IMPROVING LEARNER SUPPORT AT THE INSTITUTE OF EXTRA-MURAL STUDIES OF THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF LESOTHO

by

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DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis submitted here is the result of my own independent investigation and that all the sources I have used have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references. I further declare that the work is submitted for the first time at the University of the Free State towards the Philosophiae Doctor degree in Higher Education Studies and that it has never been submitted to any other university/faculty for the purpose of obtaining a degree.

14 June 2012

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12 June 2012

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ADE	Adult Education
BOCODOL	Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning
COL	Common Wealth of Learning
DE	Distance Education
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IEMS	Institute of Extra-Mural Studies
IGNOU	Indira Gandhi National Open University
NUL	National University of Lesotho
ODL	Open and Distance Learning
RET	Rational-emotive Therapy
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats
UNISA	University of South Africa
UP	University of Pretoria

SUMMARY

Student support is extremely important in the distance mode of learning. Distance students are geographically separated from the institution that offers them tuition. The isolation from the institution and from peers may expose students to loneliness which may lead to anxiety, confusion and even result in dropping out. Therefore, there is an obligation for distance learning institutions to provide adequate and relevant support to enrolled students to enable them to cope with the challenges exacerbated by the mode of learning they have chosen. In most instances distance students are adults who have multiple responsibilities such as raising families, holding full-time jobs and leading communities. Therefore, it is imperative that distance learning institutions provide sufficient support services to distance students.

The aim of the study was to undertake an investigation that would identify shortcomings in the nature of support services offered at the Institute of Extra-Mural Studies (IEMS) of the National University of Lesotho. The ultimate goal was to develop an improvement plan that would address the identified critical issues regarding the quality of distance student support at the institute. The literature reviewed provided guidelines for designing an effective student support system. An empirical investigation was conducted to evaluate the nature of IEMS's distance student support. The triangulation mixed-method design was employed to conduct the investigation. Data were collected from students and academic staff through a questionnaire survey and focus group discussions. A resource inventory of IEMS distance learning programme was also conducted. All data were analysed and merged into a strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-threats (SWOT) analysis for interpretation. The SWOT analysis presented a contextualised, empirically–based depiction of the current nature of IEMS's distance student support services.

The analysis and interpretation of data led to the identification of the shortcomings in the quality of some of the support services offered at IEMS. The findings revealed a number of critical elements that need attention, including tutors' lack of skills in dealing with adult students; the unsatisfactory quality of course materials; a lack of technological support; and the unsatisfactory provision

of library services. An improvement plan was then designed in the form of an event guide. Goals to be achieved are outlined and for each goal an event track, indicating the assumed order of events (actions) and the priority status of each event (short-, medium- or long- term), is explained. The improvement plan can be adapted and implemented specifically by the Department of Adult Education (ADE) at IEMS. However, other IEMS academic programmes that may opt to offer their programmes by distance mode can also implement the plan to serve as a guide to the kind of support that can be provided to distance students. The significance of the study lies in the development of an improvement plan based on the directives for designing an effective distance student support.

Key words: Adult education, distance education, higher education, Lesotho, developing country, distance student support, tutors, course materials, library services, technological support.

OPSOMMING

Studente-ondersteuning is uiters belangrik in afstandsonderrig. Afstandsonderrigstudente is geografies verwyder van die instelling waaraan hulle studeer. Die isolasie t.o.v. die instelling sowel as mede-studente, kan 'n gevoel van eensaamheid in studente laat ontstaan, wat kan lei tot angstigheid en onsekerheid; somtyds dra dit selfs daartoe by dat 'n student nie sy/haar studies voltooi nie. Gevolglik is dit noodsaaklik dat afstandsonderrig-instellings die nodige, relevante ondersteuning aan ingeskrewe studente bied, sodat die studente gehelp kan word om die uitdagings wat hierdie tipe onderrig stel, te kan hanteer en oorkom. In die meeste gevalle is afstandsonderrigstudente volwassenes wat veelvuldige verantwoordelikhede dra, soos bv. sorg vir die gesin, leiding neem in gemeenskappe en ook voltydse beroepe beoefen. Dit is gevolglik belangrik dat afstandsonderrig-instellings die nodige ondersteuningsdienste aan hierdie studente bied.

Hierdie studie was daarop gerig om tekortkominge te identifiseer in die ondersteuningsdienste wat deur die Instituut vir Buitekurrikulêre Studies ('IEMS')

aan die Nasionale Universiteit van Lesotho gebied word. Die hoofdoel was om 'n verbeteringsplan op te stel, wat die mees kritiese probleme t.o.v. die kwaliteit van studente-ondersteuning aan die instituut kon aanspreek. Die literatuuroorsig het belangrike perspektiewe aangaande die aard van 'n effektiewe studente-ondersteuningstelsel gebied. Die empiriese ondersoek was daarop gerig om IEMS se ondersteuningstelsel vir afstandsonderrigstudente te evalueer. In die navorsing is van 'n getrianguleerde gemengdemetode-ontwerp gebruik gemaak. Data-insameling het d.m.v. fokusgroepbesprekings en vraelyste geskied, met studente en akademiese personeel as deelnemers/respondente in albei gevalle. 'n Hulpbron-inventaris vir die afstandsonderrigprogram aan IEMS is ook opgestel. Na analise van die verskillende stelle data, is die resultate d.m.v. 'n 'SWOT'-analise in swakpunte, sterkpunte, geleenthede en uitdagings gekategoriseer. Die 'SWOT'-analise het 'n gekontekstualiseerde, empiries-gebaseerde uitbeelding gebied van die huidige aard van die ondersteuningsdienste vir afstandsonderrig aan die instelling.

Die analisering en interpretering van die data het tekortkominge in die kwaliteit van sommige van die ondersteuningsdienste wat deur IEMS gebied word, duidelik blootgelê. Die bevindinge het ook 'n aantal kritiese elemente geïdentifiseer wat voorkeuraandag behoort te geniet. Hieronder is opleiers se gebrek aan vaardighede in veral die hantering van volwasse studente; gebreke in die gehalte van kursusmateriaal; tekorkominge in die gebruik van tegnologie vir ondersteuning; asook onvoldoende biblioteekdienste.

'n Verbeteringsplan is in die vorm van 'n aksiegids ('event guide') opgestel. Doelwitte wat bereik moet word is geformuleer; vir elke doelwit is 'n aksieplan opgestel, wat die beplande stappe wat geneem moet word, asook die prioriteitsvlak van elke stap (kort-, medium- en langtermyn), aandui en verduidelik. Die verbeteringsplan kan aangepas word en is veral op implementering deur die Departement Volwassene-onderrig gerig (alhoewel ander akademiese programme ook die aksiegids kan gebruik in die verbetering van ondersteuning aan hulle studente). Die waarde van hierdie studie lê in die daarstelling van die verbeteringsplan, wat op aanvaarde riglyne vir die ontwikkeling van effektiewe ondersteuning in afstandsonderrig gebaseer is.

Sleutelwoorde: Volwassene-onderrig, afstandsonderrig, hoër onderwys, Lesotho, ontwikkelende land, studente-ondersteuning, opleiers, kursusmateriaal, biblioteekdienste, tegnologiese ondersteuning.

CHAPTER 1:

ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The National University of Lesotho (NUL) is positioning itself to respond to public expectations for a significant expansion in the tertiary education sector. Included in the NUL strategic plan's vision, mission and goals, is the aspiration to improve access and develop new programmes by open and distance learning (ODL) through the Institute of Extra-Mural Studies (IEMS) (NUL Strategic Plan 2007-2012). IEMS was founded in 1960 to provide education and training for the adult population of Lesotho. The initial emphasis was on non-formal continuing education and community training for cooperatives. The Institute's work has evolved over the years to include academic programmes for a Diploma in Business Management, Adult Education and Mass Communications, as well as the Bachelor's degree in Adult Education and a Master's degree in Adult Education.

In the quest to widen access to educational opportunities, IEMS offers the Bachelor of Adult Education through a distance education mode which separates students from their tutors, thus causing lots of frustration in some of the students. This situation requires students to be supported in order for them to cope with their studies and succeed. The findings from a preliminary study done by the researcher reveal that student support services at IEMS are somewhat inadequate (Makhakhane 2007:2); and thus the need to embark on a research study to investigate possible ways of improving learner support for distance students at IEMS.

This first chapter provides the reader with an orientation to the study. It also gives a background to the research problem, followed by the research questions which are addressed in corresponding chapters in an attempt to achieve the aim of the study. A brief outline of the research design and methodology employed in the study is then presented. Finally, a lay-out of the different chapters is also presented in order to acquaint the reader with the subsequent chapters.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Distance education (DE) is a mode of delivery used as an option to provide education to those students who for some reason are not able to enrol for full-time conventional studies. In most circumstances, the distance mode of delivery not only separates students from teaching institutions, but also deprives them of regular contact with their peers (Koul & Bhatt 1989:12). Keegan (2001:44) concurs that the separation of teacher and student is a major distinguishing feature of distance education from other forms of conventional teaching and learning. Academic demands coupled with the isolation and anxiety experienced by distance learners may easily contribute to confusion and loneliness (Qakise-Makoe 2005:52). These challenges may deny distance students opportunities to enjoy the learning experience and to achieve their academic goals; thus the need for adequate and relevant support services to assist these distance students to cope with their learning problems.

Thorpe (2002:106-107) describes student support as an integral part of distance education which aims at addressing individual student's needs, while UNISA (2006:1) defines student support as a range of activities, which complement the mass-produced materials in distance education. Tait (1995:8) emphasises that a wide range of support services should be offered to students enrolled in distance education institutions to maintain the expected education standards. Established DE institutions such as the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and Open Training and Education Networks (OTEN) provide student support in a continuous pattern from enrolment to graduation (Srivastav 2006:2; Sonnekus, Louw & Wilson 2006:53). At the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL) support services comprise administrative support and counselling (Roman 2001:5). According to the above descriptions, student support services include a series of activities that vary according to the needs of distance students. At IEMS only elementary student support services are provided; these include library reference books, face-to-face tutorial sessions and limited information during the annual orientation session.

Provision of relevant student support services is one of the quality criteria for distance education (Welch & Reed 2005:9). However, the obviously poor state of distance student support services at IEMS (Makhakhane 2007:2) calls for IEMS to take measures to address this problem in order for its distance students to access the quality learning experience they need and deserve. This also necessitates the need to find relevant and cost-effective approaches to dealing with the student support services of the distance learners. However, in an attempt to address this issue of learner support for distance learners, one is hindered by the lack of research on distance student support which could guide practices regarding the provision of relevant and adequate support to distance students (Robinson 1995:1), thus the need for this study.

1.3 RESEARCH PROBLEM

In the light of the above, the research problem can be summarised as follows:

- The separation of learners from the institution that gives them tuition in distance learning, creates a problematic transactional distance;
- The distance learners' lack of academic interaction with their tutors, as well as their fellow students causes isolation that often deteriorates into stress that may lead to their dropping out of their study programme;
- The status of the student support services at IEMS which have been found to be inadequate (Makhakhane 2007:2); and
- The limited relevant research on distance learner support that could guide IEMS in setting up an efficient and effective distance learner support system.

Specific questions to address this problem were formulated accordingly.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In accordance with the background of the study, the following main research question was formulated to address the stated research problem:

How can the current student support services for distance students at IEMS be improved?

The following specific subsidiary questions were also designed:

- What is considered as best practices with regard to the provision of quality student support services for distance students?
- What is the current status and nature of distance student support offered at IEMS?
- How can the findings of the empirical investigation be organised?
- How can the identified shortcomings be addressed?

1.5 RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of the study was to determine the possible shortcomings of the current student support system to IEMS distance students which are critical issues to be addressed in a potential improvement plan for IEMS's student support system.

The study has the following objectives:

- To gain by means of a literature review, new perspectives on student support in distance education, focusing on the nature, need and best practices;
- To investigate the nature and possible shortcomings of current student support at IEMS by means of an interactive qualitative approach;
- To draw up a SWOT analysis to organise the critical issues identified; and
- To formulate an improvement plan based on the critical issues identified in the study.

1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of this study pertains to developing an improvement plan which would guide the ADE in addressing the quality issues in the current distance student support services provided. The study is timely, since in the university strategic plan, IEMS has been ear-marked for widened student access. The study

will therefore hopefully contribute to addressing this specific goal. In addition, the study also provides a perspective on student support in distance education in a developing country and will contribute to the literature on student support in higher education as a field of study and research which has been indicated as very limited (Robinson 1995:1).

1.7 DEMARCATION OF THE RESEARCH

The ADE programme is one of the National University of Lesotho's academic programmes presented at the Institute of Extra-Mural Studies; therefore, the study falls within the field of higher education studies, focusing on: the categories of teaching and learning; students' experiences; and programme design according to the categorisation of Tight (2003:8). Primarily, the study addresses pertinent teaching and learning practices in the distance mode of delivery, takes note of student experiences and looks critically at programme design and related issues in the distance education mode. All these attempts have the focused purpose of evaluating and ultimately improving student support at the institution. The study focused on an investigation engaging academic staff and students involved in the adult education degree programme.

1.8 CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

The following concepts require definition for an understanding and clarification of their meaning in the study:

1.8.1 Adult students/learners

Adult students are described as individuals older than 23 years, mature individuals with the characteristics and needs of adults which are different from young traditional students (Gravett 2005:7).

1.8.2 Distance education

Distance education is a mode of delivery that separates the students from the institution that offers tuition (for a detailed discussion see 2.2.1).

1.8.3 Facilitators

Facilitators, in the context of this study, are subject experts (full-time and part-time) who teach during the residential school and are responsible for setting examinations and moderating coursework.

1.8.4 Tutors

Tutors, in the context of this study, work closely with students and provide guidance, as well as advice on academic and personal issues. They may be part-time or full-time staff members.

1.8.5 Face-to-face tutorials

Face-to-face tutorials, for purposes of this study, include an annual residential school and monthly tutorial sessions conducted at different regional centres and students are expected to attend them regularly. These sessions are conducted by tutors, the majority of whom are employed on a part-time basis.

1.8.6 Learner/student support

Learner/student support includes various activities and resources which distance learning institutions should provide to students to enhance teaching and learning (Tait 2003:4). These include face-to-face tutorial sessions, library services, guidance and counselling, as well as the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

1.8.7 Regional centres

Regional centres, in the context of this study, refer to learning centres situated in different locations. These serve as an extension of the teaching institution; therefore, they provide support services to students (Ncube 2007:62). In the case of IEMS and this study, there are three regional centres, namely: Maseru (also serving as head office), Mahobong and Mohaleshoek.

1.9 RESEARCH DESIGN

The mixed method design was employed in this study and specifically the triangulation design which was found to be most appropriate. This design was preferred because it did not restrict the researcher from utilising both qualitative and quantitative methods for data collection. The technique of mixing qualitative and quantitative methods enabled the researcher to collect comprehensive and well supported findings (see 4.1).

1.9.1 Population and sample

(a) Surveys

Non-probability convenience sampling was one of the approaches preferred for collecting data. Non-probability sampling was found to be suitable because convenience sampling could be employed and it enabled the researcher to select participants who had similar qualities; thus, this facilitated the collection of reliable data (McMillan & Schumacher 2006:125). The researcher ensured that all the students registered in the ADE degree programme and the entire group of part-time and full-time academic staff members be invited to participate in the student and academic staff surveys, respectively, so as to increase the objectivity and returns necessary for the study. However, out of the 180 students who received questionnaire copies, 140 (78%) were returned; whilst out of the 55 academic staff who participated, 38 (69%) questionnaires were returned.

(b) Focus groups

Purposive sampling is another sampling strategy which was found suitable for selecting focus group participants. The purposive sampling approach was deemed appropriate because it allowed the researcher to select knowledgeable participants on the topic being researched (McMillan& Schumacher 2006:126).

1.9.2 Data collection techniques

Surveys and focus group discussions were the methods employed for collecting data. The survey questionnaire was informed by the directives for designing an effective student support programme (see 3.2) that was derived from the literature. The questionnaire consisted of closed and open-ended questions. The focus group guide was compiled based on research question 2. In addition, a resource inventory was conducted using a check list of items based on the literature reviewed.

1.9.3 Data analysis and reporting

Data were processed and analysed by means of Survey monkey (www.surveymonkey.com). The descriptive data were presented in visual form (see 5.1 and 5.2). Qualitative data from open-ended questions and focus group discussions were transcribed and coded with mainly pre-determined codes emanating from the literature reviewed. Data from the focus group discussions, a resource inventory, as well as a questionnaire survey were analysed separately, but merged and categorised at the interpretation stage into the following themes: strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities. The SWOT analysis conducted identified critical elements in IEMS's student support system (see 5.6.5) and these were used to develop an improvement plan.

1.9.4 Ethical considerations

The researcher observed several ethical considerations during the investigation in an attempt to avoid exposing participants to undesirable situations. For example, subjects were informed that participation was voluntary and they were also assured about issues of confidentiality (see 4.12).

1.9.5 Role of the researcher in the investigation

The researcher is a member of the Adult Education Department and currently a tutor. However, she has served as a coordinator for the degrees in the Adult Education programme, as well as being head of the department. The different

responsibilities that have been assigned to the researcher enabled her to interact regularly with students. The interaction with students exposed the researcher to some of the challenges they faced as distance and adult students. Since the researcher's academic background is in guidance and counselling, which is one of the necessary support for distance students she realises and acknowledges the significant role of relevant and adequate support in the distance mode of learning.

1.9.6 Quality assurance during investigation

There were specific measures taken to ensure that quality was maintained during the investigation. To increase reliability, the questions included in the questionnaire were based on the literature review. Furthermore, questionnaires were pretested and one well-experienced member of the Adult Education Department was requested to assess the content validity of the questionnaire. In addition, the member was also requested to review data regularly to enhance credibility. The use of multiple methods, including focus group discussions as well as tape recorded discussions facilitated triangulation and enhanced dependability.

1.10 CHAPTER LAYOUT

Chapter 1 provides a general orientation to the study. The following chapters are aimed at addressing the specific research questions of the thesis.

Chapter 2 which addresses research question 1 focuses on a literature review that provides the theoretical foundation for designing effective student support in distance education.

Chapter 3 which also addresses research question 1 focuses on the directives for an effective support system for distance education.

Chapter 4 describes the research design and the methodology used in conducting the study.

Chapter 5 is a discussion of the findings and a context analysis of the current nature of student support services offered at IEMS.

Chapter 6 provides a discussion of the strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities analysis, as well as a presentation of the recommended strategies to implement in a suggested improvement plan.

Chapter 7, the final chapter contains a summary of best practices on student support for distance learners; highlights of the SWOT analysis; the critical elements of an improvement plan; recommendations; the significance as well as the limitations of the study.

1.11 SUMMARY

This chapter provided a general orientation to the study, the aim of which is to determine the shortcomings of the current student support and ultimately address its shortcomings by developing an improvement plan.

Following is Chapter 2, a literature review of the theoretical foundations for designing effective student support in distance education.

CHAPTER 2:

A THEORETICAL FOUNDATION FOR STUDENT SUPPORT IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The main research question in this study has been stated as: How can the current student support services for distance students at IEMS be improved? In an attempt to address this question, the researcher concluded that it would be logical to establish principles to adhere to in determining best practices for learner support in the distance education context. Distance learning and counselling theories in particular, seemed relevant. Chapter 2 therefore, provides a theoretical foundation for this study. The discussion commences with a clarification of the most important concepts in the context of this study and then substantiates the necessity of student support in distance education which is then followed by a description of the different types of student support such as, academic support, administrative support and the traditional system of learner support. This is followed by a discussion of three theoretical frameworks in distance education, namely: transactional distance theory; industrialisation of teaching theory; and the guided didactic conversational theory.. The humanistic, behaviouristic and eclectic approaches relate to distance learning theories. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of the selected theories in establishing a relevant and effective student support system for IEMS. The discussion commences with a clarification of the key concepts in this study.

2.2 CONCEPT CLARIFICATION

In this section the concepts of distance education; distance education students; and learner/student support, are discussed in order to clarify their meaning in this research study.

2.2.1 Distance Education

Distance education is described by Qakise-Makoe (2005:53) as a mode of course delivery that physically separates students from their peers and from institutions that offer tuition. Keegan (2001:50) also emphasises that distance education is characterised by geographical separation of teacher and student. Distance education can be regarded as an attempt to respond to the ever growing educational needs of people of all ages and sectors of society. For instance, in both developing and under-developed countries, distance education affords individuals an opportunity to improve academically due to its nature and capacity to reach wide sectors of communities (Braimoh 1994:6). Individuals opt to enrol in distance education programmes due to their various obligations and for socio-economic reasons. These include a lack of financial resources to enrol in conventional programmes and other family commitments (Braimoh 1994:7). Nowadays, distance education has been identified as relevant for all educational levels, including primary, secondary, post-secondary and lifelong education. There are, however, differences between the conventional and distance modes of learning; the characteristics of learners enrolled in these two modes of learning also differ (Koul & Bhatt 1989:12).

2.2.2 Distance education students

The students enrolled in conventional programmes in higher education are predominantly young in age. Typically, they are also full-time learners whose core business is to develop academically. On the contrary, the majority of distance students are adults who have full-time jobs and other multiple responsibilities and obligations such as providing for families (Dekkers & Kemp 1995:311). Since most distance students do not live in close proximity to their institutions of learning, they are often not able to access resources such as libraries and do not have the regular teacher and peer contact enjoyed by conventional learners (Koul & Bhatt 1989:12). It therefore seems that distance students are disadvantaged in terms of accessing institutional resources due to their geographical separation from their learning institutions. Distance students are also geographically separated from their peers. This is a further disadvantage because they are not

able to interact and share ideas regarding their academic work. Thus, a conceptualisation of distance students also reveals the need for distance learning programmes to provide relevant and adequate student support.

2.2.3 Student support in distance education

Student support includes a range of activities and resources that distance learning institutions are encouraged to provide to students to promote effective teaching and learning. Thorpe (2001:106) defines student support as cognitive, affective and systemic systems that assist students to cope with academic challenges at all stages during their entire period of study. Student support has received a great deal of recognition within distance education because of its role in promoting quality learning (Tait 2003:5; Mowes 2005:144). Generally, student support is also regarded as one of the critical elements for effective learning. Preferably, student support in any distance-learning environment should include human and non-human resources. Human resources may include tutors, facilitators, counsellors and fellow students, whilst non-human resources may include different types of technological devices as well as library facilities (Usun 2004:4). Nonyongo and Ngengebule (1998:11) state that student support "helps to reduce the isolation of students, facilitates effective learning, reduces attrition rates, increases success rate and generally improves the quality of distance education". Similarly, Simpson (2002:6) and Tait (2003:4) describe student support as various activities provided in distance learning programmes that can be instrumental in assisting students to achieve their academic goals. Qakise-Makoe (2005:58) stresses that student support is geared towards ensuring that academic challenges encountered by distance students are manageable and are also positively interpreted by the students.

In analysing definitions for student support it emerges that student support encompasses a variety of activities aimed at establishing, promoting and maintaining a favourable learning environment for distance students. However, it may be pertinent to formulate a definition of student support that can also match the Lesotho context, since student support should not be in conflict with the customs, values and traditions of students (Ibrahim & Sillong 1997:2). Qakise-

Makoe (2005:54) contends that there is an urgent need for institutions to offer distance education that respects, as well as recognises different cultures and different learning styles to address and accommodate students' specific needs.

Taking into account the above-mentioned characteristics of student support mentioned in this study, student support is described as a combination of all resources and services, both human and non-human, which have the potential to equip distance students with knowledge, strategies, attitude and skills that will enable them to succeed in their academic activities.

2.3 THE NECESSITY OF STUDENT SUPPORT IN SUCCESSFUL DISTANCE EDUCATION

In this section arguments that spell out the necessity of learner support in distance education are presented.

In most instances, the majority of students who enrol in distance education institutions have previous experience of working closely with and also of being guided by teachers in a face-to-face situation. Consequently, exposure to a new environment and challenges of distance learning may result in anxiety, frustration and loneliness (Qakise-Makoe 2005:52). Distance students may, for example, struggle with understanding prescribed instructional materials and also with tackling assignments contained in these due to lack of opportunities for peer discussions. In view of this, it is vital to provide relevant support to this group of students. Qakise-Makoe (2005:52) emphasises that the main function of providing support to distance students is to enable them to acquire the relevant skills and gain knowledge for their academic success. (Dzakiria 2004:2) also claims that:

> *Learners, who are actively engaged in the learning process and sufficiently supported, will be more likely to achieve success. Learners who are dynamically occupied in their learning will begin to feel empowered. They will be able to take charge of their learning and as a result their individual achievements and self-direction will rise. They will be better distance learners.*

In essence, these authors acknowledge that distance students need adequate support to assist them in coping with the challenges of studying on their own and being exposed to the different and unfamiliar environment of distance learning. Therefore, the message conveyed about student support is that it contributes significantly towards the success of distance students, as well as to the achievement of individual learner's academic goals (Thorpe 2001:107).

The literature distinguishes among three categories of distance students in terms of needs. Koul and Bhatt (1989:13) describe the first category of distance students as comprising those students who believe that they are capable of coping very well with the envisaged academic demands. However, Koul and Bhatt claim that the confidence portrayed by this group is actually a result of a lack of knowledge about the challenges of being distance students. This group's academic performance demonstrates that they require guidance to be able to perform satisfactorily in assigned academic tasks (Koul & Bhatt 1989:13). The second group comprises students who have low self-esteem; thus needing support and guidance from time to time. The third and last group is reported as being less motivated. Typically, this group portrays a dependency attitude. Consequently, the lack of motivation in members of this group calls for frequent attention (Koul & Bhatt 1989:13).

The above-mentioned categories of distance students confirm that student support is necessary to challenge potentially irrational thinking and also to provide information pertaining to students' academic capabilities (Lawton 1997:1076). Logically, one may argue that if adequate and relevant student support services are in place at distance education institutions, there will be opportunities for students to acquire learning skills and to adopt positive attitudes about themselves and the overall learning process.

Dzakiria (2004:3) points out that a significant number of distance students who enrol in distance education programmes might have been out of school for a considerable number of years. Therefore, they may automatically assume that they are not in a position to match the standards of their counterparts who have continuously been at school. Dzakiria states that this assumption has no

empirical basis, and as a result, needs to be addressed. Supposedly, inclusion of encompassing support services that would cater for a variety of needs, including psychosocial needs can assist in addressing some of the students' misconceptions. The importance of psychosocial needs is well articulated in the study conducted by Cain, Marrara, Pitre and Armour (2003:43) that investigated the student support needs, experience and expectations of graduate students. The findings of the study demonstrate the significant role played by psychosocial support in addressing specific distance student's needs. The findings also suggest that if relevant support services are delivered timeously to distance students, this can have positive results in terms of reducing adjustment issues for distance learners (Cain *et al.,* 2003:24).

As argued previously, the main function of student support should be to enable distance students to cope adequately with the challenges they face during their entire period of learning. Primarily, distance students should be encouraged to interpret challenges faced during the learning period as a part of their personal growth (Qakise-Makoe 2005:56). According to Tait (2003:5) one of the primary functions of student support is to provide cognitive, affective and systemic support. Firstly, the cognitive support involves supporting and developing learning through course materials and learning resources for individual learners. Secondly, the affective support involves providing an environment which supports students and promotes positive self-esteem. Finally, systemic support pertains to establishing effective administrative processes and reliable and relevant information management systems. Thus, distance students are described as a unique group, diverse in terms of age, academic and work experience; thus the need to provide adequate and relevant support (Dzakiria 2004:7). In the light of the above-mentioned issues, Dzakiria (2004:6) and Qakise-Makoe (2005:55) suggest that inclusion of support services in distance learning programmes should be mandatory in order to equip students with adequate learning skills that enable them to cope adequately with envisaged academic demands. To minimise some of the distance students' challenges, it is proposed that an all-encompassing support service be an integral part of every distance learning programme (Gatsha 2007:20).

According to Thorpe (2001:108) support services have a vital role in enhancing learning during the entire period of study, even after graduation. For instance, it is suggested that before enrolment, prospective distance students should be guided and advised accordingly on the requirements and structure of different learning programmes. Later, during the period that distance students are enrolled in distance learning programmes, they may encounter academic and non-academic problems.

This may warrant appropriate support. Similarly, even after graduation the need for support is also recommended for the adequate preparation of individuals for the world of work (Thorpe 2001:108). However, I disagree with Thorpe because I believe that distance education institutions should prepare their students for the field of work before graduation and I doubt the feasibility of distance education institution following their graduates in order to support them when they are no longer their students.

Ukpo (2006:39) emphasises that distance education institutions have to acknowledge that students are the main beneficiaries of distance education; therefore, they deserve to be provided with adequate and relevant learning resources to enhance learning. Ukpo (2006:38) conducted a study aimed at evaluating support services across a distance teacher training college in Nigeria. The findings confirmed the significant role that student support can play towards reducing distance students' dropout rate, as well as improving their academic performance. Participants in the study were adult distance education students, tutors, coordinators and managers. It is reported that students and tutors stated concerns about the lack of teaching and learning materials. Findings also revealed that tutors were not encouraged to provide individual academic counselling. Consequently, Ukpo (2006:38) argues that the reported low pass rates might be a result of inadequate and inappropriate provision of cognitive support. Ukpo further indicates that there was a relatively high dropout rate, which was neither accounted for nor monitored. The findings of the study also suggested that minimal guidance and counselling services were made available to students and it was consequently regretted by the researcher that guidance and counselling support was not afforded the recognition it deserved, since the

role of guidance and counselling is to assist learners to cope with academic and non-academic challenges. Ukpo (2006:35) also observed that poor quality learning materials could affect academic performance and also impact on dropout and pass rates. Since instructional materials also serve as a 'teacher' for distance students, their quality and availability are crucial (Ukpo 2006:35).

It has become clear that student support is a necessity for effective distance education. The need for student support predominantly stems from the challenges posed by a learning environment with which students are not usually familiar. Therefore, cognitive, affective and systemic support is needed. It is for this reason that an all-encompassing student support system is essential during the entire period of study in order to serve the diverse needs of distance students. Different types of support can be distinguished, as discussed in the next section.

2.4 TYPES OF LEARNER SUPPORT

In this section two of the most important types of student support are discussed, namely academic support and administrative support. In the context of this study reference is also made to the traditional system of learner support which is described as non-university led support.

2.4.1 Academic support

Academic support refers to the kind of assistance provided to support students with the intellectual and cognitive knowledge necessary for the various courses they study. According to Welch and Reed (2005:32) academic support in the distance education context focuses primarily on creating an environment that is conducive to learning; such an environment would promote and enhance learning. According to the authors, academic support includes face-to-face tutor support, peer support and assessment, as well as technological support. Simpson (2002:7) also maintains that academic support embraces a range of aspects including the definition of the overall course structure; the explanation of concepts; the provision of feedback; and the improvement of relevant skills, as

well as consistent monitoring of students' progress during their entire period of study. What follows is a discussion of some basic elements of academic learner support.

(a) Tutorial support

Tutorial support can be described as an essential element of academic support as it contributes to facilitating learning in distance education. Various institutions assign different responsibilities to tutors; however, one of the most common types of tutoring in the Southern-Africa region is face-to-face tutoring. The face-to-face method involves several activities which are determined by institutions. Tutors most often spend more time with students than any other distance institution personnel; the tutor's role is to guide students in their academic tasks. According to Creed, Allsop, Mills and Morpeth (2005:18-19) tutors should also be encouraged to assist distance education students in the attainment of adequate learning resources.

Welch and Reed (2005:32) explicitly describe the procedures to be followed before engaging tutors; in addition, they also explain the responsibilities of tutors. According to Welch and Reed tutors have to be trained by institutions before being engaged in tutorial services. The main purpose of training tutors is to equip them with relevant skills that will enable them to perform professionally in their assigned responsibilities. In order for tutors to provide quality support services, it is advisable to assign them a small or a manageable number of students to assist and monitor their progress. Specifically, it is the responsibility of tutors to establish a good rapport with distance students and to maintain an environment conducive to study (Welch & Reed 2005:32). According to Lee (2001:6), tutorial support is aimed at increasing interaction between students and instructors, as well as interaction among students to facilitate collaborative learning. The examples of academic support he presents include constructive feedback; teaching groups; workshops for learners to improve on certain skills; and supervision support on research projects.

(b) Learning materials

Quality learning materials and the reliable distribution thereof are very crucial in distance learning considering that learners primarily rely on the learning materials for content in the absence of lecturers during their learning period.

This fact necessitates that distance learning materials be developed in a simple, clear and readable conversational style (Holmberg 1983:117; Rowntree 1994:13-38; Hartley 1995:279-286). Pandey and Parveez (2006:295) suggest that instructional materials should be designed in such a manner that they communicate the mission of an institution and also enhance learning. In addition, Moore and Kearsley (1996:107-112) advise that self-instructional materials should contain adequate explanations, explicit analysis, relevant discussions and information pertaining to the submission of assignments.

An important follow-up to learning materials is the assignments and feedback which facilitate communication between students and instructors about the content being learned.

(c) Assignments and feedback

Assignments are regarded as very important in distance learning, because they promote student learning. Assignments can also play a very significant role in determining the success or failure of distance learners. Consequently, appropriate measures have to be taken to ensure that administrative procedures involved in handling assignments are followed precisely (Pandey &Parveez 2006:296).

Welch and Reed (2005:31) emphasise that assessment can motivate learning and is of particular importance in distance education. According to them, there are several assessment procedures that can be successfully employed for either diagnostic or formative or final grading purposes. Since assessment is such an important component of teaching and learning, these authors argue that assessment procedures should be handled professionally. For example, they emphasise that sufficient and accurate information should be provided to students pertaining to the submission of assignments.

Related to the element of assignment is feedback; Race (2001:124) points out that feedback on students' assignments is very important because it informs students of their academic progress (thus for formative purposes). Furthermore, Pandey and Parveez (2006:296) maintain that assignments provide learners and instructors with an opportunity to interact.

It is clear that academic support can assist distance students to cope with any challenges encountered due to being geographically separated from institutions. However, administrative support (as discussed in the following paragraph) is also critical since it ensures that distance learners have adequate learning centres which facilitate the necessary support, as well as relevant information.

2.4.2 Administrative support

Administrative support is essential in a distance education programme. Primarily, administrative or non-academic support mainly focuses on organisational issues and effective support for distance students. Welch and Reed (2005:32) state that administrative support relates to ensuring that distance students have adequate facilities and resources for learning, while Brown (2006:160) stresses that administrative support facilitates accessibility to information. Since distance students are separated from their teaching institutions, there has to be a mechanism in place to help students receive information regarding academic events. Thus, Simpson (2002:8) indicates that one of the important functions of administrative support or non-academic support is to provide information. The information can serve as a guide to enable students to make informed decisions, as well as helping them cope satisfactorily with academic challenges. Simpson (2002:8) summarises the functions of administrative support as advising, assessing, and administering. Sonnekus, Louw and Wilson (2006:46) suggest administrative support services to include the following essential services: student registration; fees payment; the use of the short message system (SMS); sending e-mails; sending materials by post; and the use of learning centres and call centres. Additionally, Lee (2001:6-8) claims that administrative support

regulates the functions of support services provided by distance learning programmes.

Since distance students come from geographically dispersed areas, arrangements should be made for learners to receive admission application forms and to register at learning centres. However, some institutions have introduced online registration enabling distance learners to register from their respective locations. To expose students to distance education procedures and practices, it would be appropriate to arrange orientation sessions for them to attend at the beginning of the university academic year in their learning centres (Ncube 2007:63).

The traditional system of student support is also applicable to distance students, although it is not initiated by institutions (Robinson, Le Riche & Jacklin 2007:3-15).

2.4.3 Traditional system of student support

The traditional system of student support encourages support mainly from friends and family; therefore, it is a non-university led support method. A study conducted by Robinson *et al.* (2007:3-15) in the United Kingdom on "Students views of support in higher education: a study of current practice and future directions" emphasises the significant contribution which can be made by student support, even though it is not necessarily initiated by institutions. Support in this study was classified as university and non-university led support. University led support included advisors, tutors, and overall learner support services; whilst non-university led support included partners, family members, friends who were part of the university, as well as those who were not. Participants in the study were undergraduate and postgraduate students; thus the sample comprised young and mature students. Some of the responses provided by participants indicated that effective support was regarded as of primary importance. For instance, participants emphasised the importance of "having someone to listen to

when one is stressed about academic load to motivate and also give reassurance about being capable of coping with academic demands". (Robinson *et al.*2007:7).

The findings of this study conducted by Robinson *et al.* (2007) revealed that friends were reported as the most important source of support. Partners, parents and family were identified as the second most important informal support group. Staff support, including tutors and fellow student support, were reported as less important. The general conclusion arrived at based on the responses provided by participants was that learners perceive non-university led support as very important.

The so-desired non-university led support includes: informal discussions; advice; and the sharing of resources and notes by learners. Specifically, this kind of support is expected to be provided by other peers. Findings of the study by Robinson *et al.* (2007) confirmed that non-university led support was preferred and endorsed by students. In view of this, they decided to include non-university led support, which can provide academic and non-academic support in their proposed learner support system. The authors claim that student support is effective in enhancing learning in conventional and distance learning programmes. Therefore, Robinson *et al.* (2007:140) suggest that there is a need for shared responsibility for the provision of quality learner support by non-university and university structures. This suggestion can be of special significance to a developing context such as Lesotho where family life and friendship are embraced and highly valued in society.

In the above review, a number of important elements of effective student support for distance education have been discussed. These elements are related to academic, administrative and non-university led support (traditional). The next section deals with the theories that are relevant to designing effective student support which will spell out principles to be considered when dealing with these different types of support.

2.5 THEORIES RELEVANT TO STUDENT SUPPORT IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

The purpose of this section is to establish principles which contribute to best practices in student support. Simpson (2002:183) makes the observation that theoretical frameworks can play a significant role in assessing policy and organisational development, as well as informing and influencing any desired improvements in a working environment. Simonson, Schlosser and Hanson (1999:1) claim that theories can contribute to guiding distance learning principles and practices. Simpson (2002:187) also suggests that the relevance of a distance education theory is determined by how effective it is in testing hypotheses about relevant student support systems. Therefore, the researcher concludes that counselling theories can be relevant in determining the kind of support to provide for distance students.

Simonson Schlosser and Hanson (1999:9) and Keegan (2001:56) mention the following three distance-learning theories:

1. Theory of independence and autonomy;
2. Theory of industrialisation; and
3. Theory of interaction and communication.

Amundsen (1996:73) distinguishes among six distance learning theoretical frameworks, namely:

1 Garrison, Shale and Baynton's learner control theory;
2 Holmberg's guided and didactic conversation theory;
3 Keegan's reintegration of teaching and learning acts;
4 Moore's transactional theory;
5 Peters' industrial and post-industrial theory; and
6 Verduin and Clark's structure, dialogue and self-directness theory.

Amundsen (1996:70) and Sauvé (1996:99) observe that the most prominent themes in the frameworks relate to communication and learner autonomy and communication.

Learner autonomy, learner control, learner self-directedness and learner independence are terms used interchangeably in a distance-learning context (Shearer 2003:275). In an education context these terms refer to the degree of control a student has in making decisions about the structure of an education programme. Learner's autonomy encompasses characteristics in learners that are supposed to motivate them to acquire the desire to accomplish academic goals (Shearer 2003:276-278). Learner autonomy generally refers to a balance between support, power and independence (Shearer 2003:278). Jarvis (1996:173) explains that self-directed learning allows students some degree of autonomy during the learning period. However, Jarvis (1996:184) also stipulates that students are not necessarily granted entire autonomy since institutional guidance is essential in some aspects of learning. Nevertheless, Keegan (2001:71) also reports that Moore (1996) suggests that distance students should take control of the learning process since they are usually isolated; thus they have to take responsibility and make decisions about academic activities in the absence of their instructors.

Communication or interaction is described as verbal or non-verbal. The different types of communication experienced in a distance learning programme are distinguished as learner-instructor, learner-learner and learner-content communication (Shearer 2003:277). According to Shearer (2003:277) positive communication between learner and instructor reduces the feeling of isolation experienced by distance students. Shearer (2003:278) maintains that communication has to be monitored in terms of the type and of how often the communication occurs.

Although several authors have developed theories on distance learning and counselling, for this study the researcher will focus on the transactional distance theory, the industrialisation of teaching theory and the guided didactic conversation. These distance learning theories are preferred for this study

because they recognise the most important aspects of distance learning, namely: learner autonomy/independence; communication; and management of distance learning regional centres. For instance, one of the research objectives is to formulate a plan on how to improve on the quality of distance student support at IEMS. The encompassing kind of support recommended by the transactional distance theory and the guided didactic conversation could be relevant for IEMS because IEMS enrols a diverse group of learners who require a comprehensive student support system which would cater for and accommodate the needs of all students. The development of quality instructional materials is also emphasised in the transactional distance theory, the industrialisation of teaching theory and the guided didactic theory and IEMS might greatly benefit from a system with such elements.

The discussion of relevant distance education theories in learner support commences with an overview of the transactional distance theory.

2.5.1 The transactional distance theory

In the context of distance education, the term transactional distance qualifies as a unique and significant relationship which exists between distance students and instructors. According to Moore (1996:23) the transaction that takes place between the student and instructor is referred to as distance education. Moore (1996:22) argues that the transactional distance theory is a concept that describes a unique student and teacher relationship that is separated by time and space. Therefore, transactional distance theory explains that distance education does not necessarily refer to the geographical separation of student and instructor. Instead, the theory articulates that distance education is a pedagogical concept that describes a special kind of distance-oriented relationship that exists between a student and an instructor (Moore 1996:22; Seamonkey 2009:2). According to Stirling (1997:2) the transactional theory encourages positive interaction between learners and instructors and promotes an environment conducive to learning. Furthermore, Moore (1996:22) also observes that the separation of students and instructors influences certain types of behaviours among both students and instructors. Therefore, he suggests that the separation

of student from instructor dictates the approach of teaching and learning to be provided by distance learning institutions.

Generally, the separation of the student and instructor creates psychological and communication space, which may result in an unsatisfactory student and instructor interaction (Moore 1996:22; Saba & Shearer 1994:36-52). Since the nature of transactional distance differs in most distance education programmes, it is appropriate to describe it as a relative, rather than an absolute term. Moore (1996:23), Bischoff, Bisconer, Kooker and Woods (1996:4) concur that in conventional and in distance learning programmes transactional distances exist. Jung (2001:526) mentions that the transactional distance theory can provide a relevant conceptual framework for describing distance education, while Moore (1996:23) suggests that transactional distance in an educational programme is determined by variables such as dialogue, programme structure and learner autonomy.

(a) Dialogue

The term dialogue, in the context of distance education, refers to the positive interactions between the student and teacher. However, it cannot be disputed that negative or neutral interactions may result. Primarily, a distance learning programme dialogue is aimed at facilitating a good relationship between the student and instructor (Moore 1996:25). Moore reports that instructors' and students' personalities can influence the degree of success in a dialogue. It is argued that the success of dialogue in a learning context is influenced by the active participation of the individuals involved in the dialogue (Moore 1996:25). Moore (1996:23-24) refers to dialogue as a communicative transaction in which instructors give instructions and students respond. For instance, Moore and Kearsley (1996:202) are of the opinion that environmental factors such as the type of distance learning programme, the language and the size of the group of students can affect the nature and the degree of dialogue. In essence, Moore and Kearsley (1996:206) concur that the nature of dialogue in an educational programme can be determined by factors such as:

- The educational philosophy of the individual or group responsible for the design of the course;
- The teachers' and students' personalities;
- The subject matter of the course; and
- The environmental factors (Moore & Kearsley 1996:201).

Regular and positive communication encouraged by the transactional distance theory between students and instructor can address the main aim of the study which is determining a relevant learner support system for IEMS learners. The transactional theory approach of encouraging comprehensive dialogue when presenting suggestions and comments on learners' assignments may also be relevant in facilitating effective learning in IEMS students.

(b) Programme structure

Structure refers to the extent to which a programme accommodates and responds to the individual needs of students. Primarily, the type of structure or design of a programme is determined by elements such as the type of communication media available, instructor characteristics, students' personalities, and the challenges experienced (Moore 1996:26). Moore proposes that activities such as the presentation of content, the students' motivation, analysis and criticism, advice and counselling, as well as testing and evaluation, should be well structured. Specifically, Moore suggests that audiotapes, text, videotapes and computers can be effective for presenting information to learners. Moore (1996:27) further recommends that feedback be regularly provided to learners for motivation purposes and to assess learning progress.

(c) Learner autonomy

Distance learning in most instances is an individual activity in which students engage at different locations and at different times. The suggested student's autonomy or independence at the disposal of distance students includes: planning; time management; and studying. Keegan (2001:70) reports that the

concept of learner autonomy subscribes to similar principles as the humanistic theory which advocates the participation of learners in making decisions about their educational programmes (Keegan 2001:70). Keegan maintains that this kind of approach is different from what exists in most conventional institutions; further claiming that most conventional institutions decide on the structure of an educational programme. Student autonomy embodies learning or teaching relationship that allows students to participate in structuring their educational programmes (Moore 1996:30; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzares 2008:2). Although Moore supports the concept of student autonomy, he however notes that this does not apply to all learners who may be differently prepared for self-directed learning, since most students may have been exposed to the conventional mode of learning. Thus, his recommendation is that students first be equipped with the necessary skills to promote and encourage self-directed learning (Moore 1996:31-32).

The transactional distance theory describes the importance of regular and positive communication between students and instructors regarding academic activities. Students enrolled in the ADE programme at IEMS are distance students, because they are separated from their teaching institution and also do not have to attend regular face-to-face sessions. The transactional distance theory deliberates on the consequences of students being separated from institutions and teachers. According to the theory, the separation between students and instructors influences inappropriate undesirable behaviours in students (Moore 1996:22). Since IEMS's ADE students study by distance mode, the isolation may expose them to academic challenges such as, anxiety and loneliness. Therefore, to enable IEMS students to cope with the challenges of being isolated, the transactional distance theory concept of regular student and teacher interaction is a relevant kind of support. For instance, if the interactive approach between student and instructor is encouraged by the Adult Education Department, the assumption is that good relations between students and instructors will enhance learning.

Further corresponding principles for good support are provided by the industrialisation of teaching theory.

2.5.2 Industrialisation of teaching theory

Peters (1996:39) describes distance education as an industrialised form of teaching and learning, because certain principles that guide the distance education practices and also conform to some of the procedures adopted in the production of goods. He also claims that the structure of distance education is determined by similar principles that control the industrialisation process involved in the production of goods. Firstly, the similarities pertain to the development of distance learning study courses which are considered as crucial as the preparation involved prior to the production of goods. Secondly, planning and organisation for effectiveness is also fundamental in distance education, as well as in an industrial setting. Thirdly, distance education is only cost effective if a large number of students enrol. This principle also applies to industrial settings; for instance, mass production is encouraged for cost effectiveness. Finally, both distance education and industrial organisations have to secure funds and engage professional staff to take on the administrative responsibilities (Peters 1996:39).

Keegan (2001:78) observes that distance education is regarded as an industrialised mode of learning and teaching. Simonson *et al.* (1999:4) and Keegan (2001:78) note that the industrialisation of teaching theory suggests that conventional teaching is a pre-industrial mode of teaching and learning. According to this theory, distance learning practices and principles differ significantly from those of the conventional mode of learning (Peters 1996:40). Thus, due to the nature and demands of distance learning and teaching, Peters observes that distance-learning programmes cannot function effectively without reliable and efficient postal and transportation services.

Keegan (2001:83) reports that Peters is of the opinion that distance education is an unnatural process that changes the teaching and learning processes. Amundsen (1996:62) also reports that Peters claims that the nature and quality of most distance education programmes is determined by the existing industrial society. Therefore, Peters maintains that distance education is recognised because it does not conflict with the values and principles of the current industrial

society. However, Peters also proposes that distance education focuses on introducing individualised technology and promoting values that will encourage independence amongst distance learners (Peters 1996:39).

Although the industrialisation theory is not very encompassing with regard to student support services, most of the principles applied in the production of goods are relevant in a distance context.

The third relevant theory to be discussed is the guided didactic conversation theory.

2.5.3 The guided didactic conversation theory

The guided didactic conversation theory articulates the significance of creating and maintaining a positive and personal relationship between a student and an instructor in order to enhance teaching and learning. Holmberg (2003:80) states that the theory of guided didactic conversation focuses on learning, teaching, and organisation. According to Holmberg (2003:83), there should be empathy between the student and the instructor to facilitate effective teaching and learning. Similarly, Amundsen (1996:63) notes that the theory of guided didactic conversation is based on "non-contiguous communication", emotional involvement and self-study. Furthermore, Amundsen (1996:64) also observes that the guided didactic conversation theory encourages inter-personalisation of teaching and learning. According to Amundsen (1996:64), Holmberg (1983: 114-122) decided to use the term non-contiguous communication to describe the type of communication recommended between distance students and instructors. Amundsen also reports that Holmberg encourages the idea that distance learning programmes should offer open admissions, flexible start and completion times of study units and no compulsory requirements to attend academic activities (Amundsen 1996:65). In an attempt to demonstrate the relevance of the guided didactic conversation theory in a distance education programme, Holmberg in Keegan (2001:96) proposes that the guided didactic conversation be based on the following seven postulates:

1. Feelings of positive personal relations between the instructor and the student can facilitate learning and promote motivation;
2. Feelings can be supported by well-designed instructional materials, as well as good two-way communication;
3. Motivation facilitates the achievement of academic goals;
4. A friendly environment promotes a feeling of positive, personal relations;
5. Communication given in a conversational style is mostly understood and remembered;
6. The conversation approach can be successfully translated for use by distance learners; and
7. Planning and adequate guidance in distance education programmes is essential.

In an attempt to justify the significance of the guided didactic conversation theory, Holmberg (2003:81) presents the following statements about distance education:

- Distance education provides learning opportunities to individuals who are not able or do not have the desire to enrol in conventional institutions;
- Distance education is based on the premise that learning is guided and supported by non-contiguous approaches; thus, distance learning promotes and recognises the behaviourists, cognitivists, humanists and constructivists mode of learning; and
- Positive personal relations, study pleasure and empathy between the tutor, counsellors and learner are important in teaching and learning in a distance education programme.

Holmberg (2003:83) states that some distance learning instructional materials are designed in a similar form to the instructional materials developed for conventional learners. Holmberg criticises this practice because he maintains that distance learning instructional materials have to be presented in a conversational form. Furthermore, he also observes that assessment procedures do not meet the required standards for the industrialisation of teaching theory and the guided didactic conversation theory.

Keegan (2001:97) remarks that Holmberg (1983) has made a significant contribution to the field of distance education. The quality of distance students' instructional materials has improved since Holmberg suggested the conversational approach for developing distance-learning materials. Keegan (2001:93) also reports that Holmberg supports the humanist approach to learning, thereby valuing students' independence and autonomy. Primarily, Holmberg advocates for the provision of relevant and adequate tutorial support. The idea of emphasising the provision of quality support services by Holmberg sounds logical and reasonable, since distance students face many challenges and would benefit greatly if appropriate support is offered by distance learning institutions.

Counselling theories have also been identified as relevant to learner support strategies in a distance learning context (Simpson 2002:187).

2.6 COUNSELLING THEORIES

Counselling aims at identifying and correcting irrational thinking which contributes to inappropriate behaviours occasionally demonstrated by individuals. Additionally, counselling attempts to challenge and provide coping strategies to individuals. In a distance learning setting, counselling provides information that can assist students in making informed decisions. Therefore, relevant counselling theories such as the humanistic, behaviouristic and eclectic theories are briefly reviewed.

2.6.1 Humanistic theory

The humanistic theory is based on the premise that a positive environment that comprises trust, respect and being non-judgemental can promote positive thinking and also encourage the desired behaviour in learners. Simpson (2002:185) is of the opinion that counselling theories such as the humanistic or person-centred, behaviourist theories and eclectic combinations of these approaches are relevant types of support for distance students. The humanistic

theory is based on the assumption that human beings are capable of making realistic decisions through self-exploration (Simpson 2002:184).

One of the examples of the humanistic theories is the client-centred approach developed by Carl Rogers (Corey 1990:207). This approach suggests that individuals are aware of the circumstances which contribute to their unstable conditions. Therefore, if there is a need for individuals to change, they will recognise this and work towards change. According to Corey, attentive listening and being non-judgemental encourages positive behaviour. Moreover, demonstrating an accommodating and positive attitude towards learners promotes a sound learning environment (Corey 1990:216).

Keegan (2001:70) also confirms that the humanistic theory advocates the recognition of student autonomy. The humanistic approach conveys the idea that if students are exposed to a supportive and non-threatening environment, they can easily make informed decisions (Corey 1990:223). However, Corey (1990:222) also claims that the humanistic theory lacks structure. He therefore identifies this as a limitation, since he argues that structure is crucial in some cultures for providing the necessary professional guidance. Moreover, in distance education programmes, structure has a major role in determining the nature of a distance education programme (Moore 1996:26). Generally, the humanistic theory supports the idea of student autonomy combined with structure.

2.6.2 Behaviourist theory

The behaviouristic theory is described as more directive compared to the humanistic theory. Behaviourists believe that a supportive learning environment can influence a change in behaviour (Gibson & Mitchell 1990:131). The behaviouristic approach focuses on the nature of a relationship between individuals and the environment. The assumption is that the individual's subjective interpretation of the environment influences certain behaviours (Gibson & Mitchell 1990:131).

Rational-emotive therapy (RET) is an example of the behaviouristic theories. The RET is described as didactic, and directive. Primarily, RET theory aims at restructuring thinking and challenging the irrational belief patterns of individuals (Corey 1990:327). Dryden and Ellis (1988:214) suggest that human beings are made unhappy and uncomfortable by their subjective interpretation of events. Makinde (1984:110) also confirms that human beings can either be rational or irrational. It is observed that individuals tend to be more rational when they are content. However, in most instances, psychological disturbances perpetuate irrational thinking and promote undesirable behaviours (Makinde 1984:110). The RET aims at challenging the intelligence to facilitate constructive and logical thinking (Corey 1990:328). Since distance students face many challenges due to the nature of their mode of learning, RET can provide learners with skills that would enhance learning. Even more so, RET can provide distance learners with skills that would assist them to cope with academic challenges.

2.6.3 Eclectic theory

Simpson (2002:184) claims that some distance education practitioners would prefer utilising the eclectic approach to provide support to distance students. The eclectic or integrated approach is described as a process of selecting relevant concepts and methods from different counselling theories. Providing support to distance students in an eclectic approach is relevant in distance settings because learners face academic and personal challenges. Thus, it would not be advisable to rely on one specific counselling theory, but to draw from all relevant theories to address the various challenges that distance students experience (Simpson 2002:185). However, according to Gibson and Mitchell (1990:139), the eclectic theory is criticised for allowing individuals to draw from any of the counselling theories, while pretending to be experts in designing counselling theories. Corey (1990:446) also argues that when developing an eclectic approach, there is a need for extensive reading and experience.

The three counselling theories reviewed provided guidelines on how to contribute to an effective student support system. An analysis of distance learning in

association with counselling theories in the next section will further emphasise these aspects.

2.7 IMPLICATIONS OF THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR THIS STUDY

In the literature a combination of distance learning and counselling theories is recommended for designing relevant and effective support for distance students. This would certainly apply to IEMS as well. Simpson (2002:184) claims that counselling theories are relevant for providing guidance regarding the adoption of best practices in distance learning institutions. Moreover, counselling theories are relevant in distance education, but not necessarily adequate in terms of guiding principles on student support. Counselling theories focus on interpersonal skills aimed at improving behaviours (Baruth & Robison 1997:24), but distance education is very broad and involves the production of instructional materials, the provision of feedback to students and the general management of learning centres. Furthermore, one may argue that counselling focuses on personal growth and development; therefore it cannot adequately cater for the diverse needs of distance learners.

The counselling theories discussed included the humanistic theory, the behaviourist theory and the eclectic theory. An example of the humanistic theory which was discussed is the client-centred theory in which people are exposed to positive and nurturing environments and thereby are capable of behaving appropriately, instead of being negative and defensive. The client-centred theory conveys the idea that individuals understand factors that contribute towards undesirable behaviours. Therefore, if individuals are not criticised or judged, individuals tend to behave appropriately. According to RET which is an example of the behaviouristic theories, human beings decide to interpret events subjectively and as a result, become unrealistic and unhappy. In essence, the RET theory communicates that individuals contribute to their anxiety through interpreting events negatively. Finally, the eclectic theory encourages an integrated approach when providing counselling.

Although counselling theories are not all encompassing, they are still relevant for distance education programmes. However, Corey (1990:362) raises a concern regarding the behaviourist approach of assuming that all individuals are capable of solving problems without the support of family members. According to Corey (1990:262) in some cultures, family support is vital to promote the desired behaviour, thus traditional support (see 2.4.3). Therefore, he maintains that individuals from such cultures should be encouraged to consult with family members for possible support. The observations of Corey (1990) and Robinson *et al.* (2007) in dealing with support from members of the extended family, sounds a viable strategy for IEMS students. IEMS ADE students are mainly Basotho and as a result, they would value African practices such as relying on support from family members..

The eclectic counselling theory approach is also a suitable strategy that could be adopted as a support for IEMS distance students. IEMS adult education students are faced with academic and personal challenges similar to those of other distance students. Generally, the counselling approach to solving academic and personal problems varies significantly. Therefore, the eclectic approach would be relevant for IEMS because it allows counsellors to apply different counselling techniques to address various presented concerns.

Distance education theories have been discussed in relation to their role in providing relevant support to distance students. Amundsen (1996:64) and Sauvé (1996:99) report that distance education theories regard communication and the learner's autonomy as very important in distance learning. The industrialisation of teaching theory focuses mainly on the production of instructional materials. Although the production of quality instructional materials is very crucial in distance learning programmes, this is not the only activity that takes place, Therefore, this theory would be more encompassing if it accommodated other important elements of learner support such as psychosocial support. The transactional distance theory articulates well on dialogue, programme structure and learner autonomy; however, it is not as elaborate as the guided didactic conversation on some important aspects of distance learning. Thus, amongst the discussed distance education theories, the most appropriate for this study may

be the features of the guided didactic conversation theory. This theory is highly relevant because it focuses on important aspects of distance education such as teaching, learning and organisation/administration. Primarily, the theory explains the role of distance education, which is to provide opportunities for adults who would not or do not wish to enrol at conventional institutions. This is commendable since it is not all individuals who have the opportunities to enrol in face-to-face learning programmes. The concept of adult learning established by the theory is also relevant, since this investigation focuses on adult students.

Additionally, the guided didactic conversation theory encourages good personal relations between students and the institution personnel, such as tutors, counsellors and other administrative staff (Holmberg 2003:81). A combination of tutoring, mentoring and counselling can enhance learning. Distance students are isolated and, as observed by Moore (1996:22), experience psychological disturbances, which require professional guidance that is provided through counselling. Tutoring and mentoring are also essential in a distance education programme; institutions determine the role of tutors and mentors. However, they can serve as role models, counsellors, educators, advisors, etc. (Mohono-Mahlatsi & Van Tonder 2006:286). The guided didactic conversation provides important directives for designing relevant and comprehensive learner support systems which can promote effective learning. For example, the guided didactic conversation theory maintains that the quality of distance learning materials is very important. Similarly, Holmberg also emphasises that distance learning materials should be presented in a format that can enhance learning. He insists that instructional materials developed for distance learning programmes should be different from the handbooks designed for conventional learners (Holmberg 2003:82). This is also an important observation since distance students, in most cases, rely mainly on instructional materials for content in the absence of lecturers.

The main research question aims at investigating how the current student support services at IEMS can be improved. Student support that is provided to students at IEMS must enhance learning. The guided didactic theory is concerned with aspects such as, learning, teaching and the overall organisation of a distance

education programme. Since the role of student support is to promote effective teaching and learning, the guided didactic conversation theory is relevant when preparing an action plan to improve on the IEMS learner support system. The didactic theory is very inclusive; it promotes a comprehensive approach in delivering distance learning services.

The transactional distance theory describes the nature of a relationship that should exist between the student and instructor. Primarily, the theory reveals and demonstrates that positive interaction between students and instructors enhances teaching and learning (Moore 1996:25). According to the industrialisation of teaching theory, distance learning principles are similar to the procedures recommended in the production of goods in an industrial setting. The theory also recommends some of the modern trends which can be introduced during the post-modern era. However, the guided didactic conversation theory also stipulates the importance of a good personal relationship between learners and instructors. The theory also provides guidelines on the quality of self-instructional materials for distance students. In essence, the theory attempts to identify and recommend good practices with regard to the important elements of distance education. The literature has revealed that comprehensive student support includes adequate academic, non-academic and non-university led support. Therefore, in presenting an improvement plan on the quality of IEMS learner support the three identified categories of learner support will be included.

2.8 CONCLUSION

The main aim of the study is to investigate how current student support at IEMS can be improved. Students enrolled in the ADE programme offered at IEMS comprise a very diverse group of individuals in terms of age and experience. Therefore, to accommodate the needs of this unique group of distance students, a comprehensive learner support system would be more suitable. Distance learning encompasses organisation, managing, teaching and learning. Thus, taking cognisance of various activities involved in a distance learning programme, one concludes that adequate support should be provided to learners to facilitate learning and teaching.

Distance students face a number of challenges which may be influenced by the mode of learning, therefore when preparing an improvement plan of learners support services for this group, it would be appropriate to draw from several different principles. One may argue that a combination of counselling and distance learning theories are suitable in terms of determining an effective student support system. For example, counselling aims at improving behaviour and recognises the importance of interpersonal skills. A positive attitude and good relations between students and instructors are crucial in distance learning since they can promote effective learning and teaching. Similarly, distance learning theories also recognise the importance of good communication between students and instructors, as well as the significance of producing quality learning material. Generally, distance education theories provide guidelines on good distance learning theories. Therefore, in view of the identified relevant attributes of counselling and distance learning theories, the theoretical foundation of the study is based on the above discussed counselling and distance learning theories.

In the next chapter directives for an effective learner support system will be discussed.

CHAPTER 3:

DIRECTIVES FOR AN EFFECTIVE SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION

3.1 INTRODUCTION

While Chapter 2 focused on the theoretical principles underlying an effective student support system in distance education, Chapter 3 aims at gaining perspectives from the literature on best practices in student support for distance education students. These lead to the identification of practical directives in the design of a support system which can promote a productive learning experience in a distance learning context. Designing effective student support for distance learning entails observing and recognising pertinent aspects. For instance, the nature and needs of distance students should be taken into account when determining a relevant and effective system. Primarily, in designing a student support system for distance students it is vital and significant to include relevant and sufficient resources and infrastructure that will facilitate quality teaching and learning. Human resources such as counsellors, tutors and mentors are essential in distance learning; additionally, physical resources that include: regional centres, libraries and electronic media are also necessary. All these aspects are considered in greater detail in this chapter.

The literature provides perspectives on anticipated challenges in designing an effective student support system and these need closer investigation. Amongst these is the cultural context in which students find themselves, as well as the cultural diversity with which any support programme has to deal. Furthermore, designing effective self-instruction materials can also be a challenge since distance learning materials have to be designed differently from textbooks. The geographical distribution of distance students also influences the quality of any student support system. For instance, the provision of adequate technological support is still a problem in countries such as Lesotho, because of a lack of adequate and appropriate technological infrastructure in some parts of the

country. In addressing some of these aspects, institutional collaboration with regard to the sharing of resources would be advantageous. However, this can also be a challenge because, there seems to be a lack of relevant research on learner support in distance learning and this poses challenges in the promotion of good practices in this regard.

Examples of student support systems are included in the chapter and they provide valuable perspectives to take into consideration in this study. The institutions selected for discussion include the University of South Africa, the Distance College of Botswana, the Indira Ghandi National Open University in India and the Open Training and Education Network in Australia.

The perspectives gained in the literature review and presented in this chapter finally lead to the formulation of a set of key directives for effective student support for distance education. These directives can be used as the minimum standards or broad criteria against which an existing support system can be evaluated. Furthermore, they can also serve as baseline for designing (and refining) a relevant action plan for improving an existing support system (such as at IEMS).

The chapter commences with an overview of the resources and infrastructure needed to ensure that distance students are provided with relevant and adequate resources.

3.2 RESOURCES AND INFRASTRUCTURE NEEDED IN STUDENT SUPPORT FOR DISTANCE LEARNING

In all distance learning institutions there are attempts to provide adequate human and physical resources to learners for the purposes of maintaining quality, together with adhering to generally accepted best distance learning practices. Therefore, this section describes the significance of availing relevant and adequate human and non-human resources.

3.2.1 Human resources

Distance students require adequate and relevant human resources such as counsellors to cope with the challenges of being isolated and to assist them to accomplish their academic goals. Tutorial staff is another example of an important human resource that is engaged in most distance learning programmes.

Counsellors are responsible for providing guidance and counselling before enrolment and during the entire study period. Pre-counselling is essential to assist learners to choose courses suitable for them based on their capabilities. In addition, during the learning period, distance students also experience various challenges, which may result in inappropriate behaviour; thus, there is a need for distance education institutions to engage trained counsellors to provide guidance and counselling (Jha, Ghosh, & Mehta 2006:283). Counselling may thus be regarded as one of the essential support services that can assist distance students in making informed decisions regarding their academic course, before and during their studies. Gibson and Mitchell (1990:32) rightly describe counselling as a client-centred process that focuses on assisting individuals to solve their problems.

Rekkedal (1991:3) emphasises that counselling in a distance education context refers to providing advice to students on academic issues. Trained counsellors can also offer counselling to students prior to enrolment. Jha *et al.* (2006:282) suggests that counsellors should provide prospective students with adequate information on different programmes offered at the distance institution. Distance learning institutions should certainly be encouraged to offer and extend this type of support service in an attempt to assist students in adjusting to the challenges posed by the distance mode of delivery.

Tutors are assigned the responsibility of working closely with distance students. Welch & Reed (2005:32) suggests that tutors have to be trained by institutions before being engaged in tutorial services. The main purpose for training tutors is to equip them with skills that that will enable them to perform professionally in

their assigned responsibilities. Individual institutions usually decide on the responsibilities of tutors. In most instances, tutors provide academic support, such as marking assignments, advising, conducting face-to-face sessions, providing feedback and guiding students in their preparations for examinations.

3.2.2 Physical resources

Physical resources are of major importance in a developing country; three examples of physical resources are discussed in this section, namely the regional centres, libraries and electronic media/infrastructure.

3.2.2.1 Regional centres

In distance learning programmes learning centres, also known as regional centres, usually serve as an extension of the teaching institution for the provision of support services to distance learners (Ncube 2007:62). Institutions decide on a suitable name to give to these designated learning centres. However, in the African context, regional centres seem to be the preferred term. The term *regional centre* is also used in this study because countries in the Southern-African region, including Lesotho, tend to use the facility more often.

Since distance education introduces an element of separation of the student from the teaching institution, alternative structures have to be in place to promote effective learning (Braimoh 1994:22). Most distance students live far away from the main campus and this prohibits them from easily accessing available institutional learning resources. For example, high travelling costs may portray distance learning as costly and unaffordable. To reduce travelling expenses incurred by students, regional centres should be at locations where there is easy accessibility (Ncube 2007:63). However, this does not suggest that institutions should decide on having centres randomly; instead there should be adequate planning based on students' profiles (Ncube 2007:63). The functions of learning centres include: providing venues for face-face sessions; students' registration; and the provision of facilities for training workshops, group discussions and counselling services (Ncube 2007:62-67).

3.2.2.2 Libraries

Libraries are an essential aspect of student support, especially in a distance-learning context where the student depends mainly on written materials during the learning period (Ncube 2007:65). In the African context, institutions are encouraged to have physical libraries equipped with adequate learning resources. Physical libraries are mainly recommended for the African continent due to a lack of modern technological devices that could enable students to access some of the learning resources easily (Ncube:2007:65). However, Braimoh (2005:172) reports that in most distance learning institutions library facilities are only made available at the main campuses. Consequently, Braimoh (2005:172) proposes that distance learning institutions should provide equal and similar learning facilities to distance students, even for those who visit only the regional centres. However, in most instances it would not be feasible to duplicate library facilities due to financial and administrative constraints.

3.2.2.3 Electronic media/infrastructure

Currently, there is a great demand for accessibility of relevant student support. Consequently, the use of telephones, radios, mobile devices, computers and television has become important in student support. Modern technology has contributed to the availability of information (Daniel 2006:4), even though some areas of developing countries often do not have the necessary infrastructure and connectivity that can facilitate easy access to the desired information.

(a) Telephone

A telephone is identified as a relevant and viable student support in most African countries. Gaskell and Mills (2006:2) point out that telephone student support for distance students has been in existence since 1970. These authors describe three types of telephone support and tuition used as: proactive contact between institutions and the individual student; responsive contact between the tutor and the individual student; and planned tutorial by phone. Proactive contact with the

institution involves contacting students shortly after enrolment to offer them support and encouragement. Regular communication by telephone with students to assess and monitor academic progress is reported as essential for improving students' retention rates. With regard to the proactive contact from the tutor, Gaskell and Mills state that if tutors, prior to submission of the first assignment contact students, the chances are that they may score good marks. Additionally, it is reported that telephone contact is effective for initial support compared to e-mails or letters (Gaskell & Mills 2006:3). Responsive contact pertains to tutors responding to questions and comments. Telephones are also considered as more effective in facilitating a discussion of content by the tutor and student within a short period of time, compared to the process of sending several e-mail messages. This kind of exercise is considered as tutorial contact from the tutor.

(b) Mobile phones

With the rapid increase in the use of cell phones in developing countries (replacing the traditional telephone in many instances), mobile devices can provide an additional and often easy way of communication and support. It has also given rise to the practice of mobile learning. Mobile learning (m-learning) is an innovation that has been applauded by most developing African countries offering programmes by distance mode. Viljoen, Du Preez and Cook (2005:116) refer to m-learning as "the use of mobile devices and mobile phones for teaching and learning". Daniel (2006:5) also concurs that mobile phones can be very effective in facilitating communication with students on academic and administrative issues. Brown (2006:16) claims that the mobile phone affords students in remote areas and professional distance students who are constantly travelling on business, an opportunity to access support services. M-learning is considered as a feasible option due to the rapid expansion of the cell phone industry and in view of inadequate infrastructure for communication technology in most developing countries in Africa (Brown 2006:16).

Many distance-learning institutions are engaged in projects to investigate the impact of m-learning support. For example, the University of Pretoria (UP), conducted a study on implementing short message service (SMS) technologies

to support distance students. The purpose of the study was to allow students to communicate with facilitators and other peers, since the majority of the learners had mobile phones. The majority of students enrolled in the UP distance education programme live in remote rural places with inadequate or non-existent communication infrastructure (Viljoen *et al.* 2005:116). Participants in the study were provided with academic and administrative support. SMS messages for administrative support included messages informing students about study materials sent to them and reminding them to collect study materials from the post office. Participants were also sent SMS messages reminding them of the dates for submission for assignments, as well as dates of examinations. Similarly, SMS messages for academic support are sent to participants. A list of messages sent include instruction messages to guide students with information that could assist them when working on assignments. In addition, questions and answers about specific topics are also sent to learners. It is reported that the study findings demonstrated a reduced number of returned learning packages; improved attendance during face-to-face sessions; an increase in the number of students who registered on time; and also an improvement in the quality of assignments submitted by learners (Brown 2006: 14-25).

(c) Radio

For most African countries, including Lesotho, radio is still regarded as a feasible educational option for teaching adults, as well as primary and high school learners. Couch (in Arulchelvan & Viswanathan 2008:40) states that although television is preferred to radio, radio is easily accessible to a fairly large number of people at reasonable costs. Most importantly, Arulchelvan and Viswanathan report that some universities have established that a radio can serve as a supplementary device for slow students. In addition, radio can also facilitate curriculum content with which some teachers are not conversant (Arulchelvan & Viswanathan 2008:40). In countries such as India, educational radio also has a facility that allows the audience to have discussions and ask questions. Furthermore, Satyanarayana and Sesharatnam (in Arulchelvan & Viswanathan 2008:40) suggest that radio is effective in facilitating remedial tutorials. Furthermore, they also claim that distance students tend to listen to radio

programmes more frequently than conventional learners. This makes the radio an effective and viable medium of instruction in developing countries such as Lesotho, Botswana and Malawi (Arulchelvan & Viswanathan 2008:41).

(d) Computers and the Internet

Computers and the internet are technologies preferred by distance students, since they enable them to access a vast amount of valuable information within a relatively short period of time (Arulchevan & Viswanathan 2008:42). The internet allows students to access learning resources and also permits them to interact with peers and any other groups of their choice. According to Beldarrain (2006:139) these technologies enable distance students to easily access learning resources from different locations. Beldarrain (2006:140) also emphasises that technology has the capacity to promote communication and collaboration among distance students by making use of email, the social media, blogs, wikis and more. Arulchevan and Viswanathan (2008:42) concur that the internet allows students to access learning resources and also permits them to interact with peers and any other groups of their choice. Nowadays, most students use the internet to access information on various academic areas, including career advancement and career management (Arulchevan & Viswanathan 2008:42). Therefore, the internet has the capacity to provide more information compared to the radio (Arulchevan & Viswanathan 2008:42) However, Verma and Lata (2006:286) mention that mostly, due to financial constraints, many students in the poorer countries in Africa cannot afford to buy computers for learning; thus, institutions in those countries provide other relevant and affordable student support, such as radio services instead of computers to distance students.

(e) Television

Television is described as one of the mediums of instruction that can successfully be adopted to promote effective teaching and learning. Arulchelvan and Viswanathan (2008:41) claim that educational television captures students' interest and can motivate students to perform satisfactorily in their academic work. According to these authors, the combination of sound and picture provides

a representation of reality and thus enhances learning. They argue that institutions should promote students' access to television sets at the respective learning centres to enable students to watch educational programmes. Primarily, the authors propose that institutions introduce relevant television programmes which can address the academic needs of students (Arulchelvan & Viswanathan 2008:41).

It is clear that infrastructure plays and can play a very important role in providing quality distance education and support. Any effective support system should consider the most practical, affordable and effective way of utilising technological resources. The provision of adequate technological infrastructure is a real challenge, in particular in the context of a developing country. It is also one of the many challenges distance learning has to deal with in Lesotho. This and other challenges are discussed in the next section.

3.3 CHALLENGES IN ESTABLISHING AN EFFECTIVE STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEM IN A DISTANCE EDUCATION INSTITUTION

An effective student support system is expected to provide relevant, adequate, as well as essential services to an institution's student body. There are however, several challenges an institution has to take into consideration when implementing a student support system for distance students. These include: the cultural context; designing of effective self-instruction materials; the geographical distribution of students; provision of adequate technological infrastructure; establishing possible institutional collaboration; and a lack of comprehensive research on learner support in distance education.

3.3.1 Cultural context

Cultural differences are an important variable to be considered when designing student support systems since they can influence students' expectations and styles of learning (Carnwell, Moreland & Helm 2001:63). According to Carnwell *et al.* (2001:63), values and beliefs can also influence students' perceptions about the significance of support services. For example, students who are considered

independent are less likely to seek support from designated student support sources. On the contrary, it is also reported that students who regard learning as a social process are more likely to expect and utilise support services (Carnwell *et al.* 2001:63). The behaviour alluded to is as a result of what is described as cultural capital. Theoretically, cultural capital includes attitudes, beliefs, and values influenced by several factors in the environment which an individual experiences as he/she grows up. The described cultural influences suggest that student support has to take cognisance of cultural differences to accommodate the different interpretations of support services by students.

Dzikiria's (2004:1-21) case study on the experience of Malaysian distance students also supports the notion that cultural difference can influence learning styles. Dzakiria reports that Malaysian students are very reserved and passive in nature due to their cultural orientation. Consequently, they expect elaborate and regular instructions from teachers. If that is not the case, they feel neglected and academically challenged (Dzakiria 2004:15). The study confirms that cultural orientation influences different expectations and interpretations of student support by distance students.

Qakise-Makoe (2005:46) opines that acknowledging the cultural context is instrumental in determining the nature of support appropriate for distance students. What is considered a relevant support system in the Western context may very often not necessarily apply in the African setting. Thus, there is a challenge for most African countries to design support activities for students which do not conflict with their cultural values (Qakise-Makoe 2005:49).

3.3.2 Designing effective self-instruction materials

Distance students in most instances do not meet frequently with instructors to establish an environment of learning and teaching as in the conventional mode of learning. Therefore, the teaching and learning is mainly through self- instruction materials (which could be in the form of text, audio and video formats), tutoring, tele-conferencing and assignments. However, many distance education institutions rely mainly on self-instruction materials as a medium of instruction

(IGNOU 2001:12). Consequently, if self-instruction materials play such a significant role for distance students, it would be advisable to provide adequate guidelines which promote and facilitate the production of quality learning materials. According to IGNOU 2001:12) self-instruction materials for distance students should be presented in a different style from the text-books used by conventional learners. For example, IGNOU contends that the difference in the presentation of text-books and self-instruction materials can be attributed to the fact that self-instruction materials are intended to assist students to learn effectively and independently in the absence of teachers (IGNOU 2001:12). Thus, IGNOU (2001:12) proposes that self-instruction materials be self-explanatory, self-contained, self-directed, self-motivating and self-evaluating.

Pascual, Murriello and Suarez (2000:4-5) are also of the opinion that distance-learning institutions have the responsibility of developing materials of good quality, since distance students primarily rely on materials as a means of learning and communication. To maintain quality standards Pascual *et al.* (2000:4) suggest that tutors be engaged in the material production, because if they are not directly involved they may not be very conversant with the content and this may negatively affect their general performance.

Welch and Reed (2005:29) also agree that self-instruction materials are the key elements of support for many distance students. Taking cognisance of this, the authors suggest that generally accepted criteria should be observed when developing distance education self-instruction materials. The criteria proposed by Welch and Reed include the following important guidelines:

- Stating learning aims, learning outcomes and actual allocation of time per section to enable learners prepare a realistic study schedule;
- Including appropriate and relevant introductions, linking a summarising paragraph to motivate learners;
- Considering the target group of students and
- Recognising academic background and any kind of experience gained by students.

Holmberg (1983:117) also emphasises that when developing learning materials for distance students some of the most important principles that should guide the process should include content which is presented in a simple and readable language, with adequate information regarding activities students are expected to perform. In addition, Holmberg maintains that students should be involved emotionally in an attempt to promote effective learning.

3.3.3 Geographical distribution

The geographical situation of a distance learning centre and the distribution of students will determine how easily support services can be accessible. Since modern technology allows students in some countries to access support materials easily wherever they are, distance does not seem to be a constraint. However, in some countries the traditional practice of restricting females travelling to certain places, especially in the evening, has to be considered when planning for student support services. In view of this, Tait (2000: 292) claims that "social meanings of geography" work hand-in-hand with technology; therefore, the two can determine the most convenient manner in which support services can be made available to distance students. Furthermore, a lack of appropriate infrastructure in remote areas in most African countries, including Lesotho precludes students from accessing relevant technological support.

Unfavourable climatic conditions such as heavy snow and extreme rainy seasons frequently experienced in Lesotho, have a negative impact on students who need to travel and access the required learning support.

3.3.4 Provision of adequate technological infrastructure

Technological infrastructure and communication are still a challenge for some of the distance learning institutions in Africa. Tait (2000:292) postulates that institutions have an obligation, prior to introducing support services, to establish if students have access to any technological devices and the accompanying infrastructure. According to Tait, it is also important for an institution to determine what is at its disposal in terms of technology. It would be advisable for institutions

to confirm with students the availability of and access to technological devices and services (e.g. radio, cell phones, TV, computers, the internet, and others), in their respective regions, including their workplaces. Tait further suggests that in the second generation of distance learning, print and face-to-face tuition still play a significant role in the provision of support services. Probably, the choice among the different types of technological support will be influenced by the availability of adequate and appropriate technological infrastructure on the African continent.

3.3.5 Institutional collaboration

Institutional collaboration refers to a working partnership where institutions agree to participate collaboratively in identified activities. According to Braimoh (2002:244) and Masalela (2007:45) this type of collaboration usually implies cooperation in terms of sharing various resources. Braimoh (2002:244) and Masalela (2007:53) concur that in order to reduce expenditure on resources it could be advantageous for distance learning institutions to forge partnerships with other stakeholders. Masalela notes that collaboration is determined by national structures and policies. Although Masalela confirms the significant role of collaboration, she also reiterates the importance of observing context when engaging in institutional collaboration (Masalela 2007:45).

Masalela (2007:45-46) distinguishes between three types of institutional collaboration, namely the franchise; the market place; and the collaborative type, which can be described briefly as follows:

- The franchise type of collaboration is a type of model which institutions without adequate infrastructure adopt. These institutions teach at a distance but do not have traditional campuses. These institutions have policies and also award degrees to students.
- The marketplace type of collaboration refers to practices adopted by some distance education institutions of not developing any course materials; instead they prefer to purchase materials from other distance learning institutions.

- The collaborative type of approach endorses partnerships of institutions in the development of learning materials. It also encourages exchange programmes for students and academic staff (Masalela 2007:49).

Braimoh (2002:245) argues that since most African countries lack appropriate technological infrastructure, the sharing of support resources for students might be a viable option. However, according to this author, most of the materials prescribed for students enrolled in distance learning institutions in Africa are not relevant. With regard to effective collaboration, Braimoh states that there should be well spelled-out conditions. For instance, if institutions agree to collaborate on material development, there should be well-articulated procedures and guidelines to facilitate the collaboration process. Most importantly, there has to be a shared mission, values and responsibilities that can be reinforced by constant and productive communication (Braimoh 2002:246). Masalela (2007:45) also observes that in some instances collaboration can be counterproductive if partners lack respect for each other. She also cautions that collaboration involves financial risks and may also jeopardise any existing relationships. Although institutional collaboration may certainly hold advantages for IEMS in advancing the current support for its students, warnings and other perspectives such as the above-mentioned should be kept in mind.

3.3.6 Lack of research on student support in distance education

Robinson (1995:1) mentions that distance education research has not afforded student support the recognition it deserves when compared to other areas of distance education. According to this author, this could be a result of not considering student support as an activity as prestigious as other aspects of distance education research, e.g. by means of priority funding (Robinson 1995:1). Additionally, it is also reported that research conducted on student support does not demonstrate the existence of diversity in most distance education programmes (Robinson 1995:3). This would certainly mean that all elements of a support system need to be researched, as well as evaluated and monitored regularly. These would include: tutorial sessions and workshops; study material; and the different types of services on offer. Furthermore, Robinson claims that

some of the studies conducted on student support are not theoretically grounded (Robinson1995:3). Therefore, one may conclude that it is important that research be conducted on student support, since it is vital that any recommended student support system be informed by findings from well-grounded investigations.

3.3.7 Summary of challenges in establishing student support

In analysing the challenges anticipated when a comprehensive learner support system is planned or reconsidered, one concludes that the provision of relevant and adequate support services involves an elaborate and consultative process, which has to include relevant stakeholders. For example, the importance of the students' profiles is well articulated, since it assists to determine the needs of each unique group. Distance students comprise a very diverse group in terms of age and experience; thus, it is crucial to be aware of their different characteristics. Moreover, if adequate and appropriate information is not available about students' attributes, as well as their geographical distribution, it may not be possible to propose a feasible and relevant support plan. Furthermore, since technological infrastructure is still a challenge for most African countries, this study needs to investigate and consider what is advisable and advantageous in terms of students' current accessibility to technology and the relevant infrastructure. The discussions in this section also clearly spell out the possibilities that institutional collaboration hold for increasing the effectiveness of student support in distance education. The perspectives gained in the chapter so far, can be enriched by a consideration of exemplary support services for distance education students in other parts of the world.

3.4 EXAMPLES OF STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEMS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

According to Shareef and Peterson (2005:1) the adopted student support systems in some developing countries are not relevant and all-encompassing in nature. The authors are of the opinion that financial constraints may be a contributing factor towards the often low quality of student support services. In addition, they also emphasise that the nature of the context in individual countries

determines the nature of the support services for distance support. Gatsha (2007:13) also concurs that "there is no single existing universal learner support system. Instead the nature of any learner support system has to be informed by identified needs of learners". Ibrahim and Silong (1997:5) also state that variables such as culture, finances and academic experience play a role in determining the nature of student support relevant to a specific clientele. Therefore, they regard it as acceptable if respective institutions choose to adopt different student support systems in an attempt to accommodate the needs of a diverse group of distance students.

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) (1993:16) also distinguishes two types of student support systems; namely the traditional and the industrialised. According to COL, the two models have distinct features. The traditional type encourages family and community support, as well as the provision of appropriate self-instruction materials, which can also serve as support for distance students. The industrialised type is regarded as more encompassing due to its nature of utilising various communication networks and a variety of study centres. Institutions may prefer to adopt a student support system that matches their clienteles' needs. For example, the University of South Africa (UNISA) established a student support system which could be described as the industrialised type. The system is very inclusive in terms of modern technology. The UNISA student support system will be described in detail later in this chapter. Similarly, distance learner support systems of the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning, the Indira Gandhi National Open University and the Open Training and Education Networks, will also be discussed. Each of the student support systems adopted by these respective institutions has unique features which will be articulated. Moreover, these distinct features may serve as directives in the search for an improvement in the student support at IEMS.

3.4.1 University of South Africa

Information regarding UNISA and its current support system was sourced from the relevant web pages (see www.unisa.ac.za) and from Sonnekus *et al.* (2006: 44-53).

UNISA has been in existence since 1873; initially, it operated as a college that mainly offered courses by correspondence. The University boasts a population of approximately 300,000 students per year constituting a population from very diverse backgrounds (Mbatha & Naidoo 2010:170). UNISA's student support model is designed in such a manner that administrative support and academic support are integrated. For example, administrative support has a convenient online facility that enables students to enrol, as well as make payments. However, a fair number of students have to register at the main campus since their study centres are in remote areas without any communication networks. The large numbers of students from different parts of the country enrolled at UNISA compel the institution to operate from regional centres. Students also have a call centre facility that provides them with an opportunity to present their academic and administrative concerns. The UNISA website offers services such as: links to learning resources; discussions with facilitators; the submission of assignments; and access to the university calendar of events. In this comprehensive student support system, UNISA is able to address some of the needs of students who come from diverse backgrounds (Sonnekus *et al.* 2006:44-53).

The Bureau for Career Counselling and Academic Development facilitates the provision of personal support to students. For instance, guidance and counselling is offered to students to assist them in making informed decisions about suitable course selection. Advice on personal concerns is also offered to facilitate effective learning. Additional courses such as Time Management and Reading are also offered to enhance learning. Peer support is emphasised at UNISA. This kind of support is provided by designated peer students who are trained and monitored. In brief, the overall function of the Bureau for Counselling and Academic Development exists to assist students to adjust well to the distance learning mode, prepare students for examinations and also equip them with skills that will enable them to cope with personal problems that would have a negative impact on their academic work (Sonnekus*et a*l. 2006:46).

Academic support offered to students at UNISA focuses on tutorial services. The institution's practice is that students volunteer to register for tutorial services at

regional centres and they are responsible for payment of a stipulated fee for these services. During tutorial sessions, facilitators are not expected to teach any content or assess students. Instead, during tutorial meetings tutors are supposed to provide information to guide students. Tutors also have the responsibility of clarifying issues which students do not understand when writing assignments. Furthermore, tutors are also expected to guide students on how to prepare for examinations (Sonnekus *et al.* 2006:46). UNISA has established learning centres in different parts of South Africa, engaging staff responsible for providing services to distance students. Technological devices such as telephones, computers and the internet are also other types of student support which have been introduced at UNISA; however most of the technological devices are mostly available at the main campus.

Qakise-Makoe (2005:44) asserts that UNISA has to identify and assess the needs of distance learners, to enable any policy developed by the institution on relevant student support systems to be adequately informed by identified students' needs. According to Qakise-Makoe (2005:45) research has not been conducted recently to determine the type of self-instruction materials that may be suitable and preferred by current UNISA distance students. Qakise-Makoe (2005:58) argues that cultural experience dictates the way in which individuals learn. Therefore, she suggests that UNISA student support has to accommodate the preferred learning styles of all students including black students, instead of emphasising what conflicts with their values.

The key features of the UNISA student support system are adequate and relevant physical, as well as human resources for student at its different designated learning centres. However, Oosthuizen, Leodoff and Hamman (2010: 203-205) report that there is a need to improve on the quality of student support services provided at UNISA. The authors state that results of a study conducted on students' perceptions of the quality of UNISA student support revealed that there was dissatisfaction regarding administrative support and the handling of assignments. This serves as a reminder that no learner support system is perfect and all support systems need to be constantly monitored and improved according to the needs of students.

It has become clear that UNISA has attempted to introduce an all-encompassing student support system. The adopted student support system caters for the provision of modern technological infrastructure required and recommended for distance education and this is commendable, since it demonstrates that UNISA strives to offer quality student support.

3.4.2 Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning

Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL) is one of the institutions that attempts to provide effective and relevant student support to its distance students at all stages during the learning process (Tau 2005:6).The student support that BODOCOL decided to introduce can be described as traditional. BOCODOL, like most distance learning institutions, has a diverse clientele in terms of age and working experience. Consequently, in an attempt to achieve its mission and vision, the institution has introduced a viable student support system. The wide range of student support focuses on the provision of academic and non-academic support before and during enrolment. According to Tau (2005:6) the BOCODOL student support system is a product of a consultative process that included different stakeholders in the country. The model is decentralised and also generic in nature. An aspect of the model considered as very effective is the collaboration among different partners. Collaboration in sharing of resources in distance learning can easily promote access to non-human resources at reasonable costs. Perraton (2004:2) also confirms that distance learning at all levels of education is based on the collaboration between different stakeholders. Tau (2005:7) claims that the adopted BOCODOL student support system yielded positive results in terms of increased enrolment, improved participation in tutorials, timely submission of assignments, improved participation in examinations and the gradually increasing pass rates. The institution offers programmes at the main campus in Gaborone and at regional centres in different parts of Botswana. Strategically, the following support services are made available to learners at all regional centres: pre-enrolment counselling and counselling during the entire period of study; learning

material distribution; and the facilitation of face-to-face tutorials (Tau 2005:5; Gatsha & Evans 2010:155-169).

The adopted BOCODOL student support model which emphasises community collaboration is considered strength, since distance students spend most of their learning period in their respective home and work locations. The provision of adequate support services at regional level is a commendable practice because the necessary support is easily accessible to students. Moreover, the institution is able to reduce expenses by utilising community facilities, e.g. community schools and churches; if that was not the case, a considerable amount of money would have to be spent on erecting buildings for learning support centres for students. This practice is a positive move, which can be emulated by other distance learning institutions in similar contexts.

BOCODOL has not introduced many technological devices, although students can access some information from their website. The institution which has introduced electronic media is still a problem due to a lack of adequate technological infrastructure in some remote parts of Botswana where learning centres are located (Gatsha 2007: 30).

Student support at the Botswana College of Distance Education thus clearly shows community collaboration in the sharing of physical resources. This is a commendable initiative, since collaboration in sharing any kind of resource is encouraged in distance education. From the discussions of the BOCODOL student support system it has become clear that the institution collaborates with the community in several activities. The collaboration can be identified as an advantage, since it embraces and reflects the cultural practices of most African countries of working together and sharing.

3.4.3 Indira Ghandi National Open University

The Indira Ghandi National Open University in India reflects an example of a combined model of the student support system in Asia. Indira Ghandi National Open University (IGNOU) is classified amongst the largest universities that offer

distance education programmes. The university has a population of 1.8 million distance students and over 550 study centres and has been mandated with the responsibilities of determining, coordinating, promoting and monitoring distance education activities in India (Srivastav 2006:1). Student support at IGNOU includes academic and non-academic support. The University has established study centres at education institutions in different parts of the country. Administrative support offered to students includes the regular provision of general information and specific information about dates and venues for examinations. Physical resources such as libraries are accessible at most study centres. Tele-conferencing services are also available at the various study centres. Non-academic support such as counselling services is considered vital. For instance, counsellors are charged with the responsibility of providing guidance to advise students on academic issues.

The institution adheres to student support good practices; for instance, it is reported that some of the engaged counsellors are not conversant with distance learning principles; thus, regular orientation on distance education approaches is organised. Additionally, appropriate facilities for conducting counselling sessions are made available. Furthermore, technological devices such as the phone-in radio counselling facility is reported as operating in a considerable number of study centres in different parts of the country. IGNOU, like most universities worldwide, introduced a self-instruction material system for its distance learning programme and audio and visual cassettes were adopted to supplement the prescribed self-instruction materials. This is a positive development because printed materials distributed to distance students should be supported by other additional support systems. According to Srivastav (2006:2) the entire process of IGNOU's self-instruction material development is in accordance with student support good practices. Collaboration with the community in sharing facilities is also regarded as a positive exercise.

The institutional decision to utilise local facilities enables distance students to access resources within easy reach, since they spend most of their time in their respective communities. Moreover, the emphasis placed on the psychosocial aspect, specifically counselling, is one other identified strength. The important

role contributed by psychosocial support in addressing adjustment issues has already been established by Cain *et al.* (2003:44). However, there is no indication of structured pre-counselling for prospective students on how to guide them in making informed decisions about the possibility of coping with distance education challenges. This is another important component of student support for prospective distance student as it provides relevant information that enables learners to make informed decisions about whether to enrol in distance education programmes or not.

The discussion above makes it clear that student support at the Indira Ghandi National Open University attempts to provide adequate human and physical resources to enrolled students. The institution has also made available various technological devices at different study centres. The availability of modern electronic media to students promotes effective learning; therefore, IGNOU student support system can be described as encompassing and relevant.

3.4.4 The Open Training and Education Network

The Open Training and Education Network (OTEN) is one of the largest distance education institutions in Australia. The student support system introduced at OTEN is industrialised in nature. OTEN provides an all-encompassing academic and administrative learner support system. In 2002 OTEN introduced a learning support website which provides administrative support to students (see www. oten.edu.au).The site allows students to access to the relevant information they require. Students can also access courses material and modules, as well as reports on assignments from the website. The institution has made provision for learning centres in different parts of the country.

Non-academic support for students encompasses the close supervision of students by course specialists. Students intending to enrol at OTEN are provided with educational counselling. Similarly, a substantial number of students is also assisted in solving educational issues such as: planning their academic courses; assessing academic problems; and managing as well as achieving academic goals; and developing a variety of appropriate study skills (OTEN 2006:1).

Counselling is also provided to students to help them cope with personal concerns such as personal problems that directly contribute to unsatisfactory academic performance; for example, stress and how to manage it effectively. Career and Vocational counselling is provided to help students make informed decisions about their careers. Students are also equipped with interview skills and adequately prepared for the world of work. One very commendable practice adopted by OTEN is the special recognition of students with disabilities. Students with disabilities are provided with additional resources such as tape recorders, Braille materials, adaptive computer equipment and software. Most importantly, there is a disability support unit established at the institution. Furthermore, students with disabilities are encouraged to liaise with a teacher consultant for appropriate guidance before enrolment. The support that is provided includes: assistance in identifying needs and interests to enable these students to choose suitable courses; guidance in drawing up educational goals and plans; the provision of appropriate equipment that facilitates learning; and tutorial services determined by specifically identified student needs (OTEN 2006:1).

Ukpo (2006:34) confirms that there is a need to recognise the existence of students with disabilities and an attempt to cater adequately for their specific needs. However, it is reported that most institutions are not even aware of the exact numbers of students with disabilities who are enrolled in their learning programmes. Since the nature of the disability may also be unknown, there is no guarantee of relevant support (Ukpo 2006:34). Furthermore, the emphasis on pre-enrolment counselling is commendable with its role being to help students identify their academic strengths. Pre-counselling is a positive feature, since it is important that students are aware of their limitations and capabilities so as to be in a position to make informed decisions about enrolment and career paths to follow (OTEN: 2006:1). The key features of OTEN are the provision of relevant and adequate academic and non-academic support, as well as recognising the needs of minority groups such as individuals with disabilities. Since this study aims at improving the quality of learner support at IEMS, the good practices adopted by OTEN should provide guidance with regard to proposing an

improvement plan aimed at enhancing the quality of student support services at IEMS.

3.4.5 Reflections on practices at selected institutions

In practice, the three distance learning institutions namely: the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning; the Indira Gandhi National Open University; and the Open Training and Education Network in Australia have attempted to implement similar good practices. Primarily, the three institutions offer a wide range of relevant and effective activities aimed at enhancing and improving learning. Support services offered to students include: pre-enrolment counselling; library facilities; study centres; tutoring; academic advice; and well-designed self-instruction materials. It might be appropriate to single out specific services which may not be afforded the attention they deserve by some distance learning institutions. Currently, there is no exceptional provision made for distance students with disabilities at IEMS. It might be advisable for IEMS to acknowledge that students with disabilities, although in the minority, deserve to be afforded special recognition and treatment. For instance, their presence in institutions should be registered so that additional human and physical resources can be made available to facilitate their learning.

IGNOU and BOCODOL's learning strategies of collaborating with stakeholders such as communities with regard to sharing learning facilities is a laudable effort towards supporting distance students. The practice enables students to access learning support conveniently at locations in close proximity to their homes or places of employment. Distance students spend most of their studying period in their respective dwelling places. Moreover, if study centres are located in different communities, this is an advantage for learners considering that they then do not have to travel long distances to acquire support services. Equally, the institutions are able to save funds because they do not have to incur a lot of expense in erecting learning centres. Generally, the three major recommended components of student support namely: cognitive, affective and systemic types seem to be well integrated in the support services offered by BOCODOL, OTEN and IGNOU.

Establishing an effective support system for distance education students or just improving existing practices can be a huge challenge for developing countries, mainly due to financial constraints and lack of technological infrastructure. However, it is important that distance learning institutions adhere to established guidelines when introducing or evaluating student support services. A set of such guidelines, as identified in this chapter (and referred to as 'directives') is presented in the next section.

3.5 DIRECTIVES FOR DESIGNING AN EFFECTIVE STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEM IN A DISTANCE EDUCATION INSTITUTION

Table 3.1 presents a set of guidelines with desirable elements considered relevant in an effective student support system for distance learning. These directives are guided by good distance education practices as indicated in Table 3.1. Best practices identified in this chapter, including those adopted by the selected distance education institutions, have also been incorporated. Based on the literature review undertaken, it is suggested that the directives for establishing/designing an effective student support system or plan should focus on the following key elements:

- Having an operational and effective tutorial system in place;
- Developing, prescribing and providing relevant learning materials;
- Using relevant, effective and accessible technology/media;
- Providing adequate and relevant learner support at learning/regional centres; and
- Acknowledging the important role of research in improving and sustaining an effective support system.

The directives in Table 3.1 are divided into the two main categories of academic support and administrative support, with sub-categories similar to those that emanated from the literature review. The corresponding paragraphs to which a particular directive relates are indicated throughout.

Table 3.1 Directives in designing a relevant and effective student support system

Categories of student support	Directives
1. Academic support	***Put an operational and effective tutorial system in place (2.4.1 a)***
1.1 Tutorial system (2.4.1a); (2.5.3);(3.4.1)	**The institution:** • Train tutors prior to their tutorial engagement (2.4.1a); • Assign adequate and manageable numbers of students to tutors per tutorial group (2.4.1a); • Encourage interaction between tutors and students and among students for collaboration purposes (2.4.1a); • Arrange regular tutor professional development workshops to enhance tutoring skills (2.4.1a); and • Encourage good relationships between tutors and students (2.4.1a). **Tutors and other role-players:** • Provide formative assessment that supports students with detailed constructive feedback (2.4.1a); • Give guidance on study methods and time management during face-to-face tutoring sessions (2.4.1a); • Recommend relevant learning resources to students (2.4.1a); • Monitor students' academic progress (2.4.1a); • Execute intervention measures to assist students to improve academic performance (2.4.1a); • Serve as role models for students (2.4.1); and • Counsel, advise and coach students (2.4.1.2b)
1.2 Learning materials (2.5.3); (3.3.2)	• Design learning materials that are relevant and supportive to learning (3.2.2); • Provide simple, self-explanatory, self-contained, self-directed and self-evaluating learning materials (3.3.2); • Design learning materials in a simple, clear and readable conversational form (2.5.3); • Involve relevant stakeholders when designing learning materials (3.3.2); and • Consider institutional collaboration in the designing or sharing of study material (3.1) (3.3.5).

Categories of student support	Directives
1.3 Effective formative assessment : (2.4.1.4); (2.5.3); (3.4.1)	***Assessment systems should be administered professionally:*** • Provide formative assessment that supports learners with detailed constructive feedback (2.4.1.4); • Stipulate and observe timeframes to receive and return learner assignments (2.4.1.4); • Provide detailed comments on learners' feedback (2.5.3); and • Equip learners with examination-taking skills through tutoring exercises (3.4.1).
1.4 Support technology	***Use effective, relevant and accessible technology/media***
1.4.1 Mobile phones (3.2.2.3)	• Use mobile phones to provide academic support (3.2.2.3b); • Send bulk SMS messages to motivate students before submission of assignments and exams (3.2.2.3b); • Send instruction messages by SMS to guide students when working on assignments (3.2.2.3b); and • Distribute questions and answers on specific topics by SMS messages (3.2.2.3b).
1.4.2 Telephone (3.2.2.3 d)	• Provide proactive telephone and tuition support (3.2.2.3d); • Contact students after enrolments for motivation (3.2.2.3d); and • Encourage communication by telephone between tutor and student when necessary (3.2.2.3d).
1.4.3 Radio (3.2.2.3c)	• Facilitate radio discussions which allow students to ask questions (3.2.2.3c); • Provide support tutorials via radio services (3.2.2.3c); and • Provide adequate computers and reliable internet services (3.2.2.3).
1.4.4 Computers and the internet (3.2.2.3d); (3.4.1)	• Provide an online registration facility (3.4.1); • Provide information on academic and administrative issues to students on the institution website (3.4.1); • Provide online learning facilities where students can access learning materials and assessment (3.4.1); • Provide an online facility where students can participate in collaborative activities with other fellow students.(3.2.2.3d).

Categories of student support	Directives
1.4.5 Television (3.2.2.3e)	• Encourage the use of television for learner support (3.2.2.3e); • Equip learning centres with television sets, video players, CDs, DVDs, etc. (3.2.2.3e); and • Facilitate the introduction of relevant educational programmes on national television services (3.2.2.3e).
1.5 Role of research(3.3.6)	***Acknowledge the important role of research in sustaining a relevant and effective student support system (face-to-face and distance).*** • Give priority to research on student sup by funding, bursaries, etc.; • Expect research on student support to be theoretically well-grounded; • Evaluate and monitor all elements of existing support systems on a regular basis port(including study material and other services); and • Evaluate all tutorial sessions and workshops for relevance and effectiveness.
2. Administrative support 2.1 Effective administrative services(2.4.2); (3.2.2.1); (3.4.3); (3.4.4); (3.6.2)	***Regional centres must provide adequate and relevant resources for learner support e.g. libraries (2.4.2):*** • Provide relevant resources for learner support at all regional centres (2.4.2); • Make information regarding academic events accessible to all students (2.4.2; 3.4.3); • Provide student support services such as pre-enrolment counselling, registration, orientation and fee-payment (2.4.2); • Offer adequate and universal learning resources to all students including students with disabilities (3.4.4); • Provide face-to-face tutorial sessions (3.2.2.1); and • Negotiate collaboration in sharing physical resources with local communities (3.6.2).
2.2 Guidance and counselling (3.2.1); (3.4.1)	***Offer effective counselling services (3.2.1,3.4.4)*** • Engage trained counsellors (3.2.1); • Provide pre-enrolment counselling to assist students choose suitable courses (3.4.1); • Provide career guidance to assist students to make informed decisions (3.4.1); • Offer psychosocial counselling to enable students cope with personal problems (3.4.1); • Provide a phone-in radio counselling facility (3.4.3); and • Encourage support by friends and family members in personal consultation and through marketing exercises (2.4.3).

One cannot claim or conclude that there is a universal guide for designing an effective learner support framework, since there are several variables to be considered for quality and relevance purposes. Thus, the framework presented in Table 3.1 can be regarded as an attempt to present the elements needed in evaluating the current support system at IEMS. It can also form the basis for developing an improvement plan for distance student support in a distance education university (the final objective of the study). The unique circumstances, context and characteristics of an institution will certainly make adaptation and extension a necessity.

3.6. CONCLUSION

The literature reveals that distance education exposes students to challenges such as isolation and thus, there seems to be a need to provide relevant and adequate support to distance students to assist them in coping with the demands of distance learning. Academic and administrative support is described as instrumental in enabling distance students achieve their academic goals. Adequate human and physical resources are also vital in terms of assisting distance students adjust to the unfamiliar distance mode of delivery. Currently, there are various student technological devices recommended; however, due to a lack of sufficient technological infrastructure in some developing countries, these innovations cannot be introduced. Challenges anticipated when establishing an effective learner support system were also highlighted. Examples of student support systems introduced by some distance learning institutions were discussed. There seems to be a commendable attempt by different institutions in Africa, Asia and Europe, to adopt the recommended distance education systems. It is encouraging to realise that the African continent is also represented amongst these exemplary distance learning institutions. Variables such as the cultural context, geographical location accessibility and technology are crucial in determining the nature of student support for distance students. According to the literature discussed, student support is perceived as important in enhancing throughput in distance learning and therefore needs the recognition, attention and status it deserves. Since the aim of student support is to enable distance students to attain desired results in their studies, distance learning

institutions are expected and encouraged to provide quality support at all designated learning centres.

The literature review in chapter 3 has ultimately informed the formulation of a set of directives for designing and establishing a relevant and effective distance student support system. These directives provided the basis for the compilation of the questionnaires used in the surveys undertaken in the empirical part of this study. As such, these guidelines were indispensable in the evaluation of the current system at IEMS and the compilation of a SWOT analysis for this purpose. These directives also provided potential points of departure in structuring an improvement plan for student support at IEMS (see 6.3).

CHAPTER 4:

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the research design and methodology in the empirical part of the study and is therefore linked to the second research question: What is the current nature of student support offered to distance students at IEMS? Currently, rudimentary support services are made available to students enrolled in the Adult Education degree programme. Furthermore, results of the preliminary study on the current nature of student support services revealed that the services were inadequate (Makhakhane 2007:1). Hence, this study investigated the nature of student support services at IEMS with an aim to develop an improvement plan that can address the identified shortcomings.

The investigation conducted in this study is of an applied nature and can also be typified as evaluation research, which is formative in nature because its main purpose is to improve on a practice (Anderson 2004:136). McMillan and Schumacher (2001:20) indicate that evaluation research is aimed at evaluating the merit or worth of a particular practice at a given site(s) and whether the practice works, i.e. whether it does what it intends to. In the context of this study, the practice refers to the provision of student support services to distance students at IEMS. The study evaluated the support services and put forth a set of recommendations which have the potential to address the inadequacies identified. The proposed improvement plan (see 6.3) was directly informed by the findings of the study.

The research design of the study is described in the next section.

4.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

Mouton (2003:55) describes a research design as a " plan or blueprint" that explains and guides individuals on how to conduct a research project. Mouton emphasises that a research design addresses different kinds of research questions. Moreover, for this study the main research question focused on how IEMS student support could be improved to comply with recognised and recommended good distance education practices. The mixed method design was identified *as the* most relevant method for conducting an investigation to address the main research question. Preference for the mixed method approach was based on its unique attributes that Creswell (1994:174) describes, such as, when researchers intend utilising various methods for data collection and analysis. Later, Creswell and Plano-Clark (2007:4) claim that combining qualitative and quantitative methods can facilitate collecting more reliable and valid data as compared to when one methodology is utilised. Similarly, Hesse-Biber (2010:3), points out those researchers choose the mixed method design if they would like data collected by different methods in a study to "converge to enhance credibility". Moreover, for the researcher to identify and establish a need for efficient and effective student support at IEMS, a single method might not have been adequate. The pragmatic combination of quantitative and qualitative methods in this study allowed a more practical and functionalist approach to the research, which means that the two research approaches could be used to strengthen the data gathering and analysis processes (Nieuwenhuis 2007:65).

4.3 TYPES OF MIXED METHODS DESIGN

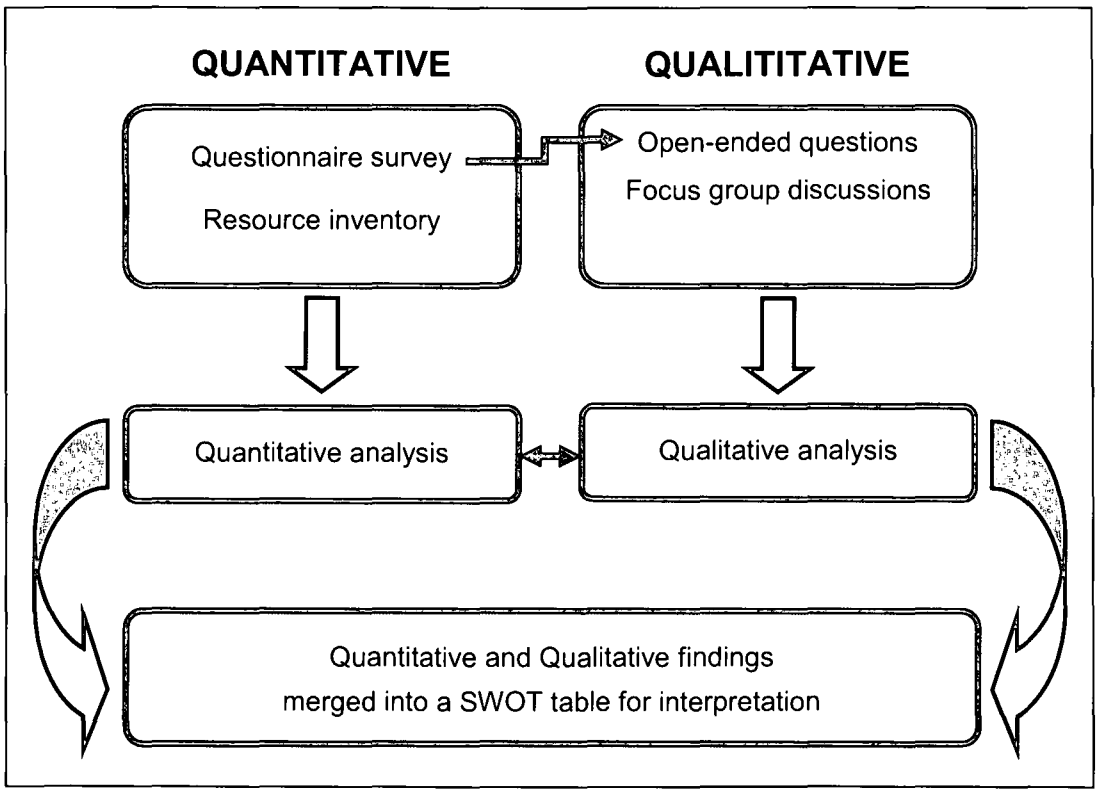
The four primary mixed method designs, namely: explanatory, exploratory, embedded and triangulation are illustrated in Table 4.1. The triangulation mixed method design was found more suitable for this study.

Table 4.1 Different types of mixed methods designs

Type of designs	Interpretation/Analysis
Explanatory	Data connected between the two phases
Exploratory	Data connected between the two phases
Embedded	One type of data embedded within a larger design
Triangulation	Data merged during interpretation/analysis

Source: Compiled from Creswell and Plano- Clark (2007: 85)

The triangulation mixed method design is used if the researcher has the desire to compare and contrast qualitative and quantitative data. This description fits the needs of this study. Data collected from focus groups discussions (qualitative) as well as findings from the questionnaire (quantitative) could be compared and contrasted. Combining qualitative and quantitative data in the interpretation stage enabled the researcher to make well supported conclusions about the investigation. The design as applied in the study is illustrated in Figure 4.1.



Source: Compiled from Creswell and Plano Clark (2007: 85)

Figure 4.1 Triangulation mixed method design as employed in the study

4.4 RESEARCH METHODS

The research methods pertain to the procedure in data collection, interpretation and analysis and which the researcher decides to follow in the study (Creswell 2008:15). Quantitative and qualitative modes of enquiry were employed for data collection.

4.4.1 Quantitative mode of inquiry

The survey was the quantitative mode of inquiry utilised for data collection. McMillan and Schumacher (2001:34) state that surveys are "frequently used in education research to describe attitudes, beliefs and opinion". Hence, the survey mode of inquiry was relevant because the aim of the research question addressed was to gain preferences and perceptions regarding student support services offered at IEMS. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2006:33) a survey permits the researcher to obtain information on individual's demographics, opinions and other areas through questionnaire and interviews. Therefore, a questionnaire survey was found suitable for the investigation since it enabled the researcher to collect information on different themes even though there is an assumption that designing questionnaires is time consuming and also requires skill (Best & Khan 1993-230).

4.4.1.1 Students survey questionnaire

Survey monkey (www.surveymonkey.com) was used as template for the design, processing and analysis of the student's survey questionnaire. The construction of the questionnaire was based on directives for designing an effective student support system (Table 3.1) that were in turn informed by literature. The questionnaire consisted of closed and open-ended questions. Open-ended questions were included and aimed at confirming quantitative data or gaining additional insight. Section 1 of the questionnaire served to establish biographical data and section 2 aimed to collect information on perceptions of students on the quality of support services. The questions focused on aspects related to the tutorial system, the library services, the availability and quality of course guides, the use of technology and administrative support in general (see Appendix A). The questionnaire was printed and distributed in hard copy form. Respondents were informed that participation was voluntary and were also assured of confidentiality and anonymity of data. The

questionnaire was administered during the residential school to allow utmost participation. Respondents were requested to return the questionnaire on the last day of the residential school; this allowed students to complete the questionnaire within a week.

4.4.1.2 Academic staff questionnaire

Survey monkey (www.surveymonkey.com) was also used in the academic staff survey. The construction of the questionnaire was also guided by directives for designing effective student support from literature (see Table 3.1). The questionnaire was distributed during the examination workshop in paper format. The academic staff was informed that participation was voluntary and they were also assured of confidentiality and anonymity of data. Closed and open-ended questions were used to collect information. The two sections in the questionnaire were similar to that of the student questionnaire and covered similar aspects. The survey questionnaire served to establish biographical data and information on perceptions of academic staff on the quality of student support services (see Appendix B). The open-ended questions were included to provide an opportunity for respondents to give honest answers which would reveal their opinions regarding the nature of IEMS support services. Respondents were requested to return the questionnaire during a face-to-face tutorial session which was scheduled to take place three weeks from the day the questionnaires were distributed.

4.4.1.3 Resource inventory

A resource inventory was conducted at Maseru, Mahobong and Mohaleshoek regional centres. The resource inventory was conducted to obtain information regarding available human and physical resources at the different centres. For this purpose a checklist, also informed by the literature review was designed and used for the data collection exercise (see Appendix C).

In the analysis process of the resource inventory the following pre-determined categories were used: human resource, provision of learning materials, infrastructure and availability of technology.

4.4.1.4 Sampling method

A non-probability sampling technique was preferred because it uses available subjects with certain determined attributes (McMillan and Schumacher 2006:125). A purposive sampling method was considered appropriate since it allowed the researcher to select subjects she had easy access to at IEMS, which formed part of groups with similar characteristics regarding course of study being followed (students) or taught (staff); all had exposure to and experience of student consisting of information-rich prospective participants. The researcher expected to receive reliable data from these participants. The aim was to invite all the 180 registered degree students to participate in the survey, thus forming a comprehensive sample in order to increase validity and reliability of findings. The researcher also distributed the staff questionnaire to the entire (55) ADE academic staff population. Response rates can be regarded as good. Regarding the students' questionnaire, 140 of 180 distributed copies (78%) were returned and out of the 55 questionnaire copies distributed to academic staff, 38 (69%) were completed and returned.

4.4.1.5 Quantitative data analysis

Data were processed and analysed by means of Survey monkey (www.surveymonkey.com). The descriptive data were presented in visual form that included tables, graphs and charts (see 5.3).

4.4.1.6 Validity

According to Babbie (2004:143) validity refers to the extent an empirical measure accurately reflects the concept it is intended to measure. Creswell and Plano-Clark (2007:146) also mention that validity in the mixed method design is described "as the ability of the researcher to draw meaningful conclusions from all the data collected. In attempt to enhance validity both qualitative and quantitative responses were included in the questionnaire used in the study. Primarily, the use of triangulation increased internal validity since qualitative data was used to verify quantitative data.

4.4.1.7 Reliability

Reliability, referring to the consistency of results, was enhanced by the good response rates and validity of the questionnaire surveys (see 4.4.4). The Survey monkey analysis was not set for the calculation of statistics to prove this claim, but according to Babbie and Mouton (2001:278.) there is no reliability without validity, and vice versa. The purpose of the survey was not to determine relationships of some significance, but mainly to aid the exploration of the status of student support at IEMS. The use of different data collection and multiple data sources employed in the mixed method design also added to the extent of reliability of the study as a whole. For, example, the use of open-ended responses to confirm the quantitative results, as well as conducting focus groups discussions with students as well as staff members facilitated obtaining of detailed and "honest" information regarding the current nature of student support at IEMS.

4.4.2 Qualitative mode of inquiry

4.4.2.1 Focus group discussions

Focus groups discussions were a qualitative mode of inquiry adopted to investigate perceptions of Adult Education degree students and academic staff about the nature of student support services at IEMS. Focus groups discussions were the preferred strategy for data collection because of their unique nature of providing an opportunity for participants to share and compare among themselves during the planned discussions. According to Chilisa and Preece (2005:151), the focus group technique was introduced as a result of concerns about the manner in which individual interviews are conducted. Chilisa and Preece claim that the role of the researcher is non-threatening during focus groups discussions since he is more of a facilitator rather than controlling and directing the discussions. Furthermore, one of the advantages of the focus group technique is to enable the researcher to collect data within a short period of time. Moreover, that is one of the reasons that influenced the researcher to employ the focus group discussion method for collecting data. However, despite articulated positive attributes of the focus group method, it is

argued that focus group discussions can be costly. Generally, there is a concern that if researchers lack group facilitation skills some of passive participants may not have an opportunity to participate in the discussions (De Vos 2005:312). In an attempt to overcome some of the concerns raised about the focus groups discussions the researcher established ground rules. The ground rules stipulated the importance of involving all the participants in the discussion. Participants were also encouraged to express their genuine opinions without any reservations during discussions.

4.4.2.2 Sampling methods

Qualitative research is characterised by purposive sampling since it allows a researcher to involve participants who are knowledgeable about the phenomenon being investigated. Purposive sampling is referred to as judgemental sampling that permits the researcher to select certain individuals from a population who may be knowledgeable about the subject researched (McMillan and Schumacher 2006:126). The samples that participated in the study were drawn from ADE students and academic staff, taken maximum variation (age, gender, year level, experience), into regard. The total number of ADE degree students who were selected to participate in the focus groups discussions was thirty. Each focus group discussion comprised 10 students; strategically, one focus group discussion was conducted at each of the Maseru, Mahobong and Mohaleshoek centres. The four levels of the degree programmes were represented in the focus group discussions. At Maseru centre 10 tutors participated in the conducted focus groups discussions whilst two and four tutors from Mahobong and Mohaleshoek centres also participated, respectively in the academic staff focus group discussions.

Tables 4.2 and 4.3 illustrate the composition of the students and academic staff sample.

Table 4.2: Composition of the students' sample

IEMS Centre	Level and gender (1st year)	Level and gender (2nd year)	Level and gender (3rd year)	Level and gender (4th year)
Maseru (n=10)	2 females	1 female 2 male	1female 1male	2 females 1 male
Mahobong (n=10)	2 females	2 males	3 females	2 female 1 male
Mohaleshoek (n=10)	3 females	3 males	1 female 1 male	2 females
Total= 30 (15 Females and 15 male	**7 (All females)**	**8 (1 female and 7males)**	**7 (5 females and 2 males)**	**8 (6 males and 2 females)**

Students were requested to focus on the following questions during the focus groups discussions:

(i) What is the nature and quality of the available student support services offered to distance students at IEMS?

(ii) How would you describe the form and nature of student support services for distance students you would expect, but currently not available to students at IEMS?

Table 4.3: Composition of academic staff sample

IEMS Centre	Number of participants
Maseru (n=10)	4 males 6 females
Mahobong (n=2)	2 females
Mohaleshoek (n=4)	4 females
Total= 16	**12 females and 4 males**

The following questions were asked during the academic staff focus groups discussions:

1) What kind of student support is made available to IEMS ADE students?
2) What are some of the shortcomings you have identified with the current student support of ADE at IEMS?
3) How can IEMS improve on the existing shortcomings you have identified?

4.4.2.3 Qualitative data analysis

De Vos (2005:333) claims that qualitative data analysis involves reducing excessive amounts of collected data by organising the findings into patterns and then attempting to attach meaning to the data. Bless,Higson-Smith and Kagee (2006:163) also concur that data analysis assists researchers to identify consistent patterns so that researchers can make generalisations about findings.

Data collected from the focus groups discussions as well as from the open-ended questions included in the survey questionnaires, were transcribed and read several times in order for the researcher to become familiar with the opinions of the participants. The data were coded with pre-determined codes emanating from the literature review. Pre-determined code categories included themes as indicated in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4: Data categories and codes

Category	Code
Tutorial system	**TUT**
Learning materials	LM
Learner support related to assessment	**LSRA**
Administrative services	AS
Access to technological support	**ATS**
Potential supportive technology	PST

4.4.2.4 Trustworthiness of the study

Trustworthiness in the context of this study pertains to analysis and interpretation of the topics covered. Moreover, Babbie and Mouton (2001:276) state that trustworthiness of a qualitative study includes; credibility, transferability dependability and conformability.

a) Credibility/internal validity

De Vos (2005:345) states that credibility is an alternative to internal validity and mainly aims at demonstrating that the investigation was conducted in a manner

that confirms that the subject was precisely identified and described. With regard to this study, the focus of the study was accurately identified and described in the literature review as discussed in chapters 2, 3 and 7. The triangulation mixed method design allowed the researcher to use different methods for data collection. For example, both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed during the investigation and this enabled the researcher to collect reliable and valid data (Creswell & Plano 2007:1). Peer review was another strategy used by requesting a member of the ADE department to comment on a continuous basis on aspects of the research process, including the conclusions, decisions made and the recommended improvement plan.

Referential adequacy refers to the kind of materials available to document the findings (Babbie & Mouton 2001:276). The completed questionnaires have been kept as well as the audio tapes recorded during focus groups discussions are also available.

b) Dependability

According to Babbie and Mouton (2001:278) dependability or reliability is determined by the credibility. To enhance dependability of the study, i.e. to ascertain that a similar study can reveal similar results, the researcher maintained an audit trial of data collected and openly described all processes and decisions made.

c) Transferability/external validity

Transferability or external validity refers to the degree to which generalisation of findings can be made to other populations (Babbie & Mouton 2001:276). The aim of the study was not to generalise findings to a broader population, because this was a case study. A case study is used to gain an in depth understanding of a single phenomenon or a particular group or programme (McMillan & Schumacher 2001:391). However, the researcher believes that the findings of this study can be generalised from the sample to the current ADE population. The researcher has endeavoured to describe and discuss the collected data in great detail to qualify as "thick description" (Babbie & Mouton 2001:277).

(d) Conformability/objectivity

Conformability pertains to the degree to which the findings accurately reflect what the study primarily focused on (Babbie & Mouton 2001: 278). An audit trail involving the following aspects was used to determine conformability and dependability simultaneously:

- Conducting literature review which provided information on the directives for designing an effective student support
- Basing the survey questionnaires on the directives emanating from literature review
- Use of pre-determined codes emanating from literature for data analysis and
- Use of the SWOT analysis based on the findings to identify critical elements that could be included in the recommended improvement plan.

4.5 MERGING OF QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE FINDINGS USING A SWOT ANALYSIS

In the final analysis the researcher decided to make use of a SWOT analysis framework in order to organise and adequately evaluate encompassing information, which was revealed during the investigation - which could be referred to as the IEMS student support context analysis. A SWOT analysis is described as a reliable strategy for investigating existing conditions in a programme (Dugger 1995:1). The SWOT analysis was adopted to identify categories that reflected on the nature of student support services provided to distance students at IEMS. Data from the student and academic staff focus groups discussions, resource inventory as well as student and academic staff questionnaire surveys, were merged and categorised into the following themes; strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT). This was a demanding process which involved coding and pattern-seeking. The researcher employed the SWOT analysis because it firstly reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of the student support services. Opportunities and envisaged successes were also identified. Specifically, information collected from the

SWOT analysis guided the researcher in developing an improvement plan for better quality of distance student support services at IEMS.

4.6 IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The conducted SWOT analysis identified critical aspects in the IEMS student support services which needed to be addressed. The researcher used these critical aspects to create an event guide (Passfield 2004:4) as a strategy leading to an improvement plan. The main elements of an event guide directly relate to the major goals set for possible improvement in a specific context or situation. In the construction of an event guide, the setting of goals is therefore taken as a point of departure. For each goal an event track is structured, indicating the order of priority and suggested time of implementation for various actions Passfield (2004:30-33) in this study, the SWOT analysis aided the identification of goals for improving student support at IEMS (see 6.3). An improvement plan was then designed, which consists of an event track for each goal indicating the assumed order of events (actions) and the priority status of each event (short, medium or long term) (see 6.3). The final improvement plan is presented in chapter 6 (see.6.3). The plan makes provision for adaptation, following consultation with and scrutiny by the various stakeholders (as recommended in 7.5).

4.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

One of the main principles of research is to protect participants from being harmed. Harm to participants may be intentional or non-intentional; hence the researcher has to guard against exposing participants to unpleasant situations during the research period (Bless *et al.* 2006:141). The issue of autonomy is also cited as one of the major ethical principles. Bless *et.al* (2006:142) argue that the principle of autonomy in research endorses that participants participate voluntarily in social research.

Researchers are expected to recognise ethical guidelines as standards that can assist them in determining their behaviour during the period they are conducting investigations (Strydom 2005:57). In this study, one of the important ethical guidelines that the researcher adhered to was informed consent, meaning that

participation was voluntary and the participants were not coerced but agreed to participate on their own accord. Furthermore, participants were also informed of advantages and disadvantaged of participating in the project. Participants were also assured that whatever was discussed during focus groups discussions would be treated confidentially. Particularly, the researcher avoided misleading participants by providing sufficient and accurate information about the purpose of the study.

4.8 CONCLUSION

This chapter provided background on the research design and research methods employed in the empirical study to investigate the nature of current student support services at IEMS. It was indicated that the mixed methods approach was deemed suitable for the investigation because it permitted the researcher to utilise different methods to collect data. In this way comprehensive and reliable data could be obtained. The measures taken to ensure trustworthiness of the study were also discussed. In the next chapter the results of the empirical part of the study are presented.

CHAPTER 5:

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND CONTEXT ANALYSIS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter builds on the information discussed in the previous chapter on research design and methodology. It addresses the second research question (see1.4) aimed at determining the current status and nature of learner support services offered at IEMS. The results and findings of the context analysis and the resource inventory done as part of the study's Phase 1 activity are presented. Findings are drawn from data collected by means of a student questionnaire, an academic staff questionnaire, a resource inventory, and focus group discussions with groups of students and academic staff. The findings are presented in this order: The integrated findings lead to the compilation of a SWOT analysis table indicating the major strengths and weaknesses of learner support at IEMS, as well as possible threats and opportunities that have to be considered as part of an action plan to improve current support shortcomings in the current system. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the SWOT table, including the meaning of the various indicators and the possible implications of each. The discussion of the context analysis commences with the presentation the results from the student survey.

5.2 STUDENT SURVEY

A questionnaire (see Appendix A) was distributed to 180 Bachelor of Education in ADE students during the first semester residential school that took place at Maseru Centre. Completion of the questionnaire was voluntary and respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Of the 180 distributed questionnaires, 140 completed questionnaires were returned resulting in a very satisfactory return response rate of 78%.

In the presentation of the results from the questionnaire in this section, the quantitative data are presented by means of graphs and percentages. Most items of

the questionnaire were followed by an open-ended question which gave the respondents an opportunity to comment on the aspect covered in the preceding structured part on the question. The qualitative data proved to be a rich source of information and are used throughout to highlight or explain the quantitative findings or to allow additional perspectives to emerge.

The discussion commences with a brief overview of the demographic data on gender and age supplied by the respondents. This is followed by a representation and discussion of their access to technological devices.

5.2.1 Gender and age distribution of students

The respondents comprised 34 % males and 66% females. The ADE degree programme age distribution of the respondents is presented in Figure 5.1.

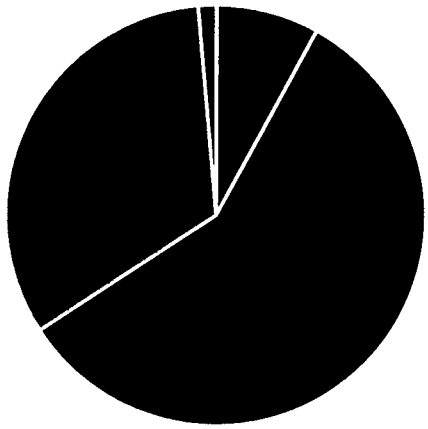


Figure: 5.1 Age distribution of student respondents

Of 140 respondents, 90.8% were in the age group of 30-50 years old (see Figure 5.1). In fact, all respondents were older than 23, confirming the status of the group as a whole as adult students according to the social category (Gravett 2005:7). The implication is that tutors are dealing with mostly mature people with the characteristics and needs of adults, which differ from those of younger groups of students (Gravett 2005:7).

5.2.2 Tutorial support

Figure 5.2 illustrates respondents' rating of the quality of tutorial support provided to adult education distance students.

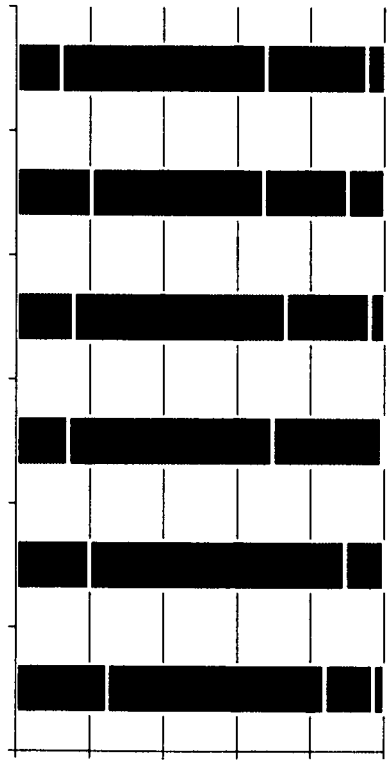


Figure 5.2 Tutorial support: Student level of satisfaction

The responses " highly satisfied" and" satisfied" indicated in Figure 5.2 were grouped together and referred to as "satisfaction level," whilst "dissatisfied" and "deeply dissatisfied" were also grouped together and referred to as "dissatisfaction."

The views of respondents on aspects of the tutorial support they were receiving at IEMS are reflected in Figure 5.2. Respondents' qualitative comments also provided

some explanation of the data and revealed further insight into the highlighted areas in the discussion.

According to Figure 5.2 the majority (83.8%) of the respondents indicated that their interaction with the tutors was at satisfactory levels. Regarding the nature of their relationship with tutors, 89.2% indicated that they were satisfied. In the comments one of the respondents described tutors as "motivating and available when needed". Minority groups of 16.2% and 10.8% indicated levels of dissatisfaction with the interaction and the relationship between students and tutors, respectively. The nature of some of the problems experienced by these respondents seemed to lie with the undesirable attitude and behaviour of tutors towards the students.

Almost three-quarters (72.9%) of the respondents showed satisfaction with the guidance provided by tutors on time management. However, these statistics also provided evidence that 30.6% were dissatisfied with the tutor's guidance on study methods and 27.1% were not happy with guidance offered on time management skills. Possible reasons as provided in the open-ended questions are: *"they (tutors) do not assist; they say we should help ourselves". "Tutors are lazy; they do not want to do anything".*

The majority (66.9%) of the respondents showed satisfaction with the tutorial class size. Notwithstanding the higher levels of satisfaction, the question arises as to why nearly a third of the respondents were not satisfied with aspects related to tutorial class size. It is disturbing that a third of the participants indicated dissatisfaction with regard to the tutorial size. One may conclude that the big numbers did not allow the tutors to give attention to individual students as they deserved.

With regard to the tutors' initiative to recommend learning materials, the data in Figure 5.3 revealed that 67.6% of the respondents indicated a level of satisfaction. One should, however, also take note of the 32.4% who indicated that they were not satisfied with the attempts made by tutors to recommend learning material. The nature of the problems experienced in this regard, as reflected in respondents' comments, seemed to include the non-availability of material at times, the inadequate number of copies made available and inadequate photocopying facilities.

Strong statements were made, such as: "*We are embarrassed because with some of the courses offered we are not provided with even a page to support the course modules".* There were also many complaints about the quality of the learning material. This aspect is dealt with in more detail in the discussion of the responses to the next question.

The qualitative analysis of more than 100 comments made, provided further insight into the nature of the problems experienced by the respondents in the area of tutorial support. There seemed to be a feeling among several respondents that "*tutors should pull up their socks".* The following behaviours, as demonstrated by tutors, were particularly mentioned:

- Regular absenteeism during face–to-face sessions;
- Lack of respect for adult students("*treating students like children*");
- Treating students like strangers;
- Reluctance to provide relevant additional learning materials;
- Failure to provide feedback on time *("they delay in providing feedback"); and*
- Occasional harassment by some tutors.

Several of the respondents complained about the tutor's lack of skills and experience in dealing with adult students. A few questioned the expertise of some of the tutors. In this regard, one of them suggested that "the institution has to employ tutors who can respond to learners' questions and also assist them in learning."

The analysis of the responses to this question gave an early indication that the strength of the student support system at IEMS lay in the availability of the tutor system with the general good relationships and interaction between tutors and students.

In the next section the weaknesses depicted in the quality of course guides will be discussed.

5.2.3 Quality of course guides

In Figure 5.3 respondents' ratings of the quality of prescribed self-instructional learning materials are illustrated.

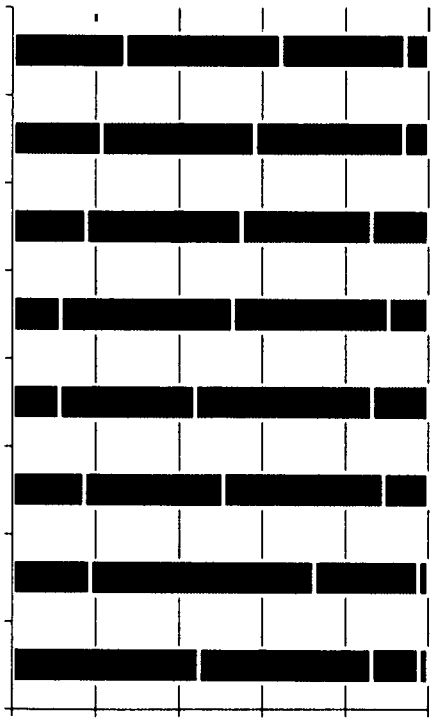


Figure 5.3 Quality of prescribed course guides: Student satisfaction

In Figure 5.3 the language used in the course guides (self-instructional materials) is indicated as good by the majority of respondents (86.1%). The satisfaction levels showed with regard to suitable and easy to understand language was considered as a positive attribute that could facilitate and promote better understanding of the content, particularly that English (language used in the materials) was a second language for the majority of ADE students. The conversational style of writing and relevance of the materials to students needs were indicated to be at a good level by almost two-thirds: 72.3% and 64.2% respectively. However, almost one-third (30%) indicated that relevance to their professional needs was at a poor level.

More than half (56.4%) of the respondents indicated that the learning activities provided in the materials were either poor or average. Learning activities engage students in the absence of instructors; consequently, the high response rate was found to be disturbing. Alarmingly, over one-third (38.7%, 37.7% and 36.0% respectively) of the respondents also indicated that the self-explanatory nature, self-assessment and relevance to learning outcomes were at a poor level. The relatively high number of respondents who indicated dissatisfaction with various aspects of the materials suggested that there were several deficiencies depicted that needed urgent attention. To confirm the frustration and concern of the respondent's one of them said: *"The learning materials that are called our bibles need to be reviewed"*. The reference to the materials as 'bibles' could be interpreted as implying that they were regarded as very important and comprehensive in content. Consequently, it is argued that if the materials were considered to be so significant, it would have been appropriate and desirable to have improved their quality to meet the expected standards.

The comments provided by respondents revealed several weaknesses in the perceived quality of the prescribed learning materials. For instance, there was a feeling amongst several respondents that the materials were out-dated and therefore, had to be reviewed. The following negative aspects were also identified:

- Lack of depth in the content *("they do not contain detailed information");*
- Failure to include relevant activities (*"there are no learning activities provided");*
- Dissatisfaction regarding the adopted style of designing material;
- Lack of current and relevant issues (*"the text books must be reviewed so that they can include current issues");*
- Grammatical and spelling errors*("books are very old and have a lot of spelling and grammatical errors"*); and
- Resemblance to textbooks *("materials like text books are out-dated"*).

It has become evident that the only strength identified with regard to the quality of self-instructional materials was the simple and easy to understand (English) language. Several weaknesses pertaining to the content and other important issues were also mentioned.

The next section highlights the responses on the availability of learner support related to assessment.

5.2.4 Student support related to assessment

Respondents were requested to show their views on student support related to assessment and these are reflected in Figure 5.4.

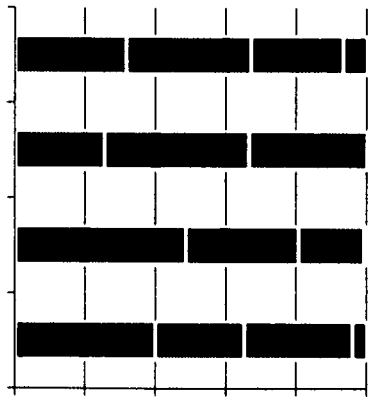


Figure 5.4 Availability of student support related to assessment

The responses "always" and "very often" were grouped together and referred to as "often", whilst "rarely" and "none" were also collapsed and referred to as "never".

According to Figure 5.4 the majority of respondents (66.9%) indicated that tutors often provided formative feedback. Surprisingly, a third (33.1%) pointed out that they never received formative feedback. Almost two-thirds (66.4%) of the respondents indicated that they often received timely and constructive feedback. One of the respondents explained that *"tutors are trying hard to give us feedback on time, but due to high numbers of students it is impossible. But they are trying".* However, one should take note of the 33.6% of the respondents who pointed out that they never received feedback on time. Failure to provide formative feedback could be described as one of the undesirable practices in the distance mode of learning. In view of this, formative feedback is considered essential (see section 2.4.1a).

It is interesting to observe that the majority (80.4%) of the respondents pointed out that they received detailed comments on submitted assignments. Provision of

comprehensive feedback is appreciated by all students since it is assumed that feedback facilitates positive interaction between tutors and students (see section 2.4.1 c).

Almost two-thirds (65%) of the respondents indicated that quite often, tutors made attempts aimed at improving the students' academic performance, whilst (35%) felt that the tutors failed to make any interventions to increase the level of their academic performance. One of the respondents wrote: *"I feel abandoned by the department"*. Failure to offer any kind of guidance to improve academic performance should be a challenge considering students are geographically separated from their respective institutions and tutors. Therefore, having intervention strategies to monitor students' academic progress is highly desirable.

Many respondents commented that they appreciated tutors' detailed comments on their assignments. However, several of them were dissatisfied about the failure by some tutors to provide feedback on time. Regarding untimely feedback, one of the respondents said: *"Feedback does not come on time to us. Sometimes students sit for their final examination without having had any feedback"*. There were several respondents who complained about a lack of interventions to improve their academic performance, with one of them stating that *"Some tutors do not intervene to assist students improve but they rather depress them."*

The analysis of this question revealed that detailed feedback was one of the major strengths of student support related to assessment. However, there were several weaknesses identified regarding the provision of timely feedback, as well as expected interventions that would promote effective teaching and learning.

In the next section, students' satisfaction with different elements of administrative support is discussed.

5.2.5 Administrative support

Respondents were asked to indicate the quality of administrative support provided by IEMS. Figure 5.5 illustrates the results of this question.

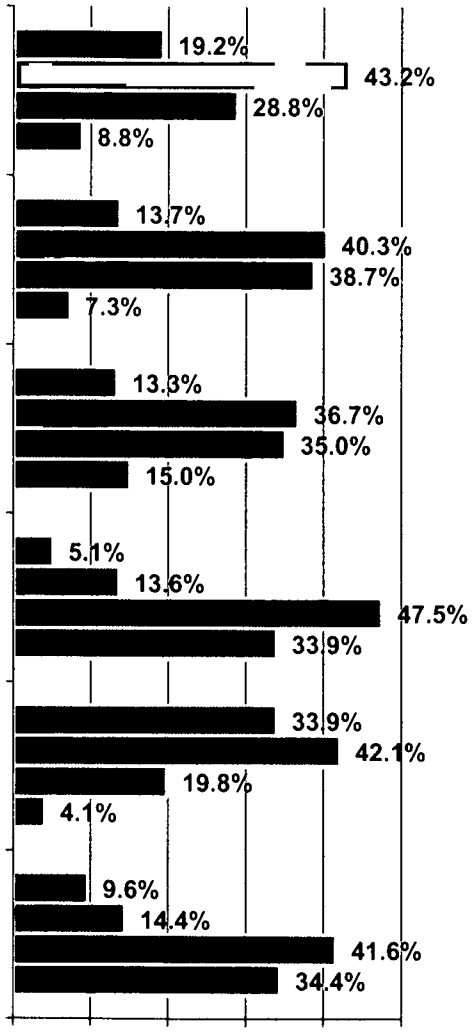


Figure 5.5 Administrative support: Students' satisfaction

In the discussion "very satisfactory" and "satisfactory" were grouped together and referred to as "satisfactory," whilst "unsatisfactory" and "very unsatisfactory" were also grouped together and considered to be at the "unsatisfactory level."

The graph, (Figure 5.5) illustrates that almost two-thirds (62.4%) of the respondents regarded pre-enrolment counselling services as satisfactory, meaning that 37.6% regarded these as unsatisfactory. The respondents who regarded the services as unsatisfactory may have not been able to make informed decisions since the pre-

enrolment counselling function is to assist students choose suitable courses (see section 3.4.1).

Almost 50% of the respondents showed satisfaction with provision of information regarding planned activities and registration. The relatively low numbers demonstrate a level of dissatisfaction. Failure to provide information about planned activities implied that occasionally, some of the students were not able to attend and participate in some of the scheduled activities. Unfortunately, such circumstances may have negatively affected students' academic performance.

High percentages of the respondents indicated that they were not happy about the unavailability of multi-media resources (81%) and library services (76%). One of the dissatisfied respondents indicated that *"changing librarians is also a pain to be considered because attitudes contribute to students' reluctance to make use of the library".* It is disturbing and unfortunate that students are not able to access multi-media resources and expected library services. In the absence of regular contact with tutors one would expect that relevant and sufficient multi-media resources and library services would be made available.

It is encouraging that the majority (76%) of the respondents showed that they were satisfied with the monthly tutorial services (see 5.1.2). Tutorial sessions are found to be an essential type of support for distance students (see 2.4.2a).

It is evident from comments made by respondents that ADE students are not happy with some of aspects of administrative support. For instance, comments such as *"Registration activity is so stressing that when one has to register one becomes frustrated (anxious)".* In general, the respondents complained about the following aspects of administrative support:

- Lack of libraries at regional centres;
- Unavailability of photocopying facilities at the library (*"most of the time when students want to make photocopies there is no paper. The photocopier is not working ...all sorts of excuses",*);
- Inadequate reference books at the library (*"the books at the library are very old and very few in number"*);

- Poor administration of mobile library services (*"mobile library services are not reliable"*);
- Unsatisfactory physical condition of library (*"our library is too small to accommodate students enrolled in different programmes"*); and
- Unsuitable library opening hours (*"library always closes early on weekends"*).

The analysis of this question revealed that IEMS learner support strength mainly lies in the provision of satisfactory tutorial support. The unavailability of relevant multi-media resources is regarded as a weakness which requires further investigation. Several other weaknesses pertaining to administrative support were also identified.

Respondents were also given an opportunity to respond to two different questions involving technological support. In the first question, they had to indicate whether they had access to selected technological devices. In the second question, they had to point out suitable technological support.

5.2.6 Access to technological devices

Respondents were requested to indicate their access to a number of technological devices. Table 5.1 presents the results of this question.

Table: 5.1 Students' access to technological devices

Technological Devices	Number	Percentage (%)
Cell phone	114	81.0
Radio	**95**	**67.2**
Computer & Internet	83	59.0
TV	**81**	**57.7**
DVD player	65	46.0
CD player	**58**	**40.9**

According to Table 5.1 the majority (81%) of respondents had access to a cell phone, whilst (67.2% and 59.4%) indicated that they had access to a radio and a computer with internet connectivity. The large numbers who indicated access to a cell phone implied that the offering of academic and administrative support by mobile phone could be a viable option for enhancing support at IEMS.

Less than half of the respondents indicated that they had access to DVD and CD players. Respondents' comments revealed that students encountered problems with

regard to accessing adequate and relevant technological devices. Some of them complained about a lack of computers with internet connectivity at IEMS's regional centres. The majority of Maseru Centre respondents were not happy about not being allowed to have access to computers available at the centre to the point of demanding that "*IEMS has to give students more access to the use of computers.*"

Lack of computers and internet at IEMS was one of the major weaknesses. This is a disturbing factor because students were being denied the opportunity and privilege to obtain additional relevant information that could enhance their learning. Futhermore, it was unfair that ADE students were prevented from using the Maseru Centre computer laboratory.

5.2.7 Potential of selected technological support

Respondents were asked to indicate the potential of selected types of technological support services for IEMS students. The results are shown in Figure 5.6.

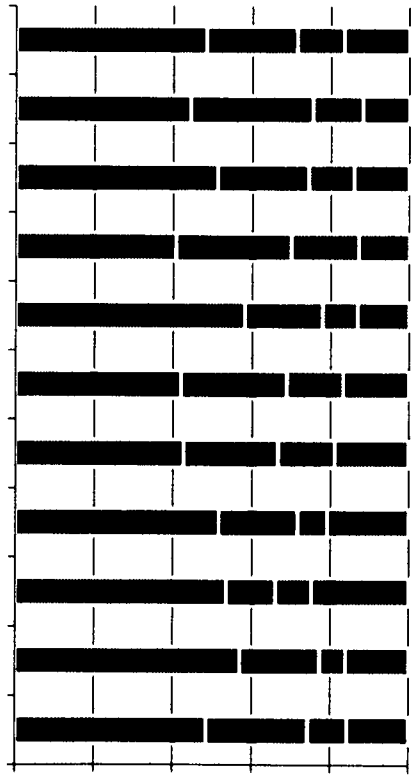


Figure 5.6: Views of students on the potential of technological support

In the analysis of the responses from this item (5.1.7) the responses "very useful" and "useful" were grouped together and referred to as "useful", whilst "somewhat useful" and "not useful" were also grouped together and referred to as "not very useful."

According to Figure 5.1 the majority, of the respondents indicated that SMS messages after enrolment for motivation (75.4%), SMS messages for announcements (74.3%) and the use of a mobile phone to provide support (71.4%) would be helpful. Similarly, the majority of more than 70% showed that information provided on the university website about administrative and academic issues and lectures on DVD would be useful. Several respondents (71.7%) also indicated that the online facility could enable them to access learning materials. Almost three-quarters (70%) of the respondents indicated that radio tutorial sessions could be useful. This means that (30.1%) felt that radio tutorial sessions could not be very useful.

It is also interesting that (33.9%, 33.3% and 31.1%) felt that lectures on CD, the use of e-mail for communication and on-line registration would not be useful. Lectures on CD could be regarded as a viable option, particularly for students who reside in rural places that lack adequate and relevant technological infrastructure for internet connectivity.

Respondents' comments provided additional insights on their views regarding the suitability of selected technological devices as support for IEMS students. Several respondents confirmed that the following were viable options for technological support at IEMS:

- Use of a mobile phone and SMS messages;
- Provision of information on university *website ("information can be provided on the university website".);*
- Online registration facility *("let's register online please to avoid long queues; for somebody in a wheelchair to register, depends on the 'mercy' of other students".);*
- Radio tutorials *("radio tutorials have been useful for a long time".);*

- Provision of lectures on CDs and *DVDs ("over and above our traditional way of learning, if we have lectures on CDs and DVDs they will enhance our distance learning".); and*
- Access to learning materials online.

Interestingly, a few of the respondents made legitimate and valuable observations regarding the recommended technological support. For example, one the respondents cautioned that *"in some areas, people cannot access any cellular networks. Besides, there are some places without electricity, so the use of technology supplementing on-going services would be fruitless".*

In general, according to the analysis of the responses on the issues of suitable technological support for IEMS distant learners, it is evident that respondents felt that certain selected technological devices could be a viable option which could enhance teaching and learning.

5.2.8 Summary

In this section the purpose was to address the second research question aimed at determining the nature of learner support offered to IEMS students. The results of the students' questionnaire survey showed that there were strengths and weaknesses pertaining to the quality of student support. For example, some of the depicted strengths lay in the monthly tutorial face-to-face sessions, as well as the simple and easy language used in the prescribed self-instruction materials. However, the following weaknesses were highlighted:

- Tutors' lack of relevant skills of dealing with adult students;
- Occasional tutor inappropriate behaviour;
- Failure to review out-dated prescribed self-instruction materials;
- Provision of untimely feedback;
- Lack of relevant technological support;
- Tutors' failure to provide additional learning materials;
- Poor administration of mobile library services; and
- Unsatisfactory physical condition of libraries.

The introduction of mobile phones to provide academic and administrative support was indicated as a suitable opportunity that could be explored.

In the next section findings from data collected from an academic staff questionnaire will be presented.

5.3 ACADEMIC STAFF SURVEY

A questionnaire (see Appendix B) was distributed to the 55 IEMS academic staff members during the first semester residential school. Of the 55 distributed questionnaires, 38 completed questionnaires were returned which is a very satisfactory response of 69%. Respondents were informed that participation was voluntary and were also assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

Quantitative data results are presented by means of graphs and percentages. The majority of questions allowed respondents to make comments as a follow-up to the structured (preceding) question (see Appendix B). Qualitative data provided additional detailed information and insights.

In this section discussions include demographic data on the gender and age of the respondents, followed by an indication of their work stations. Highlights pertaining to the responses on the quality of prescribed study guides and suitable support services are also provided.

5.3.1 Gender and age distribution of academic staff

The majority of respondents (68.6%) indicated that they were female, whilst almost a third of them (31.4%) indicated that they were male.

5.3.2 Age distribution of academic staff

The age distribution of academic staff respondents is presented in Figure 5.7.

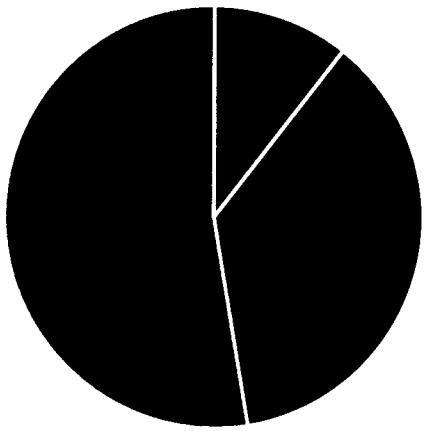


Figure 5.7 Age distribution of staff respondents

In Figure 5.7 data show that (89.4%) of the respondents were over 40 years old and only 10% below 41 years of age. This is an indication that the majority of tutors were mature and experienced individuals.

5.3.3 Location of respondents

Regional centres where respondents work are indicated in Figure 5.8.

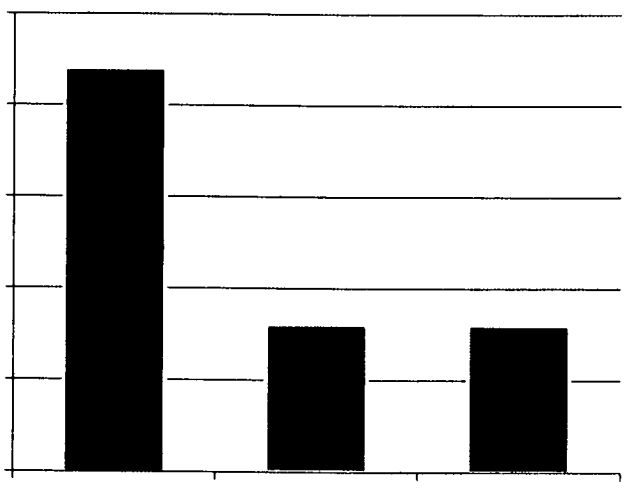


Figure 5.8 Centres where tutors work

More than half of the respondents (57.9%) were from Maseru, while Mahobong and Mohaleshoek were equally represented by 21.1% each. Figure 5.8 reveals that the majority of respondents provided services at the Maseru centre.

5.3.4 Access to technological support

Respondents' access to technological support is presented in Table 5.2.

Table 5. 2 Access to technological support

Technological Devices	Number	Percentage (%)
Cell phone	35	91.7%
Computer /internet	**34**	**88.9%**
Radio	32	83.3%
TV set	**31**	**80.6%**
USB flash	27	69.4%
CD player	**26**	**66.7%**

According to Table 5.2 several (91.7%, 88.9%, 83.3% and 80.6%, respectively) respondents indicated that they had access to a cellphone/smartphone, a computer, with internet, a radio and a television set. About two-thirds (69.4% and 66.7%) indicated that they had access to USB flash disks and CD players, respectively.

The majority of the respondents who reported that they had access to a cellphone confirmed that IEMS could consider offering administrative and academic support using mobile phones. Encouraging were the findings on access to radios and computers with internet connections; these were also highly rated. IEMS could also consider introducing these devices as support for its ADE distance students.

5.3.5 Learning materials

Figure 5.9 shows respondents' views on the quality of prescribed learning materials used in the ADE programme.

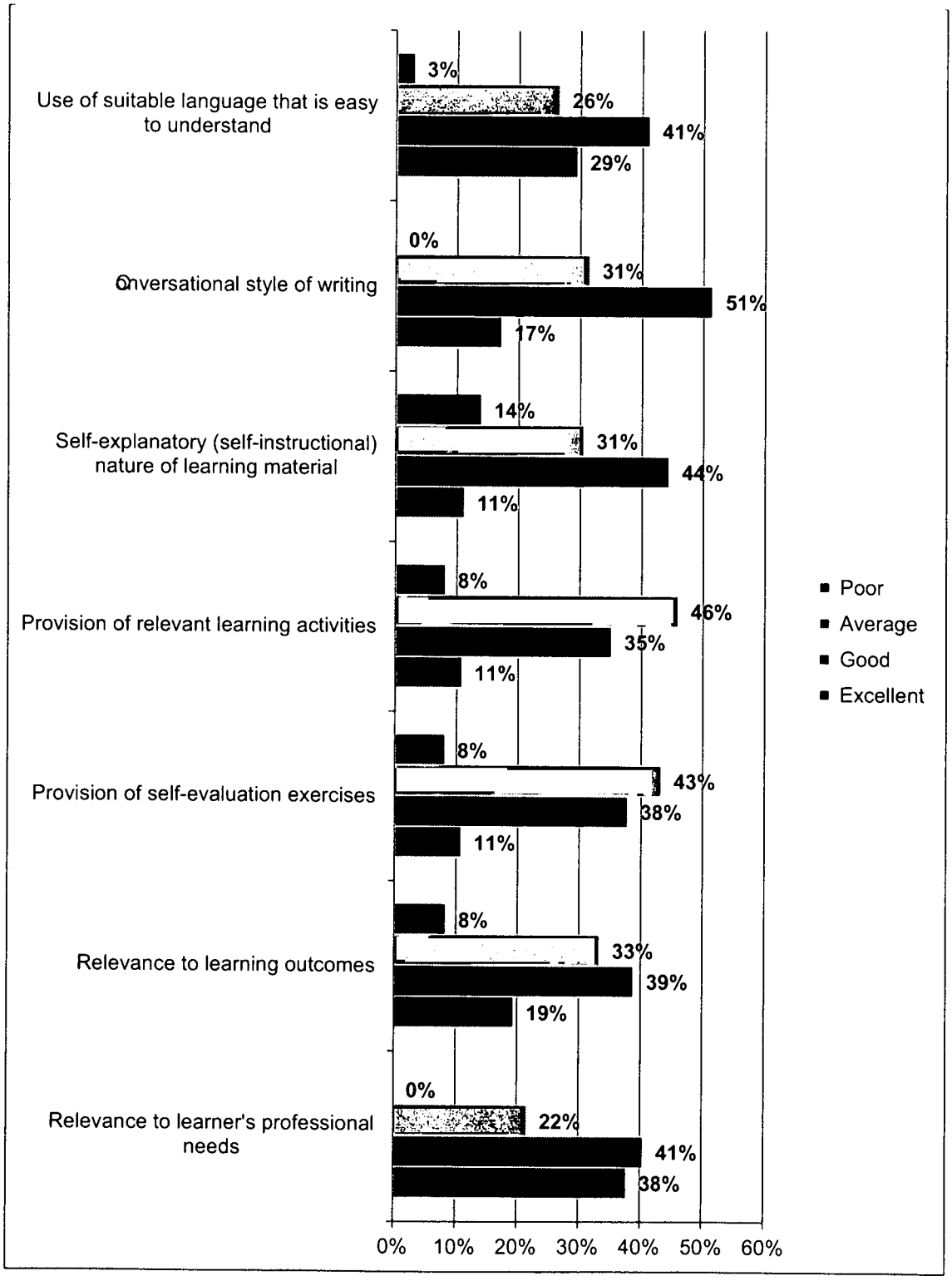


Figure 5.9 Rating of quality of prescribed learning materials

Figure 5.9 presents the rating of prescribed study guides by the IEMS academic staff where 78.3% of the respondents rated the (simple) language in the prescribed course guides at IEMS as good. The conversational style was rated as good by only 58.3% of the respondents. Aspects of the prescribed course guides that were rated as poor were the learning activities, their self-explanatory nature and their self-assessment. These were rated as poor by 54%, 51.3% and 44%, respectively.

Comments added other negative features of the prescribed learning materials as viewed by the participants. They described them as "out-dated," very shallow and lacking in most of the details, as well as "not adequate". These claims were further substantiated by examples such as, unavailability of topics, e.g. HIV/AIDS and disease management as evidence of current issues (inadequacy).

Several respondents complained about the "textbook" style in which the materials were written. Some of the respondents even suggested that when the materials are being reviewed the conversational style had to be adopted to meet the expected standards of distance learning materials.

In conclusion, analysis of the quality of the prescribed self-instruction materials indicated that the strength of the materials was with the simple and easy to understand language used. However, several weaknesses such as the style of writing, the omission of current issues and a failure to review the materials were mentioned.

The next section will provide highlights on suitable selected support services for IEMS students.

5.3.6 Suitable support services

Recommended suitable support services are shown in Figure 5.10.

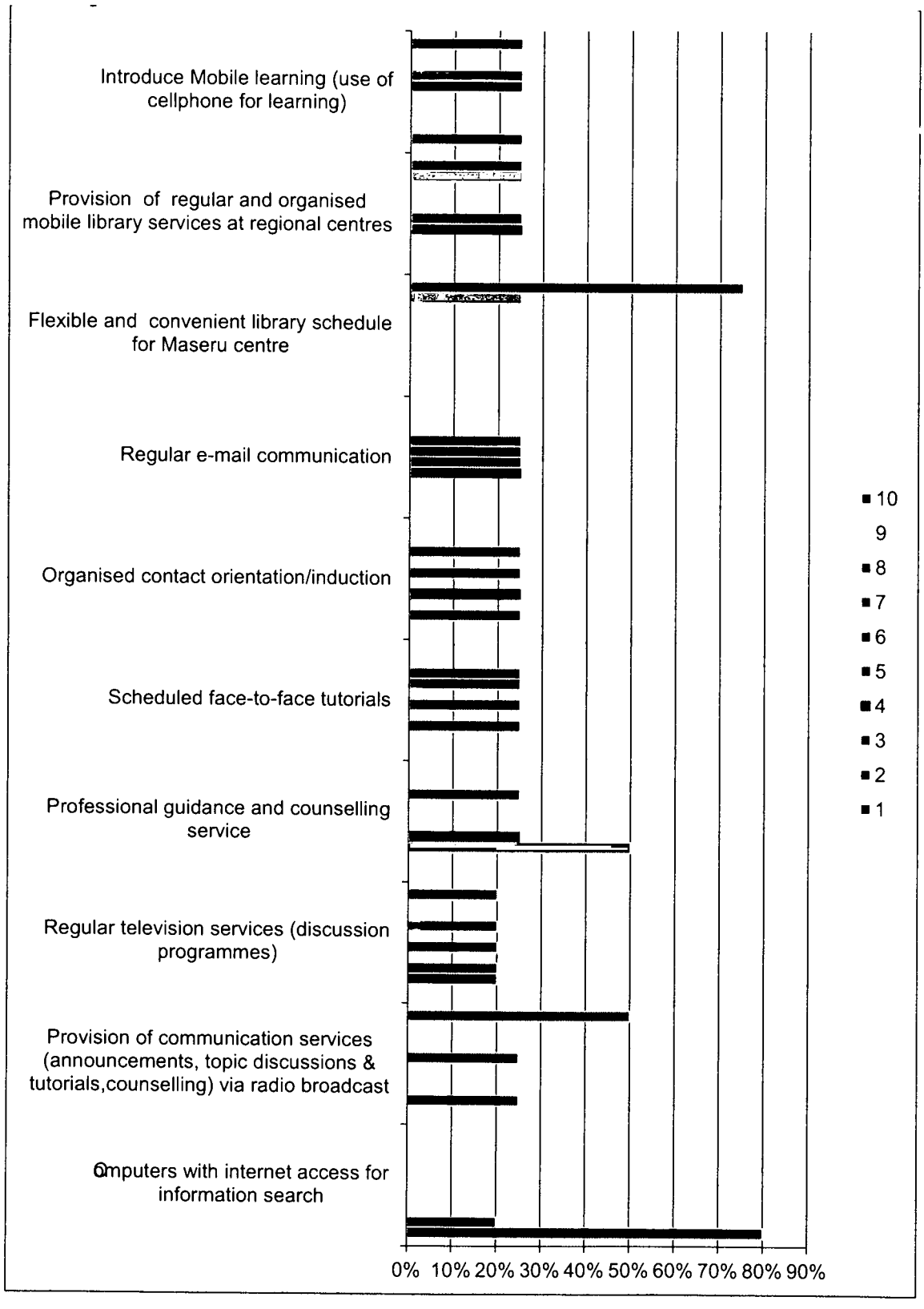


Figure 5.10 Suitability of selected support services

Computers and a flexible library schedule were rated as suitable support by 80% and 78% of the respondents, respectively. These services were described as the most essential. Other services viewed as suitable were communication and professional counselling services (50%). Face-to-face tutorials, organised induction, email, mobile services (all at 25%) and TV services (20%) were noted. One respondent explained that although TV education programmes are desirable, they are expensive to produce and the number of students who would watch them would not justify the expense. Mobile learning was anticipated to be an additional expense due to the need for airtime in order to access information.

According to the analysis of data on the suitability of selected support services, the majority of respondents rated computers with internet and a flexible and convenient library schedule as the most suitable support services. Television programmes were not rated as highly as the other support services.

5.3.7 Summary of academic staff questionnaire survey

Findings of the academic staff questionnaire survey highlighted and confirmed some of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats pointed out by students. For example, good interaction between tutors and students was one of the strengths indicated by both academic staff and students. Similarly, the findings show that the groups also concurred about the following depicted weaknesses: tutors' lack of skills when dealing with adult students; the unavailability of photocopying facilities; and unsatisfactory library services.

5.4 STUDENT FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

In this section findings related to the qualitative data are discussed. The qualitative data were collected by means of focus group discussions conducted with IEMS students and academic staff, separately. The aim of conducting focus group discussions was to obtain in-depth information regarding the quality of learner support at IEMS. Furthermore, it was to determine participants' views on the type of learner support they perceived to be relevant for IEMS adult learners. Qualitative data analysis was undertaken to confirm results and provide better insights into the findings. The data were transcribed and read several times in order to become familiar with the opinions of the participants. The data were coded with

predetermined codes emanating from a conducted literature review. Pre-determined code categories included the following themes as indicated in the tables below (5.4 and 5.5).

Table 5.4: Data categories and codes

Category	Code
Tutorial system	**TUT**
Learning materials	LM
Learner support related to assessment	**LSRA**
Administrative services	AS
Access to technological support	**ATS**
Potential supportive technology	PST

Table 5.5: Participants in students' focus group discussions

IEMS Centre (See Appendix D)	Level and gender (1st year)	Level and gender (2nd year)	Level and gender (3rd year)	Level and gender (4th year)
Maseru (n=10)	2 females	1 female 2 male	1 female 1 male	2 females 1 male
Mahobong (n=10)	2 females	2 males	3 females	2 female 1 male
Mohaleshoek (n=10)	3 females	3 males	1 female 1 male	2 females

Table 5.4 shows that ten students from each centre participated in focus group discussions (see Fig 5.4 for details). They were predominately females as indicated.

At the beginning of the discussion the term *student support* was explained in the context of IEMS to enable participants to conceptualise the meaning of the phrase. Student support can be defined differently because there are various and significant factors which may determine the relevance of a learner support system. Participants were asked to focus their discussions on the following two aspects during the focus group discussions:

1) What is the nature and quality of the available student support services offered to distance students at IEMS?

2) How would you describe the form and nature of student support for distance students you would expect but currently not available to students at IEMS?

The findings are presented according to the following different pre-determined categories (tutorial system, learning materials, learner support related to assessment, administrative services, access to technological support and potential supportive technology). The discussion commences with the participants' views on the tutorial system.

In the next section, the results and findings on student focus group discussions are presented.

5.4.1 Tutorial system

Participants reported that they had a good working relationship with tutors. They expressed a satisfactory rapport between tutors and students which was also indicated by the quantitative survey respondents. However, several participants in the focus group discussions complained about a lack of skills and confirmed the dissatisfaction which was also indicated in the quantitative results. One of the participants described some of the inexperienced tutors and facilitators as *"Extremely unprofessional and not willing to address learners' needs."*

Participants stated that they appreciated that during monthly face-to-face sessions they had an opportunity to consult with tutors on the content covered during the residential school. However, they expressed their dissatisfaction with the manner in which facilitators presented their lectures during the residential school. Participants generally felt that, facilitators did not seem to care whether they acquired any knowledge; instead facilitators seemed to be more concerned about complying with the unrealistic demands of the ADE department. They argued that for the ADE department to have expected that thirteen lectures could be covered in one week of the residential sessions was very unrealistic. One of the participants stated that *"although the ADE department feels that it is essential that during residential school we be introduced to all thirteen lectures covered in the prescribed self-instruction materials, it is impossible, considering that each course is only allocated a total of six hours during the residential school."*

The issue regarding the behaviour of facilitators during the residential school is disturbing, especially that the ADE department expected and even "demanded" that thirteen lectures be introduced in six contact sessions; thus the practice is likely to compromise issues of quality teaching and learning.

Participants mentioned that they were not happy about the tutors' failure to provide additional learning materials. With regard to this, student participants reported that the majority of tutors were not willing even to assist them on how they could access additional materials to support their arguments in submitted assignments. One of the participants mentioned that some of the tutors said: *"We are paid only for the 2hrs that we teach and it is not even enough, so we cannot do more."*

The reported tutors' reluctance to provide additional learning materials confirmed what was also highlighted in the quantitative survey. In addition, there is further insight into what might have contributed to their reluctance, considering the statement made regarding remuneration. However, it is worrying that if individuals engaged as tutors feel that their responsibility is mainly teaching, perhaps additional orientation about tutors' responsibilities is necessary.

In summary, qualitative data and quantitative data reveal that one of the strengths of the tutorial system was the satisfactory relationship maintained between tutors and students. However, dissatisfaction pertaining to tutors' lack of relevant skills and their failure to provide additional learning materials were expressed and considered as a weakness. The analysis of the participants' perceptions regarding the tutorial system confirms what was revealed by the quantitative data results.

5.4.2 Course guides

The general feeling of participants was that prescribed course guides were out-dated and consequently, had to be reviewed. One of the regional centres' participants said: *"The ADE department does not seem to recognise that we spend most of the time at our different districts without any kind of support except from the out-dated course guides".* The dissatisfaction regarding out-dated materials confirmed what was also indicated in the quantitative results. Participants concluded that current issues were

not included in the materials considering that they were designed more than fifteen years ago. Similarly, the problem of a lack of relevant issues in the materials which was highlighted in the quantitative data participants was also referred to. Several participants concurred with the quantitative survey respondents that the materials did not qualify as distance learning material. They complained about lack of relevant activities and the style of writing. One of the participants claimed that the material resembled "lecture notes."

Mahobong and Mohaleshoek participants were extremely unhappy about inadequately printed course guides. They explained that they had concluded that they were not treated like the Maseru Centre students. For example, they reported that instead of the ADE department facilitating and ensuring that the few available printed materials were distributed equally, it was not actually the practice; instead the few available printed copies were kept in Maseru.

The issue of unfair distribution of the few available materials is a concern which the institution has to address urgently, because it suggests that the Maseru Centre students seemed to have more access to some of the learning materials than students from the other centres.

It is interesting to note that there were similarities regarding the quality of the prescribed materials which were reflected in the qualitative and quantitative data. For example, several participants were of the opinion that the language used in the material was simple and easy to understand. However, weaknesses pertaining to a failure to up-date materials, inadequately printed materials and an unsatisfactory style of writing were also highlighted in both the quantitative and qualitative data.

5.4.3 Learner support related to assessment

The dissatisfaction with regard to late feedback which was detected in the qualitative data was confirmed by several participants. Surprisingly, the majority of the regional centres' participants blamed facilitators for untimely feedback. They were of the opinion that tutors graded assignments on time; however, they stated that facilitators spent a relatively long time moderating coursework. For example, one of the

participants claimed that *"tutors mark assignments on time, but facilitators take a long time moderating and changing marks unnecessarily."*

The majority of the participants concurred with quantitative survey respondents regarding detailed comments provided by tutors on assignments. Both groups were happy about the detailed feedback provided by tutors. Nevertheless, both groups complained about delayed feedback. It is evident that there were weaknesses identified in the administration of feedback. Several regional centres' participants reported that some of the tutors suggested strategies that could assist them improve their academic performances.

5.4.4 Administrative support

Participants reported that it was a very positive decision for the ADE department to have offered a guidance and counselling course. However, one participant complained: *"We are very disappointed, since the institute did not find it necessary to engage counsellors who could provide essential counselling services".* Several respondents were of the opinion that the provision of professional counselling services could have assisted them cope with academic challenges. Regional centres' participants explained that in the absence of professional counselling services, regional coordinators were always willing to provide advice on academic and personal issues.

Maseru participants reported that they could access a few current journals and distance education books from the Maseru library. On the contrary, participants from Mahobong and Mohaleshoek centres stated that at their respective regional centres journals and reference books were not available. They mentioned that occasionally when mobile services were available they could be loaned a few books. Several participants stated that the Maseru library opening schedule was not flexible enough to allow them to utilise the facility as they desired. They also mentioned that during the day, when the library was open, they were usually engaged at their respective work places. Therefore, they were of the view that the opening and closing hours should be extended to accommodate them.

Regional centres' participants mentioned that they were extremely dissatisfied about the poor administration and unreliable mobile library services. They complained about not being provided with a schedule that stipulated the dates on which these services would be made available. They also reported that library services were not made available during the monthly face-to-face sessions. They felt that this was an opportunity that IEMS was missing out on and they indicated it could be more strategic and logical if mobile library services were provided during scheduled monthly face-to-face sessions when the majority of students were present at the centre.

Several respondents from all centres complained about unsatisfactory photocopying facilities. Maseru participants reported that one available photocopying machine was not functioning properly and was taken in for repairs regularly. In addition, they mentioned that in many instances, photocopying paper was unavailable. Therefore, students were not able to make copies of '*hand-outs'* and any other relevant learning materials. One of the respondents felt as if *"the institute does not seem to be trying to make it possible for them to have access to reliable basic services such as photocopying."*

The analysis of the participants' views regarding the quality of administrative support also confirmed the following weaknesses which were also depicted in the quantitative data results:

- Lack of multi-media learning resources;
- Unavailability of photocopying facilities; and
- Lack of relevant reference books.

5.4.5 Access to technological support

The majority of participants confirmed a lack of access to technological support which was highlighted by the quantitative survey respondents. For instance, participants from the regional centres expressed the fact that they were very unhappy about a lack of internet connections and about the few computers which were available at their centres. One participant confessed and complained "*It is very*

embarrassing to be a university learner who is not able to use a computer. I think it is unfortunate and not fair because students at the main campus studying with the conventional mode have access to computers; we consider this kind of practice as an example of discrimination."

In brief, the majority of participants were of the opinion that the institution did not seem to recognise the importance of technological support in the distance mode of learning. Generally, a lack of access to technological support was identified as one of the weaknesses which the institution had to address urgently, since the important contribution technology can make in teaching and learning nowadays cannot easily be disputed.

5.4.6 Potential technological support

Participants reported that the university had a slot on the local radio station aimed at disseminating information about the university, its programmes and activities. However, the majority of the participants claimed that the ADE department had not adequately used the radio programme as a means of support for them. One participant commented: "*We are surprised at why the department does not utilise the radio programme frequently, because we were advised (requested) and encouraged by ADE academic staff to disseminate information about the annual practicum organised by completing students."*

Participants also confirmed that the following would be viable and relevant technological support as suggested in the students' questionnaire results:

- Computers with internet;
- Use of SMS message for academic and administrative support;
- Online registration; and
- Radio services.

It is surprising that participants did not mention that accessing learning materials would also be a suitable type of support mechanism considering that they were physically separated from the institution and their instructors. One would expect that

since online materials can be accessed at anytime and anywhere they would be amongst the preferred learner support services.

5.5. ACADEMIC STAFF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Focus group discussions were conducted with Maseru, Mahabong and Mohaleshoek tutors. Focus groups conducted with Maseru tutors comprised four males and six females. Mahobong and Mohaleshoek Regional Centres' participants comprised six females in total.
The following questions were posed to guide the discussions:

1. What kind of support is made available to IEMS ADE learners?
2. What are some of the shortcomings you have identified with the current student support of ADE at IEMS?
3. How can IEMS improve on the existing limitations you have identified?

The findings of the focus groups discussions are presented according to the different pre-determined categories namely, access to technological support, course guides and suitability of selected support services,

5.5.1 Access to technological support

The majority of participants reported that they owned a cell phone; however, they stated that they were not happy about having to use their cell phones to communicate with students about academic issues. Mahobong participants mentioned that they were very unhappy because there was no landline telephone at the centre; therefore, they had to use their cell phones frequently to communicate with the regional coordinator and students at a cost to themselves.

The issue of inadequate computers and a lack of internet facilities at all centres was yet another concern which was raised by participants. They stated that they were of the opinion that a lack of access to relevant technological support disadvantaged students. The general feeling of participants was that the institution had to try to improve on the unsatisfactory conditions. Dissatisfaction about inadequate

computers and a lack of internet facilities were also detected in the quantitative results; thus, the qualitative data confirm that the issue was one of the major concerns. One may argue that this was a legitimate concern in view of the unavailability of technological resources such as computers with internet facilities which restricted students and instructors from accessing relevant information that could promote effective teaching and learning.

Several participants were extremely dissatisfied about students and tutors not having access to computers and the internet at a tertiary institution. They maintained that the institution did not give the adult education programme sufficient recognition and the status it deserves. Access to relevant technological support was identified as a weakness that needed urgent attention.

5.5.2 Course guides

Participants confirmed that the language used in the prescribed self-instruction materials was simple and easy to understand. However, several participants complained about the general design of the materials. For example, one of the participants said: *"IEMS has an urgent responsibility to work towards facilitating a process of designing relevant self-instruction materials".* The issue of the self-instruction materials being out-dated was confirmed and the suggestion from participants was that the institution had to embark on a process of designing appropriate learning materials. Several respondents reported that the materials did not qualify to be called distance learning materials or to even be used by students studying by distance mode. The argument was that the stipulated criteria recommended for designing distance learning materials were not followed.

It has become clear that the quality of the prescribed self-instruction materials was very unsatisfactory to the different groups who participated in the investigation. For instance, the only strength identified is in regard to the simple language used. In general, both groups that participated in the investigation were unhappy about the following aspects:

- Lack of depth in the content;
- Unsatisfactory style of writing;

- Lack of current issues; and
- Failure to include relevant activities and assessment.

5.5.3 Suitability of selected support services

Access to computer and 'reliable' internet facilities were confirmed by participants as one of the suitable services for ADE students as indicated in the quantitative results. Expressions of caution such as *"It's time that IEMS management realises that distance learners should have access to modern computers and a reliable internet if they wish to be recognised as a distance learning institute and stop functioning like a village secondary school".* Several participants felt that computers with internet access would be a viable option. Their argument was that computers were not very expensive nowadays. Participants also argued that internet connectivity would not be a challenge since the majority of IEMS centres were located in urban areas.

The general feeling of participants was that effective and efficient library services were also amongst the most suitable type of support. However, regional centre participants complained about the poor administration of mobile library services. Maseru participants also reported that the library opening schedule was not flexible enough to allow students to use the facility regularly. Therefore, they recommended that the opening hours be extended to suit the busy schedule of adult students. Poor administration of the mobile library service and the unsuitable library opening schedule were also identified as areas of concern by quantitative respondents' therefore, the dissatisfaction expressed by participants confirms that there were certain weaknesses in this regard.

Introducing mobile learning was also described as a suitable support. Participants agreed that the majority of learners had cell phones; therefore, it would be more convenient and less expensive for tutors to send cell phone messages if the institutions had a facility that allowed bulk SMS messages to be sent to individual students.

The findings from the focus groups conducted with students and academic staff reveal that both groups reported that the language used in the course guides was

simple and easy to understand. However, both groups reported that the course guides were out-dated and hence did not include relevant and current issues. In addition the groups also complained about lack of learning resources. Similarly, lack of adequate technological support was also described as disturbing because it denied students access to relevant information.

In the next section, the results of the resource inventory will be discussed.

5.6 RESOURCE INVENTORY

The results of the resource inventory which was conducted at IEMS centres will be presented in this section. The resource inventory was conducted in order to obtain information about the type of resources which were made available and served as a means of support for ADE distance students. The resource inventory was conducted at the Maseru, Mahobong and Mohaleshoek centres (see Appendix C). A check list based on the literature review was used for collecting data. In the analysis process, the following pre-determined categories were used: human resources; provision of learning materials; and infrastructure/technology.

5.6.1 Human Resources

Relevant human resources are considered mandatory and essential in assisting distance students cope with the challenges associated with the isolation they experience (3.2.1). Providing distance students with relevant human resources such as tutors and counsellors can enable them accomplish their academic goals (see section 3.2.1). In addition, in a distance learning programme, non-academic staff is also essential and desirable. The IEMS organisational structure is illustrated in Figure 5.11.

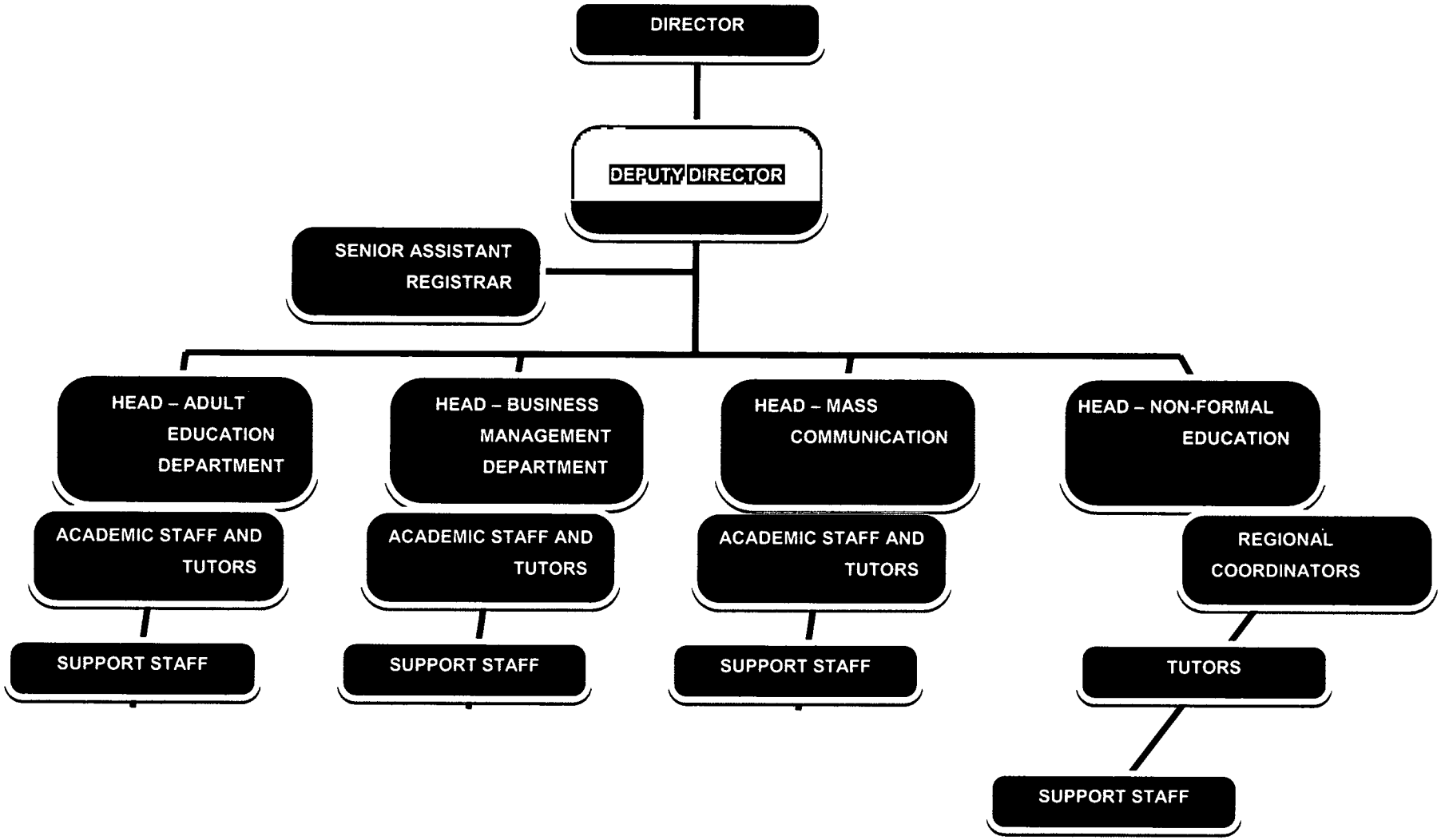


Figure 5.11 IEMS organisational structure

The IEMS organisational structure in Figure 5.11 reflects IEMS academic and non-academic staff. The director is the chief executive responsible for overseeing the general management of the institute, whilst the deputy director is responsible for academic affairs. The senior registrar is an administrator who also serves as the secretary of the academic board. Additionally, the institute appoints 4 heads of academic programmes. Tutors and facilitators are also part of the academic staff, whilst relevant support staff is also engaged.

The ADE department is manned by individuals with experience and training in adult education. Table 5.5 illustrates that ADE department has engaged permanent staff who have experience and training in adult and distance education.

Table 5.5: Adult Education Department's academic staff

Department Members	Qualification
Head of Department	Ph.D. (Adult Education)
Programme Coordinator	Professor (Adult Education)
Tutor	Associate Professor (Adult Education)
Programme Coordinator	Ph.D. (Adult Education)
Programme Coordinator	M.Ed. (Adult Education)
Tutor	M.Ed. (Guidance and counselling)
Tutor	M.Ed. (College counselling)

5.6.2 Course guides and course outlines

Course outlines are also very important, as they provide information about the content to be covered, assessment, submission of assignments and relevant reference books which students can consult.

The number of printed prescribed course guides was very low; for example, in some instances there were only twenty to thirty copies available. Some of the courses taught did not have any printed course guides. The majority of the courses had one printed copy of the course outline and students were expected to make copies from it for their own use. This was regrettable in view of the lack of photocopying facilities indicated by the quantitative survey respondents and the focus group participants.

The library had 85 volumes of adult education books and only 23 volumes of distance education books. Current copies of the Journal of Adult Education and Development were also available at the library. The number of available copies of the Journal of Adult Education was relatively high (more than 100) compared to other journals. There were only 31 copies of the Distance Education journal of which the majority were not current issues. Approximately 22 copies of the Journal of Higher Education were available and only 12 copies of the International Journal of Lifelong Learning.

It was noted that relevant reference books were very few at the library. For example, adult education books that students could use were fewer than 100. The few available copies were supposed to be used by almost two hundred ADE degree students. Nevertheless, it was encouraging to see that on the library reserve shelf; a few copies of relevant journals were kept. However, an analysis of learning resources depicted inadequate learning resources as one of the major weaknesses and this was confirmed by the quantitative and qualitative results.

5.6.3 Infrastructure and technology

Adequate infrastructure and technological support are regarded as fundamental in promoting provision of quality distance education (see section 3.2.2.3). Therefore, the expectation is that institutions should provide students with adequate infrastructure and technological support.

Table 5.7: IEMS's infrastructure and technology

Category	Number	Comment
Classrooms	12	Can accommodate only 40 students each
Computers with internet	23	15 working
Fax machine	1	Working
Halls	2	Crowded during examination period
Photocopying machines	4	2 functioning satisfactorily
Printers	5	3 functioning
Telephone	1	1
Teleconferencing facility	1	Not functioning
Television	1	Very old
VCR	1	Old
Library	1	Small

Table 5.7 reflects that the infrastructure available at Maseru centre includes 8 classrooms, 2 halls, as well as a very small library. Approximately, the total number of students enrolled at IEMS was close to 2,000. Therefore, it was surprising how feasible it was for the institute to accommodate the increasing number of enrolled students, since there had not been any expansion to the existing building used for tutorials.

The 'supposed' library is a small room which was initially used as a classroom and does not have adequate cooling and heating facilities. The type of furniture used is not suitable for use in any decent library. There is only one old photocopying machine. Unfortunately, there is not a single computer in the library.

5.6.4 Regional centres resource inventory

Regional centres serve as an extension of the teaching institution responsible for providing relevant and adequate support for distance students (see section 3.2.2.1).

The different types of support provided at Mahobong and Mohaleshoek regional centres are reflected in Figure 5.7.

5.6.5 Human resource and learning materials

There were four part-time tutors engaged at each centre to provide essential support services. In view of this, at both regional centres the numbers of students enrolled was relatively small; therefore it was concluded that four was a manageable and adequate number. However, it was disturbing to observe that regional centres did not have any printed self-instruction materials that students could purchase, as was available at the Maseru centre. Interestingly, at the Mahobong centre, students had access to copies of the Adult Education and Development Journal. The inconsistency regarding the provision of learning materials was found to be unacceptable.

Table 5.8 Regional Centre infrastructure and learning resources

Category	Number	Comment
Mahobong		
Classrooms	4	Small
Adult Education and Development Journal	15	Number of copies
Photocopying machine	1	Functioning
Computers	5	Functioning
Mohaleshoek		
Classrooms	4	Small
Photocopying machine	1	Functioning
Computers	5	Functioning

As reflected in Table 5.8 infrastructure and learning resources were found to be extremely inadequate at both centres. Each of the centres was equipped with only five computers and the expectation was that the computers should be used by almost 100 students, which was impossible. However, it was encouraging to have discovered that photocopying facilities were available at both regional centres. Classroom space was observed to be a challenge at both centres.

In summary, the regional centres resource inventory exercise revealed and confirmed the following weaknesses also highlighted by the quantitative and qualitative data results and findings:

- Failure to provide adequate learning materials; and
- Lack of adequate infrastructure and technological support.

In the next section integrated results and findings on context analysis and a resource inventory will be presented in a SWOT analysis.

5.7 SWOT ANALYSIS

In order to present a holistic overview of the perceptions regarding the nature of IEMS student support, the researcher decided to make use of a Strength, Weakness, Opportunity and Threats (SWOT) analysis. A SWOT analysis is regarded as a powerful tool for determining a project's capabilities (strengths and weaknesses), its unexplored opportunities, as well as the external threats to its success (Thompson, Strickland & Gamble 2005:91). The SWOT analysis applied in this section serves as a framework to categorise the views relating to the nature of student support and to use this information in planning for improved and better support services at the institution.

Strengths	Weaknesses
• An established tutorial system • Availability of qualified human resources • Existing infrastructure and services • Existing course guides • Access to technology	• Shortcomings in the tutorial system • Shortcomings in the course guides • Lack of resources • Lack of infrastructure and services
Opportunities	**Threats**
• Providing regular in-service workshops for tutors • Reviewing course guides • Utilising technology fully • Utilising library services fully • Re-considering the organisation of distance learning and funding at IEMS	• Lack of funding • Nature of current ODL policy • Lack of national infrastructure • Limited access to some technology for some students

5.8 SUMMARY

In providing a summary of this chapter, it is significant to note that the section addresses the second research question (1.4) aimed at determining the status and nature of support services offered at IEMS.

The collected biographical data show and confirm that students enrolled in the ADE degree programme are mature adults who are unique and have multiple responsibilities; therefore, they have different needs compared to the young learners enrolled in traditional institutions.

The quantitative results show that tutors had a good working relationship with students; similarly, focus group participants also confirmed that tutors and students maintained a satisfactory working relationship. However, the qualitative and quantitative results also revealed that some of the tutors lack the necessary skills for dealing with adult students. A lack of relevant tutoring skills is a negative and undesirable aspect which can influence, as well as contribute to unsatisfactory academic performance.

The quantitative survey respondents and focus group participants noted that prescribed learning materials were written in simple and easy to understand language. However, both groups concurred that the materials were out-dated and therefore did not include current issues. Thus, it was suggested that the materials be reviewed. The lack of learning resources, such as relevant reference books and printed hand-out notes, were some of the negative aspects reported by participants and respondents. The resource inventory results also confirmed that the provision of learning resources was not satisfactory.

The majority of participants and respondents indicated that the institute did not provide adequate technological support and both groups expressed the fact that they were dissatisfied with the prevailing conditions. They highlighted the negative aspect of the unavailability of technological support which was also confirmed by the few devices recorded in the resource inventory. Access to

computers with internet was pointed out as one of the major problems to be overcome as they were rated highly by students regarding their suitability for support in the distance mode of learning. Mobile learning through the use of a mobile phone was well reported as a viable support option. Therefore, it was concluded that in view of the fact that several respondents and participants indicated that they owned a cell phone, the investigation revealed a positive aspect.

That tutors attempted to provide constructive and comprehensive feedback, was one of the positive practices reported by quantitative respondents and focus group participants. However, they complained about tutors' tendency to delay returning their assignments.

A lack of infrastructure such as classrooms and the unsatisfactory physical conditions of the library were also noted both in the quantitative and qualitative results. The resource inventory results also confirmed that there were inadequate learning facilities. Mobile library services at the regional centres and photocopying facilities were reported as most unsatisfactory at all centres.

CHAPTER 6:

DISCUSSION OF THE SWOT ANALYSIS AND AN IMPROVEMENT PLAN

6. 1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter the results and findings of the context analysis and the resource inventory conducted were presented. In this chapter, the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the support of students learning through a distance learning mode at IEMS are analysed in order to present a realistic view of the student support at IEMS. The aim of this SWOT analysis, as it is generally known, is therefore, to present a contextualised, empirically based depiction of the current student support situation at IEMS. This is an attempt to improve on the existing practices, as well as to recommend an appropriate student support system for the institution. Some implications of each element of the SWOT analysis are discussed.

The chapter concludes with the outline of a proposed improvement plan for addressing shortcomings in student support at IEMS. This improvement plan is informed by perspectives gained from the SWOT analysis, as well as the literature review. The table of directives (from the literature) for designing a relevant and effective student support system in a developing country (see Table 3.1) is of particular importance here and serves to bring theory and practice nearer to each other. As indicated in chapter 3 (see Table 3.1), the set of directives also informed the nature of the questionnaire surveys undertaken and thus ultimately also the SWOT analysis. The chapter commences with an overview of the SWOT analysis which clearly portrays the 'practice' at IEMS.

6.2 DISCUSSION OF SWOT ANALYSIS

Student support includes several activities, as well as different resources which can facilitate effective teaching and learning (see 2.2.3). Qualitative and quantitative data results reveal that student support at IEMS has positive and negative aspects. Therefore, a SWOT analysis was compiled to serve as a

framework to categorise the views relating to the nature of student support at the institution and ultimately act as a guide to the improvement plan. The discussion takes place in the order of the four main categories (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) and briefly reviews the main elements (sub-categories) identified under each of these.

6.2.1 Strengths

In the empirical investigation the following strengths were identified in the learner support provided by the Adult Education Department:

- An established tutorial system;
- Availability of qualified human resources;
- Existing infrastructure and services;
- Existing course guides; and
- Access to technology.

Each of these strengths is briefly reviewed below.

6.2.1.1 An established tutorial system

The existence of a tutorial system in a distance learning programme is considered a very important aspect (see 2.2.1, 3.5 and Table 6.1); therefore, the introduction of a tutorial system by the Adult Education Department as one of its academic support elements is regarded as strength. Furthermore, the research results indicate that students 'valued' monthly face-to-face tutorial sessions. In addition, the provision of constructive and comprehensive feedback by tutors is a commendable practice, as well as a recommended element of effective student support (see 3.5).

Importantly, data indicated that students enjoyed very good working relationships with most tutors. This is a very positive aspect since IEMS's distance students are separated from the institution and thus rely on tutors' guidance and support in academic and administrative issues. Moreover, maintenance of a good rapport between tutors and students is one of the best distance learning practices (see 2.4.1 *a*).The interaction between tutors and students should be maintained as

communication is a sound principle in effective undergraduate education (Chickering & Gamson 1987:3-7).

6.2.1.2 Availability of qualified human resources

The existing permanent staff of ADE is adequately qualified (see Table 5.5) and this is regarded as a strength, since adult and distance learners form a unique group (see section 2.2.2) that requires sensitive handling by competent individuals. Therefore, there is capacity for training other (part-time) tutors in relevant adult education skills.

6.2.1.3 Existing infrastructure and services

Building structures, such as lecture halls and classrooms at the Maseru Centre, as well as the existing classrooms at the Mahobong and Mohaleshoek centres are good assets for the provision of student support. At the regional centres there are classrooms which are used during examinations and for conducting monthly face-to-face tutorial sessions. Similarly, at the Maseru Centre there is an assembly hall, computer laboratory and tutorial classrooms. The availability of tutorial classroom facilities at all the IEMS centres is a strength considering that the classrooms are primarily utilised to provide support to students.

At the Maseru Centre there is a library that provides services to all registered students. However, at the regional centres, IEMS provides only mobile library services. The existence of library services is a strength that could be developed. Library services are essential because distance students depend on written materials and other resources during their period of study (see 3.2.2.2).

6.2.1.4 Existing course guides

The Department of Adult Education has developed learning materials for most of the courses offered in its degree programmes. For example, all first-year introductory courses have course guides that are meant to be self-instruction materials. These materials include pre-test and post-test exercises which some of the students described as very helpful in terms of evaluating their understanding

of the course content. Another positive aspect of these self-instruction materials is the simple and easy to understand language used (see 3.5 and Table 6.1). Despite shortcomings detected in the course guides, their existence is a strong foundation for the design and development of relevant and more appropriate materials.

6.2.1.5 Access to technology

Since the majority (roughly 80%) of students in ADE have access to a cell phone (see 5.1.6) and the use of cell phones for teaching and learning is one of the recommended good practices of supporting distance students (see 3.2.2.3 b). The institution has the option of considering how it could fully utilise cell phones in mobile learning. Furthermore, almost 60% of the students have access to radio, television sets, as well computers with internet connection. Similarly, above 80% of the academic staff pointed out that they had access to such technologies including cell phones. The reported accessibility by students and staff to the relevant and recommended technological devices opens up opportunities for further utilisation of these devices for teaching and learning purposes.

Another key aspect of this strength is the established university website which the ADE could consider utilising for the provision of additional academic and administrative support to students (see 6.2.3.3). The identified strengths form a foundation for continuing current support and for improving it where shortcomings have been identified. New opportunities can be created by making use of available technology.

6.2.2 Weaknesses

Academic staff and students exposed weaknesses in the provision of support for Adult Education degree students. The weaknesses reduce the effectiveness of the support provided (and prove counter-productive when considering the directives in Table 6.1).

The main weaknesses identified are the following:

- Shortcomings in the tutorial system;
- Shortcomings in the design of course guides;
- Lack of resources; and
- Shortcomings in infrastructure and service.

6.2.2.1 Shortcomings in the tutorial system

It has become clear that one of the weaknesses of the tutorial system is the tutors' lack of relevant skills for dealing with adult students. Students complained about the inability of some tutors to provide guidance and the expected support. A lack of relevant skills has a negative impact on the quality of the tutorial system, since adult students constitute a unique group who have distinct needs (section 5.2.1).

The reported negative behaviour and attitudes from some tutors raise concern about their professional ethics. These behaviours include late arrival for face-to-face tutorial sessions, or not showing up at all without an apology and a failure to provide timely feedback (see 5.2). In addition, the reported inability and/ or failure to provide students with additional learning materials is unacceptable, considering that ADE students are distance students; thus learning materials are vital (see 3.2.2.2) for them. Furthermore, the tutors' lack of enthusiasm to cover the syllabus content, during the residential school, at the expense of students' understanding (see 5.3.1), defeats the whole purpose of these face-to-face contact sessions.

6.2.2.2 Shortcomings in the design of course guides

The out-dated course materials do not provide the students with the relevant information and thus compromise the effectiveness and value of their studies. This necessitates the reviewing of these materials. Besides the dated materials, these materials had many reported shortcomings including: textbook writing style (see 5.13); spelling and grammatical errors; inadequate learning activities; and

poor quality self-assessment exercises. One wonders what value these add to the students' learning experience since they are reportedly not setting examples of good learning material for students.

6.2.2.3 Lack or shortage of resources

Evidence of shortages of learning materials such as the unavailability of printed copies of the course guides, non-functional photocopying facilities and the unavailability of relevant reference books and journals at the regional centres provides a stressful learning environment for the students. The number of copies available and the nature of the collection of books at the Maseru centre can also be regarded as inadequate (see 5.5.2).

The resource inventory provided evidence of a shortage of computers and relevant multi-media tools (see 5.6) with the problem compounded by students being denied access to the few available computers. This situation needs to be addressed.

6.2.2.4 Lack of infrastructure and services

Data revealed that the physical condition of the library was very unsatisfactory (see 5.5.3.). For example, the library is very small and thus cannot accommodate the entire IEMS population. Furthermore, there is inadequate ventilation as well as heating and cooling facilities at the library. The library schedule is also not flexible enough to allow students to frequent the library as often as they could. Mobile library services are poorly administered, resulting in regional centre students not being able to use the services most of the time.

Moreover, the ADE department also fails to provide timely and adequate information regarding planned activities, such as registration and examination information. Failure to provide information about planned activities is a weakness which may have caused inconvenience and disadvantaged some of the students and academic staff, because they may have not been able to attend some of the important scheduled events.

To reduce or eliminate the identified weaknesses it could be logical and strategic to utilise some of the existing opportunities.

6.2.3 Opportunities

In the study, several opportunities were identified which could be exploited to improve the quality of the support services provided by IEMS. It was found that there were opportunities for:

- Providing pre-service and regular in-service workshops for tutors;
- Reviewing course guides;
- Utilising technology to its full potential;
- Utilising library services fully; and
- Reconsidering the organisation of distance learning and funding at IEMS.

6.2.3.1 Providing pre-service and regular in-service training for tutors

It has become clear that some of the tutors lack the relevant skills to deal with adults. Training prior to taking up duties, as well as regular in-service training for tutors is recommended good practice (see 3.5 and Table 3.1). The majority of the ADE permanent staff has training and experience in adult education (see 6.1); therefore, members of the department should facilitate such workshops to equip tutors with the relevant skills.

6.2.3.2 Reviewing of course guides

Distance learning materials are not supposed to be presented like textbooks (see 3.2.2); therefore, the institute has an obligation to initiate a process of designing relevant self-instruction materials.

The ADE department comprises permanent staff and some tutors who have experience in distance and adult education. Therefore, academic staff could be involved in designing relevant self-instruction materials. There is also the opportunity to identify and engage competent and knowledgeable individuals

(including part-time tutors) and other experts familiar with designing course materials according to the latest learning design principles (see 3.3.2). Collaboration with other institutions in sharing materials is another option (see Table 3.1). IEMS should also address the lack of research on student support in distance education (see Table 3.1) by commissioning a full-scale evaluation of all aspects of the current course materials by outside consultants.

6.2.3.3 Utilising technology to its full potential

In this section, reference is made to the online facility already established at NUL, as well as other technology that can be utilised for student support. These include cell phones; the telephone; computers and the internet; radio and television; as well as the recording of lectures on CD and DVD.

The National University of Lesotho has established a website (www.nul.ls), but the website provides mainly information on academic programmes offered at the institution. Periodically, advertisements of vacant positions are also posted on the website. The website does not seem to be adequately utilised to provide support to ADE students. Online facilities can be crucial for facilitating different activities, such as registration, enabling students' access to learning materials and information, as well as allowing students to participate in collaborative activities with their peers (see 3.4.1). As available information suggests that the website is not adequately exploited, an opportunity exists to utilise it for the provision of relevant support. It has also become evident that the majority of students and academic staff have access to a cell phone (see 5.1; 5.2). This is a positive aspect which creates an opportunity the institute can explore in strengthening student support. Nowadays, the use of mobile technology for student support is highly recommended (see 3.2.2.3). Considering that cell phones are regarded as very significant in facilitating regular communication with students on academic and administrative issues (see 3.2.2.3), introducing mobile learning at IEMS would be advantageous and a commendable option that could enhance teaching and learning.

The few available computers at different centres could be supplied with an internet connection to enable students to access learning resources, as well as better communication with tutors and peers.

Radio is considered another feasible option for teaching (see 3.2.2.3). Consequently, the existing radio programmes could be extended and utilised to provide academic and administrative support.

Mahobong regional centre does not have a telephone facility (see 3.2.2.3). Thus, since Mahobong centre is situated in an accessible area (see Appendix D: map), installing a telephone facility (at least) would be an advantage in terms of providing essential support. The use of CDs and DVDs in the distance mode of learning as additional support to supplement printed materials is one of the recommended good practices (see 3.4.3 and Table 3.1). At present, CDs and DVDs are not used as an additional support for degree students, although they would not be very expensive to PRODUCE and purchase; therefore, this can be regarded as a viable option. It would be strategic and valuable if the recorded CDs and DVDs were made available at the library, as well as at the regional centres to enable students to access them at any time.

6.2.3.4 Fully utilising library services

At present, the availability of library services at the different centres is an encouraging aspect and an opportunity which needs to be explored. The library at the Maseru centre has to provide essential support services to ADE students, as well as all other registered students. Mobile library services were likewise introduced to support students at regional centres. However, it has become clear that there are some aspects with regard to delivery of the services that need to be improved.

Library services are considered of fundamental support in the distance mode of learning (see 3.2.2.2 and Table 3.1); thus, improvement is essential. For instance, failure to provide adequate information about the availability of library services (including the mobile service) denies students an opportunity to use the

services. Furthermore, the library opening schedule does not allow students to use the services frequently. Taking cognisance of the fact that library services are essential, it would be more suitable and appropriate to extend the opening hours in an attempt to accommodate the busy schedule of adult students. In addition, the administration of the mobile library services could also be improved by planning and agreeing with the regional centres' personnel on the dates that would be suitable for providing the services. Managing library services efficiently at all designated centres would enhance learning and enable students to achieve their academic goals.

6.2.3.5 Re-considering the organisation of distance learning and funding at IEMS

When the organisation of the distance learning programme in the Department of Adult Education (see 5.5) is considered at this stage of the study, the question arises as to whether the programme can really be regarded as "distance education", in the light of the clarification of this concept (see 2.2.1) and shortcomings in the adequacy and provision of study materials. The organisation of monthly tutorials sessions is commendable, but when it becomes mandatory, many individuals in certain occupations and those in remote areas may be excluded from this opportunity for further education. Basotho and individuals of other nationalities residing in neighbouring countries are also potentially excluded. The question can therefore be asked whether it is not time to reconsider the organisation of distance education at IEMS, and have fewer tutorial sessions, which may release funding for the purpose of preparing better self-instruction materials and developing important technological support. Student numbers may increase, which can potentially lead to more subsidy. The opportunity can also be embraced to consider a second (parallel) mode of delivery which may address the needs of a larger number of adult students. Full utilisation of the outlined opportunities could improve on the quality of student support at IEMS and consequently, some of the threats could also be reduced or even eliminated.

6.2.4 Threats

The main threats identified for the improvement of IEMS student support are as follows:

- Lack of funding;
- Lack of national infrastructure; and
- Limited access to technology for most learners.

6.2.4.1 Lack of funding

The National University of Lesotho is mainly funded by the Lesotho government. However, for the past five years there has been a significant reduction in the annual budget (Budget speech: 2011). The drastic reduction has impacted on the operation of the university. For example, although the ADE department opted to offer the degree programme in adult education by distance mode to widen access, it has become almost impossible to provide some of the essential support.

Lack of funds does not allow activities such as, learning material development and production. Introducing relevant technological support, as well as improving on the infrastructure which has been in use for the past 25 years without any further additions or modifications to cater for the current needs of students, is a disturbing factor.

6.2.4.2 Lack of national infrastructure

Lesotho is a developing country; thus, in some remote areas there is lack of appropriate technological infrastructure which can facilitate connectivity to different electronic devices. Some of the students enrolled in the degree programme reside in rural areas and since some of the rural places are not easily accessible, this shortcoming disadvantages students in terms of receiving the essential support they need.

In some rural areas television, radio and television signals are not very reliable or are virtually non-existent. Regrettably, some of these rural areas do not also have electricity; therefore, this is a problem and a disadvantage for students residing in these remote areas. Consequently, it would be virtually impossible for students residing in very remote places to access some of the suitable and anticipated technological support.

6.2.4.3 Limited access to technology

Some of the modern and recommended technological devices such as computers are still expensive in developing countries such as Lesotho; thus, some institutions cannot afford to provide students with adequate and required technological support. This is the prevailing situation at IEMS where the few available computers were purchased almost 10 years ago; there is no indication of increasing the current number, even though the student population increases each year. A shortage of computers was confirmed by the resource inventory results (see 5.6).

Provision of printing and photocopying facilities is equally not satisfactory; for example, there are no printing facilities at IEMS and printing is done at the NUL main campus (approximately 35 km away). In addition, there is also only one old photocopying machine at the library (see 5.6). There is shortage of television sets at the Maseru Centre (the resource inventory results confirm that there is only one television set available at the institute) (see 5.6).

In most instances, threats are caused by external factors that cannot be easily or even adequately addressed by departments or institutions. The majority of the outlined threats are influenced by financial constraints. Although it is difficult for the department to suggest any substantial increase in the allocated funds which could improve on the quality of the current student support, the situation cannot just be accepted. The necessity and urgency of student support should be brought to the attention of management at IEMS.

In the next section the main elements of an improvement plan for addressing shortcomings in the current support system for distance students at IEMS are proposed.

6.3 AN IMPROVEMENT PLAN FOR STUDENT SUPPORT AT IEMS

It should be emphasised that the aim of a SWOT analysis is to distinguish the most critical issues in a situation and then organise them in a way that enables the formulation of a strategic approach. This could enable a particular organisation to build on the identified strengths, maximise any opportunities and counteract threats (Startups.co.uk).

In this study the aim was not to come up with a detailed operational plan, but rather to identify the main elements of a possible improvement plan which could guide IEMS and specifically, the Department of Adult Education, in their further planning to improve student support at the institute. For this purpose the main element of a so-called event guide was identified (Passfield 2004:33-3). In the construction of an event guide, the setting of goals is taken as a point of departure. For each goal, activities are listed in order of priority.

From this study (the SWOT analysis in particular), the following goals for improving student support can be identified:

1. Develop the skills of tutors;
2. Bring course materials in line with accepted standards of design and distribution in the distance education field;
3. Utilise technology to improve support to distance students;
4. Improve/address shortcomings in the existing library services; and
5. Adapt the ADE programme to maximise its cost-effectiveness and sustainability.

An event track for each goal can now be compiled, as indicated below (some goals may have more than one track to follow). Note that each event track consists of suggested activities in order of priority (also chronologically). Taken together, the event tracks suggest the key elements in a possible improvement

plan. The activities proposed for each track are, however, not meant as elements of a detailed plan; they are intended as initial directives, almost like a road map that spells out only important destinations on the way to improving distance education support at IEMS. The detail still has to be negotiated and ultimately filled in by the leading role-players in the programme - mostly ADE staff members, tutors and university management.

In an attempt to realise goal 2, two main event tracks can be distinguished relating to (a) the availability and distribution of material; and (b) the reviewing and possible redesigning of current material. For both events it is assumed that the researcher will first share perspectives from the study with the department and any other role-players. For the different event tracks, a distinction is made between high, medium and low priority, as well as between the time span of the implementation, namely short-term (one to two years); medium-term (two to four years); and long –term (four to ten years).

Goal 1: Develop the skills of tutors

Event track: Steps towards equipping tutors (high priority; short-term implementation)

- Share perspectives from the study with the department (ADE), who will adapt, oversee and implement the plan;
- Determine the nature of an appropriate orientation workshop for tutors (in order to develop necessary skills);
- Present the orientation workshop;
- Determine the nature of semester (in-service) workshops;
- Present semester workshops; and
- Evaluate tutorial sessions regularly (including feedback from students).

An operational tutorial system is one of the significant elements of an effective student support, (2.4.1a); thus, equipping tutors with relevant and desirable skills would be practising some of the recommended best practices (see Table 3.1). Goal 1 is therefore regarded as being of high priority which can and needs to be addressed in the short- and medium-term without too many cost implications for IEMS.

Goal 2: Bring course materials in line with accepted standards of design and distribution in distance education

In an attempt to realise goal 2, two main tracks can be distinguished relating to the availability and distribution of materials; and (b) to the reviewing and possible redesigning of current materials. For both events, it is assumed that the researcher would first share perspectives from the study with the department and any other role-players.

Event track (a): Availability of study material (high priority; short- to medium-term implementation)

- Take steps to ensure that enough copies of all study material are reproduced and made available to students in each module;
- Consider the inclusion of the cost of study material in tuition fees; and
- Improve current photocopying facilities and services at all centres.

Event track (b): Reviewing of current course guides (high priority, medium-term implementation)

- Appoint a task team (mainly ADE staff) to direct and manage the process;
- Determine accepted guidelines/standards for study material in distance education;
- Share/distribute the guidelines/standards with all material developers/designers;
- Evaluate current material according to the guidelines/standards;
- Where needed, adapt material accordingly;
- Collaborate with other distance education institutions on the writing/sharing of study material; and
- Evaluate material on a regular basis (by experts and by students).

Distance learning materials should be designed according to the recommended quality criteria to avoid any resemblance to textbooks used in the conventional mode of learning (see 3.3.2). Therefore, it is imperative that suggested procedures be followed in the design and development of the study materials. Examples of study materials from other distance education institutions can play an important role in acquainting ADE staff with the appropriate design principles.

Goal 3: Utilise technology to improve support for distance students

Five event tracks are distinguished for goal 3, namely (a) study material on CD and DVD); (b) cell phone technology; (c) radio; (d) television; and (e) the NUL website.

Event track (a): Use of CDs and DVDs (medium priority, short- to medium-term implementation)

- Investigate the feasibility of recording of lectures on CD and DVD.
- Purchase/hire or borrow basic recording equipment.
- Train tutors/other staff/student assistants to use the equipment.
- Plan and start recording (also tutorial sessions) and duplication.
- Sell CDs and DVDs to students to cover costs.
- Provide equipment for the viewing of the CDs and DVDs at all centres.
- Collaborate with other institutions on the sharing and/ or recording of material.
- Embark on more professional recording endeavours.

Event track (b): Use of cell phones (medium priority; medium- to long-term implementation)

- Investigate how and in what ways cell phones (bulk SMSs) can be used for academic and administrative support.
- Investigate accessibility of cell phone networks in the country (Lesotho).
- Investigate budgetary implications of the utilisation of cell phone technology.
- Plan and implement pilot projects (possibly by means of research projects).
- Provide wider administrative and academic support by use of cell phones based on IEMS needs and affordance.

Event track (c): Use of radio broadcasting services (medium priority; medium to long-term implementation)

- Explore how to fully utilise the existing University Sechabeng radio programme for student support; for example, tutorials and information dissemination; and
- Use University Sechabeng for tutorials and dissemination of information.

Event track (d): Use of television broadcasting services (low priority; medium- to long-term)

- Investigate how to use television for supporting students;
- Establish accessibility of television to IEMS students; and
- If feasible, put plans to use television for support in place.

Event track (e): Use of computers and Internet (medium priority; short- medium- to long-term implementation)

- Investigate how to utilise the NUL website more fully for student support (e.g. for student registration, communication; access to learning materials and learning activities);
- Investigate internet connectivity in Lesotho, as well as costs of services;
- Investigate student access to computers, e-mail and the Internet;
- Put measures in place to utilise the NUL website for student support;
- Make more computers (with Internet facilities) available to students at all centres;
- Research the feasibility of introducing e-learning at NUL; and
- Draw up an Information Communication Technology (ICT) Plan.

Although access to technology (and therefore student support) may be a challenge in many African countries, it is important to realise that Africa also forms part of an increasingly globalised world and that connectivity is ever increasing, also to the more remote areas. ICTs connect people and provide access to enormous sources of information and also powerful sources of learning. If NUL and IEMS want to equip their students for life in this new world, they have to give priority to measures to investigate and plan for the implementation of many of the new technologies.

Goal 4: Address shortcomings in the existing library services

For goal 4 a distinction is made between (a) the conventional library services on the Maseru Centre; and (b) mobile library services offered to the regional centres.

Event track (a): Library services at the Maseru Centre (high to medium priority; medium- to long-term implementation)

- Share the identified shortcomings of the existing library and its services at the Maseru Centre (with ADE staff and IEMS management);
- An ADE task team assists management in drawing up a short- to medium-term plan for addressing library shortcomings impacting on student support;
- Implement the plan; and
- IEMS embark on long-term planning of improved library and other facilities and services.

Event track (b): Mobile library services at the regional centres (high priority; medium-term implementation)

- Share the identified shortcomings of the existing mobile library services at the regional centres;
- Inquire from regional coordinators and students about how and when to provide mobile library services;
- Draw up a suitable mobile library services schedule; and
- Provide students with schedule at the beginning of the semester.

The provision of library services at the Maseru Centre, as well as mobile library services offered at the regional centres were described as very unsatisfactory by students (see 6.2.2.4). Thus, improvement to cater for the needs of students is imperative since this measure will enable students to access adequate information.

Goal 5: Adapt the ADE programme to maximise its cost-effectiveness and sustainability

Event track: Re-engineering distance learning at IEMS (high priority ; short- to medium- term adaptation)

- Share the perspectives from this study on the shortcomings in the nature of the programme, beginning with ADE (in particular, as typified as a distance education programme);

- Determine (in the department), the goals of the programme (in particular, when compared to the mission and vision of IEMS);
- Determine whether the programme adheres to the definition of distance education;
- Determine the minimum standards of student support needed in a distance education programme;
- Consider ways in which the cost-effectiveness and sustainability of the programme can be improved (including collaboration with other institutions, attracting more students, providing better support;
- Adapt the programme where feasible and applicable;
- Draw up a distance education policy; and
- Enhance quality in the programme for distance students by means of continuous research and a monitoring process.

The study has revealed serious shortcomings in the quality of the provision of distance education at IEMS. It would therefore be advisable for the institute to revisit its mandate to widen access to educational opportunities through distance education (see 1.1). One certainly has reason to argue that it can no longer be the same Institute of Extra Mural Studies it used to be when it was established almost more than thirty years ago. A relevant policy can improve on some of the identified shortcomings.

6.4 CONCLUSION

In this section an improvement action plan has been presented to address some of the deficiencies identified in the provision of student support services at IEMS. The improvement involves engaging various and relevant stakeholders who would contribute to bringing about the desired changes. However, to achieve some of the desired goals, it would be advisable for IEMS and the ADE to seriously consider the findings of this study and the suggested improvement plan presented in this chapter.

The study concludes in the next chapter with a summary of the most important findings and a set of recommendations for improving student support at IEMS.

CHAPTER 7:

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of the study was to determine the nature of student support that holds the potential to improve current practices with regard to distance learning students at IEMS.

In realising this aim, the following research questions were addressed:

1) What is considered as best practices with regard to the provision of quality student support services for distance students?
2) What is the current status and nature of the student support offered at IEMS?
3) How can the findings of the empirical investigation be organised?
4) How can the identified shortcomings be addressed?

In this concluding chapter evidence that the research questions have been adequately addressed is firstly provided. This includes the suggestions for an improvement plan which could possibly lead to better student support for distance students at IEMS. In this plan a series of recommended activities is guided by five main goals for improving student support at the Institute. Recommendations for further studies are presented, as well as a reflection on the significance and limitations of the study.

7.2 SUMMARY OF BEST PRACTICES ON STUDENT SUPPORT FOR DISTANCE LEARNERS

An extensive literature review was undertaken wherein the research question that sought to investigate what the best practices are with regard to the provision of quality distance students support (Chapters 2 and 3) was addressed. Student support is afforded much recognition in the distance mode of learning because of its vital and significant role in facilitating and promoting effective teaching and learning (see 2.2.3). Therefore, elements of an effective student support system include a range of activities and human resources, as well as various physical resources (see 2.2.3). Tutors are an example of one of the human resources

expected to work closely with distance students since their role is to provide academic and administrative support (see 3.2.1). In view of this, tutors have a vital role to play in the distance mode of learning; therefore, it is important that they be equipped with the relevant skills to enable them to perform assigned responsibilities satisfactorily (see 3.1).

In some African countries distance students primarily rely on the prescribed self-instruction materials in the absence of other relevant support provided by distance learning institutions (Welch & Reed 2005:29). Consequently, the prescribed learning materials should meet the expected standards (see 3.3.2). Distance learning materials are not meant to resemble the textbooks used by conventional learners since they should be self-explanatory, self-directed, self-motivating, as well as self-evaluating (see 3.3.2).

Introducing different technological devices to provide support to distance students would enable them to access relevant and adequate information (see 3.2.2.3). For example, using mobile phones for support in Africa is encouraged because of the predicted rapid expansion of the cell phone industry on the continent (see 3.2.2.3b). Radio is also another recommended type of support for some African countries (see 3.2.2.3b). The rationale for encouraging the use of radio for support is the notion that it is accessible to most people at a reasonable cost in Africa (see 3.2.2.3b).

In concluding the literature review, a table detailing directives for an effective student support system for distance learners was drawn up from the information on best practices (see Table 3.1). This table describes directives for effective student support under the following aspects:

1. Tutorial system;
2. Learning materials;
3. Formative assessment;
4. Supportive technology;
5. Role of research;
6. Effective administrative services; and
7. Guidance and counselling.

In addressing the second research question (what is the current status and nature of student support offered at IEMS?) an empirical investigation of the nature of the current support services was undertaken and findings are outlined in the next section.

7.3 WHAT IS THE CURRENT STATE OF STUDENT SUPPORT AT IEMS?

The empirical investigation included a student survey, an academic staff survey and focus group discussions. Directives from the literature (see Table 3.1) guided the investigation, including the construction of the questionnaires which were administered to the ADE students and the ADE academic staff. A resource inventory was also conducted at the three centres of IEMS (Maseru, Mohaleshoek and Mahobong). Details of the investigations are contained in Chapters 5 and 6.

A SWOT analysis of the findings was compiled in order to organise the large amount of data gathered and to adequately evaluate the current support system (thus addressing research question 3). The summarised SWOT table is presented in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1: SWOT analysis of student support at IEMS

Strengths	Weaknesses
• An established tutorial system • Availability of qualified human resources • Existing infrastructure and services • Existing course guides • Availability of and access to technology	• Shortcomings in the tutorial system • Shortcomings in the design of course guides • Lack of resources • Shortcomings in infrastructure and services • Lack of counseling services
Opportunities	**Threats**
• Providing pre-service and regular workshops for tutors • Reviewing course guides • Utilising technology to its full potential • Improving the existing library services • Re-considering the organization and funding of distance learning at IEMS	• Lack of funding • Lack of national and institutional infrastructure • Limited availability of and access to technology

When considering Table 7.1, the following conclusions can be made:

- Student support at IEMS revealed a number of strengths that can be built upon in future efforts to improve current student support. Promising aspects, such as having qualified and experienced staff in the ADE department (see 5.5.1).who are able to equip tutors with the relevant skills, as well participate in designing and developing relevant self-instruction materials. The high percentage of students (see 5.1) who indicated that they have access to cell phones suggests and confirms that introducing the provision of academic and administrative support by mobile phone would be a feasible option.

- There are however, also a number of weaknesses which reduce the effectiveness of the student support services. For example, the reported unsatisfactory quality of the prescribed course guides (see 5.2.3), a failure by some of the tutors to provide timely feedback (see 5.2.2), a lack of computers and non-access to the internet (see 5.2.6). Unsatisfactory library services at the Maseru centre and the poor administration of library services at the regional centres (see 5.2.5) are also flaws in the current student support system.

- The investigation also exposed a number of opportunities which can be exploited for improving student support at IEMS. For instance, conducting regular in-service training workshops for tutors to equip them with the relevant skills enabling them to deal with adult students (see 3.1). Full utilisation of the established university website to provide academic and administrative support to students is also necessary. Additionally, it would be beneficial to consider reorganising the distance mode of learning into a flexible pattern which can accommodate the diverse clientele enrolled at the Institute (see 6.2.1.5).

- This said, there are also a number of stumbling-blocks which can counteract or threaten any efforts to address the current weaknesses in IEMS student support services. As Lesotho is a developing country, appropriate technological infrastructure that can be utilised for connectivity to electronic devices is still a problem (see 6.2.4.1). Thus, many students cannot access the required technological support. Furthermore, financial constraints as well,

do not permit the government to fund the university with substantial and adequate amounts of money which can enable it to provide the relevant and desired support services to students (see 6.2.1.4).

The researcher acknowledges that the SWOT analysis itself will not provide specific answers, although it can create a focus for action (startup.co.uk, n.d.) by assisting in organising information and serving as a basis for the development of a strategy and operational plans. The contribution of this study for an improvement plan for student support at IEMS is explained in the next section.

7.4 WHAT ARE THE CRITICAL ELEMENTS OF AN IMPROVEMENT PLAN FOR STUDENT SUPPORT AT IEMS?

The proposed improvement plan (see 6.3) has been designed to guide the Department of Adult Education in planning for the improvement of the quality of the student support services offered at IEMS. The use of an event guide was employed in the development of the improvement plan, the rationale behind this being the need to provide direction for the activities of the proposed plan. In creating the event guide (see 6.3), six major goals were determined and eleven event tracks were suggested in order to attain each specific goal. The priority of each event track was indicated as of high, medium or low priority, and the term of implementation as short-term, medium-term or long-term. Each of the 11 event tracks was accompanied by a series of actions (in chronological order), which suggested actions on the way to realising the specific goal or part thereof (where more than one track was suggested for a specific goal) (see 6.3).

The six goals, accompanied by their event tracks and a series of suggested actions, can be regarded as the critical elements of an improvement plan for student support for distance learners at IEMS. These goals are all based on the findings of the study. It should be acknowledged that the study also suggested other shortcomings in the student support at IEMS which are seemingly not addressed. Such aspects include: the lack of counselling services; the dire shortage of funding; and the shortcomings in the national infrastructure (see SWOT Table 7.1). The introduction of a counselling service, for example is not

regarded as a critical element for improving support to distance students (mostly adult learners) at IEMS, although it needs further investigation. The aspects of funding and national infrastructure are beyond the control of IEMS/NUL, but the suggested actions do address ways in which cost-effectiveness can be pursued; for example, by improving and extending existing services and infrastructure.

As a final contribution of the study to the improvement of support for distance students at IEMS, the 11 event tracks identified in 6.3 are listed in order of priority. An extra event, a 12th, is included, namely, the important aspect of sharing the outcomes of this study with role-players at NUL /IEMS.

Table 7.2: Prioritised event track for improving student support at IEMS

1.	Share the outcomes of this study with the Adult Education Department, as well as other role-players, including the university management;
2.	Commence with the reconsideration and re-engineering of distance learning at IEMS (high priority; short- to medium-term adaptation);
3.	Take steps towards equipping tutors (high priority; short-term implementation);
4.	Address shortage of study material (high priority; short- to medium-term implementation);
5.	Commence with reviewing of current course guides (high priority, medium-term implementation);
6.	Address shortcomings in the mobile library services at the regional centers (high priority; medium-term implementation);
7.	Address shortcomings in the library services at the Maseru Centre (high to medium priority; medium- to long-term implementation);
8.	Utilise CDs and DVDs (medium priority, short- to medium-term implementation);
9.	Investigate and extend use of computers and the internet (medium priority; short- medium- to long-term implementation);
10.	Investigate and implement use of cell phones (medium priority; medium- to longer-term implementation);

11. Investigate and extend current use of radio broadcasting services (medium priority; medium to longer-term implementation); and
12. Investigate and implement television broadcasting services if feasible (low priority; medium- to long-term).

In addition to summarising the key elements/ events in a possible improvement plan for student support at IEMS, Table 7.2 above also exposes the development in the thinking of the researcher during the course of the study. It has become clear that in order to improve the student support services IEMS has to establish whether the expected standards of distance education are followed, and maintained by the ADE. This is regarded as one of the most critical elements that has emerged from the study, and for this reason, the related idea of reconsidering and re-engineering the programme is given top priority in Table 7.2. It is crucial to look critically at the programme and determine possible shortcomings in its goals and structure before student support measures are considered and addressed. Any re-engineering process should include the formulation of a policy which also sets the standards for an appropriate support service system for distance students at IEMS. All future planning and related actions should also be accompanied or informed by appropriate research and investigation (see event guide for goal 6 in 6.3).

The prioritised listing of events in Table 7.2 and the more detailed improvement plan in 6.3 form the foundation of the recommendations presented in the next section.

7.5 RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section recommendations relating to the improvement of support services for distance students at IEMS and further research, based on the findings of this study, are briefly outlined.

(a) Improvement

The findings of the study and the elements of the improvement plan in particular, should be shared with members of the ADE and subsequently be presented to IEMS management who will be encouraged to involve the IEMS academic board and other relevant role-players in adopting the improvement plan, adapting it where deemed necessary and ultimately, determining the feasibility of implementing all or most of the elements.

The IEMS management should, in particular, be advised to engage in a dialogue to address the vision and the mission of IEMS's open and distance learning; to determine whether the ADE programme adheres to the definition of distance education; and to ensure the adherence to the minimum standards that student support requires in a distance education programme. They should also consider methods of improving the programme's sustainability and formulate a distance learning policy which will guide the Institute's distance learning practices.

(b) Further research

Student support includes a wide range of activities and resources the selection of which and implementation thereof, should be informed by research. For instance, from this study, proposed areas for further research are the following:

1. Continuous monitoring and evaluation of all elements of the student support systems;
2. Conducting needs analyses related to the introduction of guidance and counselling services at IEMS;
3. Investigation of the feasibility of introducing and extending technological support at IEMS, including e-learning;
4. Investigating the various possibilities of collaboration with other distance education institutions in Southern Africa; for example in the writing and/ or sharing of materials, as well as the sharing of electronic (library) resources, other facilities and infrastructure (such as buildings) and human resources.

7.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of this study pertains to developing an improvement plan which could guide the ADE in addressing quality issues in the current student support services provided to its students. The study is timely since, in the university strategic plan, IEMS has been earmarked for widened access. The study will therefore hopefully contribute to addressing this specific goal. In addition, the study also provides a perspective of student support in distance education in a developing country and will contribute to the literature on student support which has been indicated as very limited (see 3.3.6). In this sense, it is hoped that a valuable contribution may be made to higher education as a field of study and research.

7.7 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study focused only on the Adult Education Degree programme, although there are other programmes offered at IEMS that have not introduced the distance mode of learning. Therefore, it is not possible to generalise the findings to those departments as well. The findings are also not meant to be generalised to other institutions in developing countries, because this is a case study. However, aspects in the findings may be relevant to some of the distance learning institutions on the African continent which experience similar circumstances.

7.8 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The aim of the study was to determine the shortcomings of the current student support at IEMS. These shortcomings are critical issues which should be addressed in the proposed improvement plan that was guided by directives from the literature for designing an effective student support system. The researcher anticipates that the recommended improvement plan will be adapted after engaging in consultation with the relevant stakeholders. Finally, the expectation is that the improvement plan will be considered favourably and will be gradually implemented. In this way the National University of Lesotho (NUL) through IEMS, can bring to fruition its mandate to widen access to educational opportunities for a broader sector of adult learners in the country.

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APPENDIX A

LEARNER SUPPORT AT IEMS/STUDENT ANALYSIS

A. BIOGRAPHYCAL INFORMATION

The Department of Adult Education at IEMS has adopted the distance mode of delivery to offer its programmes. This survey is conducted as an attempt to seek ways of improving learner support services. Since you are familiar with support services offered at IEMS, I am kindly requesting you to please complete the questionnaire below. All the information you provide will be treated confidentially. You do not have to write your name or student number. Your participation will be appreciated since it will contribute towards strengthening learner support services at IEMS.

1. Gender

◯ Female ◯ Male

2. Age

◯ 23-30 years ◯ 41-50 years

◯ 31-40 years ◯ over 50 years

3. Present Employment Status

◯ Employed ◯ Unemployed ◯ Self-employed

4. Please indicate your year of study

◯ First Year ◯ Third Year

◯ Second Year ◯ Fourth Year

5. Do you have any form of disability?

◯ Yes ◯ No

6. If answered yes above, please indicate the disability or disabilities that apply to you

☐ Totally blind ☐ Lower limb impairment [Wheelchair user]

☐ Partially blind ☐ Upper Limb impairment

☐ Profoundly deaf ☐ Cerebral palsy

☐ Partially deaf ☐ Learning impairment

Does IEMS offer you support to facilitate learning despite your form of disability? Please explain

7. **From which IEMS regional centre do you receive learner support services?**

◯ Mahobong ◯ Mohale'shoek ◯ Maseru

8. **How often do you visit a regional centre? [Tick the appropriate option].**

◯ Occasionally ◯ Monthly

◯ Weekly ◯ Never

9. **How far do you have to travel to a regional centre nearest to you? [Tick the appropriate option]**

◯ 5 km ◯ 50km

◯ 25km ◯ More than 50km

10. **How did you obtain information regarding the Adult Education programme at IEMS? [Tick all that apply]**

☐ Brochure ☐ Media

☐ Friends ☐ Information from the Department of Adult Education

☐ Family

Any additional sources? (Please specify)

11. **To which of the following technological devices/services do you have access? [Mark all that apply]**

- ☐ Computer with internet
- ☐ Laptop with internet
- ☐ Radio
- ☐ TV Set
- ☐ Mp3 player
- ☐ Tape recorder
- ☐ E-Mail
- ☐ Internet

Please comment on your access to technological devices and services to support your studies.

12. **Which of the following technological devices do you own? [Mark all that apply]**

- ☐ Cellphone/smart phone
- ☐ Desktop computer with internet access
- ☐ Laptop with internet access
- ☐ Radio
- ☐ TV Set
- ☐ USB flash disk
- ☐ CD player
- ☐ DVD player

13. If you have a cellphone or a smart phone, does it have the following?

	Yes	No	Do not know
a. Bluetooth	○	○	○
b. Camera	○	○	○
c. WAP [Internet-enabled]	○	○	○
d. Memory card	○	○	○

B. LEARNER SUPPORT SERVICES

1. How do you feel about the effectiveness of the tutorial support you are receiving at IEMS?

	Highly satisfied	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Deeply dissatisfied
a. Your Interaction with tutors	○	○	○	○
b. Nature of relationship you have with tutors	○	○	○	○
c. Quality of guidance you receive on study methods	○	○	○	○
d. Quality of guidance you receive on time managment	○	○	○	○
e. Tutor-recommended learning materials	○	○	○	○
f. Tutorial class size	○	○	○	○

Please comment on the tutorial support service offered at IEMS.

2. **Rate the quality of prescribed course guides you are using in your study programme.**

	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor
a. Use of suitable of language that is easy to understand	◯	◯	◯	◯
b. Conversational style of writing	◯	◯	◯	◯
c. Self-explanatory [self-instructional] nature of learning materials	◯	◯	◯	◯
d. Provision of relevant learning activities	◯	◯	◯	◯
e. Provision of self-evalution exercises	◯	◯	◯	◯
f. Contextualization to local environment	◯	◯	◯	◯
g. Relevance to learning outcomes	◯	◯	◯	◯
h. Relevance to learner's provisional needs	◯	◯	◯	◯

Please comment on the usefulness of the prescribed learning materials you receive from IEMS.

3. **Please indicate availability of learner support related to teaching according to the description below:**

	Always	Very Often	Rarely	None
a. Formative assessment that support learning	◯	◯	◯	◯
b. Timely constructive feedback	◯	◯	◯	◯
c. Detailed comments on assignments	◯	◯	◯	◯
d. Interventions to assist leaners improve academic performance	◯	◯	◯	◯

Please comment on the academic support you are receiving from IEMS.

4. How do you rate the following for potential technological support for students at IEMS?

	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor
a. Use of mobile phones to provide academic support	◯	◯	◯	◯
b. SMS messages after enrollment for motivation	◯	◯	◯	◯
c. SMS messages for announcements	◯	◯	◯	◯
d. Radio tutorial services	◯	◯	◯	◯
e. Information on academic and administrative issues on the university website	◯	◯	◯	◯
f. Online registration facility	◯	◯	◯	◯
g. Use of e-mail for communication	◯	◯	◯	◯
h. Online facility which enables learners to access learning materials [e.g. electronic library]	◯	◯	◯	◯
i. Lectures on CDs	◯	◯	◯	◯
j. Lectures on DVDs	◯	◯	◯	◯
k. Online facility which allows learners to participate in collaborative learning activities	◯	◯	◯	◯

Please comment on the above as potential technological support at IEMS.

5. **Please rate the quality of the administrative support provided at IEMS [Tick where applicable]**

	Very Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Not satisfactory	Very unsatisfactory
a. Pre-enrolment guidance services	◯	◯	◯	◯
b. Information regarding academic activities	◯	◯	◯	◯
c. Information regarding registration	◯	◯	◯	◯
d. Availability of multi-media learning resources	◯	◯	◯	◯
e. Monthly face-to-face tutorial services	◯	◯	◯	◯

Please comment on the administrative services that affect you most.

6. **Rate the effectiveness of the guidance and counselling support you are reeceiving at IEMS.**

	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor
a. Pre-enrolment counselling	◯	◯	◯	◯
b. Career guidance [nformation on career advancement and career managment	◯	◯	◯	◯
c. Psycho-social counselling	◯	◯	◯	◯

Please comment on what you would like IEMS to do to improve on the quality of guidance and counselling support.

7. **Rank the suitability of the following support elements that could be offered by your regional centre [number 1 being the most suitable and 10 the least suitable].**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
a. Computers and Internet [E-learning]	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
b. Radio Services [announcements, discussions, tutorials]	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
c. Television Services [Discussion Programmes]	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
d. Guidance and counseling and Mentoring	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
e. Face-to-Face tutorial sessions	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
f. Contact Orientation/Induction	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
g. E-Mail communication	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
h. Learning Material on CDs	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
i. Learning Material on DVDs	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
j. Library Services	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
k. Mobile Learning [use of cellphone for learning]	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

8. **On a 10-point scale, rate your assessment of learner support services currently offered to distance learners at IEMS; [one (1) meaning very poor and ineffective and then (10) meaning excellent and effective] Example: I give learner support services at IEMS 2/10 (two out of ten) because:**

APPENDIX B

LEARNER SUPPORT ANALYSIS BY ACADEMICS AT IEMS

A. BIOGRAPHYCAL INFORMATION

The Department of Adult Education at IEMS has adopted the distance mode of delivery to offer its programmes. This survey is conducted as an attempt to seek ways of improving learner support services. Since you are familiar with support services offered at IEMS, I am kindly requesting you to please complete the questionnaire below. All the information you provide will be treated confidentially. You do not have to write your name. Your participation will be appreciated since it will contribute towards strengthening learner support services at IEMS.

1. Gender

◯ Female ◯ Male

2. Age

◯ 30-40 years ◯ 41-50 years ◯ over 50 years

3. At which centre is your work station?

◯ Maseru ◯ Mohale'shoek ◯ Mahobong

4. Please indicate your position at IEMS?

◯ Tutor ◯ Facilitator

◯ Degree programme coordinator ◯ Regional centre coordinator

5. Please indicate the length of time you have worked for IEMS?

◯ Less than one year ◯ One to two years

◯ Three to four years ◯ More than four years

6. **To which of the following technological devices do you have access? [Mark all that apply]**

☐	Computer/Laptop with internet	☐	Mp3 player
☐	TV set	☐	Internet
☐	Radio	☐	E-Mail
☐	Tape recorder	☐	CD player

7. **Which of the following technological devices do you own? [Mark all that apply]**

☐	Cellphone/Smartphone	☐	Desktop Computer with Internet
☐	Desktop Computer/Laptop	☐	Laptop with Internet
☐	Radio	☐	TV set
☐	USB Flash Disk	☐	CD player

8. **If you have a cellphone or smart phone, does it have the following?**

	Yes	**No**	**Do Not Know**
Bluetooth	◯	◯	◯
Camera	◯	◯	◯
WAP [Internet-enabled]	◯	◯	◯
Memory card	◯	◯	◯

B. LEARNER SUPPORT SERVICES

1. **Please rate the quality of training provided to IEMS part-time tutorial staff prior to their engagement**

   ◯ Excellent

   ◯ Good

   ◯ Average

   ◯ Poor

   Please comment on the training provided to IEMS tutorial staff prior to their engagement.

2. **Rate the quality of prescribed course guides**

	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor
a. Use of suitable of language that is easy to understand	◯	◯	◯	◯
b. Conversational style of writing	◯	◯	◯	◯
c. Self-explanatory [self-instructional] nature of learning materials	◯	◯	◯	◯
d. Provision of relevant learning activities	◯	◯	◯	◯
e. Provision of self-evalution exercises	◯	◯	◯	◯
f. Contextualization to local environment	◯	◯	◯	◯
g. Relevance to learning outcomes	◯	◯	◯	◯
h. Relevance to learner's provisional needs	◯	◯	◯	◯

Please comment on the usefulness of the prescribed course guides.

3. How do you rate the following for potential technological support for learners at IEMS?

	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor
a. Use of mobile phones to provide academic support	◯	◯	◯	◯
b. SMS messages after enrollment for motivation	◯	◯	◯	◯
c. SMS messages for announcements	◯	◯	◯	◯
d. Radio tutorial services	◯	◯	◯	◯
e. Information on academic and administrative issues in the university website	◯	◯	◯	◯
f. Online registration facility	◯	◯	◯	◯
g. Use of e-mail for communication	◯	◯	◯	◯
h. Online facility which enables learners to access learning materials [e.g. electronic library]	◯	◯	◯	◯
i. Lectures on CDs	◯	◯	◯	◯
j. Lectures on DVDs	◯	◯	◯	◯
k. Online facility which allows learners to participate in collaborative learning activities	◯	◯	◯	◯

Please comment on the above as potential technological support at IEMS.

4. **Please rate the quality of the following types of support services provided at IEMS [Tick where applicable].**

	Very Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Not satisfactory	Very unsatisfactory
a. Tutorial size [number of learners per tutorial group]	◯	◯	◯	◯
b. Timely distribution of learning material to learners	◯	◯	◯	◯
c. Information regarding academic activities	◯	◯	◯	◯
d. Information regarding registration	◯	◯	◯	◯
e. Availability of multi-media learning resources	◯	◯	◯	◯
f. Monthly face-to-face tutorials	◯	◯	◯	◯
g. Library services	◯	◯	◯	◯

Please comment on the quality of the administrative support provided to learners at IEMS.

5. **Rate the importance of the following support services that could be offered at the IEMS learning centres.**

	Very Important	Important	Less Important	Not important at all
a. Group counselling	◯	◯	◯	◯
b. Career guidance [information on career advancement and career management]	◯	◯	◯	◯
c. Psycho-social counselling	◯	◯	◯	◯

Please advise on what IEMS can do to improve on the quality of the currently provided support services.

6. **Rank the suitability of the following support elements that could be offered by your regional centre [number 1 being the most suitable and ten (10) the least suitable].**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
a. Computers and Internet [E-learning]	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
b. Radio Services [announcements, discussions, tutorials]	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
c. Television Services [Discussion Programmes]	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
d. Guidance and counseling and Mentoring	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
e. Face-to-Face tutorial sessions	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
f. Contact Orientation/Induction	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
g. E-Mail communication	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
h. Learning Material on CDs	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
i. Learning Material on DVDs	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
j. Library Services	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
k. Mobile Learning [Use of cellphone for learning]	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Please explain your reasons for concluding that certain elements are suitable or not suitable for your regional centre.

7. **On a 10-point scale, rate your assessment of learner support services currently offered to distance learners at IEMS; [one (1) meaning very poor and ineffective and then (10) meaning excellent and effective]**

◯ 1	◯ 6
◯ 2	◯ 7
◯ 3	◯ 8
◯ 4	◯ 9
◯ 5	◯ 10

APPENDIX C

RESOURCE INVENTORY

A.PHYSICAL RESOURCES

Resource	Availability	Utilisation/Function	Comment
1. **Course guides**			
Type/Different forms, e.g. print, electronic, etc			
• Style of writing			
• Language			
• Learning activities			
• Assessment activities			
• Written for a target group			
• Materials development parties			
Extra Information:			
2. **Technological resources**			
• Computers			
• Internet			
• Audiotapes			
• Video tapes			
• VCR			
• Monitor			
• CD Player			
• Telephone			

Resource	Availability	Utilisation/Function	Comment
• Tele -conference Facilities			
• Mobile phones			
• Radio			
• TV			
Extra Information			
3. Library services			
• Reference material			
• Periodicals			
• Library loans			
Extra information			
4. Buildings /physical facilities • Tutorial venues • Library • Halls			
B. HUMAN RESOURCES			
• Facilitators			
• Tutors			
• Programme coordinators			
• Regional coordinators			
• Counsellors			
Extra information			

APPENDIX D
Lesotho Map