

CHAPTER 4

PROFILING ESL DISTANCE LEARNERS

4.1 Introduction

The learner in distance education is the axis around which the system revolves (Harichandan, 2000), and if learners are not taken into consideration, it is not only they that will fail, but the system in its entirety, the burden of which falls on the providing institution. Institutional success depends on learner success, and an integral part of that success is knowing the type of learners that have enrolled for distance education courses.

Robinson (1995:225) cautions against the generalisation that arises from the myth of 'the learner', which might encourage a generic view of learners. Robinson (1995) states that not all distance learners are adults, highly motivated or self-managing. The profile of distance learners is changing and several writers are calling for changes with regard to policy issues, course design issues, as well as the support that students ought to be offered (e.g., Wallace, 1996). Within South Africa, distance learner profiles are also set to change due to the government's bid to increase access to and enrolment in higher education by admitting varied types of students that were limited access before (DoE, 2002).

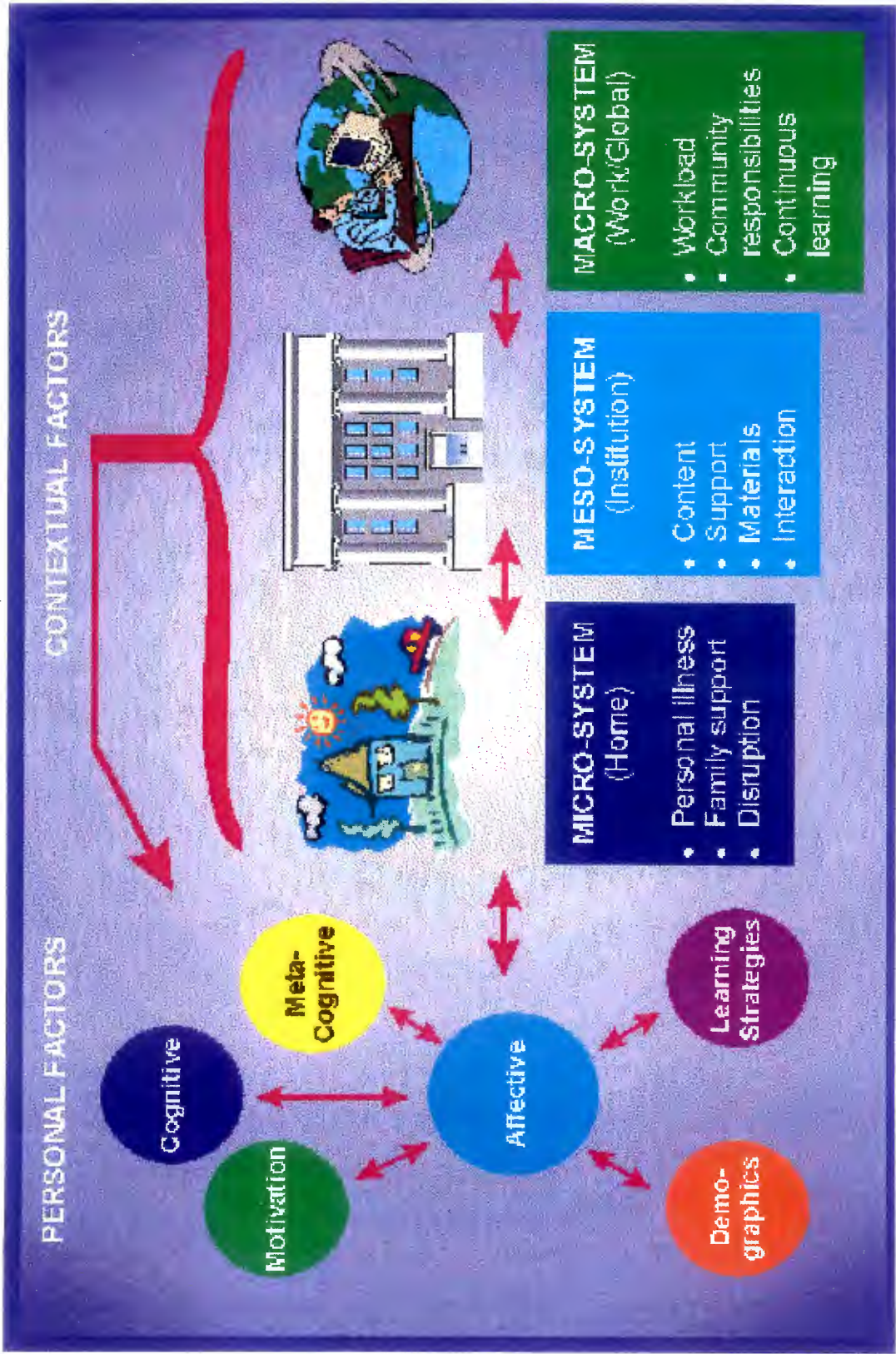
The data obtained from profiling studies can be put to use in policy issues (Harichandan, 2000), in deciding on delivery media (Fraser & Hugo, 1996; Ogude, 1997), in the design of instructional methods and strategies (Cilliers et al., 1997; Alberts, 1988), in dealing with attrition and/or failure, as shown in chapter 3, and in setting up support service systems that deal with the specific needs of the distance learners in a particular institution.

This chapter focuses on the variables that should be taken into account when profiling distance learners studying English as a Second Language.

4.2 Framework for profiling ESL distance learners

There is a critical need for higher education institutions to be able to profile with some accuracy at risk as well as successful students. By pinpointing possible factors that lead to high rates of attrition, failure or success, programme/course developers, lecturers, administrators, and/or facilitators are given an advanced opportunity to interact with students who are at risk, and to provide the necessary support. Much of the research, within distance education, has been limited to the investigation of the relationship between single factors and attrition, failure or success rates (cf. Pythian & Clements, 1982; Phipps & Merisotis, 1999), while most profiles have been limited to demographic factors (cf. Rekkedal, 1983; Ostman & Wagner, 1987). The combining of multiple factors as well as the interaction between factors as possible reasons for the attrition, failure, or success of ESL learners has generally been overlooked. The aim of the framework presented in Diagram 7 is, therefore, to provide ESL course developers/academic services, etc. with a fairly comprehensive overview of the most important factors that need to be taken into account when profiling ESL distance learners.

Diagram 7: Framework for profiling ESL distance learners



On the basis of a comprehensive review of previous studies, it is possible to classify the factors affecting attrition, failure or success in distance education into two general categories. However, it is most important to remember that the categories and their components are not like boxes into which learners and/or factors affecting their ESL learning are sorted. Rather, different categories and components are like the colours on an artist's palette. All of the colours are present within learners as well as around us, but some blend more readily, and some are more dominant than others.

The following section discusses the variables that are categorised under personal factors.

4.3 Personal factors

Personal factors are those that relate to the student personally, which are either unchanging or are gradually changing throughout the period of a student's participation in a distance education programme or course (Dreyer, 2001). The effect that these factors have on the students' chances of success tends to be relatively constant. Based on a review of empirical studies and theory, the following personal factors are discussed: demographic variables, motivation, affective variables, cognitive variables, metacognitive variables, and learning strategies.

4.3.1 Demographics and distance learning

Tait (1995), writing on planning and managing student support services, makes a case for the importance of knowing who the students are. He claims that it has long been noted that education has represented a provider-led rather than a client-led or consumer-led activity. However, significant processes of social change are changing this; market forces and consumerism are near-dominant factors governing the educational system (Field, 1994).

Tait (1995:233) lists dimensions which can be used to unpack the identity of distance students, namely, age, gender, geography, social class, cultural and belief systems, income, ethnic and racial identity, educational background, employment and unemployment, language, housing, access to communications and technology, and physical disability. The language proficiency of a student also provides invaluable information, not only for ESL course providers, but for other course providers as well because the ability to interact with study material will depend, to a large extent, on the

student's language proficiency (Gordon, 2001). While acknowledging that most institutions do collect some of this information on their students, Tait (1995:234) identifies the challenge as being the use of this information in practical ways in the planning and organisation of student support services. Knowing who students are will provide the basis for analysing their needs.

Galusha (1997) states that with the move to making distance education more learner-centred, the characteristics and demographics of learners assist in making potential barriers to learning more understandable. She also claims that although these characteristics and needs may not guarantee success, it is easy to defend these factors as contributing to success. In addition, these factors might shed light on what kinds of students are likely to take part in distance education, and why others choose not to. Learner behaviour, according to Knowles (1980), is influenced by a combination of the learner's needs and the learner's situation, together with the personal characteristics, and knowing characteristics aids in planning courseware and strategies. The following discussion focuses on gender, age and geographic location, and examines how these variables impact on distance study in general, and ESL learning in particular.

Increasingly, distance education is seen as a form of education better suited for women (Anwyl et al., 1988; Carol, 1988). This perception might stem from the flexible studying times offered by distance institutions. This perception also signals a shift from that of distance learning as mostly male-dominated. Studies on gender in distance education tend to focus on female learning processes, both academic and social, rather than those of males. Thompson (1998) maintains that gender enrolment patterns differ from institution to institution, as well as also from country to country.

Studies that have researched gender differences in distance education include: barriers to distance education (e.g., Von Prümmer & Rossil, 1988; Effeh, 1991; Von Prümmer, 1994; Hipp, 1997; Bhalalusesa, 1999; Bhalalusesa, 2001; Taplin & Jegede, 2001), differences in learning styles and strategies (e.g., Burge & Lenskyj, 1990), and differences in communication patterns (e.g., Blum, 1999).

Blum (1999) conducted a study on gender differences with regard to learning styles, communication patterns and participation barriers in a computer-mediated communication distance learning environment. The results reveal gender differences in learning styles, similar to style tendencies shown by learners in traditional learning contexts. Firstly, male subjects tended to be more dominant; most responses to questions were from males, and they posted more messages than did female students. Secondly, Blum (1999) reports that a tone of certainty tended to be present in male messages, and in instances, even arrogance, and they did not temper their messages with polite words to reduce negative reactions from the reader. Thirdly, online male students tended to communicate in an abstract manner, while female students tended to apply it to actual situations and their experiences. Female students' messages had an empathetic tone, and tended to be polite. Their messages contained niceties, such as "thank you", and included personal remarks in their responses. Fourthly, female students preferred to work in a cooperative manner rather than in a competitive manner, while males preferred to learn individually.

With regard to participation barriers, Blum (1999) reports that institutional barriers included technology and computer-related concerns, and the fast pace of online courses. Both genders claimed to have problems with slow responses from the institution. Situational barriers include lack of time, which was a problem more for males than females. More females voiced concerns over the cost of tuition, learning materials and resources. Dispositional barriers, related to self-perceptions and attitudes of the student as a learner, are reported to be higher for female students.

Burke's (2000) study examined attitudinal, emotional and physical barriers to networked computer learning, specifically relating to women. Themes that emerged from the research include: control and ownership of technology, location and access, emotional barriers, creativity and play, self-regulation, and guilt in relation to domestic responsibilities and relationships.

While regional and socio-cultural contexts account for some differences in females' learning situations, it is possible to identify similarities regardless. A study conducted by Effeh (1991) on the study habits of female distance learners in Nigeria, most of whom are primary school teachers, reveals concerns similar to those of female distance students in other countries. The results show that the home environment, household chores, maternal responsibilities, isolation and

concentration problems constitute barriers to distance learning. The result is that women do not have enough time for studying. The attitude of the community in Bhalalusesa's (2001) study on Tanzanian female distance learners is shown to be prohibitive, because education for women is regarded as worthless, and is viewed with suspicion.

Kirkup and Von Prümmer (1997), writing about concerns related to education for women in European countries, state that compared to men, there have been fewer women in tertiary education, both vocational and academic, and that they are under-represented in traditionally male subject areas (e.g., engineering). This discrepancy contributes to gender inequality in the labour market, and to a basic inequality of educational opportunities for women. This is not only applicable to Europe, but to African countries as well. The number of women enrolling in higher education is growing, but still, there is a higher proportion of unqualified mature women than unqualified men. Women are likely to be overqualified for the jobs they do, and women face difficulties in getting their qualifications recognised (Kirkup & Von Prümmer, 1997).

Life experiences have been said to be a learning resource for distance learners, particularly for adult learners. Kirkup and Von Prümmer's (1990) study investigated whether the different circumstances and life experiences of men and women support or conflict with their distance education studies. The study population consisted of men and women at the end of their first year of study. The focus was on the conditions under which they work and study, and the compatibility of distance education with other commitments. Kirkup and Von Prümmer (1990) wanted to determine students' access to local student support services and the value students place on them. They report that the major barriers to accessing services include work pressure, family commitments and the combined pressure from both areas, leading to a loss of flexibility. However, most females in the study made use of these services, as they valued the chance to interact with other women.

A study by Burge and Lenskyj (1990), examining female students taking a course on women's studies, takes issue with the traditionally male construction and ownership of knowledge, and the invisibility of women in course materials. In their attempt to address these issues they draw attention to the overt and covert effects of societal assumptions about women's studies and women's learning needs. One of the suggestions of this study is the need to take cognisance of

and reflect on the diversity in women's living conditions, needs and experiences. This could apply to most distance learning contexts.

Furst-Bowe (2001) calls for educators in distance learning courses to realise that there is a significant gender gap in technology use, and that many adult students, both male and female, may need additional assistance in courses delivered via computer-based technologies. Brunner and Bennett (1998) report that female students may have less experience in working with technology than do their male counterparts and may become frustrated with distance learning courses that require extensive use of computers.

The focus on female students and their concerns in distance education literature could be related to the previous marginalisation of women, and the understanding that context is important in understanding the differences students bring to a learning environment. Von Prümmer (1993) argues that women have special needs partly because of their social roles. Burge (1990) states that opportunities for interaction between students and staff are an indicator of relatively women-friendly distance education systems. Kirkup and Von Prümmer (1997) suggest that women's connectedness stems from a life in which one's relationships with others and the well-being of others are a crucial part of personal development.

The openness and the accessibility of distance education provides learners who have other commitments such as work and family, and those who are prevented by certain barriers from attending a residential institution, with the opportunity to enrol for higher education. Traditionally, adults have been making up the majority of distance learners. However, more and more, younger students are finding this mode of studying attractive (cf. Wallace, 1996; Dreyer & Bangeni, 2002).

Wallace (1996) analysed the enrolment patterns of students over a ten year period in a Canadian institution, and the profile that emerged depicted students of typical undergraduate age with heavier course loads. The heavier loads were a result of combining independent study with on-campus study and living in close proximity to the campus. Wallace (1996) suggests that the changes in the demographics of distance students should be carefully noted. They are not exclusively adult part-time learners living at a geographically distant location to the university. This change has

implications for instructional design (e.g., younger students might not benefit from the application of adult education principles), and student support services (e.g., distance students living within close proximity of the campus not allowed to use facilities meant for full-time students, and not having access to distance facilities either).

Another reason that younger students might be enrolling in part-time study is that the financial costs of studying are rising, and students cannot afford to study without an income, while needing to complete degrees in order to get good jobs (Wallace, 1996). The demands of work, therefore, might not only refer to adult students. Wallace (1996) suggests that the literature upon which current practice is based is inadequate if it does not reflect the growing numbers of younger students. She claims that if practice is to be informed by theory and research, there is a need to move beyond the current dependence on the field of adult education for direction, and to incorporate other frames of reference.

Besides questioning the 'generic age' of the distance learners, the spotlight is also falling on the assumptions that have been held to be acceptable about adult learners. Some of the assertions made about adult learners include: adults need learning to be meaningful, they are autonomous, independent and self-directed, prior experiences are a rich learning resource, the readiness to learn is associated with a transition point or a need to perform a task, their orientation is centred on problems, not content, they are intrinsically motivated, and their participation in learning is voluntary (cf. Holmberg, 1989; Draper, 1998; Sipe, 2001; Tice, 1997; Titmus, 1999). Draper (1998) suggests that the distinguishing factors that adults bring to education are qualitative; it is the kinds of experiences they have, and the intent of their learning. Younger students also bring experiences to the learning context, and they have articulated intentions. Sipe (2001) claims that andragogy has been criticised for characterising adults as we expect them to be rather than as they really are.

The view of adult learners that is emerging is that they can be dependent as well as independent, they can be externally motivated, and their life experiences can be barriers to learning (Merriam, 2001). Kerka (2002) suggests that autonomy and self-directed learning should be viewed in context. Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (1997) report that power differences can be based on race, gender, class, disability and sexual orientation. Sissel et al. (2001) write that adult learners can be

marginalised in terms of voice and power. Leach (2001) reports that adult education can be coercive and mandatory, not voluntary. According to Kerka (2002), adults do not become self-directed upon reaching adulthood; there are those that are not psychologically equipped for distance learning and need a great deal of help to direct their own learning effectively (Beitler, 1997; Titmus, 1999).

The main consideration is that there is no generic distance learner; the profile of students is changing and dynamic. There is also no generic adult learner; adult learners are different, and teaching practices meant for adult learners should be applied with discretion. While it is noted that younger learners are opting for distance education, the majority of distance learners are still adults.

The geographic location of a distance student affects access to resources, both human and material. The distance from the campus, rural and urban, and semi-urban are some of the geographic factors that appear to impact on the success of distance learning.

Geographic location does sometimes impact on the students' perceptions and understanding of content, and their approach to it. This was found to be the case in Burge and Lenskyj's (1990) research in the women's studies course. Burge and Lenskyj (1990) report that in their study regional differences were found to produce different priorities and concerns among women. They found that students in urban areas are more likely to know of feminist organisations, while women in rural and remote areas of Canada had long been engaged in their own, often unique, political struggles for equality and justice. Burge and Lenskyj (1990) also claim that other differences became apparent when topics such as racism and homophobia were discussed; rural students, like some urban, believed that these issues were outside the realm of their experience but were later able to realise that issues of racial and gender discrimination do apply in their lives as well.

Geographical location determines access to local study and tutorial centres. Students might have transport difficulties with regard to the location of the study centre in relation to a workplace or home. In a study conducted by Kirkup and Von Prümmer (1990) students' estimation of how easy or difficult it is to get to a study centre corresponds to their own geographical distribution. Some

mentioned safety issues and the expenses involved in attending study centres, while some felt it was not worth attending the study centres.

The role played by geographic location in the success of a student is not easy to measure or determine on its own. However, when the influence it exerts on activities such as tutorial attendance is examined, it is possible to see its role, perhaps as one in many general characteristics that make up a student's demographic profile. Thompson (1998) reports that there is no definite agreement on the role played by demographic variables in determining success in distance education. The demographic variables discussed in this section represent only the most frequently discussed in students' demographic profiles.

4.3.2 Demographics and ESL learning

This section focuses particularly on age and gender and how they relate to ESL learning. The implications of this relationship for distance learning will be highlighted and speculated upon due to the lack of substantial research of this kind.

Second language learning and age research usually focuses on whether younger or older learners are better ESL learners. Ellis (1994:484) states that a widely held belief is that younger L2 learners generally do better than older learners. This is based on the belief that there is a period where language learning and language acquisition take place naturally and with little effort, after which language learning tends to be more difficult (cf. Long, 1990; Flege et al., 1999; De-Keyser, 2000). Some studies have focused on age and the pronunciation of the L2 (e.g., Oyama, 1982; Scovel, 1988; Patkowski, 1990), and the constraints that exist for native-like pronunciation of the L2.

Age is believed to affect the rate of second language learning (cf. Ellis, 1994:485). Age also affects learners' ability to achieve native-speaker levels of proficiency, their levels of L2 achievement, and on the process of L2 learning. Flege and Liu (2001) write that adults' performance in an L2 will improve immeasurably over time, provided they receive a substantial amount of native speaker input. They are also of the opinion that formal instruction plays a role in L2 learning and acquisition, as does the type of input students receive. Therefore, while age does affect L2 learning, there are a

number of intervening factors that determine overall success in student performance, and the mediating factors tend to be different for the younger and the older learners.

Studies that focus on gender tend to try to point out whether it is males or females that are better at language learning, and specifically aspects of grammar or language skills. Labov (1991:206-207) makes a statement to the effect that women might be better at L2 learning than men, and that they are likely to be more open to new linguistic forms in the L2 input. Oxford (1990) lists gender among the factors that influence the choice of strategies used in L2 learning. She states that females report greater overall strategy use than males. A number of studies indicate that female learners tend to perform better than males in ESL learning (e.g., Burstall, 1975; Nyikos, 1990). However, Ellis (1994:204) states that gender is likely to interact with other variables in determining L2 proficiency, and that it will not always be the case that females will perform better than males. According to Piller (1999), it is important to keep in mind that in L2 learning research some outcomes might be explained by differences in social practices that enforce the stereotypes created around gender roles.

An overview of the research on demographic variables and distance learning and ESL learning indicates that course developers need to pay attention to the interaction between learners and tutors, facilitators and instructors. The demands that distance learners' responsibilities are likely to place on them compete with the demands of learning a second language on one's own. The type of input that students receive from a self-instructional manual might not be sufficient on its own, and might need to be supplemented with other material, particularly authentic material, for example, through the world wide web (cf. Warschauer & Whittaker, 1997). However, this would have to be done within the constraints of what is practically accessible for students. The needs of ESL distance learners, in view of their demographic profiles, points to the necessity for a comprehensive support system.

The following section discusses motivation, its manifestation in distance education, and in ESL learning.

4.3.3 Motivation and distance learning

Motivation has been shown to be an important factor in distance learning and in second language learning. Galusha (1997:2/9) states that student motivation has a powerful effect on attrition and completion rates, regardless of institutional setting, but that motivators for adult distance students are often different from those of traditional students.

Motivation is defined as comprising of states that: arouse and instigate behaviour, give direction and purpose to behaviour, continue to allow behaviour to persist, and lead to choosing or preferring a particular behaviour (Wlodkowski, 1978:13). There are several variations of this definition that refer specifically to the language learning context, including Crookes and Schmidt (1991), who define motivation in terms of internal and external features. The internal features include interest in the L2 based on existing attitudes, experience, and background knowledge on the learner's part; the relevance, which refers to the perception that personal needs such as achievement, affiliation, and power are being met by learning the L2; the expectancy of success or failure; and outcomes, which refer to extrinsic and intrinsic rewards felt by the learner. External features of motivation refer to the decision to choose, to pay attention to, to engage in L2 learning, to persevere even after interruptions, and to maintain a high activity level.

There are several types of motivation that are widely known, namely integrative and instrumental motivation, as well as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. With regard to language learning, integrative motivation refers to learning another language stemming from a desire to be associated with members of that language community, and instrumental motivation refers to learning a language as a result of a desire to gain personal benefits (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). An intrinsic motivation to learn refers to learning in order to fulfil personal and internal goals, for example, for personal enrichment. Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, stems from the external benefits that will come from the learning activity, such as getting a better job.

It is often felt that students who are intrinsically motivated perform better in their studies than do extrinsically motivated students, as students with an intrinsic motivation derive satisfaction from fulfilling innate needs for competence and self-determination (cf. Deci & Ryan, 1985). While some

researchers would argue that intrinsic motivation is the better of the two, other researchers (e.g., Cameron & Pierce, 1994) find that extrinsic rewards are not necessarily damaging to a student's learning and performance, and neither to intrinsic motivation. They argue that rewards have an instrumental function, namely to increase students' engagements with their learning tasks, an evaluation function, namely to provide students with feedback which could enhance students' sense of accomplishment, and a social control function, which makes it appear as though an external agent is controlling students' actions, thereby giving the impression that students are engaging in learning activities for extrinsic reasons. While some of these situations can lessen intrinsic motivation they are most likely to increase it (Cameron & Pierce, 1994).

For distance students, the instrumental and evaluation functions are particularly important because the prospect of rewards might encourage them to spend time on learning activities, and feedback ought to be guiding and encouraging. Barg et al. (2002:8/12) write about instances where in traditional universities learners might share the experience where they all do poorly in an exam, and through communication discover that the problem lies with the structure of the exam, and not their abilities. With distance students, they might not necessarily have recourse to this reassurance about their abilities, and might take failure to signify a problem with their abilities, and possibly consider whether they ought to carry on with the course. Feedback is important in this regard because to have the reassurance that others shared the experience is an important factor in course retention (Barg et al., 2002:8/12).

Klesius et al. (1997) claim that distance education is likely to be perceived positively when students need to be studying, when they enjoy little or no travel to the teaching site, and when they are intrinsically motivated. Allowing students choice and control in their learning activities enhances their intrinsic motivation (Deci, 1980). The easiest conceivable manner in which this could be achieved in distance education is through providing students with multiple tasks from which to choose in order to fulfil course requirements. Knowles (1984:125) claims that when learners understand how the acquisition of certain knowledge or skills will add to their ability to perform better in life, they enter into didactic instructional situations with a clearer sense of purpose and see what they learn as personal. These statements have immense implications for course material

design, where the relevance of course content will be of utmost importance in maintaining and enhancing motivation.

According to Ames (1992), the motivation to learn has two components, namely cognitive and affective components, which can best be described in terms of achievement goals. Achievement goals comprise performance goals or performance-oriented behaviour and master goals or mastery-oriented behaviour. Performance goals refer to the preoccupation with receiving positive judgement of ability, and these students would consider themselves as having little control over the events in their lives. Students with mastery-oriented behaviour, whose levels of motivation are higher, pursue learning goals directed toward increasing their competence. In this case, students associate success with effort; they tend to hold themselves responsible for their failures and successes, and failure is attributed to lack of effort. Students of this kind have an intrinsic locus of control; they regard themselves as having a high level of control over events in their lives (Ames, 1992).

Locus of control is an aspect of attribution motivation. Attribution motivation refers to an individual's perception of the causes of events and outcomes, and attribution theorists focus their research on how learners develop these beliefs, and the influence they have on future actions and cognitive development (Galbraith, n.d.). Locus of control refers to the source, internal or external to the learner, of the attributed cause. Ability is an internal attribution that is not under the learner's control, while effort is also internal, but is under the learner's control. Luck is an external attribution, but is not under the learner's control, while task difficulty is also external, but is under the learner's control (Weiner, 1972). People who have high levels of motivation have an internal locus of control and, therefore, recognize that they must take responsibility for determining obstacles, attempting to overcome obstacles, and taking credit for both success and failure. In general, this attitude generates high motivation, effort, perseverance, and willingness to take risk. Some students might have a mixed attribution style when it comes to success, and as a consequence do not always take the credit they deserve. Self-esteem, motivation and general well-being will most likely improve if they realize that they actively influence positive events in their lives. When students attribute failure to unstable internal sources (eg., lack of effort) it can help to mobilize their strengths and to increase motivation in future encounters with similar situations. However, attributing failure to stable

internal sources (e.g., lack of ability) can be damaging to self-esteem, perception of self-efficacy, and motivation.

Huitt (2001) suggests that in a teaching/learning environment students have to be assisted to develop a self-attribution explanation of effort as this will help them persist even in difficult situations. Galbraith (n.d.) claims that teachers' reactions and expectancies, verbal and non-verbal, play an important role in the formulations of attribution and motivation. Teacher behaviours that affect attribution and motivation include: the setting of task difficulty, assistance provided to the students, feedback, goal structures (i.e., learning for marks as opposed to learning for understanding and mastery) as perceived by students, and teacher reaction to different student characteristics (e.g., self-concept, developmental level, and gender).

Stirling (1997:1/5) writes that within the field of distance education, the concept of learner control has been explored in terms of control within the distance learning transaction. She claims that the importance of locus of control lies with instructors and students, because since the transaction is two-way, the more both parties understand this, the more effective the transaction will be. External locus of control refers to a situation where the learner follows a course dictated by the instructor without exercising any choices, and an internal locus of control allows the learner to choose among a variety of instructor opinions (Stirling, 1997). For a student to maintain an internal locus of control, three factors are necessary, namely, independence, competence, and support (Stock & Blocher, 1998). Baynton (1992) adds three necessary complementary factors, namely time flexibility, value orientation, and access to resources. Dille and Mezack (1991) found that unsuccessful distance students tend to be more controlled by external events, while successful students have a high internal locus of control. Similarly, Pugliese (1994) found that the more students had an external locus of control, the more likely they were to drop out from the course. Students with an external locus of control need encouragement and guidance from instructors, which at a distance might not be as readily available as it would be in a conventional institution. Pugliese (1994) also suggests that an individualised learning plan helps distance students to make internal attributions.

Feelings of isolation and alienation are a problem thought to be pervasive in distance education, and which might have a demotivating effect on students (Meacham & Evans, 1989). Galusha

(1997) states that students want to be part of a larger university community, and not only a member of a “correspondence” course. This, she claims, is an important part of their social lives, and more so of their motivation. The inability to interact with other students, academic and administrative staff might lead to feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, as well as a lack of confidence in their abilities (Wood, 1996).

According to Caldwell and Ginther (1996), motivation is a critical factor in student achievement, particularly for the low socio-economic student. They suggest that in order to enhance motivation, students have to become active participants in their own learning, leading students to value effort, and thus increase their commitment to effort-based strategies.

Goal commitment is often necessary for students to persist even when they keep failing. Factors that can reduce motivation include financial costs of study, disruption of family life, the perceived irrelevance of their studies and lack of support from employers (Wood, 1996). In other words, the factors that usually are held to contribute to attrition.

4.3.4 Motivation and ESL learning

The topic of motivation is of practical interest to language programme designers and administrators who want to attract students to programmes that will motivate them to learn by being congruent with their needs and interests, to teachers who would like to use pedagogical techniques that reinforce and develop student motivation, and to learners themselves, who must sometimes struggle to maintain their internal motivation in order to persist in the inherently difficult task of learning a second language (cf. Oxford, 1996).

Is motivation important to second language learning? What does motivation contribute to L2 success, over and above that which is contributed by a talent or aptitude for learning languages? The answer is that motivation is one of the main determining factors in success in developing a second or foreign language (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). Motivation determines the extent of active personal involvement in second language learning. Conversely, unmotivated students are insufficiently involved and therefore unable to develop their potential L2 skills.

Motivation is important because it directly influences how often students use L2 learning strategies, how much students interact with native speakers, how much input they receive in the language being learned, how well they do on curriculum-related achievement tests, how high their general proficiency level becomes, and how long they persevere and maintain L2 skills after language study is over (Ely, 1986; Gardner, 1992; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). Therefore, motivation is crucial for L2 learning, and it is essential to understand what our students' motivations are.

Motivation has been found to be a significant predictor of ESL achievement in various settings, for example, school classrooms, in residential tertiary institutions, and in distance education settings, and with delivery methods using a form of communication technology, for example, via satellite (e.g., Oxford et al., 1993a, 1993b).

Abi-Samra (2002) lists internal and external factors that have an influence on a students' motivation to learn a second language. The factors are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Factors affecting students' motivation to learn a second language

Internal factors	
Age	
Gender	Girls are known to acquire languages faster than boys. Hence, their motivation would be higher.
Goals	Why the learner is studying the language.
Need	How much the learner needs to study this language.
Interest (and curiosity)	How interested the learner is in learning this language.
Attitude	How the learner views this language and its speakers.
Expectancy	How much the learner expects to succeed.
Self-efficacy/Competence	Judging own ability and competence. How capable of success they think they are.
Native language proficiency	The more academically sophisticated the student's native language knowledge and abilities, the easier it will be for that student to learn a second language, then the more motivated s/he will be.
External factors	
Teachers/Lecturers	▪ Encouragement ▪ Expectations ▪ Feedback ▪ Scaffolding ▪ Task presentation ▪ Teaching strategies & techniques ▪ Rewards ▪ Strategies for teaching culturally diverse students
Course content & classroom atmosphere	▪ Relevance ▪ Attractiveness ▪ Challenge ▪ Relaxed, positive atmosphere (low affective filter)
Role models	Students need to have positive and realistic role models who demonstrate the value of being proficient in more than one language.
Home support	Support from home is very important for students' motivation to learn a second language.
Learning environment	In order for the students to be motivated, the learning environment needs to be free from anxiety; the student should not feel threatened or intimidated. In order for him/her to speak, s/he needs to feel s/he will be heard and that what s/he is saying is worth hearing.

(Abi-Samra, 2002:2).

Abi-Samra (2002) shows that motivation is complex, and the factors listed in the table will not necessarily apply to all second language learners in the same manner, as students are motivated by different values, needs, and desires.

Davis (1999:1/1) suggests that to encourage students to become self-motivated and independent learners, instructors can do the following:

- Give frequent, early, positive feedback that supports students' beliefs that they can do well.
- Ensure opportunities for students' success by assigning tasks that are neither too easy nor too difficult.
- Help students find personal meaning and value in the material.
- Create an atmosphere that is open and positive.
- Help students feel that they are valued members of a learning community.

These suggestions are particularly relevant for ESL distance learners because of the anxieties and insecurities that can be experienced by learners of a second language. The severity of these fears can only be exacerbated by the distance between the learner and instructor, which makes an open and positive learning atmosphere crucial.

4.3.5 Affective variables

There are various typologies of what constitutes a learner's affective variables in profiling studies. This section focuses on personality, self-efficacy and anxiety and how they affect distance learning and ESL learning.

4.3.5.1 Affective variables and distance learning

Allport (1963:28) defines the concept of personality as "the dynamic organisation within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his characteristic behaviour and thought." The description of personality, according to Entwistle and Ramsden (1983:65), together with its measurement, has depended on the identification of relatively consistent common traits, a consistency that ought to prevail over time and in different situations.

Various psychologists are of the opinion that while past experiences influence the manner in which people act, there is also a strong belief that certain basic behaviour patterns are inborn (cf. Dean, 1997). These patterns influence the manner in which individuals approach life, and they govern individual reactions to various learning situations. According to researchers, the five basic personality traits are extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness (cf. Heinström, 2000:3/10; Howard & Howard, 1998).

Extraverts are inclined to be more physically and verbally active, adventurous, assertive, frank, sociable and talkative, while introverts are independent, reserved, steady and they like being alone. Agreeableness is linked to altruism, nurturing, caring and emotional support versus hostility, indifference, self-centredness and jealousy. Conscientiousness refers to an individual who concentrates on only a couple of goals and strives hard to realise them, and is likely to be career-oriented. A flexible individual, on the other hand, is more impulsive, and easier to persuade from one task to another. Howard and Howard (1998) state that the more conscientious a person is, the more competent, dutiful, orderly, responsible and thorough he/she is in his/her work/study. Conscientiousness is, therefore, linked to educational achievement. Individuals that tend toward neuroticism are likely to be more worried, temperamental and prone to sadness, and therefore, might tend towards anger, anxiousness and depression. Emotionally stable people tend to be calm, stable and relaxed. Open people have broad interests, are liberal, and like novelty. Openness is linked educational aptitude and creativity (cf. Howards & Howard, 1998).

Wright (n.d.) states that a student's personality type might influence a distance student's willingness to participate in study groups. Particularly important is the possibility that study groups might be small, and students might rely on each other's help to complete assignments. Thus, it is important that provision be made for those who would prefer to make use of group studying.

According to Heinström (2000:2/10), individuals who feel secure have a constructive and positive attitude towards information and seek a lot of information, while anguished people prefer personal contacts when seeking information. People with an avoiding personality trait tend to avoid social contact in their information-seeking behaviour. Insecure people tend to experience difficulties in coping with unpredictability, disorder and ambiguity. For distance students, these personality traits might exhibit themselves in the process of their learning, for example, anguished and avoiding personality types might be hesitant to get in touch with their instructors to ask them for explanations, and might even experience problems when they are trying to sort out the problems on their own.

De Raad and Schouwenburg (1996) state that personality types are expressed through learning styles, which are reflected in learning strategies, and produce a particular learning outcome.

Conscientiousness affects work discipline and concentration, and is related to intrinsic motivation, and a positive study attitude. Openness is related to questioning and analysing, to critical evaluation and intrinsic motivation (cf. Entwistle & Tait, 1996). Neuroticism is related to a lack of concentration, fear of failure, an experience of studying as painful, a lack of critical ability and problems in understanding how things relate to each other. Students that tend towards neuroticism are likely to be focused on passing exams for an extrinsic reason (Entwistle & Tait, 1996).

Webb (2000) states that people have different learning personalities from each other. A learning personality is a combination of natural talent, personal interest, current opportunity, social environment, character, motivation and how the brain processes information. Natural talent is the base from which students can build their learning and become achievers. Students' personal interests can affect motivation positively if they are incorporated into the learning. When students are presented with opportunities it makes self-discovery possible, for example, in school there are learning opportunities for the intellectual, while there might not be sufficient opportunities for the artistic, technical and dexterous students. By social environment Webb (2000) is referring to the attitudes that are held by society which might hamper or encourage learning. These are the factors that determine a student's learning personality, and in some measure, influence the amount of success in learning.

According to Pajares and Schunk (2001:2/19), self-efficacy is very important for students. They state that, "this focus on a student's sense of self as a principal component of academic motivation is grounded on the taken-for-granted assumption that the beliefs that students create, develop, and hold to be true about themselves are vital forces in their success or failure in school" (Pajares & Schunk, 2001:2/19).

Bandura (1994) defines perceived self-efficacy as, "people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives". Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave. These beliefs produce these diverse effects through four major processes, namely cognitive, motivational, affective and selection processes. Efficacy beliefs help to determine the extent of effort that will be expended on an activity, the extent of an individual's perseverance in the face of

obstacles, and the extent of resilience in adverse situations (cf. Schunk, 1981; Schunk & Hanson, 1985; Schunk et al, 1987).

Students' self-esteem and their beliefs regarding their abilities and competencies play an important role in determining educational outcomes (Geisler-Brenstein et al., 1996:77). The feelings that come into play in the evaluation of self-as-student include: feelings of general self-worth (self-esteem), one's identity (self-concept), and beliefs about competency (self-efficacy or self-concept ability). Among the researchers that have positively related self-concept to educational progress are Maqsud (1993), and Marsh (1992). However, some believe that academic self-concept is a better predictor of academic achievement than general self-concept is (Bryne, 1994).

Self-efficacy beliefs are not based on what is objectively true, but on what an individual believes to be true, and thus should not be confused with their judgements of the consequences that their behaviour will produce (Pajares, 2002:4/9). In distance learning, the strong relationship between and the influence of efficacy beliefs on student motivation and achievements has been demonstrated (cf. Joo et al., 2000). It has also been found that students don't generally perceive distance learning to be as effective as traditional on-campus learning, but that distance learning has some advantages such as working well with their schedules (O'Malley & McCraw, 1999). Students who do not think much of distance education might not be motivated to perform as best they can, because they might not think that they are receiving the best instruction they could be, and in turn, this might affect their view of their abilities for studying via the distance medium.

Zhang et al. (2001) conducted a study to explore learners' self-efficacy beliefs of distance learning, attainments in distance learning, and the relationship of these variables to learners' characteristics. They report that males had more positive beliefs than female students, and that new students had more positive beliefs than students that had enrolled previously. This is attributed to a decrease in the novelty of distance education as the students' experiences accumulate. With regard to learners' characteristics, there was also a positive relationship between intrinsic motivation and self-regulated learning. This was attributed to the fact that since students were intrinsically motivated they were driven by their curiosity and willingness to acquire knowledge, which made them enjoy learning more than if they were extrinsically motivated. With high self-regulating abilities students

could structure and manage their learning more effectively, and, therefore, gain higher confidence with regard to distance learning tasks.

Another equally complex affective variable is anxiety which varies in its effect within and across individuals, and ought to be viewed as highly subjective (Tarone & Yule, 1989:133). Brown (1994:141) states that anxiety is almost impossible to define in a simple sentence, but that it is associated with feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension, or worry.

The Center for Teaching and Learning with Technology and UW Educational Outreach (n.d.) state that people learning independently are often anxious about how they are doing, particularly if they are new to this kind of educational environment. They need frequent and thorough feedback on their progress to maintain their momentum and gauge their learning. They advise instructors to include numerous assessments, both formal (e.g., exams), and informal (e.g., discussion assignments), to minimize this anxiety and assist learners in gauging their individual progress. However, this suggestion would need to be applied within the boundaries of what is deemed as an acceptable amount of tasks for the students, because giving them too much work might overwhelm them instead. Landbeck and Mugler (2000) also found that a cause of anxiety connected to the absence of face-to-face contact with lecturers is the feedback given on assignments, as inadequate feedback aggravates frustration and confusion.

4.3.5.2 Affective variables and ESL learning

Brown (1994:61) states that the affective domain includes many variables that might at first appear far removed from language learning. However, when the pervasive nature of language is considered it is possible to conceive of any affective variable being relevant to language learning.

According to Ellis (1994:517), many language teachers regard the personality of their students as a major contributing factor to success or failure. He further adds that learners also consider personality factors to be important in language learning, which makes it surprising that research on personality variables and L2 learning is sparse and unsatisfactory.

The personality variables that are investigated in language learning are either based on the extroversion/introversion theories of personality, on constructs in general psychology (e.g., risk-taking), or are an extension of a psychological construct that has been made applicable to L2 learning (e.g., the concept of a 'language ego') (Ellis, 1994:517). The language ego was proposed to account for the identity that a person develops in reference to the language he/she speaks, where self-identity is bound with the language (cf. Guiora et al., 1972, cited in Brown, 1994:62). Thus, as personality research in language learning borrows from other fields the variables that make up L2 learners' personality profiles are equally varied.

The relationship between L2 learning and extraversion/introversion is articulated in two hypotheses (Ellis, 1994:520). The first is that extroverted learners are likely to perform better in acquiring basic interpersonal skills, as sociability provides opportunities to practice, for more input, and more success in communicating in the L2. The second hypothesis is that introverted learners will do better at developing cognitive academic language ability, as this type of learner enjoys more academic success, as they are likely to spend considerable amounts of time on reading and writing.

Some of the key factors that affect success in language learning are self-confidence and a good image, and low anxiety. With regard to the learners' self-image, anxiety is manifested internally and externally. Internally, it relates to the learner's feelings about him/herself, and externally it relates to the learner's feeling with regard to interacting with other people, and the impression they might have of the learner. Anxious students tend to be deeply self-conscious when asked to risk revealing themselves by speaking the language in the presence of other people, or fellow students (Smithworks, no date).

Certain personality traits might affect anxiety in language learning (Smithworks, n.d.), but the basic problems which can intensify anxiety is that when students experience anxiety there is a barrier that impedes the recall of knowledge. Ellis (1994:480) states that when anxiety does arise it seems to be restricted mainly to speaking and listening. Anxiety in this instance reflects the learner's apprehension at the prospect of communicating spontaneously in the L2. Anxiety has been shown to affect L2 learning negatively (cf. MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991), but can be mediated by the learner's stage of development and situation-specific learning experiences.

The effect of anxiety on second language learning is evident in the carrying out of complex tasks that have aspects in which the student doubts his/her abilities, and wonders about the possibility of succeeding. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) found that trait anxiety is not useful in predicting second language achievement because of its global and ambiguous nature. However, anxiety in language learning has come to be associated with foreign language anxiety, which focuses on the situational nature of state anxiety. Horwitz et al. (1986) and MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) have identified three components of foreign language anxiety, namely communication apprehension, fear of negative social evaluation, and test anxiety. Communication apprehension arises from students' inability to express mature thoughts and ideas adequately, while fear of negative social evaluation arises from a student's need to make a favourable social impression. Test anxiety arises from an apprehension over academic evaluation. MacIntyre and Gardiner (1991:112) are of the opinion that foreign language anxiety can be distinguished from other types of anxiety, and that it can have a negative effect on language learning.

A further distinction made in the types of anxiety is between debilitating and facilitative anxiety (Brown, 1994:142). Debilitating anxiety has a negative effect on learning, while facilitative anxiety urges a student to put more effort into learning, resulting in positive learning results. Facilitative anxiety is connected to competitiveness, which has been shown to assist language learning by some researchers (e.g., Bailey, 1983).

Affective states tend to be volatile and affect responses to particular learning activities on a day-by-day or on a moment-by-moment basis. The isolation that distance students experience might affect their learning to such an extent that students could be easily confused, frustrated, and apprehensive. Thus, understanding that students' affective states affect their learning might make some instances in the learning-teaching interaction easier to understand.

4.3.6 Metacognitive variables

The term "metacognition" has been used to describe self-regulatory utilisation of thought processes since the late 1800s (James, 1890). Hyde and Bizar (1989:51) state that "... metacognitive processes are those processes in which the individual carefully considers thoughts in problem

solving situations through the strategies of self-planning, self-monitoring, self-regulating, self-questioning, self-reflecting, and/or self-reviewing.”

Metacognition refers to the ability of learners to be aware of and monitor their learning processes. While metacognition and cognition are related, they are different in that cognitive skills are needed to perform a task, while metacognitive skills are necessary to understand how it was performed (Schraw, 1998).

4.3.6.1 Metacognitive variables and distance learning

Self-regulation is a metacognitive process that governs many individual actions and is central to Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986). It is hypothesised that self-regulatory behaviour is critical when distance learning is the primary method of instruction. The student that self-regulates will be more successful at distance learning than the student who has problems in the area of self-regulation. Self-regulated learning is, therefore, important in distance learning because the student is dependent on his/her own resourcefulness to cope with learning.

Bandura (1994) defines self-regulation as the exercise of influence over one's own motivation, thought processes, emotional states and patterns of behaviour. Wilson (1997:1/7) states that the approach of self-regulated learning presumes that students who are active and take control of their own learning, at any age level or in any learning situation, perform better and achieve better results.

According to McLoughlin (1996:2/5), there may be preconceptions as to the roles of 'instructor' and 'learner' which act as barriers to self-regulated learning, and that there needs to be a clear understanding about which competencies and abilities self-regulated learners should possess. These abilities, particularly pertinent to distance learning, are to:

- prepare one's own learning'
- take the necessary steps to learn;
- regulate one's learning;
- provide self-feedback and judgement; and
- keep motivation high.

McLoughlin (1996) states that these functions are often performed by teachers, by preparing students, setting the stages of learning, assigning tasks/assignments to provide feedback, and designing materials and activities to keep students motivated. However, in a distance setting, the student has to assume the responsibility of preparation and setting a study schedule. Providing self-feedback might prove problematic if self-efficacy beliefs tend to be negative. Students might develop anxiety if they do not know about other students' performances relative to their own.

Lidner and Harris (1993) list six dimensions of self-regulated learning, namely:

- epistemological beliefs: a person's own understanding of their system of knowing;
- motivation: this comes from recognising the importance of the task at hand and through personal development;
- metacognition: refers to knowledge about cognition and awareness of one's own thinking and learning;
- learning strategies: students ought to be aware of their learning strategies, and how to use them appropriately;
- contextual sensitivity: this refers to the ability to understand a particular learning situation, and how to identify a problem and solve it; and
- environmental utilisation/control: the use of external resources (e.g., personal experience and knowledge) to achieve solutions.

The concepts of self-regulation, self-efficacy and self-perception are encompassed in the social cognitive theory of learning, which views individuals as agents proactively engaged in their own development. The key tenet to this theory is that individuals possess, amongst other personal factors, self-beliefs that enable them to exercise a measure of control over their thoughts, feelings and actions (Bandura, 1986:25). The significance of this theory for distance learners becomes apparent when considering that they are mostly isolated, and thus, it is likely that their perceptions of their abilities is largely self-informed with little external opinion to confirm or negate, and even to work towards changing that perception. Understanding the influence of self-beliefs and applying that to distance contexts might provide some guidance as to the type of support, particularly of a non-academic and non-administrative kind the students need.

It is possible to direct students towards self-regulated learning (cf. McLoughlin, 1996). However, it is easier carried out in contact situations where students and instructors meet on a regular basis. In distance contexts the concerns would include time, specifically time to carry out the corrective process which is continuous and requires regular assessments of students' progress. Of equal

concern is that even though the strategies would be imbedded in the learning materials, students would still require guidance.

Wilson (1997:4/7) states that distance learners are 'doubly disenfranchised' because they do not have the same support systems as institution-based learners, and they work in an isolated environment with only themselves to rely on. They also often have to develop self-regulating skills independently, and necessary for this is a personal inventory list to indicate where they are presently as learners, and how to develop their areas of weakness (Wilson, 1997:4/7).

4.3.6.2 Metacognitive variables and ESL learning

Evans (2002:62) states that: "It is no secret that many South African students who register for undergraduate study each year are under-prepared for university education and that many of these students have low levels of reading and writing ability".

Comprehension is an active process through which meaning is constructed. Often it demands that the reader "step in" to figure out the meaning of an unknown word, identify the major theme in the text, or use bridging inferences to maintain text coherence (Van den Broek, 1994). This type of directed cognitive processing is called metacognition and is regarded as "the foundation of understanding text" (Nist & Holschuh, 2000:76). Metacognition in reading involves knowledge of comprehension strategies. Thus, the metacognitive knowledge that skilled university ESL students need is about the awareness, monitoring, and guidance of cognitive processing that leads to constructing meaning from text.

Self-regulated strategy instruction is defined as instruction which helps readers to use a variety of effective cognitive reading strategies and to raise awareness of their own reading processes through the practice of metacognitive strategies. Self-regulated instruction is designed to encourage learners to take ultimate responsibility for their own learning and to become independent readers who can transfer successful reading strategies to similar reading tasks with no direct assistance from their lecturers (cf. Wenden, 1991:106).

A vast body of literature in first language acquisition has shown that learners' awareness of their own reading processes plays a significant role in improving reading comprehension (cf. Baker & Brown, 1984; Bereiter & Bird, 1985). A study conducted by Park-Oh (1992) with ESL learners indicated the effectiveness of self-regulated reading strategy instruction for improving reading comprehension. What is significant about this study is that the metacognitive strategy instruction was embedded in print material (i.e., similar to a study guide) and took place with limited lecturer contact (i.e., a setting similar to TLS).

4.3.7 Cognitive variables

Cognition refers to all the mental activities associated with thinking, knowing, and remembering. Learning styles, sometimes referred to as cognitive styles, are related to personality, and are much less amenable to change in the educational context. They are related to one's personal manner of sensing, responding, organising, and interpreting the world (Linskie, 1977:63). However, it is useful to be aware of a learner's style even though they are not readily changeable, so that the student and the teacher might become aware of potential problems occurring during the learning process (Prokop, 1989:5).

4.3.7.1 Learning styles and distance learning

Liu and Ginther (1999:1/16) state that cognitive styles refer to the individual's consistent and characteristic predisposition of perceiving, remembering, organising, processing, thinking, and problem-solving. While Liu and Ginther (1999) point out that the terms 'cognitive' and 'learning' styles are often used interchangeably, they make a distinction that cognitive styles are more related to theoretical or academic research, while learning styles are more related to practical applications.

Vermunt (1996:28) believes that the term 'learning style' is often used in a narrow sense to refer to the learning activities students employ to learn, but he prefers to use it in a broader sense to refer to the interrelations between processing strategies, regulations strategies, mental learning modes and learning orientations. Learning orientations refer to the whole domain of personal goals, intentions, attitudes, worries, and doubts of students in relation to their studies (Vermunt, 1996:24; Gibbs et al., 1984).

Vermunt (1996) conducted a study to get more insight into the way students carry out various learning functions that are related to their learning styles on the one hand, and the external regulation imposed by instructional activities on the other hand. The study comprises subjects who are distance students and conventional university students. Vermunt (1996) identifies four different styles of learning, namely the undirected learning style, the reproduction directed learning style, the meaning directed learning style, and the application directed learning style. These learning styles differ in five areas, namely the way in which students cognitively process learning content, the way in which they regulate their learning, the affective processes that occur during studying, the mental learning modes, and the learning orientations of students. The learning styles are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: Vermunt's classification of learning styles and their components

Components	Learning styles			
	Undirected	Reproduction directed	Meaning directed	Application directed
Cognitive processing	Hardly any processing	Stepwise processing	Deep processing	Concrete processing
Regulation of learning	Lack of regulation	Mostly external regulation	Mostly self-regulation	Both external and self-regulation
Affective process	Low self-esteem Failure expectations	Fear of forgetting	Intrinsic interest	Practical interest
Mental mode of learning	Cooperation and being stimulated	Intake of knowledge	Construction of knowledge	Use of knowledge
Learning orientation	Ambivalent	Certificate and Self-test oriented	Person oriented	Vocation oriented

(Vermunt, 1996: 47).

The four different styles of learning are discussed below.

▪ Undirected learning style

Cognitive processing: These students have trouble performing most learning functions. They experience difficulty in selecting important parts in the study materials, and in distinguishing between major and minor points. They cannot make connections and restructure the material, and cannot relate it to what they study and phenomena in daily life (Vermunt, 1996:33).

Regulation of learning: Vermunt (1996:33) claims that the monitoring processes of students with this style consist of being aware that they cannot discern sections of importance, and cannot understand the material in the time they have available, and they have problems testing and evaluating their learning results. They might focus on evaluation exercises, but they are still not certain what they are required to know for exam purposes.

Affective process: These students are likely to be characterised by a fear of an inability to cope, a negative view of themselves as students, little confidence in their study capabilities, they are likely to be disappointed with themselves, and build up failure expectations in the course of their study.

Mental mode of learning: Their mental model of learning might require course writers to explain the subject matter explicitly, indicate what they should know, and what they need not bother with, indicate the relations between the topics covered, and sketch an overview of the learning contents. They require explanations of how they should study, clarify difficult parts until they understand, and require their learning to be regulated by tutors and instructors. They might value cooperation and support from other students.

Learning orientation: The learning orientations of students with undirected learning are likely to have an ambivalent insecure attitude towards their studies, doubting if they made correct choices, and whether they are able to cope.

Students with an undirected learning style are likely to experience difficulties with the distance mode of delivery as it appears that not a single facet of their style facilitates coping on their own. This type of student would, therefore, need a lot in the way of support.

▪ **Reproduction directed learning style**

The cognitive processing of these students tends to be orderly, sequential and thorough; selecting, underlining and marking in order to distinguish main points from minor ones, and they focus on the indications provided by instructors/authors/tutors. They might also rely on memorising and rehearsal strategies.

Regulation of learning for these students is conducted externally; they rely on the indications in their sources, such as introductions, learning objectives, directions on studying, and evaluation exercises. The affective processes of these students inclines towards being insecure about examinations, which might lead to excessive marking, underlining or extensive summaries. Personal interests do not play a big role in the regulation of their learning.

Mental modes of learning for students with reproduction learning styles are directed towards passing examinations, and studying means absorbing knowledge for examinations. They require the materials to have a clear structure, might not be disposed to discussions, and regard the task of instructors to be the provision of clarification and extra explanations of the subject matter. Their learning orientation might be testing their capabilities, in keeping with the goal of passing examinations and scoring highly.

It appears as though students with a reproduction directed learning style rely extensively on clearly-structured and designed learning material, with clear guidelines on what to study for examinations, and guidance on what to study to be able to complete assignments successfully.

▪ **Meaning directed learning style**

Cognitive processing: This learning style is characterised by an intrinsic interest in the course, identifying parts that they find important, finding central concepts and the essence of the materials is important. They try to interrelate sections of the materials and subject matter and come up with a total picture, and they approach studying in a critical manner through asking questions, forming own interpretations, opinions and conclusions.

Regulation of learning: students select, relate, and structure the content from their learning materials. They relate studying to personal interests, prior knowledge, and to different courses.

Affective processes: Their intrinsic interest might lead them to read widely on the subjects they find interesting, and to read only the course content on those subjects that interest them less.

Mental modes of learning: These students regard acquisition of insight, being able to build relations and becoming acquainted with the lines of thought as important. They welcome discussions and exchanges of opinions and views in tutorials. **Learning orientations:** They study to deepen their interests, for personal development, and personal interests are the motives for studying. These types of distance students needs study groups and sessions and are not likely to be content studying individually.

▪ **Application directed learning style**

Cognitive processing: Students pay attention to those points that have personal relevance-including what they read about in newspapers and see on television. They capitalise on personal knowledge, either from work, own experience, etc. They need to fill abstract lines of reasoning with concrete matter.

Regulation of learning: Students regulate internally as well as externally. Internally, they have to apply what they learn to practical situations, and externally, didactic aids provide direction.

Affective processes: Practical interest plays a role in regulating learning processes; they relate that which interests them, and largely, they ignore topics that do not.

Mental modes of learning: The main goal of learning is seen as the utilisation of the knowledge that has been acquired; they want knowledge that can be applied and dislike abstract learning.

Learning orientations: These students are often intrinsically vocationally oriented. They want to use their learning in their social and societal activities; they want to learn a profession and acquire skills. Studying is linked to getting a job, being able to practice a profession, and applying the knowledge acquired through their studies.

Liu and Ginther (1999:7/16) advocate that distance education developers ought to consider learning/teaching styles at four major instructional stages, namely instructional planning, learning environment construction, teaching method selection, and evaluation administration. With regard to instructional planning, Liu and Ginther (1999) advocate testing students before the actual teaching

and learning begins which will influence the kind of learning objectives that will be formulated, the instructional content that will be selected, the methods that will be used, and the styles that will be accommodated. This might prove difficult to carry out in some instances, so the alternative option would be to design instructional materials with a number of learning styles in mind. Learning environment construction refers to supportive physical or psychological environments, which can facilitate distance students' achievement. Supportive learning environments comprise two aspects, namely contact amongst students and with the instructor, and secondly, diversified learning styles. Teaching method selection refers to matching instructional materials with learning styles. Evaluation administration refers to assessment and feedback about assessment.

Felder and Henriques (1995:27) argue that the aim is not to place all students in a specific category and to teach each student exclusively according to the preferred style. Felder and Henriques (1995:28) acknowledge that it cannot be an easy task for teachers to undertake; teachers have styles with which they feel most comfortable; accommodating various learning styles need not necessitate drastic changes from a preferred teaching style. A teacher need only incorporate some instructional techniques that will cover most, if not all, learning styles, which is important in distance learning if students' learning styles have not been tested, and where there are minimal opportunities for instructors to observe students' styles.

4.3.7.2 Learning styles and ESL learning

Research shows that students learn English at different rates and with striking different levels of completeness (Lowman, 1990). As lecturers we cannot be held responsible for the differences in ability students bring with them into the classrooms, but we are responsible for motivating our students, and for making sure that they become involved in learning (cf. Cole, 1982).

Some researchers believe that when an individual is participating in a learning task, the learning is usually accomplished more rapidly and retained longer if it is presented in ways that the individual prefers (cf. Oxford, 2002; Cohen, 2002). Learning styles, therefore, refer to an individual's natural, habitual, and preferred ways of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills which persist regardless of teaching methods or content area.

An overview of the research in the ESL learning field shows the growing importance of learning styles and language learning strategies, as educators realise the central role of the learner, not just the lecturer, in the language learning and teaching process. Oxford (1990:438) states that “because learning styles and language learning strategies, more than many other aspects of language skill development, focus on the learner in highly specific and classroom-relevant ways, they can be seen as a ‘missing link’ in our understanding of the language learning process”.

Information about learning styles can help lecturers become more sensitive to the differences students bring to the classroom. It can also serve as a guide in designing language learning experiences that match or mismatch students’ styles, depending on the lecturer’s purpose (cf. Oxford, 1990). Matching is particularly appropriate in working with at risk students and with first-year students, as the most attrition occurs in these situations. Some studies show that identifying a student’s style and then providing instruction consistent with that style contributes to more effective language learning (cf. Dreyer, 1999).

In other instances, some mismatching may be appropriate so that students’ experiences help them to learn in new ways and to bring into play ways of thinking and aspects of the self not previously developed (i.e., style flexing) (cf. Oxford et al., 1992). Knowledge of learning style can thus help lecturers design experiences appropriate for students in terms of matching or mismatching and enable them to do so thoughtfully and systematically.

The idea is, therefore, not to teach each student exclusively according to his/her preferences, but rather to strive for a balance of instructional methods and activities.

4.3.8 Learning strategies and distance learning

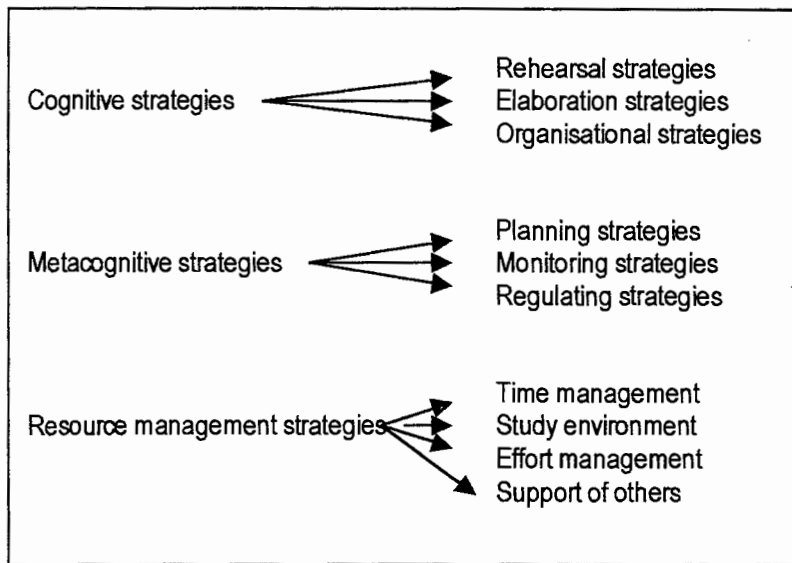
Learning strategies refer to thoughts and behaviours intended to influence the learners’ ability to select, acquire, organise and integrate new knowledge (Weinstein & Meyer, 1986). Learning strategies are designed to teach learners how to learn (Jonassen, 1985).

Learning strategies are important in today’s lifelong learning environment. Today’s society is facing a technological revolution where technology and information are constantly changing (cf. Bates,

1999; 2001). This society is requiring that the workforce continually gain new knowledge to remain productive (Weisburg & Ullmer, 1995:634). It is clear that someone that continues to learn throughout his/her lifetime will be a productive member of the workforce.

Diagram 8 indicates the taxonomy of learning strategies as developed by McKeachie et al. (1986).

Diagram 8: Taxonomy of learning strategies



(McKeachie et al., 1986, cited in Filcher, 2000:62).

Cognitive strategies assist in understanding how information is processed and encoded in a learning environment, while metacognitive strategies allow a student to monitor performance through planning, monitoring and self-regulation. Resource management strategies help in the management of the learning environment and available resources.

Components of cognitive strategies are rehearsal, elaboration and organizational strategies. Rehearsal tactics include the repetition and copying of material, taking verbatim notes and underlining texts (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986:318). Elaboration refers to the attempt made by the student to make an internal connection between what is being learned and previous knowledge. Strategies include paraphrasing, summarising, creating analogies, and question answering. Organization refers to the process by which information received in the learning environment is

organised and connections are built. Strategies include selecting the main idea through outlining, networking, diagramming the information (McKeachie et al., 1986). For Vermunt (1996:26) cognitive strategies have the following categories: relating, structuring, analysing, concretising, applying, memorizing, critical processing, selecting.

Metacognitive strategies serve the purpose of improving self-regulation by encouraging students to test their knowledge. Strategies related to planning include setting goals, skimming the material and generating questions (McKeachie et al., 1986). Monitoring strategies, which learners use to check themselves for comprehension of knowledge or skills, include self-testing and test-taking. Regulating entails processes such as adjusting the reading rate, re-reading, and reviewing. Vermunt (1996:26) lists these categories of metacognitive strategies: orienting, planning, monitoring, testing, diagnosing, adjusting, evaluating, reflecting. These strategies are directed at regulating the cognitive and affective learning activities, and therefore indirectly lead to learning results.

According to McKeachie et al. (1986), resource management strategies concern the quality and quantity of task involvement, and includes the strategies of time management, study environment, effort management, and support of others. Time management includes setting well-defined goals and scheduling. Scheduling refers to the specific time, whether on a daily or weekly basis, or some other time pattern that a student sets aside for studying activities. Study environment management refers to developing a setting that is conducive to learning, depending on the preference of the student. Effort management refers to a process by which tactics such as attribution to effort, mood, self-talk, persistence and self-reinforcement are utilised (McKeachie et al., 1986). These strategies are directly related to, and are components of motivation, an important requirement for distance education learners, as their success hinges, to a large extent, on motivation.

Support of others refers to students seeking help from other students or from the instructor (McKeachie et al., 1986). That distance students need and constantly seek interaction with other students and their instructors has been recorded in various studies. Of the strategies discussed in this section, the support of others strategies are most pertinent for distance learners, as residential

students have ready access to these resources, but distance learners require effort to access not only these resources, but to effect the strategies discussed in this section.

Landbeck and Mugler (2000) conducted a study on learning strategies, the learning environment and how these affect the quality of learning of distance students in the South Pacific. They discovered that students primarily use two learning strategies, namely pragmatic and sequential strategies. Students using pragmatic strategies focus on the material that is relevant to the assignment and limit themselves to what needs to be done in order to pass the course, ignoring other material. Those students using the sequential strategy proceed step by step through the study guide, and follow instructions closely. Some strategies that they use include reading the material more than once until they are satisfied that they understand, using the dictionary, skimming the text, highlighting salient points, and making summaries. Landbeck and Mugler (2000) state that students who use this strategy display different degrees of involvement with the materials, from a superficial reading to an active reading, practically applying what they have learnt, where possible. They are, however, sometimes forced to use pragmatic strategies because of deadlines and time constraints.

4.3.9 Learning strategies and ESL learning

Oxford (1990:1) defines learning strategies as “steps taken by students to enhance their own learning” or as specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques students use to improve their progress in comprehending, internalising, and using the L2 (Oxford, 1994). Learning strategies are, therefore, the specific behaviours or actions, often conscious, used by students to improve or enhance their language learning process.

Some of the generally accepted characteristics of LLS include the following:

- they are learner generated, steps taken by the learner;
- they enhance language learning and are helpful in developing competence in all four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing;
- they may be visible as certain steps, behaviours, techniques, or invisible as thoughts and other mental processes; and

- they involve information and memory such as vocabulary knowledge, grammar rules, amongst others (Lessard-Clouston, 1997).

An important question to ask at this point is why one should be interested in learning strategies. It is possible to answer this by looking at what makes learners successful at learning languages. Why are some people more effective at learning languages than others? What appears to be important is the learners' ability to respond to the particular learning situation and to manage their language learning in an appropriate way. Studies of successful and unsuccessful language learners show that people who succeed in learning have developed a range of strategies from which they are able to select those that are most appropriate for a particular problem, to adapt them flexibly for the needs of the specific situation, and to monitor their level of success (cf. Nisbet & Shucksmith, 1991). Nisbet and Shucksmith (1991:5) make the disturbing observations that most adults will avoid the need to learn if they can by sticking to familiar routines, and when faced with an unfamiliar task, most people will not know how to set about solving it.

Various studies (e.g., Abraham & Vann, 1987; Dreyer, 1992; 2000) have attempted to show that a positive relationship exists between language learning strategies and the different levels of language proficiency of students. Abraham and Vann's (1987) study indicated that a successful language learner used a greater variety of strategies, as well as several strategies far more frequently than did an unsuccessful language learner.

A study conducted by Dreyer (1992) indicated that language learning strategies accounted for approximately 45% of the total variance on the TOEFL test. In another study Dreyer (2000) found that successful students used cognitive and metacognitive strategies statistically significantly ($p < 0,05$) as well as practically significantly ($d > 0,8$) more often than did the unsuccessful students.

Currently, a lot of research is focusing on the training of learning strategies (cf. Oxford, 1996; Anderson, 2002; Dreyer, 2002; 2003). Learning strategy instruction gives the student a process for strategic thinking and a set of options, the strategies, from which to choose the best approach given the demands of the situation. Students who master learning strategies have a whole lot of "tools" at their command as they approach new tasks.

The personal variables that have been discussed in this section all act as mediators. No one variable is absolute in its effect on learning, particularly on learning in a distance context. However, taking all these variables into consideration gives an integrated profile of a distance ESL learner. The following section discusses contextual factors that affect learning in a distance situation.

4.4 Contextual factors

This part of the discussion focuses on contextual factors, that is, variables relating to the microsystem, the mesosystem, and the macrosystem.

4.4.1 Microsystem

Microsystem variables can be referred to as those affecting the students at a personal level. As indicated in Diagram 7, the microsystem factors include personal illness, family support, and mostly any disruption that can come from the home environment.

A study by Kumar (1999), carried out in India, found that background variables impacted significantly on students' academic self-concept, particularly with regard to the academic stream and their employment status. The variables explored in the study are students' social class, their social stream, their employment status, their prior experience, and the most relevant variable in this context, marital status. These variables were found to have a significant effect on their study habits.

Married students demonstrated better study habits, and they showed a more positive attitude towards distance education than unmarried students did. The study does not provide details about students' domestic lives, and why married students might be faring better than their unmarried counterparts. This might partly be explained by the fact that the study population was predominantly male (67.6%), which suggests that they might not have had to deal with regular household duties in addition to job responsibilities and studies.

A study conducted by Phillip (1993) provides a clearer picture of how married life affects distance learning. The purpose of the study was to determine the low enrolment and completion rates of women studying through the distance mode. Phillip (1993:4) reports that finding employment

seemed to be the most crucial factor for enrolment for the women, because traditionally, women do not have control over any family income, particularly when they are married. Furthermore, fathers are more likely to tolerate daughters' spending money on furthering their education than husbands are. Phillips (1993:4) reports that where there was conflict between male and female needs, male needs took precedence regardless of who was earning the money. However, it is also tradition that women do not take money for themselves, but to serve selflessly, thus money is used widely, not just for the immediate family. Phillip (1993:5) states that the attitude of service is entrenched. Thus, because of an overextended budget it might be difficult for the women to find support to enrol, while the money could be used for something else.

The activities that seemed to compete for time with studies are mostly domestic duties; all the women in Phillip's (1993) study reported that they were taking care of children, whether they were married or not. The society in Papua New Guinea appears to be traditional in the gender roles, thus making the choice of continuing education difficult, financially and with regard to other domestic responsibilities that have to compete for time with studying activities. However, Phillips (1993:7) reports that fewer women than men drop out, which might be attributed to the difficulty they experience in enrolling, so that they tend to persevere.

Camey-Crompton and Tan (2002:140) state that role conflicts, including those that involve familial responsibilities can affect the psychological functioning and academic performance of non-traditional female students just as Mallinckrodt and Leong (1992) found that increases in female roles, demands and time conflicts are associated with higher stress, anxiety and depression. Camey-Crompton and Tan (2002) are of the opinion that the majority of non-traditional students are not coping where the mediating factors of support systems are lacking.

4.4.2 Mesosystem

The mesosystem refers to institutional variables which includes factors such as content, support, materials, and interaction.

Shaker (2000) describes the distance education sector in Bahrain, and focuses on why students choose to enrol in distance education institutions. In Bahrain, which is an archipelago of 36 islands

close to Saudi Arabia and Qatar, there are 36 international universities from 10 countries that provide DE services through local agencies, the Education Services Offices (ESOs) and Private Education Institutes (PEIs).

The type of educational services offered by these institutions can be differentiated into educational material providers, teaching, examining, and degree awarding institutions (Shaker, 2000:61). ESOs facilitate admission, provide guidance and counselling to students, conduct registration activities, including informing students about rules, examinations and changes in the curriculum, provide learning materials, secure travel tickets and accommodation during exams, and arrange study groups and notify students of the availability of teachers and assistants (Shaker, 2000:62-62). PEIs conduct the same type of services, and in addition, provide career advice, arrange examinations, and teach the entire curriculum, selected subject or provide consultation where necessary.

Shaker (2000:61) explains that where an institution provides materials, students study on their own, or hire teachers, presumably at their own cost, to assist them to understand the difficult areas of their subjects.

Some institutions prepare and mark examinations, but get another institution to administer and conduct the exams. Other institutions might have arrangements for a certain institution to approve their programmes, internal regulations, and degrees. With this arrangement, one institution awards degrees on behalf of another. This arrangement might work better in that students receive most of their learning services from the institution. The need to supplement the institution's services with their own arrangements might not be as urgent as with the students who have to hire teachers themselves.

Sometimes foreign institutions have arrangements with representatives in Bahrain to teach their programmes and to supervise their examinations. In such instances, Shaker (2000) claims that the local teaching institutions have to use additional teaching-learning materials to ensure the students' understanding and success with the examinations. Again, if the institution takes responsibility to ensure student success, it is preferable, rather than to leave everything to the parent institution.

Shaker (2000:61) differentiates between institutions in Bahrain that act as branches or representatives. The branch carries out duties such as admission procedures, registration, teaching/learning, and evaluation. Everything takes place in Bahrain, with the exception that the curriculum (teaching-learning materials) and the degree are from an overseas university. The range of activities carried out by branches appears to be more complete compared to those of representative institutions. It also seems that branches are likely to be more in touch with needs of students than representative institutions.

Shaker (2000:64) reports that findings show that there are various reasons why students choose to study via distance. With regard to the reasons related to the state of higher education in Bahrain, students listed the limited number of students that can get into them per year, the limited number of scholarships and financial assistance and the fact that desired majors might not be offered by the institutions in Bahrain. Reasons related to the nature of distance education in Bahrain include that students can work at their own pace according to their abilities and choice, that students who completed their secondary schooling a few years ago are accepted, that students are not required to complete their studies in a prescribed number of years, and reasons tied to the language of instruction. Shaker (2000:68) writes that English is the conventional language of instruction in higher education institutions in Bahrain, even though students are taught in Arabic until secondary school. Because their proficiency in English is poor, they struggle to gain admission into any residential institutions, and if they are accepted, they struggle to acquire proficiency in English. Thus they prefer DE institutions whose medium of instruction is Arabic.

Shaker (2000) does not write about attrition/drop-out and failure in these institutions, thus it is not possible to gauge the overall impact on students' performance. The difficulties that students in these institutions experience are largely because their institutions do not oversee the entire programs, from design to implementation. The service that is provided is disjointed and not systemic, which affects content, materials and the type of support students receive from the institution with which they have registered.

Dreyer (2000) found that some of the variables that affect distance learners' academic performance include:

- the turn around time of assignments;
- too many assignments;
- support from the lecturer/instructor;
- administrative support; and
- the students' educational level.

The various divisions in an institution exert varying pressures and demands on students, which coupled with the characteristics students bring into the learning situation (e.g., educational level and language proficiency), affect academic performance.

4.4.3 Macrosystem

Globalisation is a term that has far reaching consequences for all spheres of social, cultural, political and economic life, but is difficult to define because it describes complex spheres of human life (Waghid & Le Grange, 2002). The relationship between education and globalisation has been explored only recently (Waghid & Le Grange, 2002). But even so, Gawe and De Kock (2002:36) claim that even though the concept of globalisation is embedded in the economic field, it is not foreign to education in view of the fact that economic growth leans heavily on current research trends. The implications for distance education are explored in this discussion.

According to Waghid and Le Grange (2002:6), globalisation increased concerns about social justice and equity issues in higher education, and that this is evident in South Africa in the expansion of access to higher education vis-à-vis student places and entry, and flexible modes of study. The challenge for higher education institutions is to produce a labour force that can compete globally, and to restructure course offerings that can "add value" to students' critical capacities as individual learners.

Gawe and De Kock (2002:38) state that globalisation has resulted in the vastly increased use of English, and as a result, the global supply of and the demand for English instruction are increasing. English dominates the world's books, academic papers and the mass media (Gawe & De Kock, 2002). However, since language is the most prominent and potent symbol of identity, global development must be brought into harmony with local and regional socio-cultural realities. South Africa's policy of multilingualism allows its citizens to maintain their own language in the face of

globalisation while learning at least one other language for social, occupational, or educational rewards. South African universities could play a leading role in promoting local languages while helping second language speakers to become proficient in English (Gawe & De Kock, 2002:39).

Bitzer (2002:23) states that governments are increasingly proclaiming education as the key to success or survival in the global economy, and connected to this is the concept of lifelong or continuous learning. In the United Kingdom the goals of lifelong learning include:

- ensuring that all 14- to 18 year olds continue in full time or part time education or training;
- improving the information, advice and guidance available to adults, and making learning more easily accessible;
- stimulating providers of education and training to be more responsive to the needs of individuals and employers;
- persuading employers to invest more widely in updating and adapting the skills of their workforce;
- developing qualifications which allow individuals to demonstrate their knowledge and skills and build on earlier learning (Bitzer, 2002:23-24).

South Africa is also espousing similar values with regard to higher education (cf. DoE, 2001; 2002).

Kistan (2002:172) advises that recognition of prior learning (RPL) should not be seen as an assessment exercise, but as a lifelong learning process. The principle of RPL states that education and training should, through assessment, give credit to learning which has already been acquired in different ways, for example, through life experience, job learning, through formal but not recognised education and training. In South Africa, RPL is seen as a vehicle to redress past educational inequity and the on-going professional development of working adults (Kistan, 2002). ESL programme developers, therefore, have to be guided by both global and domestic needs, which while responding to educational demands, will also ensure that an institution has viable and relevant programmes, which are an integral part of the student support system.

4.5 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to demonstrate the importance of drawing up an extensive profile of ESL students. The variables discussed in this chapter are in no way complete, yet are fairly representative of the categories they sought to discuss.

The discussion on personal and contextual variables highlighted the importance of knowing students' backgrounds and circumstances, which aids in understanding their approach to their academic work, and which makes it possible to design activities suited to particular instances, where they exist, especially if they are different from those of the people/country offering the course. The impact the variables have on success and attrition has hopefully been demonstrated, and the need for a support service system based on learner needs.

The following chapter discusses the provision of support services. Although the main focus of this study is on ESL students, students in other courses and academic streams are in no manner disregarded or excluded in these deliberations.

CHAPTER 5

PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR DISTANCE LEARNERS

5.1 Introduction

The preceding chapters have shown that distance education is a system whose components are so dependent on each other that it is impossible to isolate any single factor or component without mentioning the effects on the other components. Chapter 4 focused on the necessity of profiling distance learners, in order to provide an institution with a more holistic picture of the students enrolled in specific programmes. Profiling also informs the institution of the needs of the learners, and more importantly, the areas in which they need support, and the kind of support they need.

Research has shown that student support, in a chain of equally important services and processes, has a sizeable impact on student success and completion in distance education. According to Buchanan (2000), institutional support and services dictate the success or failure of a distance education programme. Students are faced with the challenges of tracking down the appropriate contact persons for administrative questions, registrations, transcripts, and other business is conducted via the telephone or e-mail. They also have to seek guidance and career assistance away from campus. This contributes to the high attrition rates associated with distance learning (Buchanan, 2000). Academic institutions must remember that course content is only one element of the education they provide; similar support received by on-campus students needs to be provided to distance learners (Spodick, 1995).

Dillon and Gunawardena (1992) state that one important means of analysing the effectiveness of the teaching/learning experience in distance education is through the analysis of the learner support system. Rae (1989) further states that support systems developed in recognition of student needs help the learner become competent and self-confident in learning, social interactions and self-evaluation.

This chapter focuses on the definition and conceptualisation of student support, as well as on a discussion on the different types of support services available to distance learners.

5.2 Defining support in distance education

Garrison and Baynton (1987) state that learner support systems comprise resources which the learner can access in order to carry out the learning process and resources which relate to the mediation of the communication process. These resources include access to courses, teachers/facilitators, learning materials, library facilities and media equipment. In the view of Garrison and Baynton (1987:7), the role of the teacher/facilitator is of primary importance in providing support. This could be because the teacher/facilitator is the student's immediate contact, the one a student is likely to be in touch with more than other academic or administrative personnel. Abate (1999) provides a more comprehensive list of support services: library materials and facilities, delivery of course materials, traditional mail services, financial aid, admission services, academic advising, general academic support services, counselling, mentoring, and job placement. This list is not definite nor exhaustive.

Reid (1995:268) writes that institutional perspectives of support fall within either a complimentary position or a compensatory position. A complementary position views student support as an essential integral component of the teaching/learning process, where the learner is the central focus, and the compensatory position views students as having deficits in their learning that need to be fixed. Therefore, the approach and attitude that an institution adopts and communicates to students will also affect the reception of the services, and students' acceptance of them.

Tait (1995:232) states that the term 'support' refers to a range of activities which complement the mass-produced materials which make up the most well-known element in open and distance learning. He identifies the elements normally referred to as support services as tutoring (face-to-face, correspondence, telephonic, electronic), counselling, the organisation of study centres, interactive teaching through radio or television, and other activities. In this instance, support services are viewed to complement learning materials, which refers mostly to matters of an academic nature. Therefore, support would be provided to aid students in understanding their learning materials.

Lowe (1997) groups student support into academic support, which comprises institutional and instructional support, and relational support. Institutional support is operationally defined to include elements such as the provision of competent faculty (i.e., lecturers/facilitators) with appropriate credentials, quality materials, delivery technology and other typical human and material resources. Instructional support includes the instructional design of courses, learners' interaction with faculty, and tutorial assistance. Relational support refers to the more affective dimension of the learning process; the encouragement, motivation and the nurturing of students on an emotional level in an attempt to strike a balance with the more intellectual/cognitive support usually provided by institutions of higher education (Lowe, 1997).

According to Tait (1995:232), the rationale for student support in open and distance learning has been weakly conceived, and as a consequence, weakly realised, as well as being subject to fluctuations in financial support. He also claims that often support services are seen as the poor and marginal relation of the course production side. Robinson (1995:221) also voices these sentiments, claiming that learner support has received less backing than other aspects of distance education, and provides the following possible reasons for this state of affairs:

- it is perceived as a less glamorous activity than others;
- it is regarded as peripheral to the 'real business' of developing materials;
- it is vulnerable to financial cuts; and
- it may be a largely pragmatic activity rooted in the lessons of experience.

The lesson of experience, in this case, is the high failure rate that institutions experience. Allocating a large portion of finances for material development does not ensure good performances. Well-written materials can be part of the overall support system, however, the major concern needs to be a well-developed support system.

Robinson (1995:223), after noting the differences in the definitions of support found in distance education literature, for example,

- the elements of an open learning system capable of responding to a particular individual learner (Thorpe, 1988:54);
- the support incorporated within the self-learning materials, the learning system and assignment marking (Hui, 1989:131); and

- the requisite student services essential to ensure the successful delivery of learning experiences at a distance (Wright, 1991:59).

claims that learner support can be viewed as having three components, namely the elements that make up the system, their configuration, and the interaction between them and the learners. The elements are:

- personal contact between learners and support agents, individual or group, face-to-face or via other means;
- peer contact; the activity of giving feedback to individuals on their learning;
- additional materials such as handbooks, advice notes or guides; study groups and centres, actual or 'virtual'; access to libraries, laboratory equipment; and
- communication networks.

Configuration of these elements depends on the requirements of course design, the infrastructure of a country, the distribution of learners, the available resources, and the values and philosophy of the open and distance education provider. Interactivity between the providing institution and the learners differs in level, intensity and function. A point which Robinson (1995:224) stresses is that learner support is heavily contingent on local circumstances.

Robinson's (1995) conceptualisation of support services calls to mind, and seems to complement Moore and Kearsley's (1996) systems approach to distance education in that it links different aspects of the provision of distance education that are dependent on each other for the system to function well.

Harrington et al. (2001:3) state that support in distance learning is often defined in terms of its constituents. They mention support components that have been defined as **activities** that enable students to progress satisfactorily (e.g., Bailey & Moore, 1989), as **strategies**, such as cognitive, affective, metacognitive, and motivational (e.g., Lebel, 1989), and as **skills**, for example, informing, advising, counselling, assessing, enabling and feedback (e.g., Vowles, 1990). The provision of learning support does entail all of these variables (as the previous 3 chapters have shown), but each forms part of the entire support system. Harrington et al. (2001:3) claim that some writers on distance learning support do not define the concept, but rather make assumptions about the nature

of support. Their conceptualisation of support in distance learning, based on learner needs, is of practical, emotional and academic support (Harrington et al., 2001:6). Practical support refers to effective help with work tasks, housework and childcare. Emotional support is defined in terms of tolerance, cajoling and emotional reassurance by significant others (e.g., partners) when it is required. Academic support is defined in relation to access to appropriate information, responsiveness and availability of faculty in a supportive role.

While Harrington et al.'s (2001) conceptualisation of support might appear to be similar to Lowe's (1997), it differs in that emotional support includes family and significant others, and Lowe's relational support is mostly provided by the institution. Lowe (1997) does mention that his model is based on institutional initiative to providing support, while Harrington et al. (2001) insist that learner needs are paramount in providing support. Therefore, the importance of familial support in distance education is a reflection of students' experience and their needs.

In addition to highlighting the diversity of students to be found in each institution and country, Robinson (1995:225) directs attention to contexts of learning, claiming that models of good practice developed in the western institutions are not always appropriate for other countries and cultures. Nevertheless, the information they provide is invaluable for an institution trying to set up its own learner support system; research, whether theoretical, comparative, descriptive or practical provides the basis from which to begin. The following section focuses on three international models of student support services, which, while having similar concerns of serving the student, provide different frameworks of how student support can be organised and carried out.

5.3 International models of student support services

The models featured in the following discussion propose guidelines along which support service systems can be designed and carried out. The models focus largely on the student, but highlight the responsibility of the providing institution as well, as they have to assume the ultimate responsibility. Lowe's (1997) model is based on the research carried out in a theological institution, which has a particular type of student and practices, as well as its own register. However, in keeping with the assurances that Lowe (1997) makes, the model is adaptable for any distance education institution. Tait's (1995) model focuses on the planning and managing of support

services. Reid's (1995) model is apt for this research as it focuses on institutions that want to widen a centralised support base into a regionalised one, which a traditionally contact institution that provides distance education might be looking to do.

5.3.1 Lowe's SARSIDE model

Lowe (1997) states that the "Situational Academic and Relational Support in Distance Education" (SARSIDE) model (cf. Diagram 9) is proposed as a framework to guide the design and delivery of academic and relational support as well as specific courses and entire degree programmes.

Diagram 9: Lowe's SARSIDE model

3 <u>High Personal Relation:</u> ▪ Peer Tutor Relation continues ▪ T-Delta Forum contacts continue ▪ Personal relationship with Dissertation Chair begins to develop ▪ Closer contact with department staff ▪ Easy access to faculty and staff ▪ Regional Seminar contacts maximized ▪ Continued use of audio feedback tape ▪ Initial contact about Alumni Association <u>Low Academic Support:</u> ▪ Beginning contact with Dissertation Chair ▪ Beginning contact with Committee ▪ Contact initiated by student ▪ Prompts regarding status of Registration (Computer generated letters)	2 <u>High Academic Support:</u> ▪ Peer Mentor Match-Up ▪ Trinity Triad ▪ Research Librarian Services ▪ Course Assessor Feedback and Reaction ▪ Through detailed evaluation form ▪ Contact with Faculty member ▪ Online Seminars by Department ▪ Rapid Lesson Response ▪ Regional Seminar Option Encouraged <u>High Personal Relation:</u> ▪ Initial relation with Peer Tutor ▪ Personal contact from Department ▪ Personable contacts with Trinity staff ▪ Participation in T-Delta Forum ▪ Participation in Online Seminar ▪ Use of Audio Feedback Tape
4 <u>Low Personal Relation:</u> ▪ Peer Tutor fades out ▪ Dissertation Chair relation remains stable <u>Low Academic Support:</u> ▪ Graduation details finalized ▪ Lesson grading & Comps ▪ Closure to dissertation process	1 <u>High Academic Support:</u> ▪ Streamlined Learning How to Learn course for academic credit in any degree ▪ Student friendly Materials Pack ▪ First Course Packet ▪ Adult Learner Oriented Study Guides ▪ Informational contacts from Staff ▪ Academic Troubleshooting Unit ▪ Six Week Check-Up ▪ Online Seminars by Department ▪ Rapid Lesson Response ▪ Detailed Evaluation Response & Feedback <u>Low Personal Relation:</u> ▪ Letter from Dean ▪ Contacts initiated by student as needed

(Lowe, 1997: 12).

According to Lowe (1997), the SARSIDE model is prescriptive in that it suggests components that should be put in place to facilitate learning and completion in various settings. He claims that the model is also applicable to settings outside of his particular field of expertise, which is theology, and for which this model is designed. The model, as it is, requires careful reading because some of the

elements in it refer strictly to theology, and are applicable in the institution where the research was conducted. Some elements, therefore, do not apply to other disciplines and institutions, but do provide a clue for an equivalent element, or need to be disregarded totally. For example, the T-Delta Forum in the 2nd and 3rd quadrants, and the Trinity Triad in the 2nd quadrant appear to belong strictly to the theological realm, and are practices that are specific to the institution.

Lowe's (1997) work on the SARSIDE Model focuses mostly on adult learners, and is based on the following assumptions:

- Most adult learners have little or no experience with distance learning.
- Most adult learners enter a programme with few if any, of the essential skills of self-direction.
- Self-directed learning and skills to learn how to learn are essential cognitive abilities.
- Life circumstances that are beyond the student's and the institution's control play a major role in a student's progress.
- Adult learners' skills grow and develop during the course of their learning.
- Adults who are given a proper orientation and support are more likely to complete their programmes.
- Distance education institutions need a conceptual framework to guide their provision of support.
- The institution does not impose time constraints on student learning so that they study at their own pace.

Quadrant 1 comprises high academic support and low relational support. Orientation plays an important role in providing high academic support, with the assumption that strategies employed by an institution will enable and empower students to overcome entrance inertia which is created by a lack of self-directed learning skills. The skills that students need have to be identified and the means for providing them devised. Students have to be made aware of the range of institutional support services and policies if they are to navigate their programme successfully. At the beginning of a student's enrolment, there is a need for high academic support, but low relational support. Lowe (1997:11) states that there is less need for warm mentoring relationships with faculty/lecturers, the relational support at this stage is limited to being friendly, cordial, and "a caring politeness intended to grease the social mechanisms of first encounters". The actions taken by the institution at this stage also serve to make it credible.

Quadrant 2 comprises high academic support and high relational support. Lowe (1997) claims that the approach to be taken by the institution should be one that familiarises students with the

requirements of the system, and that as soon as they feel more confident about their academic abilities the institution must adjust to the learning skill and personal growth that has taken place in the student. High academic support ought to be maintained; unnecessary delays caused by long turnaround times for returning assignments serve to dampen motivation and interest which is carefully cultivated at the beginning. Greater affective and relational support is needed at this stage so that students can have a sense of belonging and acceptance. Relational support may be in the form of phone calls, e-mails, letters, and notes on returned assignments. Lowe (1997) even advocates that one person be assigned to give the relational support instead of multiple contact persons.

Quadrant 3 comprises low academic support and high relational support. It is assumed that the student has acquired academic and learning skills to function effectively as an independent and self-directed learner. Relational support serves to encourage students to complete their studies, and it increases their level of commitment, especially near the end of their degree programmes.

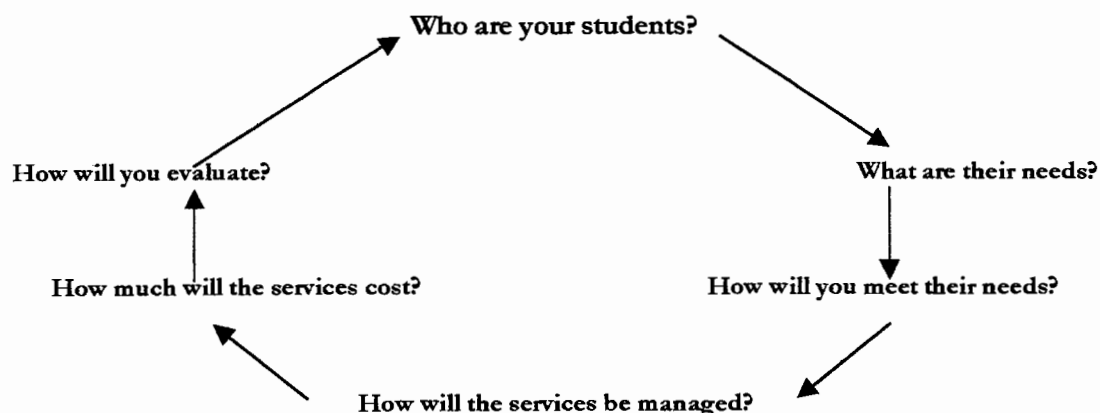
Quadrant 4 comprises low academic and low relational support. The student has received adequate skills and competencies, and the affirmations to function as an independent learner. However, the institution does not withdraw and leave the student to function alone, but there is not a need for the aggressive type of support offered earlier in the programme. According to Lowe (1997), an environment has been created in which a student has been allowed to flourish and grow academically and personally to such an extent that they require little support and direction.

Lowe (1997) claims that the intention of this model is to guide instructional and academic support activity, and any institution can fill in the blanks of the quadrants and identify strategies and services that can be provided to match the level of appropriate support.

5.3.2 Tait's model for planning and managing student services

Tait's (1995) model (cf. Diagram 10) presents a framework for the pertinent issues that need to be considered in setting up a support system.

Diagram 10: Tait's model for planning and managing student services



(Tait, 1995:233).

The profiling of students, in the question “Who are your students?” is important for acknowledging the identity of the learner in order to “complement the mass-produced teaching materials which by virtue of their nature, and as a condition of their effectiveness, are unable to do so” (Tait, 1995:234).

In response to the question of what the students’ needs are, Tait (1995:235) lists the range of services which can be provided as including advice/counselling, tutoring individually and in groups, the learning of study skills, including examination skills, peer group support, feedback concerning assessment and progress, language support, career guidance, and administrative problem-solving.

In deciding how to meet the needs of the students, Tait (1995:235) states that crucial elements in the design of services also include the extent to which they can be provided on a local basis and in groups. If provisions are made for groups, this would most likely make them easier to access, and provide students with peer support. Also to be taken into account are social, cultural, economic and technological issues which each institution has to base on its unique circumstances and not on national or international trends (Tait, 1995:236). He gives the example that some countries might have low populations which are thinly distributed, but efficient technological infrastructures which will demand student support based on their circumstances. Countries like South Africa might have a high population, but the concentration of distance students in specific regions, and access to

technological infrastructure, will demand solutions that will be unique to each institution's student population profile, which might also differ per programme.

With regard to the management of support services, the two important areas are the management of structures which are devolved from the institution's headquarters which involve centre-periphery relations, and the management of part-time off-campus tutors and counsellors (Tait, 1995). Staff development and training are important so that students receive quality services, regardless of their location. Whether students interact with the main institution, with a regional centre, or are mainly working from home, they ought to receive the same quality of service. The people that are responsible for the cost and management of support services have to engage with the following issues:

- distribution and remoteness of staff and services;
- the contribution to the reduction of student attrition;
- the relationship of costs to the volume of students and intermediaries (i.e., tutors, counsellors etc.); and
- quality issues where service rather than production is the key activity (Tait, 1995).

Providing support services might be costly, but it might even be more costly for the institution to lose students through dropping out and through failure. An efficient support system is likely to be cost-effective in the long-term.

Quality assurance addresses concerns about whether standards have been reached, and concerns about continuous improvement and the centrality of the student experience (Tait, 1995:239). Tait (1995:239) states that many tutorial and counselling staff work on a part-time basis, their time is limited, they work remotely in a range of dispersed locations, which makes it difficult to establish quality assurance work in student support services. For support services to be effective they have to be examined, documented and reflected upon.

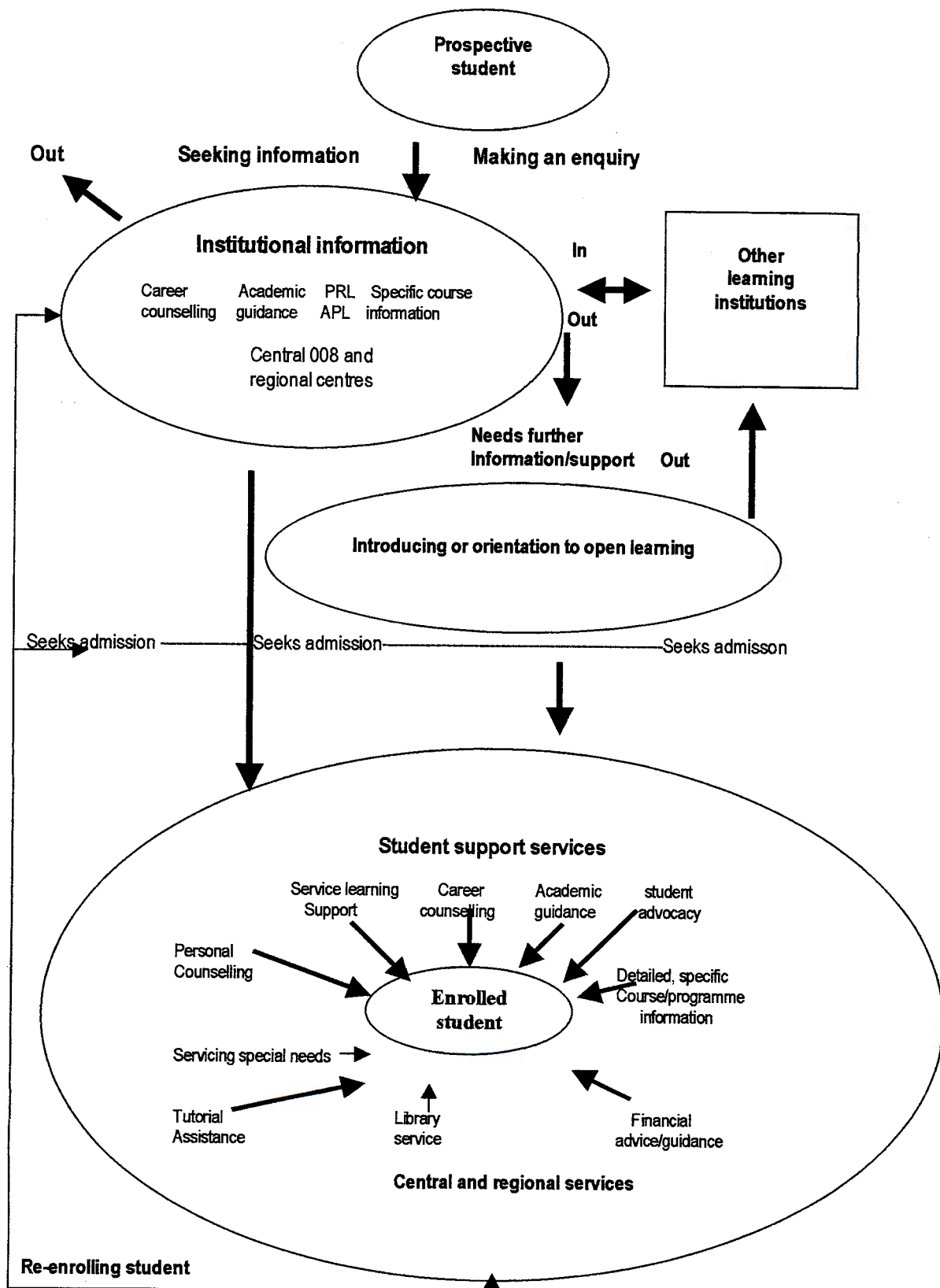
Tait's view (1995:239) is that the variables that lead to student success or failure are so numerous that the demonstrability of the value of student support services has hitherto eluded researchers.

5.3.3 Reid's model of student support services

The model presented by Reid (1995) addresses student support needs in an institution with a strongly centralised support service, but that is moving towards developing regional open learning centres (cf. Diagram 11). It is suited for an institution that sees support as holistic and is prepared to provide an integrated approach. The model places emphasis on staff development and good organisation and co-ordination. Reid (1995:269) emphasises that "learning support is as important as teaching; it is teaching" and that it is central to all that is done by professionals in the field.

According to Reid (1995:269), the type of support provided will depend on the distance education tradition adopted by an institution, which is either an emancipatory tradition, a liberal tradition or an industrial tradition. An emancipatory tradition is linked with the opening up of opportunities and with the breaking down of barriers. Learners previously denied access for social, cultural, political, economic and institutional reasons have a chance to enrol when this approach is adopted. According to Reid (1995:269-270), the providing institution needs to provide career and academic counselling, provide pathways through bureaucracy and to act as an advocate for learners, but at the same time preserve its own integrity and maintain an academic function, which are complementary and conflicting functions. The liberal tradition is linked to an emancipatory tradition; merit or the ideal of universal access to education, lifelong learning, and 'second chance' learning are some of the factors taken into consideration. Reid (1995:270) states that learners within this tradition of learning will have mixed feelings about their learning, and require a sensitivity not matched by learners in other groups. The industrial tradition is training-based and is justified by cost-effectiveness and efficiencies, flexibility and a targeting of specific skills for employees. Industry assumes responsibility and control for its own training. The local business community within this tradition plays an important role in the provision of student support, with an emphasis on flexibility and employer and employee needs.

Diagram 11: Reid's model of student support services



(Reid, 1995:266).

The model highlights that students need to be provided with information, guidance and counselling at the pre-enrolment and early post-enrolment stage. The types of services falling under 'Institutional Information' in the model allow students to plan their course of study, and allow the institution to address questions concerning the recognition and accreditation of prior learning (RPL & APL in the diagram). If the issues of RPL and APL are not dealt with at the beginning, before registration, it might be too late after registration. Reid (1995:265) claims that students need personal contact and interaction at this stage as they might decide to enrol, or be guided towards other institutions that might meet their needs. 'Introduction or orientation to open learning' in the model will help students to decide if the mode of learning is suitable for them, upon which they might choose to enrol, or opt for another institution.

'Student support services' details the services that an institution could provide, which are both administrative and learning support services. Learning support includes such services as study and exam skills seminars, access to formal study groups and informal networks, and one-on-one assistance.

5.4 A review of South African literature on support

South African authorities in education generally, and in distance education in particular, have realised the need for the provision of improved learner support services. Concerns at national level with open and distance learning are noted, as well as institutional concerns with support services.

The government as well as open and distance education organisations and associations, have seen it necessary to conduct inquiries into the effectiveness of open and distance education institutions. Examples include the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE) and government-led initiatives in requesting an international panel of commissioners to undertake a review and assessment of distance education in South Africa (SAIDE, 1995), and also the CHE task team, mandated by the government to look into education in South Africa, which included distance education (DoE, 2000). The findings and recommendations made by these inquiries have been apparent in the changes and reforms instituted by the government, and the demands it is making on open and distance education institutions (cf. section 3.2.2).

In reviewing learner support services in South African distance learning institutions, Mays (2000a) reports that his research team's general impression was that learner support is perceived as "part and parcel of the course" rather than as a separate range of activities tacked onto a core programme. Mays (2000a) states that in their research most learners and programme tutors talked about support in terms of the types of activities and interventions offered rather than in terms of an underpinning concept or educational philosophy. This, according to him, suggests that the view of support is rudimentary, basically just to ensure that students are 'on the right track'.

SAIDE (1995:xxi) states that "what in South Africa is called distance education is essentially correspondence education". The practice prevalent in South Africa, as reported by the international panel (SAIDE, 1995:60), is for students to receive materials, submit assignments for marking, and to sit for final examinations. One of the major concerns is the design of courses which is not done properly, and is conducted individually, and thus there is no benefit to working with experts in course design. The poor quality of materials, it is felt, compounds defects detected by the panel in student support services (SAIDE, 1995:61). The panel found that students were not provided with enough scope to interact with ideas they come across in their learning, nor with the mind of the lecturer who prepared the study guide. Students were instead drilled through exercises as if the exercises were the ends of learning.

The forms of learner support offered should, according to Mays (2000a), be determined by the programme's purpose, target student profile, underpinning educational philosophy, and budgetary constraints. In addition to target student profiles, students that are identified as "at risk" need to be taken into account when designing support services.

A high percentage of students are likely to fail in higher education, and in particular in distance education, most likely because of the poor quality of basic education for the majority of the population (Mays, 2000b). While access has been opened up, thereby increasing opportunity for enrolment in higher education, matching it with learner support is vital if the students are to succeed in their studies. Mays (2000b:1/19) emphasises that it is important to dispel the myth that access into educational institutions is synonymous with equal opportunities. It is not adequate to enrol learners and not offer the support which could change access into success.

Mays (2000b:2/19) claims that although there is a policy commitment to learner support in South Africa very little has been documented about the degree to which learner support has been implemented. Policy offers an environment for planning, but learner support needs to be planned and implemented at the level of pedagogy and practice.

5.5 Types and categories of support services

Support can be classified along several lines; the needs of the students and the structure of a course take precedence in designing support systems. Based on an overview of the literature and the models on support discussed earlier, the following section discusses the different types of support services using the classification of academic and relational support. In this discussion reference is specifically made to the type of support that may be necessary for ESL learners enrolled for English in distance programmes.

5.5.1 Academic support

Academic support encompasses both institutional and instructional support, which comprises various forms of human and material support (cf. Lowe, 1997).

5.5.1.1 Institutional support

The variables that form part of institutional support include the areas of administration, faculty/lecturers, learning material and delivery technology.

5.5.1.1.1 Administration

The functions of administrative departments include supervising, managing and organising the production and output of distance programmes, liaising between all the departments involved, as well as between the students and the institution. These activities are focused towards offering quality programmes, and this section focuses on how to offer quality programmes, in keeping with the view of a systems approach to distance education.

Cookson (2002) discusses the issues of access and equity in distance education. Offering quality programmes is one of the highest priorities of an institution, and it is closely tied to the provision of

quality support services. Cookson (2002) lists five criteria of quality, namely effort, performance, adequacy, efficiency, and process.

Effort refers to activities that an institution carries out (Cookson, 2002). Indicators of effort include: the number of degrees, diplomas, certificates and courses designed, developed, and delivered; the number of applications, admissions, registrations, examinations; and the credentials awarded.

Performance refers to the effect of an institution's activities on those whom it serves (Cookson, 2002). Indicators of performance include: productivity, work practices, learning gains, successful completion, and examination performance. It might not always link work-related activities with learning activities, depending on a number of factors, such as costs, the nature of the course, and time, and structures required to work with the job sector. Cookson (2002) notes that because of distance institutions' commitment to the removal of barriers to education they tend to admit students whose credentials might make them unacceptable to other institutions, and it becomes difficult to attain good performance in learning, examinations, and completion. He advocates diagnostic testing of incoming students, and investments in remedial courses, effective teaching materials and effective tutorial instruction responsive to identified learning needs.

ESL proficiency testing could serve as an indication of the type of performance that can be expected of distance students, and an indication of the extent to which students could interact with their learning materials on their own in a meaningful manner. From the testing, instructors would also have an indication of the type and extent of language support ESL students need.

Adequacy refers to the capacity of distance institutions to meet the educational and social needs of their students (Cookson, 2002). With respect to adequacy, the extent to which credentials from distance institutions enable students to attain upward social and occupational mobility have yet to be determined. Another problem is that distance institutions or distance programmes have yet to be recognised as being on par with traditional institutions or programmes offered on-campus. To be regarded as credible, steps that distance education institutions can take include responding to identified social, economic, and educational needs in their communities and country. A distance

education institution would have to offer ESL programmes that respond to needs related to global and economic demands.

Efficiency refers to the cost of distance education, and Cookson (2002) differentiates between two types of costs: cost per student and cost per successful student. He claims that distance institutions tend to focus on the cost per student rather than on the cost per successful student, which might be less flattering. Important in this regard are effective recruitment and retention strategies and also marketing. Cookson (2002) stresses that once attracted to participate, students need to be guided into and through their programmes of study. He lists student orientation, remedial instruction, enforcement of practical and realistic standards of academic achievement and advancement to higher levels of study, and other forms of effective student learning assistance and tutorial instruction as crucial to increasing students' chances of academic survival. Cookson (2002) concedes that these practices will increase the costs per student, but will reduce the institutional cost per successful student.

Process comprises a series of actions or operations conducive to particular ends (Cookson, 2002:12). In distance education, process is identified through the following subsystems:

- Course subsystem: creation, production, distribution and evaluation of instruction.
- Student subsystem: administrative functions for management and control of students' progress such as registration, orientation, learning assistance, allocation to courses, collection of fees, ensuring receipt of course materials, and communication of expected performance.
- Regulatory subsystem: practices of the academic and administrative decision-making staff and bodies in the governance, management and management of reward and accountability within the institution.
- Logistical subsystem: functions of procurement and supply of required resources (purchasing, maintenance, and personnel).
- Technological subsystem: information communications technology (ICT) infrastructure harnessed in the design and delivery of instruction.

Quality assurance mechanisms are essential in distance learning, therefore institutions should have structures, policies and procedures that are effective and efficient (cf. Cookson, 2002). Administrators might not always be aware that they are responsible for the overall functioning of the system (Husmann & Miller, 2001). If the system is not co-ordinated properly it is likely to lead to a disintegrated service.

5.5.1.1.2 Faculty/lecturers

Faculty is important not only in providing some of the support services needed by students, but important because they are in most instances responsible for deciding what goes into a programme. If faculty is able to carry out its duties proficiently, then a substantial part of supporting students is accomplished (Interviews with Heads of Divisions at TLS).

Rockwell et al. (2000) write that in order for faculty to be successful in distance education teaching, higher education institutions must take into account the wants, needs, interests and aspirations of the faculty (cf. also Kotze & Dreyer, 2002). They conducted a study with the aim of identifying the type of training, assistance and support faculty needed in order to develop educational materials for distance delivery. The subjects of the study were staff members who had taught or were teaching distance courses at the time the research was conducted. The results indicated that faculty ranked as very important: instructor to student interaction, developing materials for students that support the course content, marketing the course, students' interaction with the instructional content, developing instructional design, student feedback, and additional operational support for faculty. All these factors are grouped by Rockwell et al. (2000) under the general heading of Developing Interaction. However, included in the factors ranked as somewhat important are student to student interaction, and addressing student learning styles, which were grouped under Curriculum Content, Design and Evaluation. Also falling within the somewhat important ranks is student services, which includes providing easier access to library services for students, clarifying transfer issues, taking care of registration, copyright issues, and clarifying tuition costs.

Similarly, Bower (2001), as well as Kotze and Dreyer (2002) cites factors such as promotion and tenure, workload, and training as important for effective working conditions and delivery. She also considers interpersonal relations to be important because they may, in order to help faculty gauge

the clarity of their communications because student feedback is often delayed and indirect. This raises the question of the type of link that ought to exist between faculty and students. Is it sufficient for students to deal with the tutors/facilitators? Do the students need to interact with the people who are most likely to have put their courses together? In several instances, students have required more contact with lecturers, arising out of dissatisfaction with tutors' styles, or simply because lecturers are the ones who set and mark examination papers.

The Higher Education Program and Policy Council of the American Federation of Teachers (2001:3/14) gives the following guidelines for faculty in order for them to maintain standards in distance education:

- the faculty must retain academic control;
- faculty should be prepared to meet the special requirements of teaching at a distance (communication technology skills, more time might be spent than on traditional courses, being available to students on an extended basis); and
- faculty need, amongst other types of support, training and compensation.

The Higher Education Program and Policy Council of the American Federation of Teachers (2001:5/14) emphasises that because distance education calls on a specialised set of skills, teaching distance education courses ought to be a matter of faculty choice.

Rockwell et al. (2000) highlight the importance of institutions providing faculty with support in developing interaction and instructional materials, and applying selected technologies. It was felt that by using assistants and facilitators both students and faculty members could be provided with support, and that evaluating the delivery process and student outcomes would enable them to better provide support or to know which support students need.

According to Olcott and Wright (1995), the responsibility for instructional quality and control, the improvement of learning and the effectiveness of distance education still rests with the faculty. They need to be aware of the diverse technologies and delivery methods available, and how to incorporate them into their teaching and learning strategies. The most important faculty information

and training needs include teaching techniques, enhancing interaction, and learner-centred techniques.

Student expectations of their lecturers can also serve to inform lecturers of their support needs. The aim of a study conducted by Venter and Van Heerden (2001) with Philosophy of Education students at Unisa was to determine what students expected of their lecturers, what lecturers expected of their students, whether the lecturers live up to the students' expectations of a lecturer and whether students live up to their lecturers' expectations. Their results indicated a discrepancy between lecturers' and students' expectations; lecturers operate in a socio-constructivist framework, expecting students to be actively involved in building their knowledge base, while students expect clearly organised facts and explanations. Similar discrepancies are reported repeatedly in teaching and learning situations, also at school level (e.g., Kumaravadivelu, 1991) and at contact institutions (e.g., Venter & Van Heerden, 2001). Part of these expectations in an ESL context could include the expectations instructors have of tertiary level learners, the extent of knowledge and proficiency they ought to possess, on which all their instructional activities might be based. However, the language proficiency of students entering tertiary institutions is not always at the expected level, and the resulting discrepancy might mean that the student might not be able to follow the expected path of ESL learning.

Among the important issues to consider when reviewing support service systems, therefore, are: competent personnel, the extent of their responsibilities, support for faculty from administration, support from tutors/facilitators, and their relationship with and knowledge of the students and their abilities. The assumption is that if faculty are adequately supported by the institution, and duly rewarded, their functioning makes the overall support system function efficiently.

5.5.1.1.3 Materials

Distance learners' access and information needs, on which support ought to be based, include:

- record management;
- information on admission and registration;
- information on administrative procedures and regulations;
- bookshop services;
- library services;
- personal timetables;

- information on fees and financial support;
 - access to information technologies; and
 - career guidance.
- (Mays, 2000b).

The access and information needs listed by Mays (2000b) do not refer only to instructional materials, but to information at pre-registration level (e.g., admission and registration information), in-course (e.g., bookshop services), and towards the end of the course (e.g., career counselling). Instructional materials, however, are the most important in that, in most cases, they represent the bulk of the course.

According to Cochrane (2000), a student's initial perception of an entire course is strongly influenced by the first package of material he/she receives at the beginning of a course. Similar comments are made by the Heads of Divisions at TLS, 2002). It informs the student about content, structure and methods of assessment, and it communicates the professionalism of the course providers.

The services which distance learners expect of libraries include the ability to: search periodical indexes, abstracts, CD-ROMs, and data bases such as ERIC, do electronic book check-outs and renewals over the telephone (toll-free), deliver photocopies, the results of literature searches, government documents, and microfiche duplications, access answers to research questions, access tables of contents from professional journals, internally track and deliver all interlibrary loan services and establish an electronic feedback system (Niemi, 1998).

Several studies in the USA on library services for distance learners have concluded that support for off-campus education programmes has been minimally represented and has had a low priority for most library deans and directors (Kascus, 1994).

Henning (2000) states that it is necessary for institutions to involve library management when planning to develop or expand distance education; their exclusion can skew the results of a feasibility study on the implementation or expansion of distance education. The services provided by the library need to be based on the learner profile and the educational environment of the institution.

Wessels (2001) writes about the paradigm shift that has occurred in distance education provision, namely from being instruction-focused, where instruction comes from experts, to being learning-focused, where learners are actively involved in the construction of knowledge and experience. According to Wessels (2001:219), this paradigm shift has socio-political implications for study material and teaching methods, with an emphasis on relevancy, support of economic development and the civic culture, and education across the life-span. With regard to relevancy, Wessels (2001) mentions personal significance which is regarded as the central factor for developing understanding of learning content and for stimulating 'deep learning'. Thus, being actively engaged with the learning material, and discussing it with peers, play an important part in the learning process. The need for learning materials to support economic development might be explained as an aspect of higher education institutions' accountability to their supporting society. Facilitating learning over the course of a learner's life-span refers to material that will not lead to learning that will be redundant, but that will teach learners to learn and to think independently. However, Wessels (2001:221) argues that learning materials and methods cannot be evaluated from the perspective of changes in the international learning environment alone; they have to be responsive to the demands of the specific country's system for higher education. In South Africa, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), the Outcomes-Based Education system (OBE), and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) would need to be taken into account when designing materials for distance education.

Based on changing perspectives and theories of teaching and learning, the demands of a country-specific teaching and learning system, and a specific learner profile, Wessels (2001:223) proposes eight criteria to form the basis of a possible assessment instrument for distance materials. The criteria are as follows:

- Is the material accessible to learners? Does it take cognisance of the learner's level of school education or prior learning?
- Does the average learner understand the language in which the material has been written?
- Is the material designed according to the intended outcomes of the learning process?
- Is the learning material relevant to the specific context of the learners? Does it:

- make provision for learning experiences essential to successful performance in the various life roles of the learner?
 - enhance the learning of competencies required to perform the duties associated with a specific level in a profession, occupation or career?
 - encourage meaning-directed and application-directed learning instead of undirected or reproduction-directed learning?
 - connect the learners' own experiences and reality to create personal relevancy?
 - have relevancy to the specific age group of the majority of the learners?
 - have a problem-based approach, instead of discipline-based approach?
- Is the material responsive to societal interests and needs, and does it equip the learners with competencies to make a positive impact on the economic and civic well-being of society?
 - Does the material improve the learners' quality of learning by:
 - Equipping the learners with competencies to learn and think independently?
 - Shifting the control over learning, from the lecturer to the learner in accordance with the learner's growing learning abilities?
 - Equipping learners as knowledge workers who will be able to coherently construct, modify, configure and utilise trans-disciplinary knowledge in relation to a wide range of problem-solving applications?
 - Does the learning material show a sensitivity to race and gender issues in order to nurture a respect and tolerance for otherness?
 - Does the material make provision for assessment strategies (assignments, self-evaluation activities and examination) that will give learners the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding, and to thoughtfully apply their competencies in a variety of contexts?

Wessels (2001:223) suggests that academic departments that produce learning materials could use these criteria to assess the effectiveness of the materials they produce. Designing ESL learning materials along these lines would ensure the inclusion of authentic material, which facilitates language learning and acquisition. Students would gradually be able to take charge of their learning situation, and not necessarily engage in learning activities only through the provided learning material. As Cohen (1998:4) states, for language learning and acquisition to occur,

students have to spend more time engaged with the target language outside of only the study hours, which well-designed materials can encourage.

5.5.1.1.4 Delivery technology

The discussion on the delivery of distance education is dominated by the latest technological innovation which is said to improve efficiency and learning, and thus forms part of the learning support system. However, some researchers advocate caution in the implementation of technological delivery of distance education.

Technology, according to Grill (1999), can disappoint even in the healthiest of distance education settings; if not in generously supported settings, (i.e., without technical assistance and properly trained instructors it can prove almost worthless and more of a hindrance than a help). Grill (1999), and MacDonald and Caverley (2001), emphasise that the focus in distance education programmes should be on what needs to be learned and on the most suitable technology to accomplish this. The most suitable might not necessarily be "high-tech". Because technological advances are rapid, there might be a tendency to try and keep up with the latest technological innovations in delivery (and for general communicative purposes), which will not work for every distance learning programme, taking into consideration geography, access to technology and the ability of students.

Butcher (1998) claims that the lack of investment in integrated curriculum and course design and development processes, together with the unexpectedly high operation costs are some of the reasons for failed technological initiatives in South Africa. For Johnson (n.d.), the reason is to be found in the fact that South Africa is at a cross-roads between developed and developing countries, and in order to successfully incorporate new technologies in distance contexts, students have to be made familiar with them first.

Frieden (1999) states that there is a general awareness that technology is changing the nature of distance education, and that providing institutions tend to focus on making the correct technology choice. This, she feels, is a mistake, as it is the combination of a number of elements that promise survival for universities that translate into an effective support service system. She lists commitment at the top (the university's board, chancellor, amongst others), money for acquiring the suitable

people, equipment and training, as these are needs that keep multiplying, and infrastructure, particularly for providing support services. Research on delivery technology has largely focused on comparison studies, comparing aspects of learning and instructional activities in a traditional lecture setting with that of one delivered by some technological means. Interaction, feedback and student performance have been generously researched (e.g., Ritchie & Newby, 1989; MacDonald, 2001). These studies have mostly been conducted in developed countries where distance institution budgets are able to make provision for the availability and upgrading of technological delivery modes, and where students are in a position to make use of these services.

A large number of studies have focused on the use of specific technological tools as instruments of instruction in distance learning. Moore (1998) investigates learner-identified characteristics of quality learning experiences using a telewriter. Some students were positive about the experience and felt that the experience adds to their learning, while some were negative and felt short-changed. However, students in this study felt that the focus should be on learning and not on the technology, and that any problems with it should be dealt with outside of the course times. More than the tool, the students valued the provision of instructors who could adapt to their various learning styles, provide help even outside of normal business hours, help them to become independent learners, and provide feedback which goes beyond marking assignments. That which the students value has little to do with the technological tool being used, but rather the value of the instruction is considered to be vital.

Christensen et al. (2001) conducted a study on the role of perceived technology usefulness, technological familiarity and accessibility, distance learning reputation, constraints, learning preferences and demographic factors on the prospective receptivity towards distance learning. Firstly, perceived technology usefulness was found to be important. Secondly, interactivity was also a strong predictor of distance learning receptivity. Thirdly, distance learning reputation and the need for flexibility were positively associated with distance learning receptivity.

Khan et al. (2000) feel that delivery mechanisms are one of the most important components in the overall student support systems in distance education. They claim that one of the weaknesses is the fact that the delivery of courses has been separated from the teachers who designed and

developed them, and that the structures and channels for delivery have inherent constraints because of overriding concerns for uniformity and operational purposes. Thus, in the process, the nature of the programme, the profile of the learners, availability of resources and pedagogic requirements in specific areas of study are overlooked from the viewpoint of specificity and/or variability. A number of factors converge to determine delivery mechanisms including the available institutional framework, infrastructure, and the perceptions of the people developing the programme, and the needs of the learners.

Kizito (2001) states that at Unisa, which is the largest distance education institution in South Africa, efforts to use technology are continuously being sidelined because approximately 90% of the student body do not have access to computers and/or television. Without access and the capacity to make meaningful use of it, technology remains useless.

The feeling of instructors in distance education seems to be converging to the view that technology should be chosen to fit the learning, depending on the content, and on students' ability to access that technology. Financial considerations ought to be taken into account as well. This is supported by research based on students' perceptions, particularly in the better developed countries where there has been ample opportunity to conduct research in institutions using technological tools, and offering web-based programmes. What becomes clear from reviewing research done on technological delivery tools is that it is not so much the tool that counts from the students' view, but the quality of instruction they receive. Moore (1996:3) sums it up by stating that, "there is no relationship between the cost of a medium and its instructional effectiveness".

5.5.1.2 Instructional support

This section focuses on instructional design, interaction, tutorials, and language support.

5.5.1.2.1 Instructional design

Moore (1996:2) claims that the ratio of resources for design and course preparation compared to that of course implementation is higher in distance education than in conventional education, as distance education uses technology and technicians. He suggests that instructional design fails due to the impatience of management and instructors to implement programmes before the design of

course materials and instructional strategies has been properly planned. Moore (1996:3) stresses that there is a direct relationship between the instructional effectiveness of a programme and the time and money spent in its design.

Heydenrych (2000) states that traditionally at Unisa the course design and development was done solely by academics at their respective departments, which might have partly contributed to the inferior design of materials, little support for learners and a lack of interaction with and between learners. However, with the adoption of a team approach (in 1994) instructional designers, members of academic departments, editors, layout specialists and production staff were grouped in design teams, and other advanced universities were approached to investigate areas of improvement in design and delivery. This approach led to improvements in the quality of materials and study packages.

As one of the earlier processes to be conducted in distance education development, the role of instructional design in the provision of effective support services is significant. Course design, as discussed in chapter 2, takes into consideration aspects of content and delivery, which are part of providing support.

5.5.1.2.2 Interaction

The importance of interaction and its necessity for effective and successful L2 learning has been well-documented (e.g., Van Lier, 1988; Le Roux, 1990). Interaction affects feelings, attitudes, interpersonal relationships as well as motivation (Le Roux, 1990:427). Interaction is important because it entails the provision of input, and also because students get an opportunity to practice what they learn through output (i.e., their utterances), which is a necessary condition for learning to take place.

In distance learning settings the opportunities for ESL students to ideally get intensive language input are not as plentiful as with classroom learning; distance learners might be engaged in other languages in countless other situations (e.g., at home, at work) for a greater part of their days. Isolation has been documented as one of the more problematic aspects of distance education (Morgan & Tam, 1999).

Moore (1989:1) distinguishes between three different types of interaction, namely learner-content, learner-instructor, and learner-learner interaction. The interaction between the learner and the content is a prerequisite for learning to take place. Moore (1989:2) states that, "it is the process of intellectually interacting with the content that results in changes in the learner's understanding, the learner's perspective, or the cognitive structures of the learner's mind".

The second type of interaction takes place between the learner and the instructor, who is supposed to be an expert who either prepared the subject matter, or who is solely instructing. Moore (1989:2-3) lists the functions carried out by an instructor in interacting with students. They stimulate and maintain interest in the subject matter, motivate students to learn, and enhance self-direction and self-motivation. Instructors make presentations of information and demonstrations of skill. They try to organise students to apply what is being learned. They also organise evaluation to ascertain if there is any progress being made. Finally, they provide counselling, support and encouragement. Lack of interaction with instructors is frequently cited as the biggest disadvantage in distance learning (cf. Thompson, 1990).

The third type of interaction is that between learners. Interaction takes place between a group of learners, with the real-time presence of an instructor, or without it (Moore, 1989:4). Students have also shown an appreciation for real-time interaction with other people in their studies, particularly with their lecturers/tutors, a desire stronger in the rural areas (Pumell et al., 1996).

Fulford and Zhang (1993) conducted a study focusing on students' perceptions of learner-instructor and learner-learner interaction and whether the level of perceived interaction was a predictor of learner satisfaction with instruction. The study focused on personal interaction, which refers to the individual involvement of each participant, on overall interaction, which refers to the involvement of other learners, and to satisfaction, which refers to the perceived value and quality of instruction. They found that students valued overall participation more than they did personal participation, and that it was a more reliable predictor of satisfaction than the perceived levels of personal participation. What this means is that students value a high level of overall participation more than they do their own contribution and participation.

Feedback from tutors/lecturers is another facet of providing communication and interaction with students. The most common form of feedback is the marking of assignments and tests, and perhaps accompanying remarks from the marker. Carswell et al. (2000) explain that feedback is important because it motivates, instructs, and provides information on necessary remedial action. However, literature confirms that students require more in the form of feedback besides the prompt return of tests and assignments, whether the delivery medium is web-based, or only through the post, telephone or e-mail. They require comments that guide them, either to improve on their work, or even how to prepare for examinations. Comments are a personal form of interaction between lecturers and learners, and they could be encouraging, explanatory, or could elicit more information from the student.

5.5.1.2.3 Tutorials

Tutorials are the most pervasive form of learner support in distance education. The reason for this could be that tutorials provide an opportunity for interaction (e.g., discussions with other students and the instructor/tutor/facilitator). Tutorials give students the opportunity for both academic and social support. In this section the focus is on various types of tutorials, the advantages and disadvantages of the different types of tutorials, as well as general problems that can detract from the support value offered by tutorials.

Selikow (1998b:8) discusses telephone, letter and face-to-face tutoring, and lists the advantages and disadvantages of each. The advantages of telephone tutoring include: immediacy, feedback is quick and problems are resolved immediately, time and money are not wasted on travelling, and students hear a real voice of a real person. The disadvantages include: the expenses of using telephone services, asking questions over the phone is difficult, access to tutors is not guaranteed, and this is compounded by the fact that tutors are only available during working hours when students are likely to be at work, people tend to be impatient over the phone, lack of access to phones, particularly in rural areas, and the lack of actual contact with the tutor. The advantages of letter tutoring include: there is a permanent record of the discussion, and it is cheaper. The disadvantages include: a time delay, students might have difficulties expressing the exact nature of their problems in writing, an unreliable postal service, and not knowing if a letter has been

answered. The advantages of face-to-face tutoring include: raising additional questions to the response of an initial inquiry, covering more ground, and remembering is easier for others when explanations are done in person. The disadvantages include: travelling expenses, making and waiting for appointments; and inconvenient consultation times.

Apart from the advantages and disadvantages associated with tutorial attendance, which provides some reasons as to why students might not use these services maximally, a study by Bertram (2000) gives further insight into students' absence from tutorials. Bertram (2000) claims that the purpose of the tutorials used in her study was to provide opportunities to clarify questions students might have after working through the self-instructional materials at home, and to apply and articulate their learning in a group learning context. The reasons students gave for staying away from tutorials are categorised as personal, logistical and academic. Personal reasons include attending funerals, work-related functions, household duties, and one student reported a lack of motivation, being traumatised and losing self-esteem due to failing the exams. Logistical reasons include not being informed about the sessions, travelling great distances to get to tutorial centres, and transport problems. Academic reasons include dissatisfaction with the tutorial sessions, for example, too slow, and does not offer more than what instructional materials offer. Bertram (2000) claims that a perception that emerged was that students believed that if they attended tutorial sessions they ought to pass the examinations.

Some of the reasons provided by the students provide insight into concerns that go beyond tutorial attendance. For example, the student that reported lack of motivation, trauma and low self-esteem as a result of failing exams is not only going to stay away from tutorials, but is an at risk student who is a candidate for dropping out. Such a student needs counselling, both academic and emotional/relational. The aim of supporting students is to help them before they become totally demotivated and quit their studies.

Some of the problems recorded with tutors and tutorials in distance education include: tutors taking too long to mark and comment on assignments, marking without giving comments or with discouraging remarks, and marks totalled incorrectly (Muro et al., 1988). While some problems might appear insignificant in comparison with the others, for example, the incorrect tallying of

marks, it impacts on students' perceptions of the overall functioning of the institution. At a distance, the length of time that goes into registering complaints and receiving responses magnifies the gravity of problems as they cannot be sorted out immediately, and perhaps not to the satisfaction of the student.

Fung and Carr (2000), reporting on a research project concerned with issues related to face-to-face tutorials in the Open University of Hong Kong's distance education system list, amongst other things, students' expectations of the benefits they will gain, their reasons for attending, the approaches they prefer, and their overall satisfaction with what tutors provide during the tutorials. This shows that providing opportunities for tutorials is not sufficient; more important are the nature and quality of service provided in the tutorials. Achievement in academic study, understanding the course better, gaining more knowledge than is required for the course, improvement in performance, improvements in study skills, gaining support and encouragement from tutors and other students have all been cited as some of the benefits of attending tutorials.

5.5.1.2.4 Language support

Diagnostic testing before the commencement of a distance course should give an indication of the level of proficiency of students' language skills, and should indicate the kind of support they need. This is even more important in the South African context as students' ESL proficiency is often inadequate to enable them to engage with instructional materials without some assistance (Gordon, 2001; Dreyer, 2002).

Gordon (2001:12), reporting on a rural-based distance education project in South Africa, found that language barriers constrain teaching and learning during contact sessions. Many of the rural communities are largely monolingual, and thus not able to express themselves competently in class and in tutorials, which are provided as a form of support. Thus, not being able to take part in the tutorials defeats the purpose. Command of writing skills was also found to be poor, as well as reading learning materials independently (Dreyer, 2002). Instead, students relied on tutors to provide explanations which had to be done through the learners' 1st language, and not English. Gordon (2001:12) states that students' participation levels in the tutorials grew only when tutors provided explanations in the 1st language.

Access to support units that deal with language skills, particularly writing, is available in some institutions, though it is often residential students who have easier access to these services. In some instances, students have requested this type of service (cf. Gordon, 2001).

5.5.2. Relational support

Relational support need not only come from the people directly involved in instructional activities with students, but from the institution as a whole. This type of support can be provided in several ways, both structured and informal. Examples include counselling services, for academic and non-academic problems, motivation and encouragement (cf. Lowe, 1997).

Advisory services and counselling are becoming regular features in distance learning literature on support services, and they are not referring exclusively to academic-related matters. Often students may fail to fully understand the commitment required of them, or they might find that the course does not meet their needs (Hartley, 2001). According to Selikow (1998a), counselling can be deemed necessary based on the recognition that a number of distance learners experience problems of a non-academic nature which, inevitably, impact on their academic life. Family, work commitments, low self-confidence resulting from years of not studying, or from coming from a different learning environment are only some of the problems they experience.

Selikow (1998a), reporting on support services offered to SAIDE students registered for the Regional Access Programme (RAP), describes the pre-course, in-course and post-course counselling services which are available for this programme. Pre-course counselling entails assessing and interviewing students to advise them if they are suitable candidates for the course, and if they stand a fair chance of successful completion. Khan et al. (2000) also advocate pre-admission counselling particularly when distance learning programmes are being advertised or launched. In-course counselling includes taking into account how non-academic factors might affect performance, and deciding whether students ought to be given a second chance for failed exams. Post-course counselling includes, after the writing of exams, letting students know if they have the potential for further studies, recommendations about subject choices, and institutions of learning. The head of the programme counsels students that have failed, particularly those who collect their

results in person. Therefore, at any stage of their learning experience, students are in constant contact with somebody who can advise them on a number of aspects related to their learning.

Lecturers/facilitators/tutors rarely have formal training in counselling, nor are they in a position to provide any form of counselling because they do not see their students on a regular daily basis, and might not easily pick up on crucial problems. However, it can help if they are aware that students might face problems of a non-academic nature and, therefore, be flexible in their dealings with them. While they might not necessarily provide specialised counselling, keeping contact by listening and talking to the students might offer some support and encouragement.

Venter and Van Heerden (2001), in their investigation of students' and lecturers' expectations of each other, found that students expected what can be termed relational support from their lecturers. They expect to be seen as human beings and adults who have their own problems in specific environments/contexts. These are some of their responses:

- "... the lecturer should be the humane connection for students to feel that they belong to and are important."
- "I expect our lecturers to be fair when marking our assignments, mark them even if they receive them after the due date because there are problems that we cannot run away from as adults."

Students in Venter and Van Heerden's (2001) study also reported that they expected their lecturers to motivate them and to uplift their morale, to be friendly, and they want to know that they can trust their lecturers to be fair and just in their treatment of them.

Relational support makes students feel that they are part of the institution, and particularly where their programmes are offered by an institution that is largely residential. They should not be made to feel that they are receiving services that are not equal to those received by residential students. This perception, it is believed, contributes to students' deciding whether to continue with a programme, to drop-out, or to register with another institution.

5.6 Conclusion

There are various forces that are simultaneously exerting influences on higher education. In South African higher education, traditional and distance, the factors that can be listed in this respect include: policy issues at government and institutional levels, practical issues such as the implementation of programmes, and dealing with the success of programmes, of which student failure and success are integral factors.

According to SAIDE (1998), support ought to be about attitude as much as it is about structure. This point is made because distance education students tend to cling to received knowledge, rather than building their own knowledge; their confidence needs to be built so that they are in a position to challenge received knowledge. The challenge, therefore, is to resolve the dilemma between providing enough support to motivate, encourage and help students, though not such that they come to rely solely on what they are provided with (SAIDE, 1998).

The problem of attrition in distance education cannot be solved by addressing institutional responsibilities only, but the solution to the problem ought to be initiated by the institution. The institution ought to have an articulate policy and philosophy concerning distance education in general, and support services in particular.