

CHAPTER 6

METHOD OF RESEARCH

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the methodology employed in this study is discussed under the following headings:

- the design used in this study;
- the characteristics of the participants;
- the instruments used in this study;
- the collection of data and its administration; and
- the analysis techniques used in this study.

6.2 Design

A combination of a qualitative and quantitative research design was used in this study. A qualitative research methodology focuses on exploring, describing, and illuminating issues, and less on quantifying issues. The case study approach was chosen in order to collect detailed data (i.e., detailed profiles and comments) on ESL students enrolled for English modules within the BA (with Law subjects) programme.

6.3 Participants

The subjects of the case study comprised 8 adult ESL students enrolled in the BA (with Law subjects) programme with TLS at PU for CHE. Participants in all three levels of the academic English courses participated in the study (i.e., ENGL111, n=3; ENF211, n=3; and for ENF311, n=2). The students were categorised into red (unsuccessful/at risk) and green (successful) profiles on the basis of their failure (1-45%) or success (65% and above) in completing the English modules in their first semester of study. The participants constituted the entire population of learners studying English within the B.A. (with Law subjects) programme.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the Heads of Divisions at TLS (n=3), namely the Study Materials and Production co-ordinator, the Administrative co-ordinator, and the Client

Relationship manager. The division heads have extensive experience and have been working at TLS since 1994.

6.4 Instrumentation

For the quantitative part of the study three pencil-and-paper instruments were used, and for the qualitative part of the study, semi-structured interviews were carried out with students and with the heads of divisions at TLS.

6.4.1 Pencil and paper tests

Three paper-and-pencil instruments were used:

- The Style Analysis Survey (SAS), to determine the students' general approach to learning (i.e., it gives an indication of overall learning style preference) (Cronbach alpha=.76; content and concurrent validity);
- The Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ), to assess the students' motivational orientations and their use of different learning strategies for university courses;
- The Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI), to assess student thought processes and behaviours that impact on their studying and learning. There are ten scales in the LASSI, five dealing with motivation and self-management and five with cognitive strategies (Cronbach alpha=0.68-0.86 and test-retest correlation coefficients between 0.72 and 0.85).

Biographical data (i.e., age, gender, and geographical location) were obtained from the academic administration.

6.4.2 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were carried out telephonically and by e-mail with students, and face-to-face with TLS personnel.

6.4.2.1 Telephonic and e-mail interviews

Students participated in telephonic and e-mail interviews. The purpose of the interviews was twofold, namely firstly to ask participants to indicate the type of support they currently received from TLS as well as the support they thought they needed in order to complete their English studies

successfully, and secondly, to indicate what contextual factors affected their ESL learning as well as the extent of the influence (i.e., did the factor significantly impact on their learning or not). They were also asked to indicate their satisfaction with existing support services.

6.4.2.2 Interviews with TLS personnel

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the heads of divisions within TLS at the Potchefstroom University. This interview format contains characteristics of both structured and unstructured interviews, where the former is 'focused', and the latter 'exploratory'. Guba and Lincoln (1981:155-156) explain the major differences between the two: In a structured interview, the problem is defined by the researcher before the interview, the questions formulated ahead of time, and the respondent is expected to answer in terms of the interviewer's framework and definition of the problem. With an unstructured interview, the format is non-standardised, and the interviewer is not looking for normative responses, but is concerned with an individual viewpoint. An interview guide was used, which had a list of concerns and points that had to be addressed and which included the following:

- Policy
- Records
- Personnel
- Learning materials
- Support services

These points were used as a guide. The exploratory part of the interview was left to unfold on its own.

The aim of obtaining information about the support system provided by each of the divisions within TLS. The participants were also asked to comment on support aspects unique to their divisions. They were also asked if they wanted to comment on any strengths and weaknesses in each of their divisions, specifically as it relates to support.

6.5 Data collection procedure

The collection of data differed for the various instruments used in the case study and also for the interviews.

6.5.1 Pencil and paper surveys

The students completed the questionnaires (SAS, MSLQ, LASSI) in a scheduled facilitation session. Students were given a 10 minute break between each questionnaire administration. The researcher read the instructions pertaining to each questionnaire to the students before they began answering the questionnaires.

6.5.2 Interviews with students

Students were telephoned and e-mailed using a person details list obtained from TLS. Contact was made by telephone first. The researcher explained the purpose of the interview and asked each student whether he/she would be willing to participate in the study and answer a number of questions related to his/her studying. The e-mail interview was used as a follow-up to verify the correctness of responses as well as to collect any additional information, and also to provide students with the opportunity to comment on factors affecting their English studies and the support they needed/wanted from TLS.

6.5.3 Interviews with TLS personnel

An interview with the TLS division heads was conducted by the researcher accompanied by the study promoter.

Lincoln and Guba (1985:270-271) list steps that are followed in interview situations, namely, deciding on whom to interview, preparing for the interview, initial moves, pacing the interview and keeping it productive, and terminating the interview and gaining closure. The decision to interview division heads at TLS was based on the fact that they could provide an holistic overview of the structures and procedures followed within their divisions. Apart from going over the points that needed to be addressed in the interviews, preparations included scheduling the time and days for the interviews. The initial moves in the interview consisted mainly of informing the interviewees about the purpose of the study, the concerns it attempts to address, the importance of their input,

and providing an overview of the type of issues on which information was needed. While guiding them in a general manner, this approach allowed them to decide how to respond to the inquiry, and where to begin. Once the interviewees had begun to respond, it was easier to pace the interview, and to ask specific questions arising from their responses or to elicit more information. The interviews ended with an overview, and the assurance that should it prove necessary the interviewers were welcome to return to collect more information.

The data collected during the interviews were recorded by handwritten notes taken during the interviews. It is acknowledged that there are disadvantages in this type of recording, namely that not everything might be recorded, that rapid handwriting is often later undecipherable, and that the respondent might slow the tempo to allow for everything to be transcribed, and might lose the train of thought in the process (cf. Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, these disadvantages were addressed in that two people were taking down notes. The notes were later compared in order to ensure that the data collected corresponded and to add information which might have been omitted in the writing process. The data were written down immediately after the interview to eliminate the element of forgetting. Lincoln and Guba (1985:272) also state that the advantages of handwritten notes are impressive: the interviewer is forced to attend carefully to what is being said, questions or comments can be interposed discreetly, important items to be revisited can be marked, and the notes make summarising at the end of the interview conveniently easy.

6.6 Analysis

The quantitative data were analysed by means of descriptive statistics (e.g., means and percentages) and the qualitative data by means of qualitative narrative reporting (e.g., description of responses by interviewees).

6.7 Conclusion

The methodology of a study is important because many studies do not succeed as a result of methodological failure (cf. Bachman, 1990). The methodological overview provided in this chapter was aimed at providing an accurate description of the various steps undertaken in the research study in order to ensure future replicability, as well as facilitate the discussion of the results in chapter 7.

CHAPTER 7

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the analysis and discussion of the data. The main focus of the analysis and discussion is to address the following questions put forward in chapter 1:

- What factors can affect the failure/drop-out or success of ESL learners studying via TLS?
- What support services do ESL learners indicate they would like/need?
- What support services does the Potchefstroom University currently offer to ESL students studying via TLS?

The discussion of the responses to these questions is presented under the following headings:

- Learner profiles
- Support services required by ESL learners
- Support services currently offered by TLS.

7.2 Learner profiles

The purpose of profiling ESL distance learners was to get an overview of the most important variables that could affect the attrition/dropout or success of these learners. Galusha (1997:2/9) states that since distance education is learner-centred, knowing the characteristics and demographics of the learners helps in understanding the potential barriers to learning. The profile is divided into two sections, namely personal factors and contextual factors (cf. Chapter 4). The personal factors are reported in a quantitative manner, while the contextual factors are reported qualitatively. Where appropriate the most significant similarities and/or differences in the profiles of the at risk and successful ESL learners at the different levels (i.e., ENGL111, ENF211 and ENF311) are highlighted and discussed. The purpose of the comparison is to indicate that ESL learners' profiles are not generic and that a plethora of variables impact on ESL learning at a distance. The purpose is, therefore, not to differentiate between "good" and "weak", but to emphasise the uniqueness of individual learners.

7.2.1 Personal variables

This category consists of those factors students bring to the educational process. These personal factors are either fixed or slowly changing throughout the duration of a student's involvement with a distance education programme or course and, as such, exert a relatively constant influence on the student's chances of success.

7.2.1.1 Demographic variables

The results of the demographic variables are presented in Table 4. The demographic variables are similar for all ESL learners across the three levels.

Table 4: Demographic variables

Red profile (At risk students)	Green profile (Successful students)
Age 25-35	Age 25-35
Location (Distance from campus) - >180km	Location (Distance from campus) >60km
No prior experience with distance learning	Prior experience via UNISA
Grade 8-10 language proficiency	Grade 11-12 language proficiency

Although the methods of reporting student ages vary from study to study, researchers agree that distance education students are, on average, older than typical undergraduate students. For example, a study of students enrolled in telecourses at four education institutions in the USA reported a median age of 36 (Hezel & Dirr, 1991). Dille and Mezack (1991) found that the average age of students enrolled in telecourses at a southwest (USA) community college was 27. The average age of students enrolled in the English courses in this study ranged between 25 and 35 (cf. Table 3). The 25-35 age group seems to be the largest in most distance courses.

Traditionally, distance education has attracted students whose geographic distance from a higher education institution discouraged or prevented enrolment in on-campus classes. In this study 80% of the students lived over 180 kilometers from campus, the majority of these students falling into the "Red profile". However, in many institutions the "typical" distance learner is no longer place-bound. Increasingly, students in close geographical proximity to traditional educational institutions are

choosing distance study not because it is the only alternative, but rather because it is the preferred alternative.

The results also indicated that four of the five at risk students had had no prior experience with distance learning. The requirements of self-study, self-regulatedness and proper time management might have been a problem for these students.

In addition, the results indicated that the English language proficiency of the at risk students was only equal to that of Grade 8 to Grade 10 learners. A search on the entrance requirements of various distance institutions, particularly in the United Kingdom and in the United States of America, shows that English language proficiency is paramount to students' acceptance into an institution. Students are required to undergo language proficiency tests prior to acceptance. Since students at TLS are accepted without knowing whether their language proficiency will allow them to interact with the material satisfactorily, and since it is known that school-leaving students are not necessarily sufficiently proficient in ESL, provision should be made to accommodate enrolled students in the way of language support services.

Research attempting to measure the relationship of particular demographic characteristics to student success as measured by levels of persistence and/or achievement has often resulted in contradictory conclusions. Some studies have reported no correlation between these outcomes and specific demographic variables such as gender (e.g., Dille & Mezack, 1991), or ethnic background (Dille & Mezack, 1991). It is possible that certain demographic variables, perhaps not in and of themselves, but rather as the markers of an accompanying set of generalised characteristics, are related to student success.

7.2.1.2 Affective variables

According to Brown (1994:135), affect refers to emotion or feeling. The affective domain is the emotional side of human behaviour, and it may be juxtaposed to the cognitive side. The development of affective states or feelings involves a variety of personality factors, feelings both about ourselves and about others with whom we come into contact. The results of the affective variables are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Affective variables

Variables	RED (ENGL111) (n=2)	GREEN (ENGL111) (n=2)	RED (ENF211) (n=1)	GREEN (ENF211) (n=1)	RED (ENF311) (n=1)	GREEN (ENF311) (n=1)
Internal locus of control	16	16	20	21	16	20
External locus of control	18	10	23	14	19	13
Anxiety	28	19	27	19	27	17

Locus of control (a dimension of attribution theory) provides a measure of a student's expectations about whether the results of actions are (a) internal and under the student's control or (b) external and beyond the student's control (Rotter, 1989). The results indicated that the at risk students had a stronger propensity towards an external locus of control while the successful students had an internal locus of control (cf. Table 4). Learners with an internal locus of control, defined as one who holds the belief that the outcome of a situation is contingent on his or her own behaviour, appear to have higher rates of completion (Dille & Mezack, 1991). In a study conducted by Parker (1999), locus of control as a single, independent variable was able to predict dropout with an accuracy of 80 percent using discriminant analysis. This finding corresponds to research conducted by Rotter (1989) that found locus of control to have a direct bearing on students' completion of coursework. Alternatively, external locus of control and a related construct, external attribution, have been reported to characterise at risk distance students (cf. Kember et al., 1991).

The results indicated that the at risk students were far more anxious than the successful students. In the first-year 'red' profiles the students' level of anxiety was above the norm set for first-year students in South Africa, namely $x=26$. Horwitz et al. (1986) claim that listening and speaking as well as impromptu speaking, are the main sources of anxiety. While the relationship between anxiety and L2/FL language proficiency is unclear, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) suggest that as

proficiency increases, anxiety decreases. Thus, it might be that the low language proficiency of the students (cf. section 7.2.1.1) is one of the major causes of their high levels of anxiety.

7.2.1.3 Learning styles

The data on the students' learning styles are presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Learning styles

Variables	RED (ENGL111) (n=2)	GREEN (ENGL111) (n=2)	RED (ENF211) (n=1)	GREEN (ENF211) (n=1)	RED (ENF311) (n=1)	GREEN (ENF311) (n=1)
Visual	20	21	25	23	19	21
Auditory	10	18	17	20	16	20
Hands-on	13	9	16	10	14	17
Intuitive	8	19	14	24	13	23
Concrete-sequential	23	21	18	21	20	20
Closure-oriented	25	23	24	17	20	18
Open	10	21	7	20	14	23
Global	14	15	12	19	16	20
Analytic	21	14	20	10	19	16

An analysis of the learning styles indicated that both the at risk and the successful students had a decided visual modality strength. The at risk students also seemed to be slightly more hands-on than the successful students. The at risk students were also more concrete-sequential, closure-oriented, and analytic. These results indicated that these students were concerned with concrete facts, which they preferred to be presented in a step-by-step organised fashion. They have a strong need for clarity and structure, and they want everything spelt out carefully and systematically. The successful students, on the other hand, were slightly more intuitive, open, and global. These students like to take daring intellectual leaps and are comfortable if all information is not systematic. It is important to note, however, that the mean score for the successful students on the above

mentioned styles were close together, indicating that successful students are more likely to 'style flex'.

According to Wynd and Bozman (1996:232), a prerequisite to higher education institutions becoming more productive is the identification of how students learn. Research clearly indicates that learning style is an important factor in the success of distance learners (cf. Liu & Ginther, 1999; Grasha & Yangarber-Hicks, 2000). Therefore, the instructional adaptation of distance education programmes/courses to accommodate students' learning styles appear even more important than that in traditional classroom instruction.

7.2.1.4 Metacognitive variables

With regard to the metacognitive variables (specifically self-regulation), the mean scores of the at risk students were all lower than those of the successful students (cf. Table 7).

Table 7: Self-regulatory abilities

Variables	RED (ENGL111) (n=2)	GREEN (ENGL111) (n=2)	RED (ENF211) (n=1)	GREEN (ENF211) (n=1)	RED (ENF311) (n=1)	GREEN (ENF311) (n=1)
Goal setting	21	27	15	29	18	23
Strategic planning	26	30	25	38	20	25
Self-recording	16	26	21	32	21	26
Self-evaluation	28	30	24	36	16	20
Self-reaction	16	16	15	19	18	30

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. Self-regulated learning implies a high level of cognitive engagement, making connections with existing knowledge, organising a specific approach to a learning task, and continuously monitoring progress. In general, self-regulated learners identify a goal to accomplish, and control their behaviour, motivation, affect, and cognition, in order to attain that goal (Pintrich, 1995). Bandura (1997:175) states that: "A high sense of self-regulatory efficacy contributes to mastery of academic subject matter by building a sense of cognitive efficacy and raising academic aspiration in those domains".

7.2.1.5 Learning strategies

The data on the students' learning strategies are presented in Table 8.

Table 8: Learning strategies

Variables	RED (ENGL111) (n=2)	GREEN (ENGL111) (n=2)	RED (ENF211) (n=1)	GREEN (ENF211) (n=1)	RED (ENF311) (n=1)	GREEN (ENF311) (n=1)
Cognitive	84	94	87	99	84	90
Metacognitive	50	65	58	63	54	65
Resource management	89	88	87	85	87	86

In terms of cognitive and metacognitive learning strategy use the at risk students' mean scores were also lower than those of the successful students. Using cognitive learning strategies involves the intentional manipulation of information by the learner through processes such as repetition, elaboration, or reorganisation of the material in such a way that the new information can be stored in the learner's associative network and accessed for retrieval. These strategies, therefore, directly involve the subject matter. Metacognitive strategies help learners exercise "executive control" through planning, arranging, focusing and evaluating their own learning (Weinstein et al., 2000).

Resource management strategies include time management and concentration strategies. The results indicated that there was not a difference between the at risk and successful students on this particular set of strategies. Research has clearly indicated that knowing about and using language learning strategies is a major factor for discriminating between low achieving students and those who experience success (Dreyer, 1992; Alexander & Murphy, 1998).

These results seem to indicate that the at risk students are not sufficiently equipped to handle the demands being placed upon them by the telematic delivery system. Now, possibly for the first time in their life, they must take the initiative for their own learning, know how to do their own learning organisation, plan their own schedule, pace themselves, and hold themselves accountable for whether or not an assignment is done today or tomorrow. Previously, all of these learning tasks had been the responsibility of the lecturer or teacher, and all that the student had to do was show up and follow directions. All of a sudden, the traits of dependency that served this student so well in a traditional setting (also in school), now become a major inhibitor to student progress in a telematic learning environment. Students in this situation are in desperate need of institutional intervention in order to avoid being another statistic.

7.2.2 Contextual factors

Knox's (1977) developmental stage orientation of adult life stresses the importance of understanding an individual's contextual situation. One helpful way in which some psychological researchers and practitioners have made sense of the various forms of influence exerted by different aspects of the environment is by applying what has come to be known as an ecological perspective (Williams & Burden, 1997). In order to understand properly any person's development, Bronfenbrenner (1979) argues that we need to take into account their ecology, i.e. the environmental systems surrounding them.

Tables 9-11 present a summarised version of the narrative comments made by the students in terms of factors related to the micro-, meso- and macrosystems that affected their English studies negatively.

Table 9: Contextual factors – Microsystem

Red profile (At risk students)	Green profile (Successful students)
Family illness	Families neglected
Family disruption (mother studying)	
Inadequate studying facilities at home	

Table 10: Contextual factors – Macrosystem

Red profile (At risk students)	Green profile (Successful students)
Too much content	Lack of sufficient interaction with lecturers/facilitators & fellow students (critical discussion)
Registration chaos	Constructive feedback required
Received materials late	
Lack of sufficient contact with lecturers	

Table 11: Contextual factors – Mesosystem

Red profile (At risk students)	Green profile (Successful students)
Workload	Work responsibilities
Frequently away on work-related activities	
Community responsibilities (e.g., church, sport)	

The at risk students rated the effect that factors within the micro-, meso- and macrosystems had on their learning higher than the successful students; perhaps indicating their inability to reconcile the demands of everyday life with the demands of telematic learning. Additional comments made by the learners in terms of the support they required in order to complete their English studies successfully are discussed in the next section.

What is of particular significance is to note that ecological approaches emphasise the importance of taking into account the total environment of the learner if we are to explain adequately how and why people learn. They also emphasise the dynamic, interactive nature of all the variables involved and argue strongly against taking a simple linear view of cause and effect. Thus, when something goes wrong within the system, it should not be seen as the fault of any individual, but a lack of balance in the system.

The set of factors (personal and contextual) that differentiated between the red and green profiles in this case study may not necessarily apply to the population as a whole, other populations of ESL distance learning students and other institutions. The framework proposed in chapter 4 would lead one to expect that the profiles will vary according to personal and contextual factors. This framework becomes most useful if students, on entry, can be 'risk stratified', that is, if students can be determined as 'at risk' of failure or predisposed toward success. In future, the framework can also be used to investigate the interaction between the personal factors (e.g., learning styles and learning strategies and/or self-regulation), the interaction between contextual factors, as well as the interaction between the personal factors and the contextual factors. This may give a more comprehensive view of failure or success in telematic learning, and it may also allow the university to adapt and improve its academic and service infrastructure to reflect the heterogeneous and changing needs of students studying via a telematic delivery system.

7.3 Support services required by ESL learners

This section presents the findings from the telephonic and e-mail interviews, which were conducted in order to provide answers to the question "What support services do ESL learners indicate they would like/need?" which was posed in chapter 1. Students' concerns also reflected personal and contextual matters as discussed in chapter 4. The responses of the students have been grouped into academic and relational categories.

7.3.1 Academic support

This section focuses on: administrative tasks, instructors/lecturers, materials, delivery technology, instructional design, interaction, and language support.

▪ **Administrative tasks**

The majority of the students' comments related to the ineffective administrative services at TLS. One student complained that entry requirements that applied to him were not consistent with those applied to some other students. For example, he did not receive credit for some modules whereas other students did receive credit. This student obviously had problems with the enforcement of regulations and policies in the institution. This problem was compounded by the late delivery of materials which consequently also delayed the submission of assignments. This student stated that leaving the institution was a possibility. Bothel (2001:6/7) writes that it is challenging for institutions to implement distance learning in a complete and uniform manner, as administrators have to bring together institutional populations with diverse academic visions. This is certainly true of policy matters that affect students, as this student's response indicates.

Another student stated that she had to deal with four different people during the registration process and that it was very time consuming and tedious.

Additional aspects mentioned by the students included repeated phone calls to check on the status of the registration process, the correct registration for specific modules, and their student cards.

The students mentioned that they wanted a 24 hour one-stop one-person administrative call centre where they could complete all administrative aspects related to the registration process and enrolling with one call and only to one person. The red-tape of the TLS system was negatively experienced (i.e., the administrative staff telling the students that they will get back to them because they still had to check the status of their application).

▪ **Instructors/lecturers**

The biggest problem appears to be the availability of lecturers/instructors. However, there was a discernible difference in the responses of first, second and third year students.

First year students placed greater emphasis on the non-availability of lecturers. Students complained of not being able to get hold of a lecturer even after leaving messages. They also mentioned that the lecturers were not available during the scheduled times indicated in their

booklets. First year students wanted to have contact with the lecturers directly. They mentioned that they did not want to talk to the advisors, because their questions related specifically to the English content.

Second year students, who generally reported being able to study on their own, most of the time, did not complain about lecturer availability. The second year students wanted more interaction (face-to-face) with the lecturers in order to discuss issues. They mentioned that discussing problem issues via phone was expensive and they were very often misinterpreted. One student commented on the unprofessional conduct of some lecturers. He felt that he did not get the same attention and respect a full time on-campus student would get.

Third year students claimed to be able to study on their own, specifically those students who had either studied via distance mode before, or had enrolled for tertiary studies before. These students only required exam guidelines, specifically the at risk students.

▪ **Materials**

Students' comments with regard to materials were largely focused on the incorrect information in the study guides and assignment booklets.

One student complained about the spelling mistakes in the study guide and the lack of user-friendliness. Professionalism and quality of the study materials come into question, which might further reinforce the belief that distance learning is the step-sister of on-campus learning.

The first year students stated that the materials (i.e., the study guides) were difficult to read. They were not exactly sure what was expected of them. The students also commented on the lack of consistency in page references in the study guides.

The second and third year students stated that they needed more contact with the lecturers, because they found the information in the study guides too complex to master on their own.

A concern expressed by students was that each study guide was written by an individual lecturer, who was likely to have stringent demands regarding the time spent on each study module. Students who are registered for a number of courses find it difficult to cope with the amount of work that they have to do in a week or a month; the time demands placed on them are unco-ordinated, with the result that they have too much content to contend with.

▪ **Delivery technology**

The first year students commented on the usefulness of the audio- and videotapes. The audiotapes gave them the opportunity to hear the pronunciation of native speakers. The information contained on the videotapes added value to their study.

The second and third year students commented on the lack of video tapes in their English courses. They felt that crucial information with regard to unlocking essential aspects in their literature texts could be explained on video.

▪ **Instructional design**

All the students commented on the lack of user-friendliness of the design of the study guides. They stated that the format was tedious and superficial, for example, the notational hours needed to complete study units was unrealistic and was merely included "for the show". They also stated that they would like certain content to be graphically represented in order to make the content more accessible.

The students also stated that there was very little variety in terms of the types of questions and activities given.

All students stated that they would have liked clear study guidelines. One student commented: "The content is discussed very well, but I've got no idea what and how to approach the learning of this section".

Another problem is the assumption that all students have access to study groups and facilitators, therefore some of the problems in their study guides are meant to be discussed with their

facilitators and study groups. The writing of study guides has to follow a certain format, allowing for interaction, which is primarily through group meetings, but practically it is not always the case that students attend these sessions. There are various reasons for this, amongst which is that if there are not enough students to constitute a group in a certain area, TLS will not make that facility available for students. The planning and designing of study materials, therefore, posed practical problems that were not foreseen, particularly because of the failure to take into account mediating factors (e.g., the number of students enrolled, and whether study groups would be viable).

Dwyer (1990:221) is of the opinion that in the design, development and delivery of instructional materials there needs to be an emphasis on the same issues that concern the designers of conventional instruction, namely the psychological mechanisms for perceiving, assimilating, interpreting, storing and retrieving information. Galusha (1997:4/9) puts it more succinctly when she writes that careful consideration must be given to the special needs of students undertaking distance education for the first time, in which case the design of study materials is most important. Students who enrol with little or no experience of distance study are at risk of dropping out if they do not develop study survival skills as rapidly as possible (Wood, 1996).

▪ Interaction

The first year students indicated that they would like to have more interaction with their fellow students. They would have liked to have study groups where they can share ideas with their peers and to have a sounding board for their ideas. Their feelings with regard to interaction with lecturers were limited to "learning support" (i.e., how does she want me to study this section?).

The second and third year students wanted more interaction with the lecturers so that they could discuss issues, but also so that the lecturers could help them unlock the complex content, specifically the literature. These students placed less emphasis on interaction with their peers in terms of content discussion.

All students, especially the at risk students, wanted more interaction with their peers so that "I can find out if they are also having trouble with the content and how to do the assignments". The

successful students, on the other hand, preferred to have more contact sessions with the lecturers where controversial issues can be discussed.

▪ **Language support**

The majority of the at risk students indicated that they would like support with regard to writing assignments and also their grammar use. One student stated: "I don't know how to write an academic essay and we don't get any guidelines. The lecturers assume we learnt it at school". Another student stated: "I haven't studied for over 15 years, and I'm not sure how to read the literature critically or to write an academic assignment". General reading and writing skill support seems to be essential for these students.

7.3.2 Relational support

Relational support refers to the establishment of an amiable personal relationship with the student where students would be able to report problems, both personal and academic, that are interfering with their studies, with the knowledge that they will be appropriately, and even sympathetically received.

The at risk students indicated that they wanted someone who can listen to their "problem" and who will understand their situations. These students also wanted guidance in terms of crisis management. One student stated:

"I had an operation and fell behind with my assignments, and I can't catch up, but nobody cares".

Another student stated:

"My employer sends me on numerous courses and then I have to work weekends, neglecting my family as a result".

These students also indicated that they would have liked support in terms of someone telling them what distance study actually entailed.

7.4 Support services currently offered by TLS

The data regarding the administration and provision of support services was obtained through semi-structured interviews carried out with division heads at TLS, the Study Materials and Production Co-ordinator, and the Administrative Co-ordinator. The interviews were conducted in order to obtain answers to the question: "What support services does the Potchefstroom University currently offer to ESL students studying via TLS?" which was posed in chapter 1. Presently, TLS provides all support services, and tries to be the central point in all student dealings, a "one-stop shop" which does all the running around for students, instead of the students trying to get in touch with various people all over the campus themselves. Support services pertaining to academic and relational services were also discussed. The content of the interviews is presented in the following discussion.

7.4.1 Administration

This section discusses the data obtained from the interviews with TLS personnel under the headings pre-registration, registration, and post-registration.

7.4.1.1 Pre-registration

The most prominent activity before student enrolment is the marketing of the courses offered by TLS. Students enquire about specific courses or programmes on offer, about which they read or heard, which they do mostly via telephone or e-mail. Their enquiries are received at the TLS reception area or switchboard. This is normally the students' first contact with TLS.

They are then sent a marketing package which contains basic information about the programme(s) in which they have shown interest. This package would typically contain information about entrance requirements, the courses that make up the programme, the study programme including information about assessment methods (e.g., assignments, semester tests and examinations). They are, therefore, given information on the curriculum. Also included is information concerning fees, the minimum amount required for registration, and methods of payment. An application form is also included in the package.

At this stage there is very little personal interaction with prospective students; they are provided with the information they require to decide whether they want to register. The information of students who make enquiries is put into a database, and follow-up calls might be conducted, depending on whether there are registration applications coming forth. If the number of students that made enquiries does not tally with the applications received, students are called to enquire if they encountered any problems with the packages, or whether they need additional information or help, or perhaps to find out if they still intend to register. Up to this point, activities are geared towards marketing the programmes, and procuring enrolments. Once students register, however, the level of personal interaction picks up.

7.4.1.2 Registration

Once the application is approved, registration forms are mailed or faxed to students as the forms are not yet available online. At this stage the students' contact person is an advisor who deals with students' enquiries until registration is complete. All registration is conducted strictly by TLS personnel, namely the programme advisors.

Residential students have academic lecturers (i.e., subject advisors) and the deans to advise them at this point of their registration. However, since distance students do not conduct registration in person, and not at a specific time designated for registration, they do not have access to academic lecturers. TLS staff are their advisors. This is very often problematic, especially where recognition of prior learning is concerned. The advisors do not have the authority to recognise subjects or the academic background to recommend subject choices. The result is that these cases are referred to the programme leaders and/or subject chairpersons. The student's registration is delayed until the advisor receives a response from the relevant person in authority.

Registration is only processed once the minimum fee required by the university is paid. It is then that the student receives the study packages, together with a troubleshooting guide, which has a list of academic lecturers' contact details and their consultation times, a list of library staff with their numbers also provided, and the contact people within TLS, with their fax and work telephone numbers. E-mail addresses are also provided.

Currently, the production of the study packages is out-sourced and takes place in Pretoria. The study packages are sent to students via mail, and in the case of the MBA programme, by courier service. It appears that MBA students expressly requested this option, regardless of the costs involved, in order to forego delays with the postal service. If students call with enquiries about not receiving study packages, programme advisors are able to refer to the database and can tell the students whether study materials have been sent, and when they can expect to receive them. The information on student registration progress is updated all the time, so that TLS is able to inform students as to what is slowing their registration down.

7.4.1.3 Post-registration

Post-registration activities are TLS-based. Programme advisors are essentially the link for the student to the entire university system. When students call with a problem their first contact is the advisor. Programme advisors sometimes shoulder academic problems, and one of their biggest problems is that they are not acquainted with the content of the courses. They take down the students' problems and relay them to the lecturer if the student is not able to get in touch with the lecturer, which is often. A considerable amount of time might elapse before they are able to get in touch with the lecturer, and they might not articulate the problem in the manner the student wants. By the time they report back to the student the problem will still not have been solved, and in the meantime the student falls behind in his/her work as he/she might not be able to continue until the problematic section is understood. In dealing with academic queries, the best that advisors can do is to tell students the lecturers' consultation times, ask them to call, or leave a message for the lecturers, which lecturers seldom respond to. Advisors are also the link between the students and facilitators for their contact sessions. If something goes wrong (i.e., sessions are cancelled) the advisors have to inform the students.

The only division that distance students have direct contact with is the marks and assignments division. This division receives their assignments, distributes them to the relevant academic lecturers, and collates assignment marks and examination marks. They also post the assignments back to the students.

With regard to relational support the programme advisors provide general support. TLS have what they refer to as follow-up sessions; a programme advisor has to call a certain number of students per day or per allocated time period to find out how they are getting on, and whether they are experiencing any problems. However, while this type of support has been identified as necessary by TLS, there are problems with implementation. Programme advisors are already loaded with work, which makes carrying this service almost impossible.

▪ **Financial support**

Distance learners do not receive financial support from the university. There is a loan facility they could apply to, but not much else in the way of financial support from the university. This differs from the services provided for residential students who receive a merit bursary for good performance in examinations at the end of each year. Residential students are also able to get a discount if there are more than 3 family members also registered with the institution. This does not apply to distance learners. One of the more common results of financial problems is late registration, resulting in students obtaining their study packages later than scheduled, and a consequent delay in commencing with the work and assignment submissions.

▪ **Records**

TLS administration does not keep records of attrition. They merely compare the number of registered students with the number of students who sit for examinations.

According to Hintz (1997:4/4), a completion and retention survey conducted in a distance education institution helped to identify issues it could address that would lead to greater student learning and success, and it made clear to the administrative departments and the faculty that assessment must reach every segment of the academic community, not only the students. Completion and retention studies reveal issues that universities can change in order to improve future distance learning activities.

▪ **Access**

With regard to access, the recognition of prior learning depends on each learning programme. For example, with the Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme, no credits are given for

any of the courses. Students have to do all the courses from the 1st year level, regardless of their present qualifications in any of the courses that are part of the programme, even if they have doctoral qualifications in certain courses. With undergraduate students, it is possible to negotiate for the crediting of courses they completed in other institutions.

The recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a mechanism for individuals to receive recognition and accreditation in formal education for learning acquired in a range of contexts, for example, work and civil society. According to Osman and Castle (2001:54), it is a new and untested policy in higher education in South Africa, and very little is known about emerging RPL practices either within or across institutions. Tutorial and academic support are essential for students admitted under this circumstance.

▪ **Training of facilitators**

The training of facilitators appears to be through a booklet which details their duties. If students find a facilitator not to be adequate, they report back to TLS administration who might raise the matter with the facilitator concerned. The booklet might not be sufficient as a training tool, because facilitators might not fully understanding the implications of studying at a distance for the students, and might not even be qualified to facilitate a particular module.

▪ **Students' problems and support needs**

The administrative co-ordinator mentioned that students are often reluctant to contact the lecturers personally as they felt that doing so would be to their disadvantage for the following reasons:

- they do not want to bother the lecturer;
- they do not want the lecturer to think that they are stupid;
- they are afraid the lecturer will be able to identify them, either from their voices over the phone, or from low exam or semester marks; and
- they are afraid that the lecturer will already be prejudiced against them when he/she marks exams.

The programme co-ordinator remarked that regardless of how often the students are told that the opposite is true, it remains difficult to persuade them otherwise. Some students prefer TLS

personnel to liaise with the academic staff on their behalf, the consequences of which include unsatisfactory and delayed responses.

This type of student behaviour is particularly worrying when taking into account the role of self-efficacy beliefs in academic performance. Pajares and Schunk (20013/19) state that beliefs of personal competence help determine the outcomes a student expects; students who doubt their ability envision low marks even before they write, and expect academic failure and curtailed possibilities for the future. A student's lecturer might not be totally responsible for creating these beliefs and perceptions, but assurance would help towards alleviating these concerns. Students ought to feel that they can personally approach the lecturer for help without fear of ridicule or of a bad reflection. Unless people believe that their actions can produce the outcomes they desire, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties (Pajares, 2002).

The most common academic enquiries that TLS receives from students include the following:

- guidance on what the lecturer expects in an assignment, and whether it is in line with the approach the student is taking,
- how to get started on an assignment, and
- how to study for an exam, and what to study, as the guidelines supplied by lecturers can be inadequate.

These requests point to the fact that students are not necessarily sufficiently equipped for distance study. They need assistance with developing their language skills. It also points to the anxiety students experience with regard to examinations and assignments. The programme advisor claimed that one of the difficulties in dealing with these problems was that lecturers tended to consider giving this information as 'spoon-feeding', which left the students without a clear direction of the progression of their studies. This suggests that lecturers might not be aware of the difficulties and implications of studying at a distance. They are not able to appreciate the demands a distance student has to cope with while studying.

7.5 Conclusion

According to Waghid (2001:176), the most significant challenge that higher education institutions face in providing equal access to masses of disadvantaged students is the design, development,

production and delivery of learner-centred, quality and cost-effective distance education course materials.

As Tobin (2001) correctly states, one of the most difficult issues facing distance learning administrators is dealing with lecturers who are either inconsiderate to their students or are unsupportive of their students' learning needs. Distance learning administrators and their staff members, according to Tobin (2001), often have to play 'the devil's advocate' in order to anticipate concerns, voicing questions in order to get help and clarification, and suggesting ways to improve the process in which distance education courses are put together.

Interviewing both the students and TLS personnel allowed the results of this study to be holistic, in that TLS personnel were able to reveal certain difficulties students were experiencing which the students themselves would have been reluctant to divulge. In the same manner, students were able to provide insight into how TLS operations affect their academic performance.

Overall, the results indicate that there is a need for institutional intervention in the way of support for distance students. There is an awareness of the need for these types of services, but the problem appears to be in how TLS ought to go about providing them. The steps to be taken by PU for CHE need to be reactive, that is, compensating for identified limitations in the method of distance delivery, as well as proactive, that is, being directed to build in the personal characteristics and life circumstances of students (cf. Cookson, 1990).

The following questions flow from the results of this study:

- What type of support should be provided?
- What degree of support should be provided?
- When should support be provided?
- How can the support be described?
- Who will provide the support?
- How will the support be delivered?

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

8.1 Introduction

Student support is a crucial aspect of student academic performance, and is one of the factors that determine the quality of an institution's distance programmes. Every aspect of delivering a distance programme, as outlined by Moore and Kearsley (1996) in their conceptualisation of a systemic approach, if it is carried out properly, is effective, and forms part of supporting students. Student support is more than providing a few contact sessions in addition to the learning materials; it encompasses administrative, instructional and relational components.

The purpose of this study was to:

- Identify factors that can affect the failure/drop out or success of ESL learners studying via TLS.
- Identify and categorise the support services that ESL students typically indicate they would like/need.
- Determine what support services the Potchefstroom University currently offers to ESL learners studying via TLS.
- Provide a framework, based on the ESL learner profile, their expressed likes/needs, and the support services currently provided, for effective support provision for ESL learners studying via TLS.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a summary of the results obtained in this study, to present the framework that ought to be used as a guide to providing support for the students, and to outline recommendations for future research.

8.2 Findings of the study

Based on the data obtained in the previous chapter, the following conclusions can be drawn:

8.2.1 Factors affecting attrition/drop out and/or failure

The profiling case study conducted in this research shows that students are not a homogenous group, and that they bring different qualities to the learning situation which affect their learning. While this is accepted and acknowledged widely (Eric Digests, 1984; Thompson, 1997), each institution has to conduct profiling studies, in order to understand what in the make-up of their students contributes to attrition/drop out and/or failure. This information, when used together with attrition research which each institution ought to conduct (Cookson, 2002), would provide the university with valuable information on how to provide the necessary support to combat problems experienced by students.

The personal factors affecting attrition/drop out and/or failure were found to be the following:

- Demographic variables: where age, the students' geographical distance from the campus, prior experience with distance learning and tertiary education, and language proficiency were found to have an influence on distance learning;
- Affective variables: where students with an internal locus of control were more successful than students with an external locus of control and high levels of anxiety;
- Learning styles: where at risk students tended to be hands-on, concrete-sequential, closure-oriented, and analytic;
- Metacognitive variables: with successful students showing a tendency towards self-regulation more than at risk students; and
- Learning strategies: with the results indicating that at risk students scored low with regard to effective strategy use.

The contextual variables included:

- The microsystem: where family illness, family disruption and inadequate studying facilities at home were cited as factors that contributed to learning problems experienced by at risk students;
- The macrosystem: where registration, late materials, too much content, and the lack of sufficient contact with lecturers affected at risk students, and the lack of constructive feedback affected successful students adversely; and

- The mesosystem, where job pressures and community responsibilities affected students' performance.

8.2.2 Support services required by ESL learners

The participation of students is imperative in planning and designing support services. The insight into how students perceive their learning is necessary, as is that of the people they deal with, namely the lecturers and the administrative staff.

The results of this study indicated that students' support needs included:

- Administrative support: where students required efficient registration processes with relevant information, efficient personnel, and the timely delivery of services;
- Academic support, with quality and student-friendly materials, reliable lecturers, guidance on studying and writing assignments, more interaction with students and lecturers, and language support being some of the major needs of students; and
- Relational support, where students felt that they needed to be able to express their problems where they interfered with their academic work knowing that they would be well-received, someone to talk to, someone to listen to their problems, and general encouragement.

8.2.3 Support services offered by TLS

The results of this study indicated that TLS is aware of the importance of support services, and has made provision for students to access them. This study concluded that the implementation strategy needs to be better co-ordinated. Currently, all the support is provided by TLS. They provide administrative and, to a certain extent, academic support. They provide relational support, for example, the programme advisors lend "their ears" when a situation calls for it. However, TLS cannot provide all these services on its own; it needs to work together with the lecturers and the executive/directors/deans of the institution, who need to be part of the planning. The system will not function properly if each faculty, school, and subject group functions on its own. The result will be the disintegration of support services.

The results imply that there needs to be an institutional policy and framework within which support services will be planned, budgeted for, and provided. It should also be impressed on the institution that the resources put into supporting students allay costs incurred in the long term through attrition/drop-out and/or failure of students.

8.3 Framework for supporting ESL distance learners

Based on the results presented in chapter 7, this section presents a framework that can be used to provide support services to ESL distance learners. While the results have shown that academic and administrative concerns are difficult to separate in distance education, there are areas that can be clearly delineated, just as the areas where support is needed were clearly identified.

The suggested framework is presented in Diagram 12, together with the discussion and explanation of the application and rationale behind the framework.

Diagram 12: A framework for supporting ESL distance learners

Support	Degree of support	When provided	Description of support	Who will provide	How delivered
ADMINISTRATIVE	1 st year: High 2 nd year: Medium 3 rd year: Low	Pre-registration	- Information on fees & financial support - Information on admission and registration - Information on administrative procedures and regulations	TLS Administrators	- In person - By letter - By telephone - By e-mail
		Registration	Up to date information on every step of registration	TLS	
		Post-registration	- Demands of distance study - Bookshop & library services - Learning materials - Course completion - Not much academic support necessary	- TLS & academic services - Library personnel - TLS	
ACADEMIC	1 st year: High 2 nd year: Medium 3 rd year: Low	Pre-registration	- Diagnostic & psychological testing - Study skills - Learner support centres - Pre-course counselling - Mentoring system	- TLS/lecturers - Academic services - TLS & lecturers/facilitators - Lecturers - Other students (2nd/3rd year)	- Print - Video, WWW, facilitators - Face-to-face & Audio-visual media - Telephone, letter, e-mail
		Registration			
		Post-registration	- Academic advising - Learning material - Feedback - Tutoring - Language support - Pre-examination counselling	- Lecturer/facilitator - Lecturer - Lecturer/facilitator - Facilitator - Language centre - Lecturer/facilitator	- In person/by letter/telephone/e-mail - Printed material - By telephone, e-mail, letter, in person
RELATIONAL	1 st year: Low 2 nd year: Medium 3 rd year: Medium-high	Pre-registration	Low support necessary		
		Registration	Low support necessary		
		Post-registration	- Adult learner support - Peer support/study groups - Psychological counselling - Crises line - Religious counselling - Course completion	- TLS - TLS (acting as facilitator) - Academic services * - Psychology department - Churches & affiliated student groups - Lecturer	- In person - By letter - Telephone - E-mail

The framework indicates the types of support that distance learners need, namely administrative, academic, and relational support. "Degree of support" refers to the level of intensity of the support, which could be high, medium or low, the provision of which is linked to students' level of study. The period when a specific type of support would be most necessary is stated under "When provided", with the most perceptible periods being pre-registration, registration, and post-registration. "Description of support" provides details of each type of support which students indicated that they need. Specific people/departments assigned to provide each type of service are listed under "Who will provide". In the last column "How delivered", the media through which support services should be delivered are listed.

8.3.1 Administrative support

The administrative support needed is categorised into pre-registration, registration, and post-registration periods. During these periods it is the administrative department that has the greatest contact with students.

▪ Pre-registration

Prior to registration, students need information on fees and available financial support. Where the university does not provide any assistance, it could provide students with information on where they could be given financial assistance (e.g. Eduloan). The university might even consider providing distance students with similar financial incentives provided to on-campus students when they perform well (e.g., merit bursaries or a discount on the fees that they have to pay). If financial incentives are not possible, then the university could explore other options, but students do need to receive acknowledgement and recognition of their efforts, which increases their motivation and persistence.

The information on admission and registration procedures is important for first year students, but it appears that returning students (i.e., students returning to study after a period away) need more information than they might be receiving. It could be taken for granted that returning students already know admission and registration procedures, but complete information would include the incorporation of outstanding fees, of course combinations, of the possibilities of progressing to the next level of study in cases where the student has failed, or where the student has to write the

“second opportunity” exam. This would require that the administrative department liaise with the faculties concerned in order to consider individual cases where necessary.

The information pertaining to administrative procedures and regulations needs to be articulated in an unambiguous manner, and the institution has to abide by those regulations. There might be cases that need to be given special consideration, but the outcome should fall within the institution’s policies. Should students have inquiries about the university’s inconsistencies, a satisfactory explanation should be possible, one that can be backed by the institution’s policy. In this way, students will not have to feel that separate sets of regulations are used for different students.

Pre-registration activities consist of supplying students with information, and it is through this information that the university markets itself. It is at this stage that the university needs to impress on the students why studying with this particular institution would suit their needs. This is done through brochures that state the value of the courses which the institution provides, and the quality of services they can expect from the university. However, it is important that the university should be able to deliver on its promises, because if it cannot provide the quality of services it claimed to offer, the institution can be discredited and this might lead students to explore alternatives.

▪ **Registration**

Activities carried out during the registration period should involve TLS administrative staff. The actual registering of students is conducted by TLS staff. The support that could be provided to students at this stage relates to providing students with up to date information on the status of their registration, and being able to respond knowledgeably about problems students might be experiencing concerning their registration.

▪ **Post-registration**

Students need to be counselled on the demands of distance study so that they can have a fair idea of the extent of the claims that academic concerns will make on their time. TLS advisors are best suited to carry out this service, as it is not course-specific. Academic advisory services could also counsel students on the mode of distance study.

Bookshop services are particularly important when the students need to supplement the study material with prescribed texts, and when students are expected to conduct research that requires additional materials. Students would be given full details of the materials, details of the bookshop, and details of library staff, with the listing of the responsibilities of each staff member, as well as their contact details.

The services mentioned thus far would best be carried out by letter, telephone and e-mail. These options are ideal because it is likely that most students visit the university for the first time during graduation, and would thus not be able to receive these services in person. The information provided to students would also be available for referral at any time when the student needs it.

The timely posting of learning material is the responsibility of TLS staff and any delay in the students' receiving the material affects their ability to keep up with the course. Because of delayed material, students in this study have reported not completing assignments on time, of falling behind with their work, and have even admitted to copying the assignment from colleagues, which all became academic concerns, and not administrative. Falling behind in one's work might cause anxiety and could even lead to students dropping out, as was indicated in this study, because it is difficult to find time to catch up with work that ought to have been completed.

For those students nearing course completion, the administrative service could assist by providing students with information concerning academic completion procedures and requirements, as well as information concerning graduation procedures. Details such as the provision of academic regalia, financial costs involved, and other details that could easily be regarded as evident or unimportant should be provided to students.

The degree of administrative support needed by students varies on the level of studies they register for. First year students need a high degree of administrative support, to acquaint them with the way in which the university works, to acquaint them with their faculties, and in essence to integrate them into the institution.

8.3.2 Academic support

Academic support refers to all the activities related to learning and teaching activities, most of which are the lecturers/instructors' responsibility, but still depend on co-operation from TLS in order to be efficient.

- **Pre-registration**

Prior to registration students do not need much academic support.

- **Registration**

During the registration period, a relatively high level of academic support is necessary, with the most prominent activities being pre-course counselling and diagnostic as well as physical testing.

Pre-course counselling would include activities such as informing the students of the demands of distance studying and providing information on study skills. Diagnostic testing would have to be made a condition for registration, particularly for first year students, and it could be conducted in the same manner that exams are conducted, at designated sites, with appointed people to oversee the administering of the tests. Lecturers could counsel students based on the results of the tests. It would be obvious at this stage if remedial work would be necessary, so that the student has a clear indication of the work load before the course commences, and prepares for it. This would help prevent the student from feeling unexpectedly overwhelmed with the amount of work later on. Psychological tests could also be conducted during registration, as is the case with full time students. Students who are repeating would need to be counselled at this stage as well, to try and get to the cause of their failure, and for the instructor/facilitators and the students to work out together how the student could be supported.

Students need information on the study skills they need to make their distance studying successful, and how to manage their time, which academic services could offer. In addition to print material, the world-wide web (WWW) and the video could be used to deliver these services. The university cannot design schedules for students, because only the students know how to fit studying as well as work and personal demands in their schedules. The university can only give guidance on how to prioritise, particularly when dealing with course content. Other study skills such as learning styles

and strategies can be designed into the study material, particularly where lecturers design pre-packaged study guides. This type of support is provided by instructors, as well as facilitators when they conduct tutorial sessions.

Learner support centres are the responsibility of TLS. TLS is responsible for the setting up of centres, the selection of support staff, and for designing the time-table for contact sessions. TLS is thus responsible for obtaining staff that is competent and professional, and who understand the rigours of studying at a distance. TLS should be responsible for the overall training of the facilitators, placing emphasis on professionalism. TLS and course designers need to make provision for students who are required to work in groups, but cannot have group sessions when there are not enough students to constitute a group. Lecturers'/course designers' main concern is the quality of the content, as well as the provision of audio and visual material. The purpose of the audio and visual material needs to be stated clearly in the study guide, and by facilitators who run study sessions; it should be clear whether they are separate entities, or whether they are integral to understanding certain sections of the course.

Academic advising ought to be provided by the lecturers, because they are most likely to be able to inform students of course-specific skills needed to get through the course. It is necessary that this be conducted before the course commences, so that students have preparatory work done, and are able to gauge their own competence. Preparing the students will ease the students into course, particularly 1st year students studying via distance mode for the first time, or those students in a tertiary institution for the first time. Pre-course counselling could be carried out through printed material (e.g., booklets), so that students can refer back when the need arises.

Mentoring support refers to a system where a student that has been identified as at risk would be assigned a mentor, another student, to provide academic assistance where needed. Since it is likely that distance students might not have the time to act as mentors to each other, a full time student might be assigned to provide assistance to a distance student. Contact with a full time student would also further the aim of integrating distance learners into the university. Mentoring could take place by any means that the students have at their disposal, such as the telephone, e-mail, and face-to-face.

The services mentioned here take place throughout the period of study, but need to be finalised by the time a student registers in order to make planning and time management easier.

▪ **Post-registration**

After the registration period, the degree of necessary academic support is high.

Academic advising refers to the responses given to students' enquiries on any aspect of the study material, which ought to come directly from the lecturers. Facilitators would respond to enquiries that are brought forward at tutorial sessions, and seek the counsel of the lecturer if the students require it, or if necessary. TLS staff should not provide counselling on academic matters, as students would feel more secure if the response comes from those who are likely to examine them. This would also prevent the time delay caused by relaying student messages and queries from one department to another. It would be helpful for the lecturer to know what the student problems are, and to make provision to changes in the study materials if necessary.

Support by the lecturers can also be provided through well-designed and planned materials, as well as being present to respond to students' problems on any aspect of learning. Timely and informative feedback makes it possible for students to evaluate themselves, and makes for easy progression of learning. Tutoring is largely the responsibility of TLS (i.e., appointing and overseeing the appointment of facilitators and organising tutoring/learning centres); however, students should have access to lecturers to address matters that arise from tutorials, as it might be reassuring to deal directly with lecturers.

The provision of language skill support is particularly important because students take English as a course, but it is also the medium of instruction. It becomes difficult to separate content from style of expression and language proficiency. Also important are assignment writing and critical reading skills. The university does not have a language centre where students can take their work to receive guidance on structuring, grammar, and other basic language skills, but on-campus students could require special assistance from the lecturer, which would be easier to arrange than with distance students. The crucial time for language support would be during the first year, and this

might be in the form of foundation/bridging work done concurrently with the first level courses, or even prior to first level courses. Deciding on this would be the sole responsibility of the lecturer. First year students that are identified as needing support could be part of the mentoring system, where a specific person could be assigned to help them throughout the year. It is accepted that students entering university do not always have the required ESL proficiency, and if they are admitted into the institution, special provisions have to be made to accommodate their inadequacy.

Pre-examination counselling ought to be the responsibility of the lecturer and the facilitators. Students should be provided with guidance on how to prepare for the examinations. If they need to review their assignments and tests, memoranda should be made available to them. The examinations administrative section should provide them with past examination papers, just as on-campus students have access to them for revision purposes. It is during the examination period that students would need to be in touch with the lecturers and the facilitators.

The degree of instructional support ought to be high for first year students, and those that are repeating the courses. For second year students, instructional support ought to remain high, unless the students can show through performance that they are coping with distance studies without a high level of support. Third year students are likely to have mastered learning and coping strategies to the extent that they are able to learn independently most of the time. Academic support can be provided through e-mail, by letter, telephone, and in person, where students make arrangements to be present, and especially at contact sessions.

8.3.3 Relational support

Relational support refers largely to emotional and psychological support.

- **Pre-registration**

Prior to registration low relational support is needed from the institution. At this stage, students need the support of their friends and family, about which the institution can do very little.

▪ **Registration**

During registration, students need medium relational support, particularly students who failed, or students who have not studied for a while. They need support in the form of encouragement, a service that could be provided by a specialised department. This need not be an elaborate undertaking, just letting students know that if they experience difficulties, there are people who are appointed specifically to help them along.

▪ **Post-registration**

After registration, the level of relational support which students need increases.

Adult learner support refers to the support which students need as a result of having multiple roles, as workers, with family responsibilities, and other external demands. There is not much that the institution can do about these factors, but support can be provided in the way of extensions for assignments, providing students who cannot attend contact sessions with alternate times or arrangements.

However, for third year students, and postgraduate students, the level of relational support needed after registration is medium to low. As students approach the completion of their degrees, they have built a relationship which has progressed from the anonymity of the first year, and instructors and facilitators ought to know them better. The encouragement they would receive would be to encourage them to complete their studies, because the load of work increases with each passing level.

Peer support is needed for students to feel that there are other students who share their difficulties, and that there is a forum where academic problems can be discussed. The peer support might even make up where instructional support from lecturers and facilitators comes short. All three levels of study would need high relational support from peers.

Counselling for students could also be available through psychological counselling services, a crises line, and religious counselling. These services would, in essence, be run by the psychology

and theological departments, but would need to work together with TLS. However, these services need to be carried out by professionally trained people.

With regard to course completion, students would need support mainly in encouraging them on, and providing them with an 'ear' to listen to their problems and concerns

While recognising that students need the support of their families and employers, amongst others, this study has tried to focus on institutional intervention.

The encompassing need for effective support service provision is for TLS to have a centralised system, with accountable personnel, with clearly designated duties. This would end the disintegrated service which students complain about. And overall, the institution as a whole needs to recognise that for distance education to work, formal policies and procedures have to be put into place, to ensure that there are legitimate regulations that govern distance learning activities.

8.4 Recommendations for further research

This study has uncovered several areas of potential research, which would also focus on providing quality support services to distance students.

The university could conduct attrition research on this institution's performance. This would give the institution another perspective on the attrition problem, and it would help to gauge the institution's performance with more accuracy.

Further research could also be conducted using a bigger population, which would aid the university in a process of reviewing their provision of support services, which ought to happen periodically. Further studies could also use students from several programmes apart from English, which could provide more generalisable results, and perhaps lead to the refining of the framework that has been suggested in this study.

The university needs a policy and procedure document for TLS, which could be developed through a study that tests the effectiveness of restructuring TLS support provision which is suggested in the

framework. The emphasis needs to be on a co-ordinated support system, legitimated by the university through formal channels.

8.5 Conclusion

Research conducted on student services, referred to as customer and client services by TLS at PU for CHE, is an indication of the importance that is linked to quality service provision (cf. Bisschoff et al., 1997; 2000; Bisschoff, 2000; Bisschoff & Bisschoff, 2001).

It is the finding of this study that TLS needs to restructure its support services provision for distance students. Students have stated complaints that impact on the credibility and quality of instruction provided at the institution. Efforts to elevate support services to an effective and efficient system need to be stepped up. This research has indicated that support services need to be provided from the first year of study which will contribute to developing independent lifelong learners.

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