
THE EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS STUDYING AT AN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTION

Catherina Schenck

Professor, Department of Social Work, University of the Western Cape
cschenck@uwc.ac.za

Assim Alpaslan

Professor, Department of Social Work, University of South Africa
alpasah@unisa.ac.za

George Angelopulo

Professor, Department of Communication Science,
University of South Africa
angelgc@unisa.ac.za

ABSTRACT

The article describes the experiences of social work students enrolled at the University of South Africa (Unisa) and the implications for Unisa as an Open Distance Learning (ODL) institution. An online Q-methodology survey and qualitative question was administered to 10 000 students enrolled for social work modules at Unisa, of which, 1,346 completed the survey and the qualitative question. This article focuses on the results of the qualitative data which were analysed according to Cresswell's methodology. The themes that emerged indicated the role Unisa, as an ODL institution and the Department of Social Work, play in the lives of the students. The study confirms the importance of interacting and communicating with the students. It was revealed that the course content not only provides knowledge and skills about social work, but facilitates life-changing experiences and the development of the person.

Key words: higher education, open distance learning, person-centred approach, social work, graduate attributes

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The English author, Oscar Wilde, commented as follows on the impact of education in the UK in his book *The Importance of Being Ernest*: “Fortunately in England,” he said, “education produces no effect whatsoever...” (Brennan and David, 2010:5-12). A comment like this raises the question of what the value of education is in general, and in particular tertiary education (the university). The authors, working at an open distance learning (ODL) university, the University of South Africa (Unisa), conducted an exploratory study with the students enrolled for social work to explore their perceptions and experiences of studying at Unisa as an ODL institution.

The Oxford Pocket Dictionary (2009) describes education as intellectual, moral and social instruction. The Free Dictionary compiled a variety of definitions on the concept of a university. Collectively the definitions describe a university as a centre for advanced or higher learning and research, but it is also seen as a place where a person is supposed to be “*educated for life*”. One of the definitions even refers to a university as follows: “*The use of a university is to make young gentlemen (sic) as unlike their fathers as possible*”, confirming that a university should not only educate, but also change people on a personal level and prepare them for the “world out there.”

Cochrane and Williams (2010) commented further that the role of universities has recently been the subject of wider debate, and academics and university administrators have been criticised for making self-satisfied assumptions about their role as carriers of liberal values and generators of human well being. Calhoun (2006) stated that a university is not only a place of higher learning and research, but the university should contribute to the public good by creating spaces of communication, spaces in which individuals and groups may interact to generate political progress and spaces for critical debate. Cochrane and Williams (2010) further stated that universities increasingly are called upon to play a more active and interventionist role related to wider social goals, the transformation of society, economic development, social cohesion and national identity. Policy makers, according to Brennan and David (2010), are hopeful that Higher Education will have the impact of contributing to a better workforce, a more productive economy and increased social mobility. There should be an impact on the individual and broader society as large amounts of private and public funds are spent on tertiary education. In South Africa, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) requires all Higher Education institutions to provide formative education in such a manner that students are also employable, equipped for life and able to contribute to a well

functioning society. These aspects are referred to as ‘graduate attributes’ or ‘graduateness’ (Chetty, 2012).

What students learn at a higher education institution can be assessed in the tests they write and the exam scripts produced, but it does not tell us about the significance or the impact of such learning (Brennan and David, 2010). They also mentioned that the ‘social’ and the ‘personal’ aspects, ‘new friendships made’, the gains in self confidence and ability to get on with a wide range of people, featured more strongly than the acquisition of knowledge. Higgens (2012) confirms the development of self confidence of the students and add that students indicated the fact that they learn to defend their own views, challenge the views of the others, and critically reflect on themselves (Higgens, 2012). These personal and social effects of university studies may not just be of value to the individual students, they may be socially and economically important and prepare the students to become responsible citizens. Brennan and David (2010:11) then said that *“In their focus on employability, policy makers may be underselling the importance of universities to the creation and maintenance of a stable and fair social order”*. They concluded that higher education has a range of economic, social and personal impacts and learning which extend beyond subject expertise. Considering the above debate, the research question to be answered in this article, is:

“What are the experiences of the social work students studying at Unisa as an ODL institution?”

Context of the study

Previously in South Africa, as in many other countries, a university qualification was reserved for the elite, and in particular the white elite, except for the universities located in the previous ‘homelands’ and the University of South Africa (Unisa), which was, and still is, an open institution (Tait, 2003). After 1994, the university setting changed to a mass higher education system, opening access to universities (Brennan and David, 2010), with the results, according to Strydom and Mentz (2010) that the vast majority of students entering universities in South Africa now are from lower socio-economic backgrounds and first generation students (FGS). Unisa is the largest university in South Africa (350,000 students) and an open distance learning (ODL) institution located in Pretoria, South Africa. Unisa is regarded as the most flexible, accessible and affordable university (Du Plessis, 2011; Wade, 2009; Schenck, 2009; Tait, 2003). Students at Unisa may complete their studies on a part-time basis, making it possible to

study whilst employed or meeting responsibilities like caring for their families (Du Plessis, 2011; Schenck, 2009; Wade, 2009). Unisa also makes tertiary education available to people with disabilities as well as those living in remote areas that may not have access to residential universities (Tait, 2003).

During 2011 the Department of Social Work at Unisa conducted an online survey with the 10 000 students registered for Social Work modules at Unisa. The aim of the study was to determine the experiences of social work students studying at Unisa as an ODL institution. In addition to the structured questions pertaining to Unisa as ODL institution and the Department of Social Work, the students also had the opportunity to share experiences as qualitative comments. This article reports on the qualitative data provided by the students indicating the moral, social and personal results of being a student at Unisa, and in the Department of Social Work.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The authors of the article were the three researchers on the project. The third author developed the Q-methodology research instrument which was implemented in the Department of Communication Science at Unisa during 2010. The first and second authors then reworked the instrument to be relevant to the Department of Social Work. Q-methodology, aims to study subjectivity and individual viewpoints, attitudes, opinions and beliefs of participants using quantitative and qualitative methods. It includes a combination of elements from qualitative and quantitative research (Dziopa and Ahern, 2011; Angelopulo, 2009). Q-methodology was developed by the British physicist/psychologist William Stephenson and introduced in 1935 (Ellingsen, Størksen and Stephen, 2010; Angelopulo, 2009; Van Exel and De Graaf, 2005) and used by a variety of disciplines like political and communication sciences, health studies and Social Work (Dziopa and Ahern, 2011; Ellingsen et al., 2010).

In the quantitative part of the study, a sample of statements about Unisa and the Department of Social Work were presented to the students followed by an open question. The qualitative, exploratory question of the study informed this article. An exploratory design is conducted with the aim of exploring a topic or starting to build knowledge on something that we have very little knowledge of (Babbie and Mouton, 2011; Neuman, 1997). The question “what is your experiences about your studies at Unisa as an ODL institution?” was posed to the participants.

The population of the study included all students registered for all Social Work modules in 2011. The sample of the study comprised all students enrolled for the modules offered in the Department of Social Work at Unisa in 2011 that were listed as having a *myLife@Unisa.ac.za* e-mail address on the *myUnisa* web portal. The 35 item questionnaire was sent to each student registered for the core undergraduate Social Work modules and the students enrolled for the postgraduate studies within the Department with a *myLife@Unisa* e-mail address. Each student was also informed about this survey by being sent an SMS. On the questionnaire, provision was made allowing for the additional qualitative comments. From the 10,000 questionnaires sent, a total of 1 364 participants responded which resulted in 125 A4 pages printed qualitative data. For a qualitative research design, data saturation and not generalisation is important (Mason, 2010).

Qualitative data analysis entails working with data “which are textual, non-numerical and unstructured, organising it, breaking it into meaningful units, synthesising it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what to tell others.” (Bogdan and Bilken, 1982:145). The eight steps for analysing qualitative data as proposed by Tesch (in Creswell, 2009) were used to analyse the data.

The trustworthiness of the qualitative comments provided by the participants was confirmed through triangulation by combining the perceptions of more than two participants and integrated with literature (McBrien, 2008).

The biographical profile of the 1 364 participants in the study is presented in the following table.

Table 1: Biographical profile of the participants

Gender		Race	N	Occupation	N
Male	Female	Black	1171	Employed	960
N	N	Coloured	39	Unemployed	404
235	1129	Indian	18		
		White	136		

Source: survey data

The majority of the participants in this study were female, which confirms the trend that social work is a ‘female-dominated profession’ (Pease, 2011,

McPhail, 2004; Christie and Kruk, 1998). With reference to race, the majority of the participants were black. This phenomenon typifies Unisa's student profile. According to Unisa's Higher Education management information system (Hemis) figures for 2011 on Unisa's Intranet, 69% (or 227 680 out of 328 179) of the undergraduate and occasional students registered at Unisa are black. The table also shows that 70 percent (n=960) of the students are working while studying.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Discussion of themes and integration with the literature

The following themes were identified and will be presented with supportive literature:

Table 2: Themes emerging from the qualitative data

Themes	Subthemes
1. Unisa as an ODL institution offers flexible learning opportunities	1.1: Unisa provides opportunities to prepare for a second career 1.2: Unisa provides opportunities to work and study simultaneously 1.3: Unisa facilitates studying at own pace 1.4: Unisa is affordable
2. Unisa as ODL institution facilitates the growth of the person	2.1: Independence 2.2: Self- confidence 2.3: Self- dicipline
3. The value of studying Social Work at Unisa	3.1: Development awareness of self and context 3.2: Life changing experience 3.3: Change in perceptions, values, attitudes and behaviour 3.4: Dealing with personal issues
4. Challenges students experience when studying at Unisa as an ODL institution	4.1: Challenges managing work, families and studies 4.2: Loneliness and lack sense of belonging

Source: survey data

The first two themes refers to the experiences of the participants of Unisa as an ODL institution, while theme 3 shares the perception and experiences of studying social work while theme 4 explains the challenges the participants experienced as ODL institution students.

Theme 1: Unisa as an ODL institution offers flexible learning opportunities

Open distance learning refers to approaches to learning that focus on freeing learners from constraints of time and place while offering flexible learning opportunities (Du Plessis, 2011; Priebe, Ross and Low, 2008; Tait, 2003).

Experiences from the participants indicated that Unisa fulfils the aim as an ODL institution to offer flexible learning opportunities:

"... It offers distant learning and is ... accessible to a majority of students."

*"I think Unisa helps mostly at **rural** areas."*

*"I recommend Unisa for offering the opportunity to the **elderly** and the **disadvantaged** to study and mend their lives."*

"Thank God for using Unisa as my home sweet home especially at my age seeing myself studying social work."

According to the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) (2002), which is an intergovernmental organisation supporting developing countries with ODL, there is little dispute about some of the social benefits of distance education, particularly with regard to questions of flexibility and access. In fact, the COL (2002) further mentioned that distance education liberates individuals from fixed-location, fixed-time education and provides opportunities to people who cannot make use of traditional educational services, by meeting the needs of those in remote communities, peripatetic individuals who need to study wherever they are, those whose jobs prevent them from attending regular classes, those who are tied to the home, and the institutionalised (Oliaro and Trotter, 2010; Collins, 2008).

Oliaro and Trotter (2010), Schenck (2009) and Collins (2008) confirm that ODL institutions afford mature, employed, part-time, physically and geographically isolated students, as well as students with a disability, and those who lack resources and do not meet the prerequisite entry requirements to gain access into the traditional learning settings, an opportunity to obtain a qualification. ODL, therefore, contribute to South Africa as developing as an inclusive society.

The following subthemes highlight the additional flexible and inclusive nature of ODL as experienced by the participants:

Subtheme 1.1: Unisa as ODL provides opportunities to prepare for a second career

In addition, the participants mentioned that Unisa as an ODL institution offers people the opportunity to start a second or new career as they can gain new knowledge without having to stop working:

“Some people get tired of their current careers and want to try something new. Unisa gives them that opportunity to work and study.”

This includes persons who want to enter social work as a second career as one participant shared:

“Studying social work through UNISA has offered me a chance for a second career (Social Work) in my middle-age.”

Unisa provides the opportunity to study and work at starting or changing a career as confirmed by the Commonwealth of Learning (2002) and Baxter (2012). Harry (1999) confirms the changing political, socio- economic and technological landscape, which have made ODL one of the main pathways to education which can assist in preparing for more than one career in a person’s life time. According to Schenck (2009), the age range of the students studying social work in 2009, were between 21-59 years old with an average of 32 years. The opportunity to work and study is further elaborated on in the next theme.

Subtheme 1.2: The flexible nature of ODL provides the opportunity to work and study simultaneously

The aim of an ODL institution is to provide acces to tertiary education for those working and having to balance work, home and studies. The following comments from the students attest to the fact that they are able to work and study when studying at Unisa:

“But so far I am coping being a mother and working full time.”

“For someone who is fulltime employed and with many responsibilities I have found that it is possible to study social work with Unisa.”

“Studying at Unisa is the best thing that ever happened to me. I never thought I could work and study at the same time.”

“I really like studying at Unisa because I manage to work permanently and study I also get all the information I want on line.”

Priebe et al. (2008) and Bird and Morgan (2003) confirmed that adult distance learners, who study part-time, need to balance a range of responsibilities and experience conflicting commitments, although the working and people with family responsibilities appreciate the opportunity offered through ODL.

Subtheme 1.3: Unisa facilitates studying at one's own pace

An ODL institution should be ‘learner-centred’ according to Artino (2008) and COL (2002), and should enable the students to study at their own pace and in their unique context.

“I study ... at my pace and I am enjoying every moment of it.”

“Studying social work at Unisa is a great experience. I like the fact that I get to do things on my own ... it helps me to develop and to know how to manage my time.”

“I like to ... study at my own pace.”

Within the ODL-context, the student gets into the driver's seat and manages and controls his/her own academic process (Alpaslan, Angelopulo and Schenck, 2013; Artino, 2008). In the comments from the participants, they confirmed that studying at Unisa allows them to manage their studies at their own pace. This aspect adds to the development of responsible and equipped for life graduate attributes, as explained by Chetty (2010).

Subtheme 1.4: Unisa is affordable

Many of the participants commented that they would not be able to study if there was not an affordable institution:

“For people like us (poor) who did not believe that one day studying with a university would happen, it is a privilege to study here at Unisa and a dream come true.”

“I am grateful for Unisa because it helps a lot of students who would not have had the opportunity to access the university. I love the strategy that Unisa uses to reach out to the less-fortunate. Thank you.”

“Studying social work at Unisa is affordable because it minimises the cost as I can study at home.”

The above does not imply that all students can afford Unisa, but it is more affordable than most residential universities in South Africa (Alpaslan et al., 2013, Unisa, 2011; Schenck, 2009). Students can stay at home studying without having to pay for accommodation and daily transport. According to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) report (2013), one of the major factors affecting students' performance is finances. The affordability of Unisa, according to Kilfoil (2008) is currently also one of the contributing factors to the growing younger population of students at Unisa. Accessibility and inclusivity are facilitated by the fact that Unisa is more affordable for the poorer students.

Theme 2: Unisa as ODL institution facilitates the growth of the person

Unisa students have limited interaction with other students in comparison to residential universities which can offer more opportunities for development, but in line with the argument of Brennan and David (2010), Cochran and Williams (2010) and Calhoun (2006), studying through Unisa, over and above obtaining a qualification, facilitated the development of the person and becoming people that can contribute to society (graduate attributes), as illustrated in the following subthemes.

Subtheme 2.1: Independence

Many comments attesting to their independence were made. A few will describe their experiences:

“Every achievement I obtain from Unisa, I celebrate with pride because I know that I have done it myself.”

“Unisa prepares students for the future, gives us opportunity to do everything on our own so that we could be self-motivated.”

“Unisa also teaches self dependency and makes students learn how to find answers themselves before rather than having to always depend on lectures or course leaders.”

“Unisa has taught me to be an independent person because I am my own teacher.”

Kuo, Walker, Bellard and Schroeder (2013), Artino (2008) and Collins (2008) mentioned that ODL requires independent learning, but in this study it emerged that ODL studies actually facilitate independence (Priebe et al., 2008). The participants explained their pride and their positive experiences regarding becoming independent and that *“they could do it themselves”*.

Subtheme 2.2: Self-confidence

Comments from the participants referred to the process of building self confidence:

“Studying at Unisa gives me courage.”

“I really enjoy studying at Unisa and I hope it will build a better person in me.”

“Unisa, (addressing Unisa) my vocabulary has improved. I can think critically and I am also prepared to become a lifelong learner.”

Baxter (2012) confirmed that positive feelings of independence and self-confidence flowing from successful distance learning contribute to the development of a new identity of the person and, as previously stated, one of the main factors for student retention.

Subtheme 2.3: Self-discipline

Linked to the the development of independence and self confidence is the development of being disciplined:

“Studying at Unisa is very exciting and challenging, it teaches you to be disciplined, motivated and determined. You figure most of the things on your own and if you can't do that the lecture is always there for you.”

“I enjoy studying social work at Unisa because I enjoy the challenge of using my individual capacity of being fully responsible of my own knowledge.”

“Studying at Unisa offers the opportunity to take full responsibility for one's development.”

“... you become a very positive responsible person.”

It also appears as if the participants take pride in the fact that they perceive themselves as responsible people and they take ownership of their studies (Priebe et al., 2008). Garrison (2000) is of the opinion that the greater the distance between the students and the educator, the more the responsibility will be on the learner. Ownership, according to Baxter (2012) is also a retention factor for completion of studies and the symbolisation of these aspects, like being responsible and independent, is important in this process. Kuo et al. (2013) confirmed that the students who are self regulated students will perform better although they may take longer to complete their studies due to their more complex contexts.

The comments regarding the participants' growth experiences refer to the graduate attributes which deliver independent, responsible, adaptable and equipped for life, citizens (Chetty, 2010).

Theme 3: The value of studying Social Work at Unisa

In the previous theme the results of studying at Unisa as an ODL institution were discussed. Under this theme experiences of studying Social Work at Unisa will be described.

The Department of Social Work offers a four year BSW degree in Social Work with a strong focus on the Person-Centred Approach as theoretical foundation. The core aspect of the PCA is the focus on the 'self' of the person. According to Grobler, Schenck and Mbedzi (2013), the 'self' can be referred to as the person's conception of who he or she is as a unique human being. The perception of ourselves links to all our experiences and forms the identity of the person.

Subtheme 3.1: Awareness of the self and context

Self-awareness is the ability to have a clear understanding of one's own strengths, weaknesses, thoughts, beliefs and prejudices. Rogers (1987), in his theory of the person and behaviour, focuses on the development of the self, self-awareness and the symbolisation of unsymbolised experiences. This can also be referred to as a process of self-awareness (Grobler et al., 2013). The following comments were made:

"... I have discovered strength that I did not know I had."

"Studying social work through Unisa has allowed me to explore my own values and beliefs and to explore the world I live in".

"Studying Social Work at Unisa helped me to reflect and self awareness. I am now able to interact with different people and respect them regardless of their culture values, beliefs, age, gender etc."

According to Gardener (2001), it is critical for the social work student to facilitate self awareness within their clients, but also to develop self-awareness and to reflect on his or her own thinking, values, attitudes and actions. It seems as if the interaction with the study material and the staff facilitates the process of self-awareness.

Subtheme 3.2: Life-changing experience

Many of the students expressed the fact that studying at Unisa and social work is a life changing experience:

“Studying social work at Unisa has changed my life and that of my family.”

“To study Social work ... is life changing. So far all that I have studied is deeply rooted inside of me. ... Unisa has given me a chance personally to make something of myself and to prove my capabilities. It has been life changing thus far. I have gained knowledge about myself that I was not aware of.”

“Studying social work at Unisa has changed me to become a better person. It has taught me important values in life and to understand other people.”

Bird and Morgan (2003) are of the opinion that the identity and the lives of the students and their families change the day they decide to study. To make the decision to study implies a reconceptualisation of the self of the person (McAdams, Josselson and Lieblich, 2006). According to Baxter (2012), this development of the new identity or self can be seen as the most important retention factor to continue with studies. As the studies become increasingly integrated into the individual’s identity, it becomes less likely that a student will give up his or her studies, or risk losing a valuable part of his- or herself.

Subtheme 3.3: Change in perceptions, values, attitudes and behaviour

Social work education and the offering of the PCA seem to facilitate change in the perceptions, values, attitudes and behaviour of the students. Rogers (1987) referred to the PCA not as a theory, but as a ‘way of being’. The PCA values of acceptance or unconditional positive regard, respect, viewing the person as unique and the realness or congruence of the facilitator is embedded in all modules (Grobler and Schenck, 2010). The students indicated that they experience changing perceptions, values, attitudes and behaviour:

“The most valuable thing for me about studying at Unisa was to learn about the person-centred approach. This theory changed the perception I had about the people. It helped me to realise that everyone must be treated with respect obviously because Rogers states very clear that we are all unique and we have different perceptions.”

“Social work does not only give me the knowledge to help others but it makes me a good citizen as well by making me sensitive to the needs and perceptions of others.”

“It makes me understand and accept people the way they are without judging them. I also take it as a healing process in my past life. It is a part of empowerment to me.”

“Studying social work at Unisa has helped me so much; I now respect everybody; do not judge people; love myself. I have gain lot of knowledge about my values and my experiences of which I was not aware of. I now understand that people are unique.”

In summary, it seems as if Social Work education and in particular the PCA added value to the development of the person and his/her self knowledge and to the graduate attributes as referred by Chetty (2010). The meaningfulness of the PCA was expressed by one of the students as follows:

“I use to study SCK 1503 (number of the module) Person-Centered Approach every night before I take a nap.”

Subtheme 3.4: Dealing with personal issues

As referred to in the previous subtheme, interacting with the content of social work study guides and the PCA seem to facilitate a process whereby the students are able to reflect on their personal issues.

“With PCA you get help where your foundations as a child were interrupted before you can attempt to help the next person. In other words you become the client yourself before people can become your clients.”

“Studying social work at Unisa made great changes in my life. I was overwhelmed by personal issues, but now I am able to deal with them.”

The psychologist, Carl Jung, refers to helpers who have been wounded themselves as ‘wounded healers’. The awareness of being wounded is an important process for any person in a helping relationship (Wade, 2009).

Theme 4: Challenges students experience when studying at an ODL institution

Not all aspects were positively experienced and studying at an ODL institution poses some challenges to students:

Subtheme 4.1: Challenges in managing work, family and studies

The reason for choosing an ODL institution also poses challenges to students, in particular the management of time, relationships, studies, work and family responsibilities (Priebe et al., 2008).

“I think for me it is very challenging to juggle work and studying.”

“The course is very demanding especially for a person who works full time. I do believe that it will be worth it in the end.”

“Mens sukkel om 'n balans te hou tussen werk, gesin, werkswinkels, assignments, supervisie en praktiese werk.” (You struggle to get the balance between work, family, workshops, assignments, supervision and practical work.)

“I’ve got really good kids and a supportive husband, but they’re also wanting my love and my time and wondering why I’m sitting with my head buried in books in the afternoon and then in the evening. It was hard for me to find a measure because I wanted to do my own thing which was new and important to me, the kids wanted me and Peter wanted me and I still had to go to work and keep the income as well”.

Priebe et al. (2008) mention that in particular for the first generation students, managing family, work and study responsibilities create challenges as family members may not understand the importance and demands of the studies. This may add to the next subtheme of experiences of loneliness.

Subtheme 4.2: Loneliness and the lack of a sense of belonging

One of the previous principals of Unisa, Prof. Theo van Wijk, once made the comment that studying at Unisa implies a lonely journey. It is “jy en jou bedlampie” (you and your reading lamp) he said. The participants expressed the following comments regarding their lonely journey:

“... I’m alone no one is there to share experiences that I come across.”

“It is very difficult to learn by yourself. Unisa wants creative and matured persons.”

“Sometimes you find it very difficult to study on your own.”

The potential for isolation in distance learning is a well-documented phenomenon and interaction between the student and lecturer as well and

student to student is of great importance (Asfaranjan, Shirzad, Baradari, Salimi and Saleni, 2013; Kuo et al., 2013).

According to Alpaslan et al. (2013), Baxter (2012) Askeland and Payne (2007) and Banks and Faul (2007), studying through ODL institutions tends to deprive students of personal contact, group involvement, relationships and socialisation. Students can experience feelings of isolation (Oliaro and Trotter, 2010) as Kader Asmal the previous Minister of Education experienced when studied through Unisa when he was a political prisoner. “My own experience of correspondence study...was one of deep loneliness...” (Schenck, 2009:13). The National Survey of Student Engagement (2013) recommended that all learning should take place in a warm, safe and supporting environment, similar to Carl Rogers’ conditions for change (Grobler et al., 2013).

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to present the voices of the students regarding their experiences of studying Social Work through Unisa as an ODL institution, sharing the value that Unisa adds to their lives as well as the value added by the Department of Social Work. Some of the challenges they experience were also described. The contribution Unisa as ODL institution makes to the development of graduate attributes in the students, also emerged. The students shared their acquisition of intellectual, moral and social skills, self-awareness, their identity as a person and the integration of these values into their self structure, despite the experiences of loneliness, and the struggle to balance work, family relationships, home duties and studies. The absence of face to face learning did not prevent the learning opportunities on all levels. The results show that the important or critical factors for the students which should be maintained or enhanced in an ODL context are the following:

- The flexible nature of the ODL institution which enhances inclusivity.
- Unisa as an ODL institution should enhance supportive environments. A supportive environment may include easier access to lecturers, increased communication and support from the administrative and lecturing staff and networking opportunities with other students to address the need for interaction and a sense of belonging (Asfaranjan et al., 2013; Baxter, 2012).
- It is important for the Social Work Department to carefully select the theoretical approaches offered to the students as it needs to develop their own awareness and development of graduate attributes. It can assist in changing perceptions and most importantly encourages a more tolerant,

accepting and respectful attitude towards other people which is critical for Social Work in the context of South Africa. The careful development of course material in a conducive context, therefore, seems critical to facilitate the learning and growing of the students.

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