme may be on a par with one another.

8.6.1.2   Ensuring the quality of the learning experience of students in relation to performance, throughput and drop-out rates

➢ *The introduction of pre-orientation study programmes, which should be decentralized to cover the rural student catchment areas, is very important to prepare distance students for the expectations of the BEd (Hons) programme.*

➢ *There is urgent need to review the identified learning materials that were below the expected standard, to lessen the transactional distance between students from Distance Education and their facilitators. The reviewed materials should encourage more dialogue and offer less structure.*

➢ *In addition to this, it is necessary to conduct a survey of the learning preferences and learning styles of students, which would go along way in helping the instructional designer of the relevant learning materials.*

➢ *There is a need to supplement the printed learning materials, adopted by the University of Pretoria as the main teaching media for the BEd (Hons) programme, with audio and video tapes, as requested by certain students from Distance Education.*

➢ *A tutoring system need be implemented: Since the decision by the University of Pretoria to target rural areas as the student catchment area for the B. Ed. (Hons) study programme, practical steps need be taken to implement a tutoring system.*

  o *Firstly, tutors should be appointed for all the applicable modules; and not just the service providers.*

  o *Secondly, the module coordinators should train these tutors up to standard, specifically to serve the distance education programme.*

  o *Thirdly, these tutors need not be concentrated on the Faculty of Education campus alone, but could be past students from both this university and other universities, who meet the necessary requirements, and who live in areas where the students are situated.*

  o *Fourthly, these will, of necessity, be people that understand the academic terrain of the rural areas, and life there.*

➢ *A counseling centre need be established to serve the students from Distance Education specifically. It is a matter of urgency that attention be paid to this area, as despite all the necessary information being contained in tutorial letters – on issues such as time management and writing of assignments – there is no gainsaying that students from Distance Education need to be motivated more strongly, to combat the effect of student isolation. Therefore, a separate department need be dedicated to counseling these students. This should go beyond allocating a few members of the administrative staff to taking telephone calls, as part of their daily duties. It is impossible for the staff to cope with the number of calls received each day from these students; some aspect of their duties must definitely suffer. Call centers should be introduced for this purpose.*

In addition, some counselors – as with the course presenters – could also travel to contact sessions to be of service to the students. These counselors could also be employed on a contract basis.

➢ *Decentralized library facilities could be established, to allow for these facilities to be nearer to students from Distance Education. Even though these students may live far from the main library on campus, whatever assistance could be rendered to them in this respect would still be better than having no access to these facilities at all.*

➢ *It is necessary to encourage learner-learner interaction, especially during the contact sessions and after the examinations.*

➢ *All the course presenters, together with the contracted markers, should be involved in the marking of student scripts, as this will aid the presenters in allowing them to have first-hand feedback on student performance, which could lead to them identifying their own weaknesses, thus providing a chance to improve on these.*

Unfortunately, some of the implications of these would also have to do with availability of funds. For instance, money will be needed to extend library facilities to these students. On the other hand, the university could enter into collaboration with identified universities running similar a similar study programme, to save on costs, and improve on the learning materials. Also, parastatals can be approached with the request to open a call centre for the benefit of students from Distance Education, which would take care of both academic and non-academic support needs of these students. For example, TELKOM could also be approached to establish a toll free number for this purpose. Allied to this, when registering with the university, these students will be required to indicate their willingness to allow the exchange of phone and fax numbers, and e-mail addresses (where applicable) with other students. This could also be facilitated by them filling in *sharing forms* (Clarke et al. 2004). Lastly, experiments with tutoring models, which would have to be researched, to determine the one best suited to the needs of the situation.

8.6.1.2   **Ensuring the quality of the learning experience of students in relation to performance, throughput and drop-out rates**

➢ *The introduction of pre-orientation study programmes, which should be decentralized to cover the rural student catchment areas, is very important to prepare distance students for the expectations of the BEd (Hons) programme.*

➢ *There is urgent need to review the identified learning materials that were below the expected standard, to lessen the transactional distance between students from Distance Education and their facilitators. The reviewed materials should encourage more dialogue and offer less structure.*

➢ *In addition to this, it is necessary to conduct a survey of the learning preferences and learning styles of students, which would go along way in helping the instructional designer of the relevant learning materials.*

➢ *There is a need to supplement the printed learning materials, adopted by the University of Pretoria as the main teaching media for the BEd (Hons) programme, with audio and video tapes, as requested by certain students from Distance Education.*

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     o *Firstly, tutors should be appointed for all the applicable modules; and not just the service providers.*

     o *Secondly, the module coordinators should train these tutors up to standard, specifically to serve the distance education programme.*

     o *Thirdly, these tutors need not be concentrated on the Faculty of Education campus alone, but could be past students from both this university and other universities, who meet the necessary requirements, and who live in areas where the students are situated.*

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- o *Fourthly, these will, of necessity, be people that understand the academic terrain of the rural areas, and life there.*

➢ *A counseling centre need be established to serve the students from Distance Education specifically. It is a matter of urgency that attention be paid to this area, as despite all the necessary information being contained in tutorial letters – on issues such as time management and writing of assignments – there is no gainsaying that students from Distance Education need to be motivated more strongly, to combat the effect of student isolation. Therefore, a separate department need be dedicated to counseling these students. This should go beyond allocating a few members of the administrative staff to taking telephone calls, as part of their daily duties. It is impossible for the staff to cope with the number of calls received each day from these students; some aspect of their duties must definitely suffer. Call centers should be introduced for this purpose. In addition, some counselors – as with the course presenters – could also travel to contact sessions to be of service to the students. These counselors could also be employed on a contract basis.*

➢ *Decentralized library facilities could be established, to allow for these facilities to be nearer to students from Distance Education. Even though these students may live far from the main library on campus, whatever assistance could be rendered to them in this respect would still be better than having no access to these facilities at all.*

➢ *It is necessary to encourage learner-learner interaction, especially during the contact sessions and after the examinations.*

➢ *All the course presenters, together with the contracted markers, should be involved in the marking of student scripts, as this will aid the presenters in allowing them to have first-hand feedback on student performance, which could lead to them identifying their own weaknesses, thus providing a chance to improve on these.*

Possible implications of the above include the need to conduct a survey among academic staff, to assess the level of personal interest of the staff, and discover those that are passionate about teaching in distance education. Allied to this, is the necessity of indicating the expected roles of the academics during job interviews. Further, a leaf should be borrowed from other dual-mode universities, to ascertain what rewards and incentives they have in place, and adopt that which will best suit the academic culture of the University of Pretoria. In addition, the management of the Distance Education Unit needs to invite to students to offer suggestions on establishing a Distance Education student representative body, and suggestions on how this should be managed. Since written submitted assessments form the main support of this mode of delivery and learners rely heavily on the feedback they receive on their assignments (Dindsdag et al. 2000), there is the need for more intensive workshops for assignment markers.

8.6.2 Recommendations for future research

Interestingly, most of the recommendations made on further research enlisted in this section are issues that the researcher herself would like to investigate and provide answers to in the future. Based on the findings of this study further research needs to focus on the following areas:

➢ More mixed-methods research should be conducted into comparative studies of this nature. Past comparative research has been accused of focusing only on the quantitative research method, which does not identify reasons for poor performance, low throughput and drop-out rates of students from Distance Education (see Chapter 1, Section 1.2).

➢ There is the need for a repeat of this study, but on a larger scale at the unit of study in order to make its findings more generalizing.

➢ Comparison of this nature should be extended to at least two universities that offer the same programme. However, this would need researchers collaborating on the task as the workload would be too great for an individual to cope with. This would expose these researchers to quality

assurance issues in different settings, which may make generalisation of findings possible.

➢ Further research is needed in the area of ensuring the quality of a study programme, especially in a rural setting and in an African context.

➢ There is the need for research into the possibilities for making the tutoring system work for students from rural areas.

➢ There is also the need for research into the extending of library services to rural areas.

➢ Research is needed into the academic reading done by students enrolled for distance education study programmes in comparison to their distance education counterparts.

➢ Research is needed on an in-depth *student satisfaction survey*, and the outcomes should be made public. This is important to sensitise students to quality assurance issues.

➢ Lastly, the researcher proposes further research into the application of the conceptual framework for this study, namely: the *Transactional Distance Theory*, to the whole issue of maintaining a culture of quality within higher education.

8.7   Reflections on this study

8.7.1   Reflections on the methodology adopted for this study

The researcher was not disappointed by her choice of the mixed-methods research approach, as it helped to bridge, to some extent, a gap already identified in comparative research of this nature. Nevertheless, she found she was very comfortable with the qualitative method of inquiry, while she struggled with interpreting the tables - especially those where statistical tools were applied. Therefore, she is of the opinion that a study module be introduced at the University of Pretoria that would enable PhD students to cope better with this challenge, irrespective of their background.

Additionally, one of the disadvantages of the focus group interview was highlighted during the course of this investigation - it is easily possible to tag a *lone voice* as the *black sheep* of the group, hence care is necessary to continually encourage such people to still contribute effectively to the discussion. Also, the researcher discovered that though telephone interviews are good when interviewees are removed by space, it nevertheless becomes impossible to fully interact with participants, as could be the case in a face-to-face interview where it is easily possible to read people's emotions.

On the whole, the researcher has benefited from the methodology, as it kept her focused on her philosophical and theoretical underpinnings, which she still recommends to other students because of their potential. Nevertheless, many times during its application, she felt as if she was being torn between two worlds. This was because the mixed-method research approach is time-consuming and expensive to apply.

8.7.2   Contributions of the study to the body of knowledge

The researcher hopes this research study has helped provide pertinent information to the University of Pretoria on the differences between the performances of students from Distance and Conventional Education – an area of concern, which the SAIDE (2006) review committee, toward the end of this research process, called on this institution to investigate. In addition, the researcher hopes it will further buttress there are numerous factors affecting the performance, throughput and output rates of students from Distance Education. Further, the researcher suggests that, based on the findings from this investigation, scholars be more cautious in taking issues out of context, especially when comparing Distance and Conventional Education.

Allied to this process, was the use made of the computer software *Atlas.ti* for the data analysis, which the researcher experienced as an eye opener and an

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exposure, she would suggest, that should be experienced by other qualitative researchers. The software helped manage the large volume of collected data, a task that would have been nigh impossible to deal with manually. The programme made data usable, no matter the volume. Contrary to a belief many people have, at no time did the researcher feel alienated from the study – as, in fact, the software demands of one all that has to bring in into the study.

Besides, the software made it possible for the researcher to make available the full transcripts of all the interviews conducted, as these can be accessed on the CD-ROM submitted as part of this thesis. This, she believes will help ensure audit trial, thereby contributing to the reliability of the research instruments used.

In addition, she concurs with Clarke et al. (2004), that 'there is no one area of distance learning that can be singled out as the most important in terms of quality assurance'. It is her hope that serious attention will be paid by, especially, institutions of higher learning in African to areas that have been identified as needing improvement and improvisation in this mode of delivery. Hopefully, this will improve the performance, throughput and drop-out rates of students involved in distance education, thus making it better.

Lastly, findings from this study has strongly confirmed the importance of the relationships between *Dialogue*, *Structure* and *Autonomy* (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3) in learning materials written for, especially, students from distance education, which has been highlighted by past research. This, Moore (1973) tagged the *Transactional Distance Theory – TDT*, and it becomes important in view that the medium of delivery for the study programme here under investigation is *print*, and more so because evidence emerged from this study to confirm the necessity of improving this aspect, at the University of Pretoria. This is because the true distance in distance learning is not geographic, but refers to the cognitive distance between learner appreciation of reality and the comprehension of the primer put to the table. This causes it to become

imperative to increase the inherent dialogue of a learning material, and correspondingly reducing the structure.

Therefore, the researcher agrees with scholars (Holmberg, 2001; Fraser & Lombard, 2002) that constructivism, in which a learner constructs his or her own knowledge by individual interaction with the subject matter, should be uppermost in the minds of instructional designers. This is more so important because according to Bates (2005), irrespective of the mode of delivery, students spend more time interacting with their learning materials than with the lecturers. Hence, knowing the learning preferences and learning styles of students, and reducing the structure in learning materials, by increasing the dialogue become crucially important.

However, the researcher believes this model should not just apply to the learning materials, but to the totality of a given study programme. As findings in this study suggest that from the onset of admitting students into a given study programme, there is some *distance* that needs be reduced to ensure equal access to all students; which will in turn determines the *quality* of the learning experience of students, and, eventually, the output. The researcher hopes this study will raise critical questions about new applications for this theory.

8.7.3 Limitations of the study

Even though the researcher's main reason for choosing a mixed-methods research approach was to gather an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon, she discovered some aspects of this study were not properly covered, as she would have wanted. For instance, she would have loved to get deeper insight into certain answers to questions posed to students in the questionnaire, in which open- and closed-ended questions were deliberately mixed. It was discovered the majority of the students avoided answering certain open-ended questions, while the majority answered only the closed-ended questions they felt would be easier for them to answer correctly.

Also, it might be difficult to generalize the findings from this study to the entire aspects of the programs under investigation, and other dual-mode teaching institutions. This goes on to suggest that further investigation even at the unit of study still needs to be carried out in order to have a wider picture of the phenomenon under investigation. Nonetheless, the researcher believes these findings could provide a platform upon which similar institutions, especially in the African setting, could model their study programmes.

As well, gaining access to the contact students was problematic and their small number in comparison to their distance counterparts was almost discouraging. However, this was sorted out by the Statistics Department of the university.

Lastly, the researcher strongly believes this study has not provided all the answers to probing questions raised in this research effort, hence her suggestions on further research, to continually broaden the boundaries of knowledge.

8.8   Concluding thoughts

Findings of this study offered a range of information on factors that could be responsible for divergences in the performance, throughput and output rates of students on the BEd (Hons) Education Management, Law and Policy programme, at the Faculty of Education, of the University of Pretoria. This was done by comparing the Distance and Conventional Education teaching programme based on *access*, *delivery* and *output*. Some of these findings agree with earlier research findings in the literature. Also, it adopted the *Transactional Distance Theory - TDT* developed by Michael Moore in 1972, to ascertain the *quality* of the program, since perceived lack of quality has been identified as the main reason why aspersion is still cast on this mode of delivery (Clarke et al. 2004).

These findings confirmed those of other research, in that distance education has been identified as a tool of redressing past inequalities in higher education, in South Africa, and – in response to this – many universities, including the University of Pretoria, have implemented study programmes relevant to this end. Even though equal access to higher education is the focus in the country, it would appear that little is being said about financially supporting students in distance education programmes.

Furthermore, after an initial survey on providing access to higher education for people previously denied such access, the University of Pretoria made incursions into rural areas of South Africa, where the impact of university education was not available. However, this limited the choice of technology, for this specific purpose, to *print* – as the management at the university viewed this technology as relevant to students coming into the two delivery modes of the programme. Though the institution, through the learning materials used by these students endeavored to bring all these students on to a par – by including all necessary information in the tutorial package for the students from Distance Education – there were still gaps. This was due to a number of reasons, such as:

➢ The exposure of students from Contact Education – along with certain students from Distance Education – to, for example, ICT, which gave these students access to the Internet.

➢ In addition, some students lived nearer to the university campus, and could then access the library facilities.

Even though *far away* distance education students could borrow library books, there was the problem of delays in postal delivery, an aspect that was beyond the control of the university.

Further, various factors that determine the quality of the learning experience of students was investigated, the finding of which suggests the following:

> ➢ Firstly, Module Coordinators, Course Presenters and the Instructional
> Designer indicated that there was the need to review some of the learning
> materials and study guides used by students, as many could not relate to
> them due to, for instance, their language proficiency. As at the time of this
> report, the university was already busy with this to reduce the transactional
> distance between the relevant modules and students.

> ➢ Secondly, of importance is the use of support mechanisms offered at the
> university. Students could phone in to make administrative and academic
> enquiries. However, these findings revealed that there was an inadequate
> number of administrative staff, resulting in an incapability to allocate
> specific tasks to specific staff of the university, thereby reducing the
> possibility of attending properly to the 20,000 calls received monthly by the
> Distance Education Unit. It is believed that opening up a call centre, for the
> use of the students from Distance Education, would assist in this area.
> Allied to this, there was the problem of the cost of phoning in, an aspect
> which students lamented on, and consequently, distance education
> students rarely phoned in for academic support. Conversely, their contact
> counterparts could access the necessary support at anytime.

Furthermore, the results of this investigation revealed there were no tutors for
any the six modules under investigation (except for the service providers, who
only attended to distance students during the contact sessions). Unfortunately,
module coordinators believed there were no suitable candidates with the
experience to cater for this need. Nevertheless, the role of tutors cannot be
overlooked, especially to the benefit of distance education students. The
researcher is of the belief that, since the decision made at the university to make
incursion into the rural areas, tutors (not service providers that were available
only during the contact sessions) would benefit these students, not just on
academic matters but for emotional support also. In relation to this, students from
Distance Education also had no access to counseling facilities, as did their

Contact Education colleagues. So, there is also a need to establish a separate counseling unit, specifically for the students of the Distance Education Unit – these counselors need not be employed on a permanent basis, and could also serve these students at the call centre.

Further, the university made use of SMS technology to be in a position to continually communicate pertinent information to students, and to foster a sense of belonging. Literature indicates that though there is much research to still be done on this its potentials are yet to be fully tapped. Also, contact sessions were introduced to aid the support given to students from Distance Education. Unfortunately, not all these students availed themselves of this opportunity, while many of the students from Contact Education usually only attended their bi-monthly classes. However, a reason for this may be that accommodation is not officially supplied for the students in the outlying centers – though, in exceptional cases, where there is such an arrangement is in place, it is empowered by the concerned venues and not the university authorities.

In addition, the university used three forms of evaluation: self-assessment; formative; and summative (in which students were expected to submit assignments as part of their final year mark), in which students were expected to submit assignments, the result of which would serve as part of their final mark for the year. Allied to this, contract workers, some of whom were course presenters, were employed to mark student assignments and examination scripts. However, these findings demonstrate a need to include all course presenters in this service, and simultaneously provide more intensive training for these presenters, to enable them to identify gaps in their module presentations through student feedback, thus putting the presenters in a position to improve on their teaching efforts. Of relevance here is to note that academic performance by students from Distance Education could compare favorably with that of their Contact Education counterparts. Nevertheless, the throughput and drop-out rates of students from Distance Education were still on the high side. Also, various factors – some of

which were confirmed by past research – were identified as being responsible for this.

Moreover, to monitor, review and ensure the *quality* of the BEd (Hons) programme, a student-staff appraisal system, in which students were provided opportunity to appraise all facets of the programme, was employed at the University of Pretoria. This was done through a questionnaire, and – to the credit of the university – some vital changes had been made based on these findings. Also, the management, module coordinators and course presenters, admitted regular attention was paid to staff development, but which could be further improved upon. However, findings revealed that not all academics involved in the activities of the Distance Education Unit really had an interest in this mode of delivery. Therefore, some members felt they were coerced into such participation, and lamented a gap in the job responsibilities, as they were discussed during job interviews, and as to what was later expected of them. Therefore, it is advised Heads of Department investigate this matter.

On the other hand, a possible reason for this attitude among the academics, according to the module coordinators, was that no adequate incentive and reward system was in place at the University of Pretoria. This situation, in their opinion, had to be investigated as a matter of urgency. Also highlighted was a need for an improvement in the marketing strategy applied at the university, a responsibility that was contracted out to an agent.

Above all, it appeared as if there were no prominent discrepancies that could be found between the two modes. One could assume that this was because both modes were guided by a similar underpinning philosophy, which drove the ethos of the programs that impacted on the instructional design.

Finally, though the concept *quality in education* is slippery in its definition, there is no gainsaying the fact that, for any provider of higher education to be relevant to

its students, this term has to be understood from the viewpoints of all the stakeholders. This will empower the institution to maintain its integrity and, simultaneously, meet the expectations of the people involved in the process. Hopefully, each person will contribute only the best of their ability to this process.

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