

AN ONLINE SELF-COACHING PROGRAMME: TOWARDS FACILITATING SELF-REGULATED LEARNING OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS WITHIN AN ODL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Studying social work, a profession, within an open and distant learning (ODL) context facilitates equal opportunities as it gives more and previously deprived students the opportunity to become social workers. The Department of Social Work at the University of South Africa (Unisa) became aware of the need for social work-specific student support, taking into account the difficulty of studying a profession in an ODL context. A qualitative research study in 2010 explored the specific support needs for social work students studying at Unisa. Rothman and Thomas's Intervention Design and Development (IDD) model (1994) was adapted to develop an online self-coaching programme. The goals of this programme are to enhance student success and throughput, to accelerate personal, academic and professional development of students, and to empower students to take ownership of their learning process. As such, the programme facilitates self-regulated learning. The aim of this article is to indicate the support needs of social work students studying in an ODL context and to introduce the reader to the online self-coaching programme which was developed in response to these needs whilst highlighting its benefits and challenges.

Keywords: Self-coaching; social work; social work students; self-regulated learning; open and distance learning.



INTRODUCTION

Governments all over the world are making large investments in mass education. Open and distance learning (ODL), often using online learning systems, contributes to the massification of higher education, specifically in developing countries where it has the benefits of expanded access and reduced cost (Minnaar 2012, 240). Higher education in South Africa is facing the challenge of preparing larger, more heterogeneous student populations for graduation and lifelong learning (Moseki and Schulze 2010, 356). Studying social work, which is a profession, within an ODL context, promotes equal opportunities as it gives more mature, employed, physically and geographically isolated learners the opportunity to become social workers. Learners with disability and learners with fewer financial resources are also provided with an equal chance to study social work (Alpaslan 2012, 5). It can, however, be argued that studying social work in this way may deprive learners of sufficient opportunities for practice, direct feedback, as well as group involvement and that it demands time, lots of energy, and logistical arrangements (Alpaslan 2012, 4).

Through post-graduate research, the Department of Social Work at the University of South Africa (Unisa) became aware of the often impeding influence of the personal, social and learning contexts of social work students on their performance, and identified a need for social work-specific student support (Lawlor 2008; Lintvelt 2008; Wade 2009). This required comprehensive research on the specific support needs of social work students within an ODL context. As part of her doctoral studies, the author undertook qualitative research in 2010 in order to explore and describe the specific support needs of social work students. She gathered data from focus group discussions with social work students and individual interviews with recently graduated and employed social workers who studied at Unisa. Rothman and Thomas's (1994) Intervention Design and Development (IDD) model was adapted and selectively employed, concentrating on Phase 1, 2, 3 (only Step 2 in Phase 3) and Phase 4 to develop a self-coaching programme as support for social work students within an ODL context. The goals of the support programme are to enhance student success and throughput, facilitate the personal, academic and professional development of students, and to empower students to take ownership of their learning process. As such, the programme facilitates self-regulated learning which has been associated with the enhancement of learning in an array of disciplines and contexts (Moseki and Schulze 2010, 361). Self-regulated learning emphasizes the 'agentic role of a learner' (Efklides 2011, 6). Moseki (2013, 17) describes self-regulated learning as the form of learning that occurs when an individual self-regulates his/her motivation, thoughts, feelings and behaviour, and cyclically adapt these to attain self-set learning-goals. Self-regulated learning thus refers to 'setting one's own goals in relation to learning and ensuring that the goals are attained' (Efklides 2011, 6).

The researcher was awarded funds as part of Unisa's Innovation and Support Programme, and the self-coaching programme for social work students was developed

into an online programme by Unisa as an ODL institution and the University of the Western Cape (UWC) as a residential facility and piloted by both institutions with five fourth-level students each. The aim of this article is to indicate the specialised support needs of social work students studying in an ODL context and to introduce the reader to the online support programme which was developed in response to these needs, as well as to its benefits and challenges in an ODL context.

THE INTERVENTION DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT (IDD) MODEL

Inspired by her interest in life coaching and its focus on self-awareness, personal development and goal achievement, the author set the following research question: What would a life coaching programme to support social work students within an ODL context consist of? As sub-questions the academic, personal and professional needs of social work students in an ODL context, and core elements of the support programme and its implementation were explored. The questions in the interview guide were formulated based on Max-Neef's taxonomy of poverty (Schenck 2008, 8), which identifies subsistence, affection, protection, understanding, freedom, idleness, creation, identity, participation and transcendence (added later) as fundamental human needs, and Unisa's socio-critical model for explaining, predicting and enhancing student success (Subotzky and Prinsloo 2011), which stresses the importance of mutual responsibility as well as a 'fit' between the student and the institution at each step of the 'student walk' (choice/admission, learning activities, course success, graduation, employment/citizenship) to ensure success. This model was also used in understanding student support and interpreting the needs identified by participants.

Rothman and Thomas's Intervention Design and Development (IDD) model (1994) of was adapted and selectively employed. This model aims to develop new interventions and human technologies, including strategies, techniques and methods that can be implemented to assist social service delivery (De Vos and Strydom 2011, 474–5). It consists of six phases, each characterised by key activities, which may be implemented with flexibility. Table 1 portrays the phases and activities of the model.

Table 1: Phases and activities of intervention research

| Phases | Activities |
|--|--|
| 1. Situation analysis and project planning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Step 1: Identifying and involving clients</i> • <i>Step 2: Gaining entry to and cooperation from settings</i> • <i>Step 3: Identifying the concerns of the population</i> • <i>Step 4: Analysing the identified concerns</i> • <i>Step 5: Setting goals and objectives</i> |
| 2. Information gathering and synthesis | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Step 1: Using existing information sources</i> • <i>Step 2: Studying natural examples</i> • <i>Step 3: Identifying the functional elements of successful models</i> |
| 3. Design | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Step 1: Designing an observational system</i> • <i>Step 2: Specifying the procedural elements of the intervention</i> |
| 4. Early development and pilot testing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Step 1: Developing a prototype</i> • <i>Step 2: Conducting a pilot test</i> • <i>Step 3: Applying design criteria</i> |
| 5. Evaluation and advanced development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Step 1: Selecting an experimental design</i> • <i>Step 2: Collecting and analysing data</i> • <i>Step 3: Replicating the intervention under field conditions</i> • <i>Step 4: Refining the intervention</i> |
| 6. Dissemination | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Step 1: Preparing the product for dissemination</i> • <i>Step 2: Identifying potential markets for the intervention</i> • <i>Step 3: Creating a demand for the intervention</i> • <i>Step 4: Encouraging appropriate adaptation</i> • <i>Step 5: Providing technical support for adopters</i> |

Source: Rothman and Thomas 1994, 28.

During the initial research Phase 1, 2, 3 (only Step 2 in Phase 3) and Phase 4 were utilised. A qualitative research approach was followed and the support needs of students studying at Unisa were identified during Phase 1 at Unisa by interviewing 71 social work students: 18 from level one, 17 from level two, 19 from level three and 17 from level four, as well as five recently employed social workers who studied at Unisa. Tesch's steps (in Creswell 2009, 186) provided a clear framework according to which data was systematically analysed. Data verification could be ensured by integrating Guba's model (in Krefting 1991, 214–222) with Yin's (2011, 19–20) three objectives for building trustworthiness and credibility. As part of Phase 2, existing international and local support programmes were studied and interviews were conducted with various support specialists to gather information on usable or functional elements in existing programmes as well as new suggestions. The development of a self-coaching programme constituted Phase 3. Eight students and four support specialists provided feedback in a questionnaire on a printed version of the programme and ten students participated in a feedback discussion as part of Phase 4; adjustments were made to the programme according to feedback received. With the funds received from Unisa's Innovation and Support Programme, the programme was developed into different online

versions by Unisa and UWC. Phase 4 of the IDD model was then revisited, which involved ten fourth level social work students, five from each university, in piloting the online versions of the programme. The students, who worked through the whole programme were requested to complete a questionnaire on the different sections in the programme in order to indicate the usefulness of all the activities in the programme, as well as technical difficulties experienced. A focus group discussion was held with each group of students after completion of the programme. This article focuses on the online version developed at Unisa.

IDENTIFIED SUPPORT NEEDS

The following themes were identified and conclusions drawn about what should be included in a support programme:

Theme 1: Social work students' motivations for studying social work and studying at Unisa as an ODL institution

For many students, social work is a passion and intentional choice; in other instances, studying social work was influenced by outside factors or people. Unisa was the first choice for most of the participants, but some had no alternative. To achieve success it is essential that the student 'fits' with his/her choice of a career and the place of study (Kumar 2007, 108; Subotzky and Prinsloo 2011, 177–193). A substantial part of a support programme should therefore be to enable students to make an informed choice about their career and university, based on sound self-knowledge and thus to take responsibility for their choices.

Theme 2: Social work students' unsatisfied needs related to their academic, professional and personal development at Unisa as an ODL institution

Most of the unmet *academic needs* were identified as 'understanding needs' which are related to education (e.g., needs concerning career guidance and selection, information about Unisa and the 'student walk', registration, study material, a lack of communication with Unisa, a lack of facilities, inaccessible lecturers and inadequate feedback from lecturers, as well as a lack of support for students who are at risk). The participants felt that Unisa was responsible for fulfilling these needs. To achieve success, the student needs to have knowledge of the institution, courses and course workloads, an understanding of assessment expectations, and knowledge of where, when and how to access guidance from lecturers, tutors and other students (Subotzky and Prinsloo 2011, 186).

The unmet needs experienced by the social work students in the area of *professional needs*, such as writing reports as required by the placement organisations, using workshop times effectively, developing presentation skills and understanding the culture of clients better, fell according to Max-Neef's taxonomy of poverty (Schenck 2008,

8), into the categories of “subsistence”, “understanding”, “protection”, “participation”, “identity” and “transcendence”. These unmet needs or poverties were experienced in the contexts of the organisations where students did their practical work, the community and social workers within the profession. Students wanted these needs to be met by Unisa as institution or the organisation where they did their practical work. To become a good social worker, the student needs to have knowledge of the various contexts in which social work is practiced and the resources which can be accessed to assist clients (SAQA Registered Qualification ID 23994 Bachelor of Social Work. n. d.; Subotzky and Prinsloo 2011, 186). A support programme should therefore facilitate exploration of the broader context of the profession.

The social work students found it very difficult to identify unmet needs in the area of *personal needs*. They found it difficult to focus on themselves as the ‘student as agent’ (Subotzky and Prinsloo 2011, 184). They were only aware of unsatisfied identity needs, namely of their inability to promote their own emotional well-being and their inability to deal with failure. Social work students were not comfortable to reflect on themselves and lacked self-awareness. To be successful, students need to be responsible for their own journey, self-reliant and proactive (Kumar 2007, 40). They need to recognise themselves as ‘agents’ and should not expect Unisa as an institution to take responsibility for them. Important goals of a support programme need to be to empower students to take ownership of their learning processes, and to learn self-reflection and self-development skills to be used during their lifelong journey.

Theme 3: Social work students’ experiences and suggestions of satisfiers of their needs related to their academic, professional and personal development

Participants had knowledge of a wide variety of resources or satisfiers for their needs which they were already using or had used, and had suggested what could be used to improve their journey as students. These resources included satisfiers in themselves, such as self-knowledge, skills, goals and a positive attitude; facilities at Unisa like the library, computers, *myUnisa* (Unisa’s electronic platform), tutor classes, positive input from lecturers, facilitators, supervisors, the Bright Site project by the Department of Social Work, resources provided by the Department of Counselling and Career Development, e.g., career guidance and counselling; and support from others such as family members, peers and financial resources. Students’ suggestions for satisfiers showed awareness of different satisfiers needed at various points on the timeline of the ‘student walk’. In this regard, Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011, 186) refer to the importance of the fact that ‘sufficient mutual knowledge’ is acquired and translated into effective action at each point of the ‘student walk’. In this way, a closer alignment or fit can be achieved between the students and the institution. To be able to complete their ‘student walk’ successfully, students need to know about existing satisfiers at the various points on the timeline of their ‘student walk’. The institution needs to be aware of its students’ needs in order to provide satisfiers (Subotzky and Prinsloo 2011, 186). A support programme

should therefore facilitate the fit between the students and the institution at each point of their student walk.

Theme 4: Social work students' perspectives on the attributes of a good social worker and suggestions as to how these can be developed in students

Students perceived a good social worker as somebody who has a sound theoretical and practical knowledge base, good self-knowledge, effective intervention and administrative skills, and a service attitude, and knows that lifelong learning is essential. Social work students' perception of a good social worker is encompassed in Subotzky and Prinsloo's (2011, 188) broad definition of what success entails for the student and the institution. Social work students saw success as completing their degree and as developing the attributes of a good social worker in order to fit the requirements of employers or personal growth, even if they did not complete their degree. A support programme should therefore include students' definition of success and individual goals to achieve the success.

Theme 5: Social work students' suggestions on a life coaching programme for social work students in an ODL context

Social work students had a clear idea of what the core elements, method of delivery and manner of presentation of a life coaching programme as support for social work students in an ODL context should be. They saw it as a resource that the institution could provide. Participants provided suggestions on the content of the programme; e.g., the attributes of a good social worker, tools to create self-knowledge and how the programme should be delivered to the students, for instance online, through lecturers, tutors, supervisors, peer students or counsellors. They also made suggestions on the process of life coaching, which includes the setting of goals, planning and linking with resources. These suggestions link with the view Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011, 177–193) hold that an institutional resource creates effective, mutual engagement or 'fit' between Unisa as the learning institution and the students during the 'student walk'. It is the responsibility of Unisa as an institution to provide support programmes for its students, addressing the specific needs of groups of students. However, the students remain the 'agents' responsible to fully utilise these programmes.

No evidence was found of any life coaching model or programme used to support social work students either in South Africa or abroad. Many *functional elements* were identified in literature and existing programmes, as well as through the interviews with students, social workers, support staff and lectures at various universities. The SOAR model for student support used at the University of Bedfordshire, UK (Kumar 2007) provided a valuable framework for support of students in higher education, but needed to be adjusted for use in the discipline of social work. Many elements of the SOAR programme could be used in the life coaching programme. Life coaching provided a valuable structure for the overall support process and the coaching conversations

guiding the contact with the students (Starr 2011). Coaching questions, models and tools could be used in the support programme to facilitate intra- and interpersonal growth. The principles of positive psychology and the appreciative inquiry approach fitted well with the underlying assumptions of life coaching, respecting the unique individual with his/her strengths. Many valuable resources at Unisa were identified which could be included in the support programme.

The exploration of possible functional elements also provided valuable general guidelines on the method of delivery and the manner of presentation; e.g. students need to understand the coaching process and buy into it to ensure motivation; an online programme can facilitate access to student support resources by selecting and linking them to specific themes and year levels.

THE ONLINE SELF-COACHING PROGRAMME

The developed support programme, in the form of an online self-coaching programme, provides students with the opportunity and means to not only take responsibility for their own academic development, as required in an ODL context, but to also take responsibility for their personal and professional development from the time they enrol as social work students until they graduate as social workers. The support programme emphasises self-awareness, personal development and goal achievement.

The goals of the support programme are formulated as follows:

- To enhance student success and throughput
- To facilitate the personal and professional development of students in preparation for the profession of social work
- To empower students to take ownership of their learning process
- For social work students to experience their journey or ‘student walk’ through an ODL institution more positively
- For students to learn self-reflection and self-development skills to be utilised as part of their lifelong learning
- To contribute to the curriculum development of the Department of Social Work
- For coaching knowledge and skills to contribute towards the development of social work students.

Coaching can be defined as a process of facilitating self-awareness, setting goals, and facilitating personal and professional growth and development (Botha 2014, 21). Life coaching, more specifically, focuses on the whole person and all areas of life. Life coaching is appropriate for social work students, as all aspects of their life influence their studies and are influenced by their studies. Coaching usually consists of a series of conversations which one person, the coach, has with another, the coachee, in a way that relates to the coachee’s learning and development. Coaching conversations can take

place in different ways and in different environments (Starr 2011, 295). As Unisa is an ODL institution, it is not possible to have personal coaching sessions with all students; for this reason, the online self-coaching programme has been developed.

As a lecturer, the author is the students' 'coach voice', their host, who accompanies them through eight coaching conversations, extending across the four years during which they study social work. Two conversations are presented on each level, one in the beginning (March) and the other at the end of the year (September). Conversation 1 and 2 are presented on level 1; Conversation 3 and 4 on level 2; Conversation 5 and 6 on level 3, and Conversation 7 and 8 on level 4. These conversations create a place where the students discover and develop their potential. Should the students decide not to continue with social work, they can leave the conversations, equipped with self-knowledge and self-reflection skills they can use during the rest of their life journey. To enrich the conversations, the e-tutors on the first and second level, the workshop facilitators on the third level and the supervisors on the fourth level can assist the students with some activities. As a life coach, the lecturer tries to bring some continuity by being available on e-mail throughout the students' journey to becoming a social worker.

In order to structure and give direction to the coaching conversations, a life coaching model called the 'Seven C's and I' was developed. The 'I' represents the student and the 'Seven C's' refer to the seven actions in the process of the student's personal, academic and professional growth. These actions in the process of their development are:

- Clarifying my strengths
- Connecting to my context
- Creating my vision
- Compiling my plan
- Committing to action and change
- Confirming my direction
- Celebrating completion.

The process is depicted as repeated, ascending spirals, implying that the same process can be followed in any context as a guideline for self-development; thus, becoming part of lifelong learning (see Figure 1).

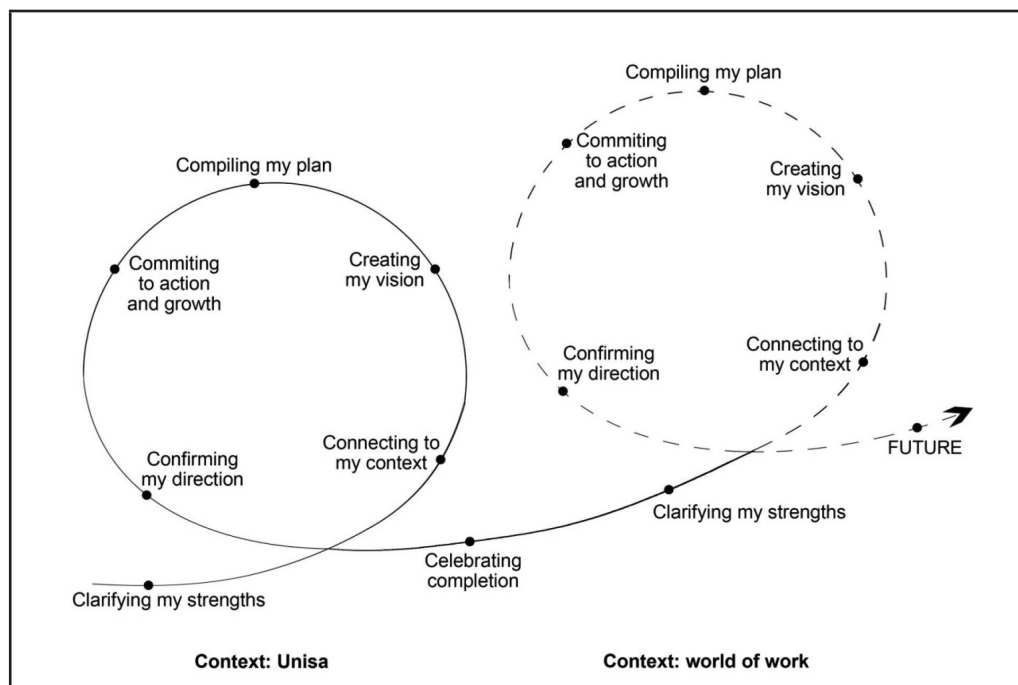


Figure 1: 'The seven C's and I' – A life coaching model to support social work students within an ODL context

The introduction to the life coaching programme familiarises the students to the self-coaching support programme. Conversation 1 assists them in identifying past positive emotions and achievements, and using these to articulate their strengths, passion and values. One activity, for instance, guides students to think of three occasions when they were at their best, when they did something they really felt good about. Students are introduced to a self-assessment, the VIA Strengths Questionnaire (n. d.), on the internet to enable them to identify their five top strengths. During a discussion with an e-tutor, students discuss in a group why it is important that social work students should know their own strengths, interests and values. Conversation 2, 'Connecting to your context', is about opportunity awareness, discovering social work as a profession and discovering the resources available from Unisa. In one activity, the students complete a diagram of the personal and virtual support system that they have created for themselves. Students are referred to YouTube videos on social work as a career. The students' new self and opportunity awareness enables them to clarify for themselves whether they fit into an ODL institution and social work as a profession. These are very important decisions, as they influence the students' motivation to steer their journey and for them to achieve the success for which they are striving.

Students who have reached their second level have probably decided that they want to continue with social work, and during Conversation 3 they create their long term vision and set their academic, personal and professional goals. To assist them to set their professional goals, students evaluate their knowledge of the 27 outcomes of the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree to measure themselves against their perception of a 'good social worker'. Students are provided links to questionnaires, booklets and even podcasts by the Directorate of Counselling and Career Development (DCCD) to support them in acquiring study skills. In a group discussion with e-tutors, students discuss the importance of setting goals. In Conversation 4, they plan actions to achieve these goals as part of their own personal developmental plan. As one activity, students draw a lifeline as a way of taking note of past experiences that may have contributed to their present situation and decisions. One of the resources to which students are referred is the DRIVER programme by the DCCD which assists students in dealing with the causes of exam failure.

Conversation 5 is about a commitment to change as the students focus on personal and interpersonal growth. Students are, for example, asked to think of an examination or an assignment in which they did not perform well and to identify how they perceived their own role in their result. Students can also watch YouTube videos on attribution. As an assignment, students do the 360° Feedback and select four people (with whom they have different kinds of relationships; for example, a friend, their brother or sister, a fellow-student and/or a colleague) to complete the set of questions and the questionnaire as feedback about how they perceive the students. In Conversation 6, the students confirm their direction by monitoring their progress and use their personal development plan to evaluate their academic, personal and professional goals and to identify fields in social work where they may work. During a workshop on their third level, workshop facilitators initiate a discussion on various fields in social work and the job opportunities within these fields. As an activity, students are linked to *my Studies @ Unisa* (2012, 44–45), one of the institutional marketing brochures, for information on how to recognise mental, emotional, physical and behavioural stress symptoms.

In Conversation 7, the students start preparing their own career portfolio and identifying a support network which may assist them in finding employment. Tips on preparing for an interview are also provided, and students are linked to various online job-finding sites. Conversation 8 facilitates reflection on their progress in their personal, academic and professional development by evaluating their progress against their personal development plan. Students also evaluate their journey at Unisa and are linked to *my Link @ Unisa* (2013), another institutional marketing brochure, for information on the phase of 'graduating and lifelong learning'. As a final activity students are motivated to celebrate their success in their supervision group by sharing goals reached and dealing with any unfinished business, giving one another celebration cards or reading the 'Solemn Declaration of a Social Worker' together and lighting candles. This celebration can also take place virtually on Facebook.

At the end of each conversation, the students have the opportunity to reflect on their growth and give feedback on the usefulness of the coaching process. The conversations include various exercises or activities as growth opportunities. The students are also advised to start a journal which could be an old-fashioned booklet or a blog where they can, preferably in private, reflect on their journey of self-development.

The programme consists of information, stories, quotes, activities, discussions, references to resources, assignments and an opportunity to evaluate the conversations. An introduction at the beginning of each level familiarises the students with the two conversations of the year. It also provides an indication of where the students are in their life coaching journey at Unisa. Symbols are used to identify the different components of the programme. Questions have been included in the conversations to facilitate self-reflection, goal-setting, action-taking and evaluation of progress. In Conversation 8, the students are requested to give feedback on the life coaching programme. This feedback facilitates the improvement of the programme.

DISCUSSION OF BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

As part of the pilot study on the online self-coaching programme students were requested to identify the benefits and challenges or disadvantages of the programme. On level 1 the discovery of their own strengths, weaknesses and values were experienced positively. Students found the information on the expectations of and resources within Unisa valuable. The personal development plan, introduced on level 2, but which is monitored throughout the four levels, was found to be effective as it assists the students to have a long term vision and do time management. Students appreciated the discussions on ethics within social work on level 3. The development of a career portfolio and preparation for the workplace was experienced as a highlight on level 4. Students specifically mentioned the usefulness of resources used within the programme, for example, a video on developing a career portfolio and other resources from the career support section at Unisa. Students also mentioned that the programme enabled them to be their own coach and facilitate their own academic, personal and professional goals. The self-coaching programme provided students the opportunity to reflect / do introspection.

They became aware of the importance of support from their family, friends, and lecturers. Further benefits of the online self-coaching programme are that it fits within the framework of Unisa's planned conversion to a full open distance and e-learning (ODeL) environment. It can also serve as a self-selection tool for students, be adjusted for other disciplines and provide a self-coaching model which can be used after graduation as part of lifelong learning.

The challenges or disadvantages of the programme are that students have to have access to a computer as well as to the internet. This cannot always be taken for granted, especially for students in far-off rural areas. Access to internet can be costly.

The successful use of the programme depends on the clarity of instructions, both on a technical and content level. The students who piloted the online programme experienced some technical difficulties, for example, by completing a table online. This will have to be corrected before further use of the programme. The online presence of a life coach can facilitate group discussions and ensure continuity across the four levels, but would create an unrealistic workload, considering that the Department of Social Work, at the moment, has about 15 000 students from first to fourth level. Practical work lecturers could assist with this task, but would necessitate the buy-in of these already overloaded lecturers. Further implementation of the programme will require negotiation with various stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

The Department of Social Work of Unisa is responsible for preparing most of South Africa's social workers for the labour market (Schenck 2008, 5). This is no easy task, considering the challenges of ODL and the nature of social work as a profession (Alpaslan 2012, 4). The online self-coaching programme, with its benefits and challenges, has the potential to make a significant contribution to the support of social work students within an ODL context. It has been developed as an online programme, thus ensuring access to support to students who are far from Unisa's regional offices. It also personalises support to students as it is a self-coaching programme which students use to facilitate their own unique academic, personal and professional goals. It can also be used to monitor their performance in achieving these goals and reflecting on their development towards becoming professional social workers. In this way, the self-coaching programme contributes towards self-regulated learning of the social work students within an ODL context; it support social work students who are doing what makes them 'come alive'.

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