



**Widening Student Participation in Higher Education -
Challenges for Policy and Practice in South Africa:
A Case Study**

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Abstract

The transformation of the higher education system in South Africa emanates from the Reconstruction and Development Programme of 1994 with its focus on redressing past racial inequities.

The thesis seeks to explore the extent to which political, educational and social imperatives for increased student access are realised in the face of multiple structural forces at the institutional level. While, in general, higher educational institutions seem to be responding positively to the policy imperatives about widening student access, several factors - including the continued low retention and optimum throughput levels - indicate that the realities of a diverse and non-traditional student population are not being met.

Indications are that, for a country deeply divided by race, language and access to resources, change needs go beyond increased student numbers and challenge the existing power relations underlying institutional as well as societal beliefs, values and practices.

To understand these concerns, this thesis presents a case study on policy implementation. The data is drawn primarily from a case study of the day-to-day experiences of students and lecturers in a distance education institution. The thesis identifies critical areas that are to be addressed in order to maximise the potential benefits and minimise the drawbacks of widening participation. It is argued that, in the past, students' and lecturers' experiences tended to be marginalised in academic research; however, their experiences provide a theoretical and, indeed, coherent understanding of the range of issues influencing change at the micro-level. The study further explores the potential of case studies to inform the transformation process. The multiple higher education imperatives, and the speed with which change is expected to happen, require a continuous examination and monitoring of the process, which a case study research might provide.

The thesis argues that current, unexamined and taken-for-granted institutional practices are likely to marginalise student access as they tend to reinforce the status quo and thereby entrench existing power relations. In a society undergoing transformation it becomes important to interrogate action at all levels, not only at the usual and obvious level of macro economic and political policy-making. Individual behaviour within higher education institutions must also be counted.

Declaration

I declare that *WIDENING STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION - CHALLENGES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE IN SOUTH AFRICA: A CASE STUDY* is my own work, that is has not been presented in whole or part for examination for any degree, and that all sources or quotations have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.


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List of Acronyms

ANC	African National Congress
BDL	Anonymous name of Unisa department
CDL	Anonymous name of Unisa department
CHE	Council on Higher Education
DET	Department of Education and Training
DoE	Department of Education
ESL	English Second Language
ERS	Education Renewal Strategy
FET	Further Education and Training
GEAR	Growth, Employment and Redistribution
GNU	Government of National Unity
HDU	Historically Disadvantaged Universities
HAU	Historically Advantaged Universities
HEQC	Higher Education Qualifications Committee
NCHE	National Council on Higher Education
NECC	National Education Crisis Committee
NEPI	National Education Policy Unit
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
OBE	Outcomes Based Education
ODL	Open Distance Learning
PQHE	Programmes and Qualification in Higher Education
RDP	Reconstruction and Development
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RSA	Republic of South Africa
SAIDE	South African Institute of Distance Education
SAIRR	South African Institute of Race Relations
SAPSE	South African Post Secondary Education
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
UCT	University of Cape Town
UWC-EPU	University of Western Cape Education Policy Unit
Unisa	University of South Africa
Wits	University of the Witwatersrand
WPHE	White Paper on Higher Education
WPE	White Paper on Education

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF STUDY

1. Background to the Study

Prior to 1994, student participation in South African universities was primarily determined along racial lines, in accordance with the National Party's apartheid policies. Institutions were differentiated and served the various racial and ethnic groups separately, in line with these policies. In reaction, the *Higher Education Act* of 1997 requires that universities widen participation to accommodate students from previously under-represented and disadvantaged groups. The widening of student participation was embraced as part of the *Reconstruction and Development Programme* (RDP), a broad reform strategy aimed at addressing post-apartheid political, social and economic challenges facing the newly established democracy after 1994. The implication of linking wider participation to the RDP is that higher education is expected to play a key role in the reconstruction and transformation of society at large. This is a major shift from the past, when universities were perceived as elite institutions far removed from broader political, social and economic realities, to the present, when they are expected to play a central role in delivering a just society to the majority of citizens.

Widening student participation in higher education is not unique to South Africa. In the UK and the USA, for instance, access has been advanced as an equal opportunity drive targeted primarily at students from lower socio-economic groups (Karabel et al., 1997; Halsey et al., 1997). In South Africa, however, where race has been a major criterion for under-representation, extending participation goes beyond the issue of social justice and incorporates broader political, economic and social reforms. Expectations are that

universities, like all other civil structures, should advance equal opportunities by accommodating increasing numbers of students from previously marginalised racial groups. The main reason for this is to develop the human capacity required to advance the country's economic, social and educational needs. These expectations challenge many aspects of university provision and call for its redefinition, as stated in the opening lines of the WPHE states:

South Africa's transition from apartheid and minority rule requires that all existing practices, institutions and values are viewed anew and rethought in terms of fitness to the new era. Higher education plays a central role in the social, cultural and economic development of modern societies. In South Africa today, the challenge is to serve a new social order, to meet the pressing national needs, and to respond to new realities and opportunities. It must lay the foundation for the development of a learning society which can stimulate, direct and mobilise the creative intellectual energies of all people towards meeting the challenge of reconstruction and development (RSA, 1997a: 1.1).

2. Statement of the Problem

Given the history of apartheid, it is rightly expected that there must be change in higher education participation. Various studies have argued that, in a country where education has been used overtly to discriminate against the majority of its citizens, it is justifiable that in the new dispensation it should be key to redressing the apartheid past (Nkomo, 1990; McGrath, 1996; Donn, 1997).

But, despite changes in the political arena, how this should happen remains unresolved. In fact current debate shows that policies fail to take cognisance of the realities at institutional level (Christie, 1997; Enslin and Pendlebury, 1998). As a result they are unlikely to fulfil their promised intention of bringing about greater participation and redress in education. Jansen (1998: 323) attributes the gap between policy pronouncements and institutional realities to the fact that the entire process is 'driven by

political imperatives which have little to do with the realities' on the ground. The limitations of the current policy context are highlighted by Kallaway et al., who contends that:

In South Africa educational policies have been increasingly reduced to a matter of policy implementation. In the name of change and redress, and because of the need of politicians to produce demonstrable innovations in a short space of time, a range of policies contradictory in their theoretical and practical orientations and outcomes, often hastily borrowed from foreign contexts without adequate research into their success and effects, have been bundled together with insufficient consultation or research (Kallaway et al., 1997:1).

These observations are even more pertinent to widening participation initiatives in higher education. Wider participation is necessary but so is ensuring that existing students graduate. Generally, there have been significant increases in the recruitment of previously underrepresented and disadvantaged students into universities since 1994. However, other developments, including declining student numbers, high drop out and failure rates, low throughput levels and a disproportionate spread of students across the various fields of study, show that many policy goals pertaining to redressing the past have not yet been met (RSA, 2001). This situation is an indication that current changes in higher education policy cannot necessarily create access routes for those groups of students previously excluded from active participation in university education. This confirms studies that argue that important as they are, policy and legislation have limited transformatory powers and cannot therefore guarantee change in practice (Enslin et al., 1998).

This study argues that even though policies are rightly aimed at the restructuring of the higher education system, how they do so will be conditioned by individual interpretation at the institutional level. The meaning and understanding that individuals give to the changing university context are vital in determining whether access will happen or not. The implementation process is further complicated by the fact that interpretations of widening participation have to occur at different levels: the systemic, institutional, and

programme levels. The contending and contradictory interpretations at each level constitute forces that can impede access. These contentions are multiplied at the individual level, where policies have to be translated into reality. For this reason meanings at this level have to be made explicit and cannot simply be assumed.

In South Africa it is often the case that interpretations are expected to converge into a common understanding of how change should proceed and how the future should be shaped against a historical background where racial and ethnic differences were previously not regarded as a strength but used instead to enforce racial divisions and perpetuate social, political and economic inequalities. As a people who have been denied the choice of voicing their collective values, it is necessary that in the transformation of higher education, lecturers and students start to express and share their own interpretations of widened participation. Their day-to-day experiences, concerns and practices are crucial in informing the extent and direction of change.

3. Aim of this Study

The aim of this study is to explore the extent to which widening participation policy imperatives have been realised in practice. It argues that policy is not being implemented in practice and that educational change is not occurring as expected in higher education institutions. Taking the University of South Africa (Unisa) as a case study, it investigates the realities of widening participation policy imperatives at the individual level, and explores possible ways of instituting change to enhance student participation. The thesis seeks to address the following general questions:

If universities are supposed to transform by widening participation for previously disadvantaged groups of students, what kind of challenges do they have to address? How are strategies for widening participation for previously

disadvantaged students experienced at the institutional level? What is the current institutional structure in relation to policy?

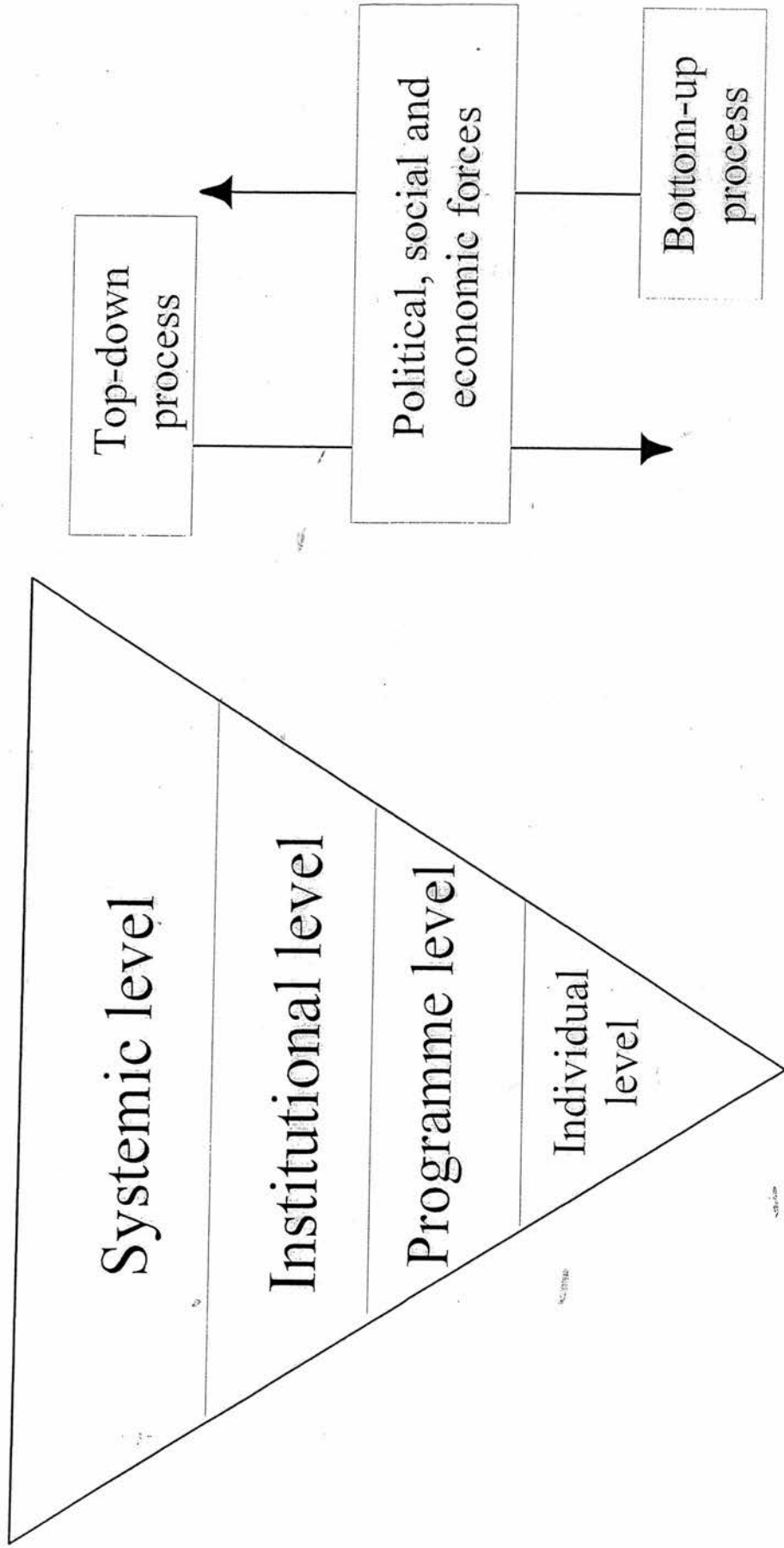
If change is to occur in higher education, those making it possible are students and lecturers in higher education. It is at the individual level that attention must be focused when undertaking a study of educational change in post-apartheid South Africa. To this end it was necessary to investigate the day-to-day challenges students and lecturers at the University of South Africa (Unisa), the largest distance education institution in South Africa, faced and the means they employed to deal with them. In a more specific sense the study explores the following questions:

- 1a What are students' experiences and perceptions of widening participation policy imperatives at the institutional level?
- 1b Do they believe that their needs are being met effectively?
- 2a What are lecturers' experiences and perceptions of widening participation policy imperatives at the institutional level?
- 2b Do they believe that they are addressing these imperatives effectively?

The analysis is located at four different levels: the micro-level which constitutes 1) the policy discourse surrounding the systemic transformation in higher education; 2) the institutional discourse of transformation which takes Unisa as a case study; and the micro-level comprising 3) the programme level at work within Unisa; 4) the personal - the researchers' - and the individual lecturers' and students' level, at which meanings and interpretations can be delineated. Figure 1 on page 6 captures the essence of the study diagrammatically. It shows that bottom-up processes, constituting individual interpretations, can inform top-down processes to facilitate change.

FIGURE 1

Processes Influencing Policy Implementation



4. Justification for Study

Considering that the present higher education policy context is aimed at greater articulation between various players at various levels in the institution - management, administrative staff, lecturers and students - the importance of investigating individual interpretations is crucial. In highlighting the significance of individuals' understandings on how change proceeds Fullan asserts:

The real crunch comes in the relationships between these new programs or policies and the thousands of subjective realities embedded in people's individual and organisational contexts and their personal histories. How these subjective realities are addressed or ignored is crucial for whether potential changes become meaningful at the level of individual use and effectiveness (Fullan, 1991: 43).

The argument is that each level – the systemic, institutional, programme and individual - constitutes unique challenges that influence how change will happen. Although macro- and micro- processes interact to shape the social context in distinctive ways it is not clear how the two interact to shape change. Focussed on a specific context a case study offers possibilities to gather first-hand information about social process in a natural context and how events at each level influence interactions at the individual level, in particular. In this respect it enhances understandings of the way access is realised. This is of particular importance in the South African context where there is a mismatch between students' and lecturers' day-to-day realities at the micro-level and policy imperatives at the macro-level.

The importance of the views of students and lectures in studying institutional change in post-apartheid South Africa is also informed by my practice as a lecturer and my close involvement with undergraduate first-year students. As a lecturer, my understanding of widening student participation was first underlined by my experiences as a black person living in South Africa. As one of a few black lecturers at my institution, I was placed in a position where, because of the changing context of higher education provision, I began

questioning my racial and professional roles. It became increasingly difficult to reconcile my experiences of widening participation, my professional practice and the unfolding transformation of the institution. The situation was exacerbated by students' and lecturers' expectations of me. On the one hand, black students rightly expected that, as a black person, I would be in a better position to understand that their disadvantaged background presented them with numerous obstacles - language difficulties, economic struggles - which they hoped would be addressed by lecturers. Having lived and attended school in a township, a former residential area reserved for blacks, I identified with these concerns. Throughout my years at school I was expected to adjust to a system that was not only overtly dismissive of my background knowledge but was also insensitive and discriminatory because of my race. On the other hand, as a lecturer, I was expected to adhere to professional norms and practices which were taken as given and thus tended to remain unquestioned, and to transmit these to students as part of my day-to-day practice. Circumscribing these expectations were institutional transformation imperatives. These expectations from lecturers and students as well as my experiences resulted in a situation which accorded with Coleman's observations on cultural capital that:

If a structure is composed in such a way that it better fits the needs, interests and life views of some people within it more than others, and at the same time defines out of existence all possible ways in which it may get feedback about this, it is operating oppressively. It renders those who do not fit comfortably within its form, without a means to validly express themselves, or to participate in the way expected of them. (Coleman, 1991: 11).

This reflects the realities of how access is constructed and measured by different groups and individuals. The possible inconsistencies between students' and lecturers' expectations, and institutional and academic requirements heightens the importance of subjecting these experiences to systematic investigation.

These experiences underlined the fact that widening participation is not an end in itself, it is only a beginning. It is equally important that students progress through degree

programmes and graduate. This accords with Akojee's assertion that widening student participation in higher education is a dual process constituting a greater number of students gaining entry into higher education, 'access as participation', as well as greater numbers succeeding, 'access with success' (Akojee, 2002:2). Access as participation, as Wagner asserts, is only one important aspect of widening participation imperatives: to be unable to gain entry is to experience one dimension of failure (1997: 29). But, as he further argues 'access with success' is equally crucial: 'The sense of frustration and discrimination which accompanies the inability to enter higher education is multiplied many times if, having gained entry, higher education does not deliver to the black community what it promised' (Wagner, 1997: 30). This study intended to investigate the extent to which this was the case for previously disadvantaged students who had gained entry to Unisa.

Studies of student experiences of higher education indicate that 'access with success' is not an easy feat (Noble, 1989; Colquhoun, 1996). They show that, because widening student participation challenges existing institutional structures and individual practices, there is a need to re-examine and re-align academic and administrative structures to fit the new students population profile (Cochrane, 2000: 33). These are necessary considerations for widening access as they frame students' expectations and have been shown to have a powerful influence on whether or not student access is facilitated. Drawing insight from these studies, it was therefore important to examine whether Unisa had been affected as suggested by evidence from other contexts.

The dilemmas lecturers face in their efforts to understand the changes in higher education, especially with respect to widening participation, have been the focus of several research studies (Evans and Abbot, 1998; Neal 1998; Doring, 2002). These studies show that lecturers occupy a controversial position in the institution as a result of the conflicting roles they must assume in the changing context of higher education provision: as employees, professionals and individuals. On one hand they are required to protect their interests as individuals, while on the other hand they have to follow

directives that require implementing policies that sometimes negate established pedagogic considerations. But, as Doring (2002:146) points out, of most significance is that in 'shifting their work to respond to the demands of the university they have in the process become victims of change'. This creates a paradox. Unravelling the experiences of Unisa students and lecturers was thus crucial in determining the extent to which access was promoted at institutional, programme and individual level.

5. Significance of case study

Case studies aim at a better understanding of complex social situations. A case study is defined 'as an empirical study that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life-context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident' (Yin, 1994: 13). Therefore a case study approach is more likely to conceptualise the 'macro' and 'micro' in social and education context as interrelated than other forms of research which tend to view the two as separate entities. In this respect case studies increase possibilities of bridging the gap between policy imperatives at the systemic level and the realities of practice at the institutional level by highlighting existing inconsistencies and tensions between the two. This view accords with Denscombe's assertion that a case study 'offers greater possibilities of going into sufficient detail to unravel the complexities of a given situation (Denscombe, 1998: 310). A deeper understanding of these realities is of importance in South Africa where increased student access is proposed as part of wider redress policies. In this thesis the focus on one instance allows for an in-depth study of the subtleties and intricacies of widening participation policy imperatives at the institutional level. More insight into the realities of widening participation is likely to bring about a deeper understanding of the day-to-day structural and individual forces that influence institutional transformation. To this end a case study approach offers 'how best to intervene here and now, in this situation, with these various individuals, in the light of these social and professional values, amidst the complex pressures of this organisational and political context' (Winter, 1998: 371).

Secondly, case studies acknowledge participants' perspective as central to understanding the complexities of a given situation. In this study the perspectives of students and lecturers are of importance because based at the 'micro' level they influence how widening participation will happen. The realities of change at the institutional level, as Fullan (1991) cautions, are always defined by the subjective realities of individuals, which might not necessarily be consistent with the objective realities envisioned in policy imperatives. The subjective accounts of participants' experiences and the meanings implicit in them are likely to bring to light existing overlaps and contradictions in individual understandings of the situation. In this regard case studies accord with Denzin et al.'s (1994) observations that qualitative research is an attempt to make sense of and interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them because it allows the researcher to grapple with relationships and social processes. In addition, a close encounter with participants offers greater possibilities to bring about change. It is important in South Africa, where the urgency for reformation brought about mainly by the apartheid past and the present policy context, that individuals' experiences be examined, reflected upon and where possible changes be effected.

Finally a case study approach attempts to link past and newly arrived at understandings to investigate possibilities of change. In this respect it differs from other research approaches in that it looks beyond interrogating and 'uncovering the truth' but looks to simultaneously understanding the social context as well as acting upon it by investigating possible opportunities for change. The involvement of participants does not only provide 'an effective means of facilitating and monitoring the change process' but 'also has the potential to foster authentic commitment to social change' (Kemmis, 1993: 179), by providing practical understandings about what is necessary to bring about change. Case studies therefore offer possibilities for participants to influence the policy context as they search for the possible answers to the problems of widening participation. In this way aimed at dealing with real-world problems and issues, typically

at work and in organisational settings, case studies are likely to democratise change from a 'micro' perspective'.

6. The Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into an introduction and six chapters. The first two chapters present the background history and theoretical context to the study. **Chapter One** provides a historical outline of university provision between 1980 and 1994. The factors influencing access in the apartheid era from 1980 to 1990 and the transition phase from 1990 to 1994 are explored. The legislation on higher education provision is of particular importance as it shows that the racially differentiated university system was aimed primarily at disadvantaging specific racial groups. In addition, underlying the unequal student participation were other legislative policies that contributed to limiting university access. Participation after 1990 remained unequal despite the changes in the political climate; the structures established during the apartheid era remained as barriers to student access. As a result, not only were black student numbers still very low in terms of the country's demographics, but the spread of students across various fields of study, retention rates and throughput levels also remained racially skewed.

The post-apartheid higher education policy context between April 1994 and 2002 is outlined in **Chapter Two**. The chapter argues that underlying the current drive to transform higher education provision in South Africa are two policies, the RDP and the *Growth, Employment and Redistribution* (GEAR), which are aimed at redressing apartheid inequities and advancing economic development. As a result, higher education institutions are required to address and contend with multiple policy imperatives. The contentions and contradictions surrounding the policy context at the system level become more pronounced at the individual level, where policies have to be translated into reality.

Chapters Three, Four and Five focus on the actual case study, Unisa, an Open Distance Learning (ODL) university. **Chapter Three** describes and justifies adoption of a case study for this thesis. The argument is that case studies bring about deeper insights into the complexities of instituting change, particularly at the individual level, as it acknowledges the understandings and interpretations held by students and lecturers as an integral part of the transformation process. Aimed at investigating their practical concerns and collaborating with them to bring about an improvement in their situation, it informs policy from a bottom-up perspective. The next two sections in this chapter describe the context of the case study - Unisa - the research design and the data collection processes. Given the National Education Department's drive to facilitate access through ODL institutions, Unisa provides an ideal context for investigating the realities of widening participation in higher education. The final section of **Chapter Three** provides a personal reflection on the possibilities and limitations of a case study approach in investigating institutional day-to-day realities and instituting change.

Chapters Four and Five present the findings on experiences of students and lecturers, and their perceptions of the realities of widening participation policy imperatives. The evidence in these chapters indicates that in general the day-to-day institutional understandings of widening student participation tend to be overlooked. The findings reveal that student access is still largely determined by dominant and taken-for-granted institutional practices, which are based on the assumption that students will automatically fit into the existing institutional structures. Their socio-economic circumstances and education background remain largely unacknowledged - and beyond the institution's mandate. The fact that lecturers have to address multiple policy imperatives linked to the institution's reform initiatives tends to place student access on the margins. The gulf between the policy imperatives of widening access and institutional responses to accommodating a diverse and increased number of students is evident.

Finally, **Chapter Six** draws on the findings and the issues raised in **Chapters One** and

Two, to highlight the implications of widening participation policy imperatives. It underscores the difficulties of retaining and supporting students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds and emphasises that, in order to address the social and economic policy imperatives, it is necessary to shift the emphasis of access strategies towards achievement and retention and away from entry barriers only. The chapter also discusses the theoretical and methodological considerations of case studies to illustrate the extent to which it has contributed to understandings of policy in practice. The last section of this chapter offers key recommendations necessary to addressing the critical areas of widening participation.

CHAPTER ONE

THE LEGISLATIVE BASIS OF ACCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: 1980 TO 1994

1. Introduction

A historical survey of studies on the apartheid system reveal that while race formed the basis of South African history well before 1948, it was only after that, when the National Party came into power, that racially segregated policies were openly legitimated, implemented and eventually extended to incorporate education (Leart et al., 1986; Harrison 1987)¹. Higher education during this period was structured to serve and advance the ruling Afrikaner Nationalist Party's apartheid philosophy of separate racial development. Universities were racially categorised into Black, Coloured, Indian and White institutions and were provided for differentially in terms of a racial hierarchy where whites, mainly Afrikaners, were situated on the top rung, followed by Indians and Coloureds, with Blacks held at the lowest level. As Beale (1994:1) contends, the consequence of these categorisations was a higher education system determined by the function of each group's position in the racial and social hierarchy.

The aim of this chapter is to outline the impact of legislation on student participation in universities between 1980 and 1994. Based on the analysis of legislation and other statutory documents resulting from this legislation, the importance of the links between,

¹ The period prior to the National Party rule in 1948 was influential in shaping the present higher education system. In *The Skewed Revolution*, Cooper and Subotzky (2001) contend that the racial as well as linguistic, cultural and gender divisions in higher education date back to the colonial period before 1900.

on the one hand discriminatory legislation and the organisation of society, and on the other hand, discriminatory legislation and students' choices within the restrictions of Apartheid is revealed. The theoretical and historical overview focuses on the governance of the higher education system and the impact that various legislative acts had on students' access to a university education. In addition, several other factors, that form an intricate part of the university system, namely, the language of instruction, the school system and the socio-economic environment, are also explored. In examining the inter-relatedness of the various policies, the chapter interweaves the examination of the legislative acts underlying the development of higher education with other racial policies that had an influence on the education sector as a whole. Statistical data is used to illustrate the quantitative aspects of black student participation in comparison to other racial groups. The student enrolment trends among the different racial groups are used to show the extent to which students' participation was controlled².

Two phases marking critical points in the history and development of the system during this period can be discerned: 1980 to 1990 and 1991 to 1994. In the first phase, from 1980 to 1990, universities were politically structured to develop and serve the different racial groups unequally. This was legislated by the National Party's apartheid policies. The result was a racially differentiated university system where participation was manipulated to disadvantage African students in particular. The system was characterised by low participation, poor graduation and low retention levels (DoE, 1997). In the second phase, 1991 to 1994, the changing political climate brought about an increase in black students' participation rates. However, underlying the change in student participation were several factors, which, while resulting in an increase in the

² With respect to South Africa there are difficulties regarding the availability, reliability and consistency of data. The recording of data was shaped by political considerations. Cooper et al. (2001) and the University of the Witwatersrand report, Submission to the National Council on Higher Education, (Wits, 1995), cite consistent problems they encountered in obtaining accurate data and argue for the establishment of a better data collection system.

number of students attending university, failed to address the underlying structural and racial inequalities laid down by the apartheid government.

2. The Phase 1980 - 1990

The phase 1980 to 1990 is significant in illustrating the development of the higher education system and its impact on student access. Underlying the governance of all civil structures during this period was the National Party's apartheid ideology; that is, Afrikaner nationalism developed policies based on hierarchically determined policies of separate racial development. Several studies show that while race had formed the basis of the South African history well before 1948, it was only afterwards, when the National Party came into power, that racially segregated policies were openly legitimated, implemented and eventually extended to incorporate education (Leart et al., 1986; Harrison, 1987).

A significant feature of the period 1980 to 1990 was the extent to which the education system was compromised to address political concerns both by the government at the macro-level, as well as by students together with workers at the micro-level (Samuel, 1990; Gerwel, 1992). Education, in particular, constituted a key site for the ensuing political struggle but as Samuel notes:

Resolving the inadequacies of the education system was seen as a short term demand, while the national struggle for liberation - and therefore with broader community and political issues ... became an important part of the educational struggle (Samuel 1990:25).

In black residential areas opposition to the apartheid government was intensified by students mounting protests in schools thus challenging the existence of a separate education system as well as demanding a right to be recognised as legitimate citizens of their own country. In response the state not only instituted more repressive racial

policies but also reacted brutally to quell students' protests. Christie succinctly sums up the consequences this had on education:

the state relied on coercive measures to contain student opposition. This is well evidenced by the numerous clashes between students and police, by the banning of organisations and by detentions, deaths and exile of thousands of students during this period (Christie, 1992: 46).

Higher education institutions, in particular, were occupied by either the army or police as they were seen to be the most active sites of resistance to the repressive apartheid policies³. The situation had adverse effects on student participation rates in general.

Given that background it becomes apparent that universities were politically structured to serve the different racial groups differentially. To explore the extent to which black student access was controlled during this period, this chapter examines the governance of the higher education system and the impact it had on black student participation. A number of studies show that a much higher proportion of whites than blacks entered the university system. They show that black students, by virtue of their status as second language speakers, inadequate segregated schooling and low socio-economic status, were less well equipped than other races to access and attain a university education.

The examination of the legislation of the higher education system is informed by research studies of which the following, in particular, were informative in the development of the thesis: Harrison (1981) and Bray (1993), on the legal implications of apartheid policies on higher education provision; Beale (1994) and the University of Western Cape, Education Policy Unit report (EPU-UWC, 1994), both examine the unequal development of the dual university system; Badat's (1991; 1999) and Nkomo's (1984) exploration of black students' politics; and Shear's (1996) account of the contradictory role of the liberal universities in the apartheid era.

³ The consequences of apartheid policies on the education system have been a focus of a number of studies including Kallaway (1984), Nasson et al. (1990), Nkomo (1990) and Unterhalter et al. (1992).

2.1 *Discriminatory legislation and higher education as tools for organising society*

Underlying black student participation in higher education were legislative Acts that influenced the racial development of the system. Studies of the South African higher education system point to two Acts passed by parliament in 1959 that were of significance in laying down the basis for a racially differentiated higher education system: the *Extension of the University Act* (no 45 of 1959) and the *Fort Hare Transfer Act* of 1959 (Harrison 1981; Bray, 1993; Beale, 1994)⁴. The result was a university system racially categorised into serving blacks, indians, coloureds and whites separately⁵. In his analysis of the apartheid education system, Harrison (1981) recounts the ramifications the legislation had on the economy, the institutions and mainly on the aspirations of black students. As he points out, for students in the urban areas, universities in their locality were effectively closed as these were designated 'white only' institutions. For many students the legislation only served to add to the many disadvantages they had to contend with in order to attain higher education qualifications. More specifically, as Beale (1994:1) argues, the legislation served to endorse the view that 'institutions should serve specific population groups, and serve them unequally' which he contends contradicted the liberal notion of the 'the levelling universality fundamental to university education'.

Another distinguishing effect of the legislation on participation levels was the extent to which it impacted on blacks in comparison to other racial groups. According to Beale (1994) the clause in the *University Act* (no. 45 of 1959) allowing students to apply for ministerial consent to attend white institutions, mainly to pursue studies in fields that other institutions were precluded from offering, was applied differentially with more of

⁴ In analysing the legal implications of the separate *University Act*, Bray (1993) asserts that the myriad of laws and regulations governing universities have seriously affected their educational character and legal status, as well as causing an imbalance between the state, the university and society.

⁵ The categorisation - black, coloured, indian, and white - is based on the National Party's classification of the various racial groups. Hence, small letters are used throughout.

the Black students' applications rejected as compared to those of the other groups. Table 1.1 illustrates that, despite being in the majority, an increasing number of black students' applications were rejected⁶. According to Badat (1999: 199) less than half of black applicants were granted permission to register in HAUs: 48% (667 of 1391) in 1981 and only 37% (954 of 2605) in 1983. The decline between these years indicates the state's determination to limit black student participation in universities. The practice also suggests that the criteria for participation had less to do with students' aptitude than with race. Indeed, as shown below, apartheid policies distorted the fine balance between the state and the university sector, resulting in an unbalanced system that, on the whole, undermined any generally accepted norms linking academic studies with intellectual ability. Race became an overriding criterion at the expense of academic development.

Table: 1.1 Racial percentage of approved ministerial consent

YEAR	BLACK	COLOURED	INDIAN
1981	48	92	88
1983	37	92	79

Source: Badat, 1991: 82.

While the *Extension of the University Act* (no 45. of 1959) and the *Fort Hare Transfer Act* of 1959, discussed above, had direct implications on apartheid in higher education, other legislative acts founded on apartheid ideologies further influenced higher education participation. Apartheid formed the basis of many (perhaps all) aspects of state legislation, but, two in particular consolidated the establishment of a racially

⁶ This practice accorded with the influx control laws that channelled blacks to 'homelands' and 'self-governing states'. Indians and coloureds were to be incorporated into government structures through the establishment of the tri-cameral parliament in 1983 (Naidoo, 1998: 372).

segregated education system: the *Bantu Authorities Act* of 1951 and the *Bantu Self-Government Act* of 1959. Both aimed at confining blacks to specific areas and brought higher education provision under the country's influx control policies. The first declared the 'geographical segregation and consolidation of ethnically structured' segments of land for blacks; while the latter instituted the establishment of 'independent states' for blacks (Bray, 1993). The laws established racially segregated residential areas. A limited number of blacks were restricted to townships in urban areas and the majority were forced into remote and underdeveloped rural areas, the 'bantustans'. Universities catering for blacks were established in the locations, which put further restrictions on students' participation. The significance of the geographical location is that the development and survival of a university is partly based on extensive networking with other institutions, easy access to libraries and bookshops as well as the availability of basic amenities such as electricity. The townships and bantustans were established in an environment that deprived potential students of the cultural capital necessary for them to succeed in an academic environment.

Furthermore, participation was curtailed through other forms of legislation that were directed at schools and the private sector. The tight controls placed on a school system that was under-resourced, had an influence on the quality of students. In the private sector racially aligned employment policies prohibited blacks, indians and coloureds from occupying specific jobs and also placed restrictions on their earning capacity⁷, thus restricting them to low socio-economic levels. In general, the legislation maintained Afrikaner hegemony and put severe restrictions on black advancement and development. The effects of the school system and socio-economic environment on student access are elaborated on below.

Table 1.2 illustrates that, compared to other racial groups, very few black students had access to a university education between 1980 and 1987. The gradual increase in the

⁷ Salaries were also racially determined. In schools, for instance, black teachers' salaries were much lower than those of whites, indians and coloureds.

percentage of black students is negligible when the low student retention and graduation rates, discussed below, are taken into consideration.

Table 1.2 Percentage of university enrolments according to race

YEAR	BLACKS	COLOUREDS	INDIANS	WHITES
1980	11.9	5.1	7.6	75.4
1982	14.4	5.4	7.7	72.5
1984	18.9	5.8	7.9	67.4
1987	27.9	6.2	7.4	58.5

Source: South African Institution of Race Relations (SAIRR) in Pillay (1992:42)

On the whole the control and governance of higher education during this period mirrored the dual societal structure that characterised every aspect of South African society. Of major concern, as numerous studies on apartheid argue, were the ripple effects the policies had on the economic development and social wellbeing of a people with no political power (Bray, 1993; Beale, 1994). While accounts of the ensuing protests against apartheid show that blacks were unwilling prisoners of the system the majority were rendered powerless by the racial legislation that pervaded every aspect of their lives.

This section has discussed legislative Acts that resulted in differential student participation based on race. It showed how various racial policies served to reinforce the state's apartheid ideology and in the process further influenced university access negatively. To bring about an in-depth understanding of the effect the policies had on student participation it is necessary to examine the different ways in which the policies were realised in practice. The effects of the legislative Acts are further developed to show that the differentiated system discriminated against black student participation. The next section outlines the administration of the racially differentiated university system and explores how it furthered the state's aims of separate racial development. It

highlights specific practices that differentiated the dual system and further curtailed black student access.

2.1.1 Differentiated administrative system

A dual university system came into being as a result of the segregation policies. The sector consisting of state-aided universities (historically advantaged universities or HAUs) for whites on one hand, and state-controlled institutions (historically disadvantaged universities or HDUs), designated for blacks, indians and coloureds on the other, was administered differentially⁸. As 'whites-only' institutions, HAUs were generally more autonomous, financially advantaged and better resourced than HDUs, which were characterised by strict state control, limited funding and inadequate resources. In its conclusions on the dual system' the University of Western Cape EPU report (EPU-UWC,1994), argues that the differentiation was 'rooted in the different roles the HDUs and HAUs were assigned in the construction and maintenance of the apartheid social order'.

A significant feature of the differentiated university system was its fragmented administration, as illustrated in Table 1.5. The twenty-one universities were administered through eight departments constituted along racial lines. The HAUs, eleven in total, were centrally administered under the Department of National Education. As state-aided institutions HAUs were in a privileged position which advantaged them both financially and academically⁹. In contrast, HDUs were not only administered separately but were further divided into seven sub-departments: Indian affairs for Indians; Coloured

⁸ Historically advantaged universities (HAU) are also referred to as historically white universities (HWUs) and historically disadvantaged universities (HDUs) as historically black universities (HDUs). The terminology used in this thesis, HDUs and HAUs, is based, firstly, on the arguments put forth in the EPU-UWC report (1994), which argues that racial policies resulted in the unequal development of the dual university system. Secondly, it was used to avoid a possible confusion between the use of the terms, black and african, as the two terms are often not used consistently in literature.

⁹ Although UNISA, a distance education institution, had a greater number of black students compared to other HAUs it is classified as an HAU because it had the same privileges as all other state-aided institutions.

affairs for Coloureds; and Education and Training for Blacks in urban areas and 'non-independent states'; and the four HDUs in the 'self-governing states'¹⁰. Several studies argue that the extent to which universities designated for blacks were under-resourced and under-funded rendered it difficult for them to develop to the same level as the white institutions (EPU-UWC, 1994; Cooper et al., 2001).

In addition, universities were further differentiated ethnically to entrench and maintain the separate development policies. HAUs were categorised into two groups: Afrikaans-medium and English-medium institutions. The six Afrikaans-medium institutions comprising Pretoria, Potchefstroom, Rand Afrikaans, Orange Free State, Stellenbosch and Port Elizabeth, catered mainly for Afrikaans speaking students. The English-speaking students were based at the four English-medium universities, namely the University of Witwatersrand (WITS), Cape Town (UCT), Natal and Rhodes. Although the basis for the categorisation of the HAUs seemed to be the medium of instruction, there was more than a language issue at hand. The separate institutions, in particular the Afrikaans-medium universities were more concerned with promoting and sustaining the Afrikaner culture¹¹. The latter institutions played a vital role in furthering and upholding the apartheid ideology. As Welsh (1972:21) argues, the institutions conceptualised as 'volks' universities were completely Afrikaans in medium and in character. They were extensions of Afrikaans nationalism structures. In discussing the establishment of the Afrikaans University, Welsh writes:

The establishment of the university was a response to the needs of Johannesburg's burgeoning Afrikaner community. According to the official calendar only the establishment of a university could enable the community to make up the large leeway in the professions which it suffered in comparison with

¹⁰ With the institution of the tri-cameral parliament in 1983, the administration of HAUS, Indian and Coloured universities fell under the House of Assembly, the House of Delegates and the House of Representatives respectively. As Blacks were still denied the right to vote, their designated institutions remained under the previous administrative structures. Perhaps as a result of their elevated status UDW and UWC were able to develop academically to a better extent than the black universities.

¹¹ Regarding the significance of the dual higher education system Harrison (1987), Leart et al. (1986), Beale (1994) and Bray (1993) contend that apartheid policies were structured to promote and sustain the existence of the Afrikaner nation by undermining the development of all other racial groups.

the English-speaking White community. It would be an intellectual and cultural focus for the Afrikaner community that would give it the power to strengthen its self-confidence and its healthy development. ... it would be 'conservative' in its orientation (1972:21).

Welsh's observations were still applicable to the 1980s. Given that very few students from other racial groups were enrolled at the Afrikaans universities, it is evident that the institutions upheld the 'volks' view in practice. While the development of 'intellectual and cultural capital is recognised as a positive attribute that should be upheld, it was unjust as it was advanced at the expense of other racial groups. Table 1.3 shows that out of a total of about 65000 students enrolled in Afrikaans-HWUs, fewer than 700 were blacks. A comparison of tables 1.3 and 1.4 illustrates that the number of black students was negligible when compared to those in English-medium institutions. This was despite the fact that black student numbers were very low compared to those of whites in the English-medium universities. As shown, black student enrolment was negligibly small, reinforcing the view that Afrikaans HAU's were exclusive Afrikaans domains representing the state's apartheid bastions.

Table 1.3 Percentage of racial enrolments at Afrikaans HAU's in 1988

UNIVERSITY	BLACKS	COLOUREDS	INDIANS	WHITES
Free State	1	2	0	97
Port Elizabeth	2	8	1	90
Potchefstroom	3	1	0	96
Pretoria	0	0	0	99
Rands Afrikaans	2	4	0	95
Stellenbosch	0	4	0	96
Total	1 (673)	2 (1497)	0 (91)	97 (65844)

Source: SAPSE, in Cooper et al. (2001: 36). The figures in brackets represent the actual student numbers.

Table 1.4 Percentage of racial enrolments at English HAUs in 1988

UNIVERSITY	BLACK	COLOURED	INDIAN	WHITE
Cape Town	7	13	3	78
Natal	11	2	16	70
Rhodes	13	4	4	79
Witwatersrand	11	2	7	80
Total	10 (4759)	5 (2384)	8 (3969)	77 (36655)

Source: SAPSE, in Cooper et al. (2001: 37). The figures in brackets represent the actual student numbers

This assertion is borne out by Badat's historical account of university students' movements. In outlining the development of black students' politics, Badat (1999) points out that while students from HDUs and English-speaking universities were able to speak in one voice and unite to oppose the government's apartheid policies, attempts to involve student unions from Afrikaans-medium universities were unsuccessful. Apartheid ideology seemed to have taken root in the latter institutions where students were seen as staunch and loyal supporters of government policies¹².

The support for separate development by the Afrikaans-medium HAUs elevated the status of the English-medium institutions which were regarded as more liberal¹³. As illustrated in table 1.4, a greater number of black students were registered in the English-HAUs than in the Afrikaans-HAUs. Furthermore, the former were more vocal in their

¹² The apartheid ideology was also reflected in the teaching material, as Enslin (1976) argues. She describes Fundamental Pedagogics, an education course offered at most Afrikaans-medium universities, including Unisa and some of the HDUs as 'a powerful doctrine in educational theory' (Enslin, 1984:139). She contends that as a philosophy of education, based on the Christian Education Policy of 1948 that purports to be a policy for white Afrikaans-speakers, it contrasted with the accepted norm of education as a science: 'it is an ideology rather than a science because the practice of Fundamental Pedagogics is determined by the interests which it serves' (Enslin, 1984:147).

¹³ The English-medium universities played a controversial role in promoting student participation. They actively and openly opposed the state's apartheid policies in some instances - a bold move in view of the repressive consequences they faced in contravention of the legislation. However, they did very little to accommodate the few black students studying at the institutions. It is evident that the environment was alienated as they had to fit into the system despite having to deal with the numerous race-related disadvantages.

opposition to state policies. For instance, student unions were allowed a measure of freedom to demonstrate against repressive state actions on the campus.

However, as privileged institutions, 'liberal' universities were seen as apartheid agents. They were blamed for not doing enough to actively promote black student participation. The perception was that, instead, they used their privileged position to advance racial practices in line with the state's segregation policies.

South African universities have greater autonomy than they have used to fight and challenge apartheid and the apartheid state. If universities have been ineffective in their open opposition to apartheid and reticent in their alignment with the democratic forces, the reason has often to be sought with the universities more than with the state (Gerwel, 1992: 125).

This view is supported by Shear (1996:1), who argues that with regard to the University of Witwatersrand, the perception that English-HAUs were 'open to all who were academically qualified for admission was contested from different quarters including students as well as workers' unions'. The institution's 1986 survey on the perceptions of black communities and black workers at the University of the Witwatersrand highlights the contestations: 'the University does not cater to the needs of the disadvantaged communities and is isolated from the experience of ordinary people. Unionists also see wits as a place where whites are trained to exploit black workers' (Shear, 1996:xxv).

In documenting the history of Wits, Shear (1996:1) points out that from inception 'while it never officially adopted a policy of excluding students on grounds of race or colour, it was very hesitant to accept black students in any substantial numbers'. Shear implies that by ensuring that the number of black students was always well below those of white students HAUs were supportive of the segregation policies. He asserts that: 'the fact that there had been a historical minority of black students there', was undisputed and that in many other respects 'the university had been co-operating with the government, especially with regard to apartheid laws'.

Shear (1996:77) cites practices which illustrate that in complying with *the Group Areas Act* the institution was unsympathetic to the plight of the black students and subjected them to apartheid practices in the teaching and learning context: in many instances black medical students could not work in 'white' teaching hospitals; for the most part students could not be accommodated in the 'white' university residences despite having to travel long distances from their home in the townships to the university; their socio-economic environment was not conducive to learning as the abysmal poverty in which many of them lived at home made for poor learning conditions. He concedes that not only were students subjected to discriminatory practices but the fact that the institution had very few black academic staff and exploited its black workers (in terms of the racially-aligned salary scales, prohibition in using areas reserved for whites - which were in line with apartheid policies) showed that it was supportive of the structures. Although Shear's accounts refer to Wits, parallels can be drawn with other English - HAUs.

Table 1.5 illustrates the differentiated university system showing its racial, ethnic and linguistic divisions. Of note was that while the underlying ethnic classification of the HAUs was partly based on the language of instruction, that of HDUs was mainly on the designated location of each racial group. The first group of institutions, established in 1960, were assigned to serve blacks, coloureds and indians separately: University of the North (Turfloop) for Tsonga, Venda, Tswana, North Sotho and South Sotho speaking students; University of Zululand (Ngoye) for Zulu and Swazi students; University of Western Cape (UWC) for coloureds; and University of Durban Westville (UDW) for indians¹⁴. The University of Fort Hare, established in 1918, was also incorporated under the *University Act* of 1955, to cater for Xhosa speakers¹⁵. The second group, the bantustan universities, established after 1976, were designated for black students in the

¹⁴ Unlike the African institutions UDW and UWC were situated in urban areas. In addition with the establishment of the tri-cameral parliament, which allowed indians and coloureds into government, the two universities were placed in a more privileged position compared to universities designated for blacks.

¹⁵ Fort Hare University evolved into one of South Africa's most distinctive institutions. Before 1959 it drew students from all over Africa; including prominent African leaders, for instance, Nelson Mandela, Buthelezi, Njojo, and Nyerere. It's status declined after it was designated an ethnic institution for Xhosa speakers in 1959 (Morrow, 2001).

three 'independent states': Transkei for Xhosa students; Bophutatswana (now referred to as North West) for Tswanas; Venda for Vendas; and QwaQwa for South Sothos¹⁶. While the population growth of the different ethnic groups might explain the need for establishing ethnic affiliated institutions, for instance, the establishment of Transkei university designated for Xhosa speakers, while an older Xhosa-designated institution Fort Hare was already operating, was economically and academically unjustifiable except to illustrate the extent to which the state was set on expanding the separate development policies. The National Party was bent on instituting separate racial development at all costs.

The practice is further evidenced by the establishment of urban universities for blacks. Rather than open up HAUs to all other races, the state set up a third group of HDUs, namely, the Medical University of South Africa (Medunsa) and Vista¹⁷, to cater specifically for the demands of a growing urban black population. According to Badat urban universities only served to further the state's segregation policies:

The significance of Medunsa and Vista was that they were urban campuses, and signalled acceptance by the state of a permanent urban (black) population in the 'white' areas. However they could also be seen as part of state strategy to enforce a divide between urban black residents and rural and bantustan (black) residents (Badat, 1999:193).

Badat's assertion confirms that politics, that is racial segregation, rather than academic development was, an overriding factor in the establishment of HDUs as four HAUs, RAU, Wits, Pretoria University and Potchefstroom university, had been established. Medunsa, for example, offered medical degrees which were already offered at

¹⁶ Although situated in a separate province, QwaQwa was established as a satellite campus of the University of the North

¹⁷ As Badat (1999) points out, the emergence of the later group of institutions was profoundly conditioned by the changing imperatives of the apartheid state with regard to channelling blacks to the bantustans. Both were more specialised, with the Medical University of South Africa (Medunsa) designated a medical university and Vista University, a multi - campus university with a head office in Pretoria and campuses in townships near cities such as Pretoria, Port Elizabeth, Johannesburg and Bloemfontein. It also had a distance education campus in Pretoria specifically for the further education of teachers but it also moved into offering degrees as well.

neighbouring Wits and Pretoria University. Vista, a multi - campus university, only served to duplicate the services offered in the English and Afrikaans institutions in the vicinity.

The establishment of the urban institutions, in particular, served a dual purpose. According to Badat (1999: 193), government policies of relegating blacks to bantustans were failing as the institutions 'signalled the acceptance by the state of a permanent urban (black) population in the 'white' areas'. The black urban residential areas, that is townships, were conceived only as temporary abodes for blacks who were useful as cheap labour. They were therefore expected to stay on a temporary basis in townships for a specified period and then move back to their permanent homes in the bantustans. More significantly, as Badat (1999) maintains, this was another way to further fragment the black population as the move 'could be seen as part of state strategy to enforce a divide between urban ... and bantustan ... residents' (1999: 193). Given the growing opposition to apartheid the minority middle-class black society would both serve as a buffer between the majority blacks in bantustans and the white society. He contends that in fragmenting HDUs into even much smaller ethnic groups, the state maintained the divide and rule policy that would prevent the majority black population from uniting against it. However, on the contrary, HDUs turned out to be fertile grounds for activism against the apartheid policies.

Furthermore, while the divisions in the HAUs could be partly justified in terms of the language of instruction this was not the case with HDUs where the medium of instruction remained English, with the exception of UWC which used Afrikaans. The ethnic categories in HDUs had very little to do with the institution's academic functions but were mainly instituted to further entrench the separate development policies.

Table 1.5 The structure of the university system between 1980 and 1990

GOVERNANCE	ADMINISTRATION DEPARTMENT	RACE/ETHNIC GROUP	INSTITUTION	
State- aided: National Education House of assembly		English	Cape Town (1918) Witwatersrand (1922) Natal (1949) Rhodes (1951)	
		Afrikaans	Free State (1950) Potchefstroom (1951) Pretoria (1930) Raand (1966) Stellenbosch (1918)	
		Afrikaans-English	Port Elizabeth (1964) Unisa (873) ¹⁸	
State-controlled universities	Indian affairs House of delegates	Indians	Durban-Westville(1960)	
	Coloured affairs House of representatives	Coloureds	Western – Cape (1960)	
	Department of Education and Training	N.Sotho, S.Sotho, Tsonga, Tswana, Venda, Ndebele		North (1960)
		Zulu		Zululand(1960)
		Xhosa		Fort Hare (1959)
		Blacks		Medunsa (1976)
	Blacks		Vista (1982)	
State-controlled ethnic universities	Transkei	Xhosa	Transkei (1977)	
	Bophutatswana	Tswana	North West (1980)	
	Venda	Venda	Venda (1982)	

Adapted from Cooper et al. (2001:2)

¹⁸ Unisa started off as an examining body for other universities, which subsequently became independent. But unlike other HAUs it played a significant role in promoting access because it made it possible for many blacks to study at a university and acquire degrees. Of significance is that many political prisoners, including Nelson Mandela, studied and graduated through Unisa. As shown in Chapter 3, compared to other HAUs, Unisa, has had the highest number of registered black students over the years.

The previous section illustrated how the differentiated system provided a further means of controlling access to higher education. The ethnic and linguistic fragmentation characterising the system influenced black student participation negatively. This argument is developed in the next section which delineates the disparities between HDUs and HAUs. The thesis focuses on four areas that skewed the development of the dual university system: the geographical location of the universities, the disparate funding system, the unequal provision, and the fields of study on offer. It outlines how each aspect extended the inequalities between HAUs and HDUs that impacted qualitatively and quantitatively on black students' access to higher education and academic development.

2.1.2 Geographical location

A significant feature differentiating HAUs and HDUs was their geographical location. Compared to HAUs, HDUs were situated mainly in remote underdeveloped rural areas. Aptly called 'bush colleges', they were cut off from essential academic networks; for instance, the older universities, the North, Zululand and Fort Hare, were established in predominantly poverty - stricken rural areas: the Northern Province, North Eastern Kwazulu Natal, and Eastern Cape. Similarly, the 'independent state' universities, that is, Transkei, Bophutatswana and Venda, in Eastern Cape, North West, and Northern Province, were erected in underdeveloped 'small towns intended to be showpiece capitals of these bantustans' (EPU-UWC, 1994: 29). The locations served to further disadvantage students whose choice of institution was primarily limited by their ethnic grouping. First, the transport system, which tended to be unreliable, irregular and expensive, was inadequate for students coming from the various provinces. For instance, students from the Orange Free State had no other option but to travel extremely long

distances to their designated institution in the Northern Province¹⁹. As the then principal of the University of Natal's comments indicate, the state was indifferent to students' plight: 'Zulus who had had their homes in Durban for many generations were told that if they still wanted a university education, they could either get it by correspondence or go to the new college of Zulus about a hundred miles away in Ngoye' (Harrison,1987:193).

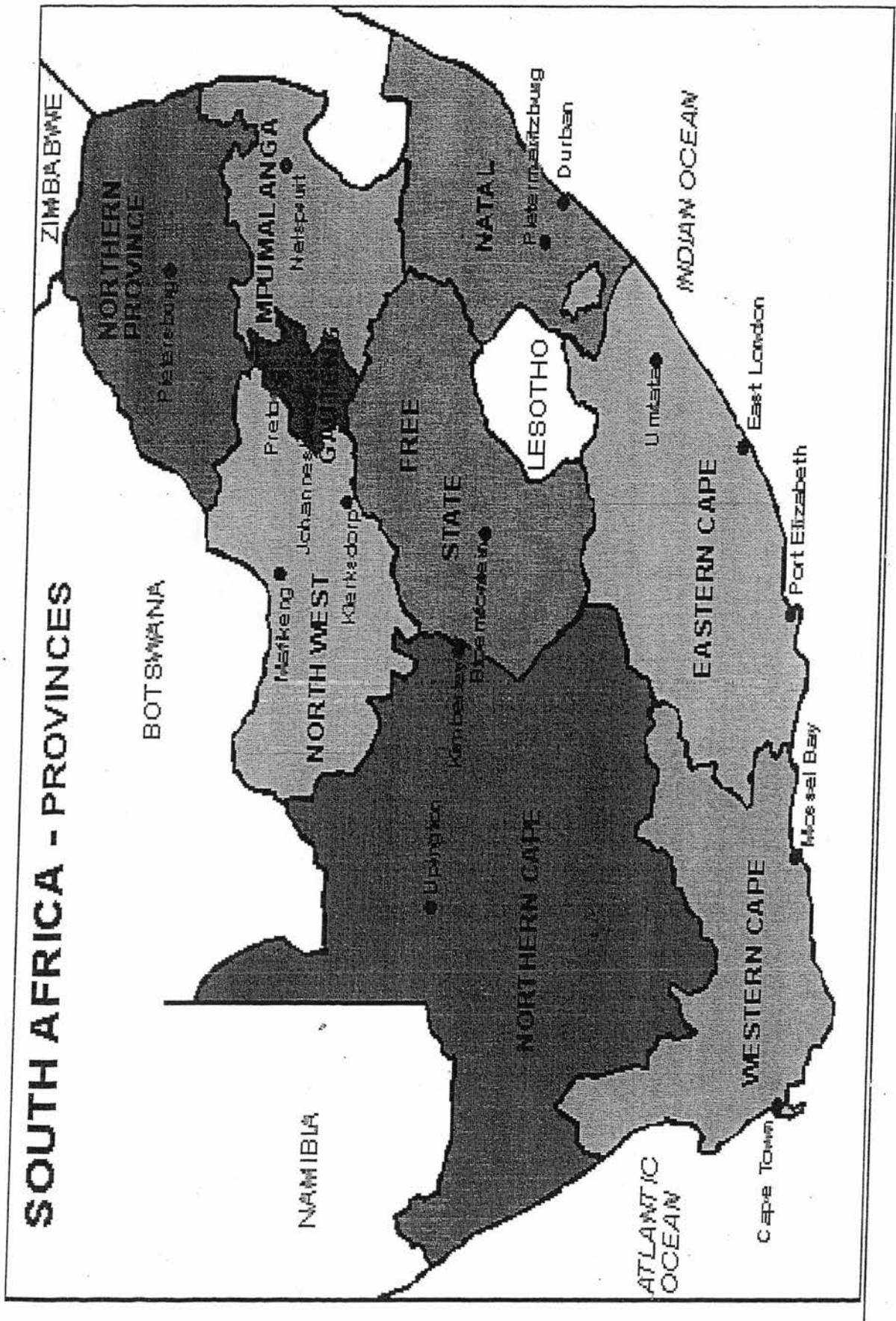
The map on page 34 shows the different provinces in South Africa. Gauteng had the greatest number of universities, seven in total, followed by Eastern Cape which had four, and Western Cape with three. Natal, Western Province and North West each had two and the Free State only one. No universities were established in the Northern Cape or Mpumalanga.

The locality also influenced the academic development in HDUs. The university buildings stood in stark contrast to their poor surroundings which had an almost non-existent infrastructure. The villages in the vicinity were characterised by their lack of basic amenities such as electricity, a telephone system, and in some instances, a water system. Institutions were isolated from other academic and intellectual networks where most of the specialist libraries and bookshops were situated. The few facilities available in the white, Afrikaner dominated small towns in the vicinity were in general, 'whites-only' domains, which were inaccessible to black students.

Another aspect related to the locality of the institutions was the extent to which academic concerns were undermined by apartheid structures. Contrary to government expectations HDUs turned into active sites for opposition to the state's segregation policy. In response to student uprisings in the 1980s, the police and the army were deployed to the institutions where students were exposed to various forms of inhumane treatment. Badat (1991;1999) gives a detailed account of the various forms of repressive conditions students were subjected to, included their being assaulted or in some

¹⁹ Students in Mpumalanga opted for the University of Swaziland, in a neighbouring country, as Swaziland was nearer to their homes than their designated ethnic institution.

FIGURE 2



instances maimed or killed. The University of the North (then referred to as Turfloop), like most university campuses, became a scene of violent disturbances:

Many university and college administrations frequently summoned the riot police at the slightest sign of student opposition, and throughout the 1980s students were whipped, baton charged and tear-gassed by police on campus. Between 1986 and 1989 the University of the North came under military occupation by the South African Defence Force. A curfew was imposed, soldiers invigilated exams and raids on student residences were common In 1989 three students were killed by the army at a protest against the continued military occupation of their campus (Badat, 1999:207).

Similar conditions were prevalent throughout the 1980s on other campuses. The government resorted to repressive measures, including instituting a state of emergency throughout the country, to protect its apartheid structures. The developments in HDUs had an impact on access both qualitatively and quantitatively. The continued battles between students and the state contributed to an increase in student dropout rates. For some students the boycotts marked the end of their academic aspirations as they were invariably detained, expelled or refused admission. For others the oppressive conditions and experiences relating to both the violence and the state's repressive responses were unbearable and finally marked the end of their hopes of attaining a university qualification²⁰. Equally, for the students who stayed on, it is clear that the continuous disruptions and the presence of the police and army - who were unsympathetic to the students' cause - had a negative impact on the quality of their studies.

The discussion showed that the political environment in the 1980s had a major impact on student access. Of significance was the way in which political structures were built into and influenced the day-to-day institutional practices. But, perhaps, of major concern is that the university system was structured in contradiction to the liberal notion of a

²⁰ Statistics illustrating the number of students affected are not readily available. But indications are that over a third of black students dropped out of the system as a result of the ongoing clashes between students and the state.

university as summed up by Professor Davie, a former vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town:

According to the concepts prevalent in our western democracies, a university is essentially a gathering of persons whose object is the search for the truth. It aims at the pursuit, preservation and dissemination of learning, and it seeks knowledge for its own sake, irrespective of its apparent usefulness or otherwise. It demands of all who foregather under its wing absolute intellectual integrity; it prizes scholarship and research as the major requirements of those who work within its walls, and it fights at all times to secure the fullest measure possible for academic freedom, in the atmosphere of which experience has shown that learning flourishes best (Davie, 1954:40).

Given the extent to which apartheid policies shaped developments in higher education institutions, it is clear that institutional freedom to pursue, preserve and disseminate knowledge, as argued by Davie, was curtailed by racial legislative acts. Forced to operate along racial, linguistic and ethnic lines institutions had their 'intellectual integrity' undermined. A major concern, in terms of access was that institutions were denied the academic freedom to experience, address and explore diverse understandings of knowledge because race was a pre-condition for their existence. The implications on black students' participation in particular was adverse but this also precluded the South African academic community the opportunity to experience the challenges and benefits of belonging to a diverse academic terrain.

2.1.3 *disparate funding*

The second feature of the skewed HAU-HDU development was the disparate funding applied in the system. Universities were funded through three main sources: state subsidies, grants from research councils and donations from the private sector. The state subsidy funding formula, founded on the premise that standards in all institutions were equal (Bray, 1993; Kaap, 1994), contributed to further disadvantaging HDUs. In the first instance, based on a point system where more points were allocated for the number of students in the final year of their studies (NATED, 1992: 51), it benefited those

institutions with high retention and completion rates. HDUs, which by comparison with HAUs, had to contend with high dropout levels were disadvantaged and thus benefited very little from the funding²¹. The low throughput levels, that is the number of students who complete successfully as a proportion of students who enrol, were to remain a basic feature of HDUs as well as in the university system in general. In its report on *The Shape and Size of Higher Education* the Council on Higher Education (CHE: 2000), discussed in more detail in the next chapter, alludes to the ensuing high drop out levels, low retention rates and poor academic performance as the major apartheid legacies that still characterise the higher education system.

The funding system further disadvantaged HDUs in relation to the fields of study they offered. Programmes that HDUs were precluded from pursuing were allocated more funding (EPU-UWC, 1994: 24). For instance, medicine, engineering, science, postgraduate studies and research work received higher weighting in points compared to other undergraduate degree programmes. This meant that HDUs, which on the whole had a restricted number of undergraduate courses and a limited range of natural science courses on offer, lost out on the funding. They were thus technically excluded from benefiting from the state funding of programmes. The consequences of these restrictions imposed on programmes offered by HDUs not only deprived the institutions financially but also impacted on the country as a whole.

Another aspect of the funding system was that state subsidies were based on the assumption that all universities were involved in research activities to the same extent. This had a negative impact on HDUs as their research output was considerably less than those of HAUs, as illustrated in table 1.6. HAUs dominated the procurement of the

²¹ In its submission to the National Commission on Higher Education (Wits, 1995), the University of Witwatersrand disputes that the funding system disadvantaged HDUs from inception. It argues that instead the disparities in funding were only applicable in the 1980s. However, the report fails to point out that as a result of their racial category HDUs were already at a disadvantage well before 1980 and that invariably in line with apartheid policies and prevailing economic practices there was no way in which HDUs could compete financially with HAUs. But, two HDU's, UDW and UWC, are exceptions as both have over the years developed into institutions of academic and research excellence both locally and internationally.

research funding from the state subsidies. While research is considered one of the core activities in universities, HDUs were structurally less well equipped to engage in research activities. The low research outputs in HDUs could be attributed mainly to the limited undergraduate programmes they offered and the lack of suitably qualified academic and research staff as shown below. The rigid control structures of the state ensured that HDUs would remain under-funded and under-developed.

Table 1.6 Comparison of the number of published research articles in HDUs and HAUs

	1987	1990
HAUs	4459	4586
HDUs	224	250
Unisa	260	333
Total	4943	5169

(Adapted from Brink, in EPU-UWC, 1994:16)

In addition to the differentiated state funding HDUs were also precluded from benefiting from other forms of external funding (EPU-UWC, 1994; Badat, 1991). The EPU-UWC report (1994) argues that while HAUs profited considerably from private sector funding, research grants, private donations, bequests and investments, very little, if any, of the funds were channelled into HDUs. Underlying the funding system were the state's aims to provide education for different racial groups unequally. HAUs were structured to get the most benefit from the state subsidies. As white institutions they were likely to get funding from other sources, for example private donations, and bequests, for which HDUs could not compete. The donations and bequests were more inclined to come from whites, individuals or businesses, as they had the economic power. In contrast, classified as black institutions, the chances of HDUs procuring external funding were reduced.

2.1.4 *disparate resourcing*

The third feature that characterised the dual university system was the unequal resourcing of the institutions. Badat (1991) argues that the facilities in HDUs were inadequate and of inferior quality to those in HAUs. For instance, comparing the reference volumes available in HDUs and Rand Afrikaans university (RAU), an Afrikaans-medium HAU, Badat (1991: 88) contends that RAU's library 'contained 195 000 volumes, while the libraries of the black universities each held between 67 000 and 84 000 books'. This was despite RAU being a newer institution, established in 1967, and the University of Fort Hare being much older, founded in 1918. Further, he points out that the poor quality of the library books in the HDUs, highlighted in an audit of library books at the university of the North, was characteristic of the library material in HDUs. With reference to the University of the North the report shows that not only was the library inadequately resourced, it contained 'one hundred thousand volumes', but also most of the material was 'obsolete, useless, dated, or of poor reject quality...' (Badat, 1991:88). In consequence, in HDUs libraries were clearly ill equipped to serve an academic community. It also meant that, in the absence of other available resources, students were more likely to rely on the prescribed literature, which was probably authored by the same academic staff at the HDUs or those from Afrikaans-medium institutions.

Given that academic staff in HDUs were most likely to be adherents of the National Party's apartheid policies, this meant that for students in these HDUs the teaching and learning reflected conservative Afrikaner views (Fataar, 1997)²². This was in keeping

²² Fort Hare, established in 1916 by the black elite and white clergy was academically highly esteemed but with the advent of the Bantu Education Act and Homelands Act it's status declined as shown below. Both UDW and UWC were also an exception because they sought to maintain high academic standards and research outputs despite government's interference.

with the state's intentions of restricting and limiting educational experiences to specific boundaries within apartheid ideologies.

Another aspect of the under resourced HDUs was the high student-lecturer ratios. The 1980s saw a considerable increase in black student numbers, as illustrated in table 2.2. The increase, borne mainly by the HDUs (EPU-UWC,1994:37), was not complemented by a similar growth in facilities. Student enrolments had increased at a much higher rate than academic staff and facilities, as student-staff ratios in HDUs had almost doubled compared those of HAUs. The increase in student numbers had major implications on the quality on teaching and learning in HDUs, as the NEPI report illustrates: 'In 1985 the historically white universities had a full-time student to academic/research staff ratio of 13.8:1 and the historically black universities of 14.9:1. By 1989 these ratios were 14.3 and 22.3 respectively' (NEPI, 1993:207).

Given the limited resources and high student-lecturer ratios, it is evident that the quality of the teaching and learning environment was compromised. While it is expected of students to be responsible for their academic success, the institution, too, has an obligation to provide adequate support for students to advance academically. The academic experiences of students in the HDUs, characterised by overcrowded lecture halls, inadequate, outdated and irrelevant reading material, as well as inadequate student accommodation, were clearly impoverished. The consequences of the overcrowded lecture halls also had an impact on academic staff. It was not unheard of for a lecturer to inform students at the beginning of the year that two thirds of the group were unlikely to sit for the year-end examinations. While on one the hand this attitude could be ascribed to staff's frustrations with the high student-lecturer ratios, on the other hand, it also points to the state's apartheid objectives to ensure Afrikaner supremacy. For students it meant that the likelihood of successfully completing their studies was constrained. Inevitably, students' uprisings in the 1980s were mainly a result of their anger at, and frustrations with the institutionalised disadvantage.

Another factor distinguishing the resourcing of HDUs and those of HAU's was the staff composition, that is, the academic, research and administration staff. HDUs were rarely able to retain and recruit qualified and experienced academic and research staff. Their isolated location, poor facilities, narrow range of degree programmes on offer and lack of specialised forms of research programmes dissuaded experienced academics and researchers (Harris et al., 1954: 28; EPU-UWC, 1994: 17). According to Harris et al (1954:28) the remote underdeveloped and under-provided environment was academically and intellectually uninspiring for academic staff. Perhaps, more specifically they were reluctant to be part of a teaching and learning environment that Cook objected to when the extension of the *University Act* (no 45 of 1959) was legislated. He described teaching in HDUs as 'training people to fit into a setting that is already determined for them' (1957: 44) and in working conditions 'that no self-respecting man [sic] could possibly be expected to accept' (Cook, 1957: 27).

Several studies suggest that for the most part, academic and administrative staff in HDUs tended to be state appointed 'male conservative Afrikaner nationalists', who were staunch adherents of the apartheid ideology (Nasson, 1990; Beale, 1994; Fataar, 1997)²³. Nasson (1990:130) contends that in keeping with its view as custodians of blacks the state employed 'conservative academics from Afrikaans universities' in HDUs. Commenting on the teaching ethos, Beale (1994:145) notes: 'It appears that the segregated black institutions were overwhelmingly dominated by academic staff trained at Afrikaans universities, who instilled a conservative and positivist intellectual tradition' Fataar sums up the content of the apartheid curriculum succinctly:

Historically, the work of universities was underpinned by an apartheid educational philosophy. Universities were expected to give intellectual substance to the segregationist ideology of the ruling class The majority of faculty members of these universities were from the Afrikaner ruling class. Universities

²³ As noted previously Fort Hare University can be regarded as an exception because even though it was legislated under the Bantu Education Act of 1959, it played a significant role in promoting access to higher education for many local black students as well as foreign students in particular those from other parts of Africa.

taught an ideologically determined curriculum. The lecturing style was authoritarian. Students were not allowed to engage critically with the curriculum. Students were expected to rote learn pre-packaged content. Examinations tested the students' recall of facts. The objective was for students to imbibe the official canon (Fataar, 1997: 9).

Fataar's observations echo findings on the questionable quality of the content of some study material at Unisa by two independent assessors Swift (1993) and SAIDE (1994;1995). The reports on the study material reveal that the content turned out to be authoritarian, top-down and upheld the views of the National Party, which according to the SAIDE report (1995: 61-62) were 'closer to catechisms than university texts'. In keeping with the state's aims of producing docile black communities, the influence of the conservative Afrikaner academic staff was reflected largely in the course content and the teaching style. This invariably restricted students to a conservative, narrow Afrikaner-oriented curriculum, which, on the whole tended to ignore radical social theories and writing. The curriculum served to reinforce the structural impediments impacting on the quality of students' academic experiences. Perhaps of more importance were the adverse consequences the practice would later have on the country's social and economic wellbeing.

Another aspect closely linked to the course content was the racial staff ratios in HDUs. In keeping with the state's apartheid objectives, HDUs tended to have more white academic staff than other racial groups, in particular black staff. A 1986 survey of staff ratios at HDUs shows that 87% of the academic staff at Medunsa were classified white, 82% at Vista, 65 % at Fort Hare, and 51% at the university of the North (Badat, 1991:88). Similar ratios were applicable to black-white administrative staff numbers.

The implications of a mainly white staff composition on student access can be drawn from the fact that both academic and administrative staff are important in establishing the ethos of an institution, in this case one likely to uphold the apartheid ideology as well as maintain Afrikaner control.

2.1.5 *Fields of study*

The fourth feature of the skewed HAU-HDU divide was the restricted range of courses and programmes HDUs offered. HDUs were not equipped to develop beyond the racially constructed occupational structures as shown previously. Subotzky (1999: 516) contends that in line with apartheid policies the undergraduate degrees and diplomas on offer in HDUs, mainly in liberal arts, humanities, education and law, reflected the employment opportunities open to Blacks. Subotzky (1999) further argues that the programmes were structured to channel students into fields of study that would, in the first instance, provide personnel for the homelands civil service and for the embryonic black middle class; secondly, the choice of programmes would guarantee and maintain Afrikaner supremacy by not undermining the existing racial division of labour. A narrow range of programmes was therefore developed in the professional fields associated with these constituencies within the racially divided occupational structure.

Table 1.7 illustrates the distribution of students across four fields of study. Of note is the uneven distribution of students across the programmes offered in HDUs, where a higher percentage are concentrated in the education and humanities fields. In contrast, in HAUs, there is an almost even distribution between the sciences and the humanities with very few students in the education field. The contrast reflects the state's racially determined allocation of occupational structures.

Table 1.7 Percentage of student enrolments by field 1990

INSTITUTION	SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY	BUSINESS, COMMERCE	EDUCATION	HUMANITIES
HAU-Afrikaans	37	13	8	42
HAU-ENGLISH	40	16	7	37
HDU	10	4	49	37
DISTANCE	8	19	14	59

(Bunting in EPU-UWC, 1994:13)

The differentiated governance and provision of university education entrenched deep inequalities between HDUs and HAUs. Inevitably this had a negative impact on the participation rates of black students. Restricted to HDUs, they had their aspirations as individuals and as citizens shattered as they had to contend with institutionalised racial barriers at various levels of their academic life. Fort Hare university, founded in 1918, is a good example of the consequences of the institutionalised barriers. Over a comparable period it was not able to develop to the same extent as any of the newer HAUs. Harris et al.'s (1954: 23) earlier observations in the 1950's, about the quality of teaching at Fort Hare University were applicable in the 1980s to all HDUs: 'It cannot compare in teaching staff, variety of courses, equipment and contributions to research to any of the white universities'.

Participation levels were controlled in the first instance by limiting the number of blacks going into universities. As illustrated in Table 1.8, as a percentage of the population black student numbers remained considerably lower in the 1980s.

Table 1.8 University students as a percentage of the population

YEAR	WHITES	INDIANS	COLOUREDS	BLACKS
1980	2.52	1.48	0.33	0.11
1989	3.11	n.a	n.a	0.26

(Sunday times in Pillay 1992: 42)

Secondly, for those students who did get into a university, participation was further curtailed through various institutional practices. Students were exposed to discriminatory practices that unquestionably had an influence on their academic aspirations. The 1980 academic report of the University of Witwatersrand aptly highlights the status accorded black students in the system:

It acknowledged that the university was not serving society to the best of its ability in the setting of contemporary South Africa. Students were not being educated to be fully aware of the social and economic problems which surrounded them and the university was not doing enough to equip able students from the disadvantaged sectors of the South African education system to overcome their early educational disadvantages so that they might benefit fully from their studies at Wits. Moreover not enough research in the university concentrated on the problems of its immediate environment (Shear, 1996: 79).

The discussion indicates that the university system acquired a unique nature and character owing to the political influences exerted by government. Its function in the public education system was reduced to the notion of a university as an institution rooted in a particular race. More importantly, HDUs were structured to advance the aims of the state to harness education at all levels for all races to the overall policy of apartheid.

The previous section outlined the structure of the HAU-HDU system and showed that black student access was curtailed quantitatively and qualitatively. It illustrated various ways in which the number of black students going on to university was controlled,

qualitatively access limited by the inequalities between the two systems. Racial policies had wider implications for black student participation that went beyond the racially differentiated higher education system. Inequalities of access manifested themselves in various areas which invariably had an impact on student participation. The language of instruction and the school system as well as the socio-economic environment were all facets of this inequality. The inequalities were perpetuated through language, as student's status as second or third language speakers was largely unacknowledged and as a result not given adequate structural priority. The racially segregated school system was also influential in maintaining the inequalities that resulted in fewer students attaining the necessary standards for university entrance. The third aspect, the socio-economic environment, was structured to deny students the social capital to succeed academically. The three aspects of inequality are all used to further the aims of the National Party's apartheid policies. But, more significantly, also of a racially segregated higher education system which controlled student participation. The three facets are explored further below.

2.2 Discriminatory legislation and student choice

2.2.1 The language of instruction

Language constitutes a major area of contestation in the history of South Africa and had a significant influence on student participation throughout the 1980s. Starting with the National party's language policies before 1994, only two of the eleven local languages were recognised official languages, namely English and Afrikaans²⁴. Both dominated the

²⁴ After 1994 eleven South African languages were declared official languages. However, in the education sector, black languages remain largely marginalised. English and Afrikaans are still the main languages of instruction for content subjects. Debates on which language should be adopted as a language of learning is a controversial aspect. Reagan (2002) outlines some of the debates on mother tongue instruction in South Africa. Research shows that many blacks reject the use of their mother tongues as languages of instruction (Nkabinde: 1997; Reagan: 2002). Given the practical and financial role English plays in South Africa this is understandable.

education and the business sector. More importantly, Afrikaans became the main language of communication in black education, particularly at the level of management, control and teacher training for all black education institutions administered separately under Bantu Education²⁵ (Hartson, 1992). The teaching of content subjects in high school was through the medium of English or Afrikaans. This meant that black languages were effectively reduced to spoken languages at home as well as teaching languages mainly at primary school level. Thus from school level the status of black languages as teaching languages was diminished.

A controversial aspect about the language of instruction was that the National Party supported mother-tongue instruction for blacks while blacks themselves for the most part opposed such schooling. Mother tongue instruction was consistent with the ideology of apartheid. But as Reagan (2002: 423) points out it functioned as one of the pillars of apartheid in perpetuating racial and ethnolinguistic divisions in society. Blacks rejected the use of mother-tongue instruction for practical and financial reasons:

Thus while maintaining a strong alliance with their home languages students seem to see them as just that – the languages of the home - whereas English is perceived as the language of aspiration. Similarly, many parents believe that the home language is learnt quite adequately at home: it is the job of the school to teach the language of wider communication (Murray, 2002: 438).

The role language played during this period was clearly a way of controlling student participation and maintaining apartheid hegemony, particularly in education. The preference of the majority of secondary schools for English over Afrikaans as a medium of instruction for content subjects went against the state's apartheid objectives to regulate black education in line with its segregation policies. Thus, to enforce the use of

²⁵ Bantu Education was later renamed the Department of Education and Training. However, the change was only in name; the separate racial institutions still remained.

Afrikaans the extension of the *Bantu Education Act* was enacted whereby 50% of the teaching of content subjects in secondary schools was to be in Afrikaans. But the 50/50 use of Afrikaans and English was met with fierce resistance in many townships and sparked off what started as the 1976 Soweto school riots²⁶. The ensuing opposition and riots spread throughout the country and gained support from both parents, through workers' unions, and students in higher education institutions. In the process education at all levels was compromised, as the state sought repressive means to deal with the growing opposition.

Of major significance was that the resistance to language policies was extended beyond the enforced use of Afrikaans. It encompassed all other aspects of racial inequalities brought about by apartheid policies. Opposition to the language used as medium of instruction was the vehicle for expressing strong opposition to the state's racial policies.

The intensity with which the state sought to protect Afrikaner hegemony had wider implications for student participation in the HDUs as well as in schools under the Department of Education and Training (hereafter referred to as DET). Education in many townships almost came to a standstill as students attacked and destroyed what they viewed as structures representing and perpetuating apartheid ideologies (Naidoo 1990; Christie, 1992). The government's response was wide ranging - from instances where schools were occupied by the army to closing down of schools so students could not sit for examinations. In some instances brutal means were used: teachers were detained and students shot or killed.

The opposition against state policies grew in the 1980s to challenge the use of English as an extension of the existing inequalities in reproducing power relations in society²⁷.

²⁶ The riots resulted in the state sending the army and police to occupy black residential areas. Despite the government's withdrawal of the policy, the riots continued into the 1980s, implying that language symbolised many of the oppressive and discriminatory practices black communities were opposing.

²⁷ It is people's English, and not other local languages, which was proposed as an alternative by some factions of the movement.

Given that 74% of South Africans had a problem understanding the English Language (NEPI: 1992), the establishment of the NECC People's English Commission, in 1986, was of significance. It challenged the role language played in perpetuating the power relations and inequalities in education²⁸. In response to criticisms raised against People's English, Pierce (1989:403) argues that it was not an alternative to standard English but an 'approach that challenged inequality in society', which went beyond the surface structure of language use by challenging the politics of language over meaning, access and power:

To interpret People's English as a dialect of international English would do the movement a gross injustice; People's English is not only a language, it is a struggle to appropriate English in the interests of democracy in South Africa. Thus the naming of People's English is a political act because it represents a challenge to the current status of English in South Africa, in which control of the language, access to the language, and the teaching of the language are entrenched within apartheid structures (Pierce, 1990:108).

However, the efforts by progressive civil movements to interrogate the role language played in the reproduction of inequalities were frustrated. The 1980's saw many members of the NECC detained and others banned. In addition the state invoked the *Public Safety Act* of 1953, which provided for the prohibition of all non-approved syllabuses, courses, books and pamphlets as well (Pierce 1989; Christie, 1992). The state-wide bannings and detentions in the 1980's marked an end to a significant move to critically examine roles that the languages of instruction, in particular, played in perpetuating the inequalities in education.

²⁸ The National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) was established to counter the growing rejection of apartheid education structures by black students. As a counter to students' 'Liberation before education' slogan it adopted the slogan 'People's Education for People's Power'. Its main objectives were to articulate an alternative education system. Its involvement in the education sector is well documented in several publications including *Apartheid Education and Popular Struggles*, Unterhalter et al. (eds.) (1991). Based on the NECC, the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) was established in 1990. It embarked on and produced twelve research reports on apartheid education restructuring, which contributed to the development of policies after 1994.

But while the role of language was contested at school level, in higher education very little seemed to be questioned. According to Scott (1990) the disabling effect the use of a second, third or in some instances fourth language had on the academic experiences of many ESL students was not acknowledged in universities. The use of English was conceived as a neutral transfer of skills, knowledge or competencies (Auerbach, 1995), and as such it tended to be accepted as a 'natural, neutral and beneficial' vehicle for the acquisition of an education (Pennycook, 1995:38). As this extract from the 1980 Wits academic report shows, while admitting that in dealing with black students the institution did not acknowledge the disabling effect their socio-economic background had on their academic success, it still failed to associate the use of English as a medium of instruction with the social context of culture and the power relations brought about by the apartheid inequalities:.

It recognised that the University had historically served predominantly the white-middle-class community of the Witwatersrand and that efforts should be made to open it effectively to all who were qualified and wished to receive an education in the English language (Shear, 1996:79).

The perception, applicable to the university sector as a whole, illustrates a narrow view of the language usage in teaching and learning. It negates the powerful influence the use of the English language had on student participation and success. Holliday (1994) asserts that the teaching and learning context must take into account the meaning and the socio-cultural potential that any language may have for particular individuals. English in this case, acted as a potential obstacle to black students who had no other options but to study in first language context that did not acknowledge English Second Language (ESL) learners' needs. Language was divorced from its broader social context as an extension of the apartheid policy at the macro-level to serve to entrench the power and politics of the state. The inability to associate language with the existing social and political contexts, as well as power structures, precluded higher education institutions from interrogating the wider implications of the language of instruction on student participation.

The second aspect relating to language and student access in higher education was the lower status accorded black languages in universities during the 1980s. In promoting the use of Afrikaans and English, black languages were in general marginalised at institutional level. For instance, in comparison to foreign languages, black languages were in the first instance translated and taught through the medium of English or Afrikaans. Secondly, they were grouped together under a single department, mainly an African Languages department. Of note was that the department was dominated by white academics, suggesting that in line with apartheid policies, the aim was to marginalise black academics. Another possibility could have been that in order to secure the dominant position of the Afrikaans language, it was necessary to suppress all other languages. As a result minimal resources were invested in black languages to make them viable as academic languages of teaching and learning. Given the extent to which Afrikaans was developed as an academic language by government and higher education institutions, it is clear that the development of African languages would have gone against apartheid objectives.

The dominant role language played in limiting student participation at university level was not fully recognised. The introduction of academic development programmes, to address students' language incompetencies, while significant, did not fully address the impact the use of either English or Afrikaans had had on student participation levels. The reduced status accorded to black languages could be perceived not only as part of government policy to limit student participation but also to entrench the aims of apartheid policies.

2.2.2 The School system

Schools constituted yet another distinguishing feature of the racially differentiated education system that had an impact on student participation in higher education:

Numerically, the number of students qualifying to go on to university; qualitatively, to the extent that students were well prepared to cope with a university education. The incompetence of students was partly ascribed to disadvantaged schooling system and the adverse socio-political conditions students came from. Very few black students were able to attain the entrance requirements of most universities, in particular HAUs (Gerwel, 1992:126). The percentage of final-year school students qualifying with matriculation exemption was very low between the years 1980 and 1990. As Table 1.9, shows there was a large discrepancy between the number of students obtaining matriculation exemption and those who did not. It illustrates that less than a third of the students who sat for the examination obtained matriculation exemption, that is, a pass that would allow them to go on to university.

Table 1.9 Black matriculation passes as a proportion of matric candidates.

YEAR	TOTAL MATRICS	% PASS WITHOUT EXEMPTION	% PASS WITH EXEMPTION
1980	22 650	71.5	28.5
1985	38 699	74.3	25.7
1988	106 185	71.1	28.9
1989	74 249	76.4	23.6

(Source: Unterhalter, 1991: 46)

A racial comparison of students succeeding at high school level, illustrated in Table 1.10, reveals that while a very high proportion of white candidates passed senior certificate examination with matriculation exemption, very few black students were as successful. The statistics show that the number of black matriculants decreased considerably. This could be attributed partly to the inequalities in education provision between the schools under the Department of National Education (decentralised into

provinces) and those under the Department of Education and Training (the former Department of Bantu Education).²⁹ While the former shows a very high and steady increase in pass rates over the relevant years, the numbers fluctuate in the latter. The pass rates were not only lower in DET schools, around 50%, but also tended to decrease. For instance, in 1989 the pass levels were less than 40%. DET schools, situated in townships and 'bantustans' were structured to uphold and complement the inequalities of the state's apartheid domination.

Table 1.10 Racial percentage of matriculation passes

YEAR	BLACK	WHITE
1980	52.4	83.2
1985	46.5	92.1
1988	56.7	96.1
1989	37.9	96.9

(Adapted from: Unterhalter: 1991: 47)

Certain factors contributed to the varying pass rates in black schools. Schooling, like higher education, was racially differentiated and funded according to a specified racial formula. The result was that many black schools remained under provided and under resourced²⁹. For example, overcrowded classrooms, high teacher-pupil ratios, unqualified teachers, inadequate textbooks and other reading material, were characteristic of many township and bantustan schools. Table 1.11 illustrates the teacher-pupil ratio in black schools, under DET, which was relatively much higher than

²⁹ Although research on good quality black schools is sparse there are several black schools that were exceptional: these comprise township schools and church schools, in particular. Most of the missionary schools lost control over black education with the introduction of the Bantu Education Act in 1953. In *Open Schools: Racially Mixed Catholic Schools in South Africa, 1976-1986*, Pam Christie (1990) explores the problems and challenges Catholic Schools faced in addressing black education under the National Party government.

that in all other departments of education. The high failure rates and drop out levels in black schools are partly attributed to the high teacher-pupil ratios, consequently limiting the possible number of students going on to university.

Table 1.11 Teacher-pupil ratio by race

YEAR	AFRICAN	WHITE	COLOUREDS	INDIANS
1980	1:47	1:19	1: 29	1:25
1982	1:39	1:18	1:27	1:24
1984	1:41	1:19	1:26	1:23
1987	1:41	1:16	1:25	1:21

(SA Statistics in Pillay, 1990: 38)

The higher education system has been criticised for its apparent lack of consideration for the abysmal state of education in many black schools during this period. According to Gerwel the indifference to the consequences of apartheid in schools perpetuated the inequalities in student access:

The universities in South Africa stand at the receiving end of the inequalities of the segregated schooling system. The challenge to which most South African universities have not responded with sufficient urgency, is how to deal with the fact that educational disadvantage is a majority phenomenon in our country, a fate suffered by the majority of students at school (Gerwel, 1992:125).

Gerwel's words echo Scott's (1990) argument that critical disparities in the racialised school system as well as the articulation failure between the black school system and university system influenced black student participation negatively in higher education level. According to Scott 'the traditional SA university structure has been developed virtually exclusively in relation to the levels, approaches and norms of white schooling... (1990: 13). Scott suggests that the curriculum in black schools was not

geared towards preparing students to cope with a university education. This invariably influenced student participation in terms of throughput levels³⁰.

2.2.3 *The socio-economic environment*

Closely related to the school system the fourth aspect to influence student participation in higher education was the socio-economic environment, which takes into account family income, education, occupation and the social environment. In attempts to access higher education institutions black students had to contend with oppressive socio-economic conditions. Blacks were subjected to multiple repressive legislative Acts and restrictions related to apartheid policies which resulted in extreme poverty levels. Three Acts in particular were significant in perpetuating socio-economic inequalities: the *Group areas Act* of 1950 empowered the government to proclaim certain areas for the sole use of certain racial groups; the *Separate Amenities Act* of 1953 stipulated that members of different race groups could not use the same amenities; and the *Labour Act* resulted in a distorted distribution of wealth among the different racial groups. Placed on the lowest rung of the racial hierarchy blacks, were the worst off. Aspiring students often came from families with little by way of income or savings, living in one or two room houses and attending schools which that lacked electricity and the required textbooks. The same living conditions applied to students already attending university:

For students from black communities low wages for parents, unemployment, inadequate housing and services and poverty were lived experiences. African students were not exempt from legislation and pass book harassment, nor unaffected by forced removals and the stripping of South African citizenship for those deemed to be citizens of independent bantustans (Badat, 1991: 80).

³⁰ The national matric pass rates have improved, particularly from 1999: 48.9% in 1999; 57.9% in 2000; 61.7% in 2001 and 68.9% in 2002. However, the quality of the pass rates is questioned by various educationists as shown in Chapter 2. Jansen (2002), the Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria, argues that the quality of education has been compromised to accommodate poor teaching and that students still battle to cope with academic demands at university.

Linked to the socio-economic conditions were the poor infrastructure and inadequate resources found in black residential areas. As a result of the inequalities brought about by the *Separate Amenities Act* and the *Group Areas Act* black residential areas, that is townships, rural areas and bantustans, provided inadequate housing and basic amenities. According to the South African Institute of Race Relations Survey (SAIRR, 1989/1990) the housing shortage in townships was aggravated as '56% of the African population found themselves in informal settlements, which the authorities were doing little as yet to upgrade' (1989/1990: 99). Furthermore, townships were poorly provided for as pointed out in the survey very few households were electrified 'in June 1989, the Minister of constitutional development and planning Chris Heunis, reported that of the 208 African townships 70% of households were without an electricity supply' (SAIRR, 1990: 110). In keeping with state policies townships were poorly resourced and inadequate in catering for the population in the area. The situation was much worse in rural areas and the bantustans:

The underdeveloped areas are characterised by widespread poverty, low productivity, virtually no industrialisation or urbanisation, high levels of unemployment, high dependency ratios, extensive participation in the migrant system (SAIRR, 1981: 113).

The work environment also contributed to the multiple oppressive system by perpetuating the state's racial discrimination policies. According to the SAIRR employers reproduced discriminatory practices that reinforced racial segregation and inequalities in the sector. In comparison to other races the average monthly earning for blacks was low resulting in significantly low average household incomes as table 1.12 illustrates.

Table 1.12 Average household incomes 1981-1985

Year	BLACK	INDIAN	COLOURED	WHITE
1981	174	591	417	1134
1982	204	819	548	1380
1983	220	1034	558	1630
1984	273	1072	624	1834
1985	352	1109	680	1958

SAIRR 1985

Statistical data on unemployment in South Africa tends to be unreliable, as the contribution made by the informal sector is often marginalised. Research shows that nearly two million black people were involved in the informal sector in 1985 (Kirsten, 1991: 158). This sector undoubtedly contributes to the GDP, a fact that tends to be overlooked. Preston-Whyte et al. (1991) explore urban and rural money-making ventures in the informal sector in *South Africa's informal economy*.

Blacks came from the lowest income group where parents occupied jobs characterised by low pay, long hours, and lack of benefits such as overtime remuneration and pension benefits. This was aggravated by the fact that they consistently constituted the largest percentage of the unemployed. Table 1.13 illustrates that, compared to other races, the unemployment levels for blacks between 1988 and 1989 increased³¹, an indication that they were likely to remain trapped in the cycle of perpetual poverty and lack of facilities.

³¹ Official data on black statistics before 1994 tends to be inaccurate as many were excluded for various reasons related to apartheid policies. According to the SAIRR (1985) survey unofficial figures estimate the unemployment levels among blacks to be as high as 43%. However this figure excludes many black urban and rural informal money-making ventures. A significant number of the unemployed were active in the informal sector which in the 1980's tended to be marginalised as a significant economic activity as shown below. According to Kirsten (1991: 158) participation could have been as high as 23% in this sector.

Table 1.13 Registered unemployed: 1988, 1989

	1988	1989
Blacks	68 737	72 533
Coloured	19 390	18 417
Indian	21 612	6 645
White	21 612	19 462

Source: SAIRR 1989/1990

In general, the socio-economic environment constituted powerful environmental and political constraints that reinforced and maintained the cycle of disadvantage in black communities (see Table 1.14). As indicated the lack of basic resources and discriminatory employment practices, in combination, entrenched the inequalities between races. In terms of participation in higher education this meant that black students were most likely to experience extreme financial difficulties, with adverse consequences on their studies.

Table 1.14 Gross Domestic Product 1982-1989

YEAR	GROWTH RATE
1980 - 84	2.97 %
1985-89	1.50 %

Source: Fourie (1997:212)

However, students' socio-economic realities, as well as the disabling consequences this had on their learning environment, were lost on higher education institutions, in

particular the academic staff in universities, as Shear (1996), the former deputy vice-chancellor of the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) concedes:

The university administration, myself included, was slow to comprehend that black student politics was substantially different from that which had obtained when the institution had comprised predominantly white students. Black students fiercely resisted the imposition of rules and regulations drawn up by the authorities without prior consultation. Brought up in a society in which they were entirely disempowered by a white hegemony which had imposed unjust laws on them, they would not accept this in their university where complete equality was the policy (Shear, 1996: 88).

Institutions were structured to accommodate white students who, in contrast to black students, were likely to be more privileged socio-economically and often had very little or no experience of the adverse consequences of the apartheid legislative Acts. It was expected that black students should adjust to an environment that was structured to marginalise them both academically and socially.

Various legislative acts shaped and determined access to education in the 1980's. But the Total Strategy Policy enacted by the then head of State, PW Botha, had an impact on developments in the education sector between 1985 and 1989. Adopted as a response to the growing political crisis, the policy illustrates the extent to which military force was used to curb opposition³². As Slabbert (1991:2) argues 'More and more the regime fell back on security and authoritative control to maintain racial segregation'. In response to the intensified political crisis the National Party embarked on the military to maintain racial segregation. All aspects of civil society were affected: 'It coordinated and in some cases controlled policy, throughout the public service' (Cloete, 1991: 34). In analysing the National Party's security-based reform programme Alden asserts:

³² For a detailed analysis see Alden's (1998) *Apartheid's last stand: the rise and fall of the SA Security state*; and Lee et al's (Eds.) (1991) *Transition to Democracy: Policy perspectives 1991*.

Drawing upon the strategic imperatives of total strategy, the government sought to employ the full range of means at its disposal – the diplomatic, economic, political and military – to support the interests of the South African State (Alden, 1998: 97).

Education, like all public sectors, was also affected. The appointment of Gerrit Viljoen, widely regarded as one of the best Afrikaner Nationalism strategists, as Minister of Education could be viewed as a reinforcement of the state's control on education matters, particularly pertaining to the maintenance of segregation. Opposition against the state policies increased between 1984 and 1990. In response the state took draconian action and reinforced or replaced the police control with the army as townships and rural areas became ungovernable: the state of emergency was imposed on 36 magisterial districts, 17 apartheid organisations were banned and many activists detained. It was therefore not surprising that schooling and education in many black residential areas was disrupted or came to a standstill as resistance and opposition to state policies intensified: schools and some of the HBUs were shut down: students were detained, dismissed or suspended; teachers and lecturers were detained.

In summary, the discussion on the development of the higher education system between 1980 and 1990 highlights the influence apartheid structures had in limiting black student participation at university level. It shows how race was characterised and prioritised as the main factor determining access to, as well as the attainment of, a university qualification. Furthermore, it illustrates how, through a multilevel sifting system that included the socio-economic environment, the school system, the language of instruction and the racially differentiated university system the number of blacks getting into and through higher education was controlled.

Given the fact that underlying all civil structures were racially related legislative Acts, it is clear that black student access to the university sector was qualitatively and quantitatively undermined as part of government policy. Policies were structured so that

a limited number of students was likely to enter university and for those who did it was probable that still fewer would make it through the system as they tended to lack the cultural and intellectual capital necessary to succeed in higher education

The previous section outlined how the multiple racially aligned policies interacted to limit black student access in higher education between 1980 and 1990. The next section explores student access further and shows that the change in political climate, as well as the decline in the economy, influenced participation. More specifically, the study argues that, despite the increase in student numbers between 1991 and April 1994, access remained racially determined according to apartheid policies.

3. The Phase 1991 - 1994

After 1990, the change in the political climate brought about various developments countrywide. Of significance were the release of political detainees, including Mandela, as well as the lifting of the ban on all political organisations which had been termed unlawful in terms of the apartheid emergency regulations. The action was partly a realisation by government that its apartheid policies, which had resulted in the duplication of facilities along racial lines, were costly and the increased opposition from various fronts, both internally and the internationally, intensified the pressure for political change. More importantly, apartheid policies had exacerbated the economic recession the country was facing.

The SAIRR (1993) survey notes that the economic crisis in 1993 was partly attributable to the segregation policies that had resulted in a shortage of skilled labour and experienced professionals and the duplication of facilities according to race were shown

to have been economically unsound. The economic crisis was aggravated by the decline in the value of the rand (the currency) as well as the world-wide economic sanctions imposed against the South African government. Of major consequence was the increase in unemployment levels as many businesses were either shut down or were pulled out of the country. Citing the National Manpower Commission's data, the SAIRR (1993: 469) survey indicates that unemployment 'in the formal sector in 1991 was 4.9 million, representing 39% of the economically active population', while Sanlam (SAIRR 1993: 465) figures show that in 1993 'there were 3 million people with no source of employment at all'³³.

Given the existing racial imbalances it is clear that compared to other racial groups, blacks were more affected by the economic recession than other races. They had consistently constituted the largest percentage of the unemployed and, if employed, were likely to be the lowest paid compared to other racial groups. The Development Bank of Southern Africa shows that in 1993 about '18 million Africans were struggling to survive in households with incomes below the minimum level', while between 8 and 9 million were 'completely destitute' (SAIRR, 1994: 72). Because the majority entered the job market at the lowest level with little or no skills, they were the most vulnerable group in times of recession. As a result their poor living conditions, characterised by low socio-economic conditions and high poverty levels, were exacerbated.

Against this background the next section examines black student access in relation to developments in the higher education sector between 1990 and 1994. It illustrates that, although the political changes brought about a growth in black student numbers in the university sector, the growth was largely in line with the apartheid structures of the 1980s: black students remained concentrated in HDUs and distance education. Following the discussion on the 1980 to 1990 phase, the study shows that student participation was racially aligned both qualitatively and quantitatively between 1991 and

³³ As noted earlier some of the unemployed were employed in the informal sector. But because of lack reliable statistical information and sparse research in this area very little information is available.

1994. The HDU-HAU divide is discussed in relation to the impact the economic recession had on student participation. In addition the discussion demonstrates that other factors shown to have influenced student participation in the 1980s - the language of instruction, the school system and the socio-economic environment - continued to impact negatively on the black students participation.

3.1 Legislation on higher education

A significant change during this period was the increase in the number of black students in the university sector (see table 1.15). A comparison of the 1988 and 1993 enrolments indicates an 82% growth in student numbers. The growth could partly be attributed to the increase in population and the change in the political climate as influx control policies, which restricted the mobility of blacks into urban areas, were relaxed. Compared to rural areas and bantustans, urban areas offered better employment opportunities, improved facilities and easier access to universities.

Of note was the expansion in Afrikaans-medium HAUs which showed a 547% increase in black student enrolment. The growth illustrates a major shift from the 1980s where participation was negligible. The increase is in stark contrast to the 104% growth in English-medium HAUs, perhaps an indication that in line with Shear's (1996) observations that, despite accommodating the majority of black students in the sector, English-HAU still resisted enrolling them in greater numbers.

Table 1.15 shows that on the whole the growth in black student enrolment was still along racial lines. Statistics of 1993 indicate that of the 89 000 black students enrolled in higher education, HAUs accommodated about 10 000, the majority of whom remained concentrated in HDUs and distance education universities, that is Unisa and Vista. As Tables 1.6 and 1.17, illustrate the total number of students enrolled in HAUs remained low in comparison to that of whites. In Afrikaans-medium HAUs, blacks constituted 5%

of the student population while in English medium universities 17% were black. As pointed out in the Wits Submission to the NCHE (Wits:1995: 2-12), HAUs accounted for 10% of the total black enrolment with 82% accommodated at Unisa and Vista.

Table 1.15 Growth in black student enrolments 1988 vs. 1993

UNIVERSITY	1988	1993	GROWTH	%GROWTH
All universities	49180	89750	40570	82
HDUs	15249	28746	13497	89
UDW/UWC	2 546	7540	4994	104
English-HAU	4 004	8 173	4169	104
Afrikaans-HAUs	396	2564	2168	547
Unisa and Vista	26 985	42 727	15 742	58

Source: Adapted from Wits, 1995

Table 1.16 Percentage student headcount in English-HAUs 1988 vs 1993

Race	1988	1993
Black	10	20
White	77	63

Source: Wits,1995

Table 1.17 Percentage student headcount in Afrikaans-HAUs 1988 vs 1993

Race	1988	1993
Black	1	6
White	97	90

Source: Wits, 1995

Given that the growth in student numbers was mainly in HDUs and distance education, it is necessary to examine how access was skewed as a result of the HDU-HAU divide. In the light of the political and economic changes the growth of student numbers in

students were registered at Unisa and Vista than in other universities. While distance education had advantages for students – the fees were generally lower compared to those in contact-tuition institutions and more importantly, given that students were likely to come from a lower socio-economic environment, they could earn a salary while working – there were notable quantitative and qualitative drawbacks. First, the throughput levels in Unisa and Vista were much lower than those in contact institutions³⁴. According to the Wits Submission (1995: 2-36), despite having the largest group of registered students Unisa and Vista produced 27% of the total university graduates in 1993, while more than half, that is 55%, were attributable to HWUs and the remaining 18% by HDUs. Coupled with the lower throughput levels were the limited programmes offered in distance education. In contrast to HAUs, the majority of students at Unisa and Vista were registered in the Arts Faculties, consequently producing 'the most extreme of the Arts bias' in the higher education sector (Wits-EPU,1995: 2-27). Comparisons of the 1988 and 1993 statistics reveal that in both years Unisa and Vista had the highest proportion of 'Arts' graduates (Wits-EPU,1995: 2-27). The general focus in the distance learning institutions, as pointed out in the Wits-EPU (1995: 2-40), was in the education category. Given that the growth in black students' numbers was borne by HDUs, Unisa and Vista it is clear that access continued to be determined along apartheid lines.

Where previously only two universities offered distance education, now more traditional contact universities, in particular HAUs, moved into distance tuition (SAIDE:1994). The expansion in black student numbers in Afrikaans-HAUs (see Table 2.13) was primarily in distance education. The quality of the distance-programmes was questioned:

it appears that the approaches being used are essentially the same as those of UNISA. We have no evidence of dropout rates or pass rates, but we would be surprised if they were other than very low. It is our impression that most if not all the students enrolled in these programmes are black. Very real questions must be raised about the morality of enrolling students for courses if the great

³⁴ According to internationally, the throughput levels in distance education are low. The throughput at Vista's distance education campus might have been higher than that at their contact campuses.

HDUs influenced student access negatively. The gap between HAUs and HDUs widened as state funding to higher education institutions was reduced. University subsidies declined from 90% to 64% in 1993 (Gultig, 2000:48). While HAUs were able to offset the reduction in funding, HDUs struggled to survive, partly because they ' were more heavily reliant on subsidy and tuition fees as sources for their income than HWUs' (Subotzky, 1997: 19). Table 1.18 illustrates the source of funds across the university sector in 1992. It shows that HDUs derived a larger proportion of their income from the state and student funding than HAUs. HDUs were further disadvantaged as they received much lower funding in comparison to HAUs as Subotzky states: 'the University of Pretoria for instance received R230m in subsidy in 1992, about three times the most received by an HDU, namely R76, 5m received by UWC' (1997:19). The financial crisis in HDUs was exacerbated by the increase in student debts. As a result of the prevailing economic recession during this period growing numbers of students were unable to pay their fees. This meant that HDUs remained disadvantaged, despite carrying the largest number of the student population.

Table 1.18 Proportion of income in HDUs and HAUs

Sources of income	HDU	English-HAU	Afrikaans-HAU
Government subsidy	331.6 (54%)	552.3 (41%)	711.7 (46%)
Tuition and other fees;	125.1 (20%)	257.7 (17%)	257.3 (19%)
Grants and contracts	4.6 (1%)	48.7 (4%)	37.4 (2%)
Private gifts grants and contracts	52.6 (8%)	240.2 (18%)	147.7 (10%)
Investments	43.4 (7%)	124.2 (9%)	195.6 (13%)
Auxiliary services	38.8 (6%)	86.1 (6%)	96.1 (6%)
Other	23.1 (4%)	29.1 (2%)	94.3 (6%)
Total	619.2	1338	1541

Source: UPE-UWC,1994

The increased participation levels in distance education also contributed to exaggerating the inequalities in access. As illustrated in table 3.1, in Chapter Three, more black

majority will be doomed to failure because of including student support, effective teaching and inadequate support during a course (SAIDE, 1994: 53).

The view that the distance education programmes offered were inadequately planned for is supported by the 1996 National Council on Higher Education (NCHE) report and the 2001 *National Plan for Higher Education*. The shortcomings of the programmes, as noted in the NCHE report (1996), included the claim that they were developed primarily for financial gain with little consideration for quality and efficiency: 'programmes do not appear to relate to the social or educational goals of the country'. The National Plan for Higher Education (RSA: 2001) argues, 'The quality of programmes is undermined by a lack of research into the needs and contexts of students, appropriate modes of delivery and new methods of assessment'. Underlying the growth in black student numbers were qualitative aspects of the teaching and learning context which invariably influenced student participation negatively.

On the whole, the expansion in black student participation was aligned along apartheid lines as the proportion of black students in universities remained lower than that of other races. A racial comparison of the 1992 statistics, (see table 1.19), shows that whites dominated the sector while black student participation continued to be at the lowest level: 3/100 of black students in contrast to 20/100 of white students. The numbers were lower also in 1993 where blacks constituted 40 570 of the total 232 085 university population (Wits-UPE: 1995: 28).

Table 1.19 The number of university students per 100 of the population in 1992

RACIAL GROUP	/100
Black	3
Coloured	2
Indian	4
White	30

Source: Kapp, 1994:3

So far this chapter has outlined the changes in access. It has argued that between 1991 and 1994 black student participation remained marginalised along racial lines. It has noted that changes relating to three other factors, the limited fields of study, the language of instruction and the segregated school system, are also important in an understanding of the situation of higher education in South Africa. To aid this understanding each aspect is discussed in turn.

3.2 Fields of study

Enrolment trends indicate that the growth in black student numbers was skewed in specific fields of study and certain qualification levels in line with the racial policies of the 1980s. As noted above, the increase in student numbers in HDUs, Vista and distance education meant that black students were still concentrated in specified fields primarily in the social sciences and humanities. It was shown above that Unisa and Vista in comparison to other institutions, were mainly 'Arts' oriented, with the majority of its students in education programmes. The number of black students in the science programmes was small and the throughput levels were in general very low, as noted in the SAIDE report:

At Unisa only 9% of first-time students embarked on science degrees. The university's output of science is very small. There were 341 in 1992, including mathematics and computing, of whom 82% were white. Of the cohorts of students first enrolling for BSc in 1984 and 1985 only 4.7% and 5.2% had graduated by 1992 (SAIDE,1994: 48).

Similarly, in HWUs black students were concentrated in undergraduate diplomas in education and undergraduate degrees in the social sciences and humanities (Wits, 1995; Cloete et al., 2000). In general, as in the 1980s, the growth in student participation was

aligned to the fields of study as proposed in the state's policies which limited blacks to specific careers.

3.3 *Language of instruction*

The language of instruction remained a barrier in facilitating black student access to university. The racial 'opening up' of Afrikaans-medium HAUs highlighted the language contestations. Despite institutions promoting themselves as non-racial and bilingual, lecturers continued teaching as before, in a language they had been using for decades and were most comfortable with; that is, Afrikaans. However, as Merten (2001:2) points out, this was often with little regard for the growing number of enrolled black students. This view is supported in the SAIDE report (1994: 49) which identifies the use of Afrikaans in texts as problematic: 'Language is clearly an issue. We were surprised to see a study guide written in English but referring to texts in which three quarters were in Afrikaans'. It points out that the practice raises questions about 'the sensitivity to the need all students have to feel culturally and linguistically comfortable in the education institution in which they are enrolled' (SAIDE, 1994: 49). It also extends the issue of language to relate to personal relations:

We were left with the impression that the authority of the institution and of the professor or lecturer can be made to bear heavily on black students. If that impression is correct, it is in line with the impersonal, authoritarian tone of the study guides (1994: 49).

The report suggests that the same racial roles applying to blacks were likely to be extended to the teaching and learning context in universities. Consequently, students were subjected to the same roles that apartheid assigned them that of a lower race, with unequal treatment – but more specifically, lower treatment. While the SAIDE report refers to distance education, its observations are also applicable to HDUs and HAUs, where teaching was only in English. The indiscriminate use of language illustrates that

at the institutional level students were subjected to an environment that was insensitive to their second or third language status. Consequently, they were likely to be labelled inadequate and incompetent.

The two factors, the field of study and the language of instruction, highlight both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of student participation. They indicate that while access was increased in terms of students getting into university, students were marginalised by structural barriers in practice resulting in high dropout rates and failures. The qualitative and quantitative aspects of access are further developed below to show that a third factor, the racially segregated school system, compounded the barriers related to student participation.

3.4 The School system

Developments in the school sector show that student participation was compromised by the continued political unrests resulting from the state's unilateral restructuring of the system. The teaching and learning environment deteriorated, partly as a result of the National Party's continued skewed restructuring of schools through the Education Renewal Strategy policy (ERS). This meant that there was a failure to address inequalities in the school system. For instance, black schools supplied pupils with stationery and textbooks for the first time and white schools were reclassified Model C to accommodate black students. However, the changes were offset by authoritarian practices that were seen as another form of state control (Badat 1992:24). Constrained by the apartheid framework that characterised the ERS, the state was criticised for its 'cosmetic changes to the existing apartheid education system which suggested minor reforms that were added to the existing structures' (NEPI: 1993). According to Christie: 'Notably absent are details of finance and means of implementation nor is any mention made of redressing historical imbalances in education' (1992:24). The overall aims of government initiatives, as Walker (1995: 59) asserts, was to moderate and not remove

apartheid. The state continued with the policy of desegregation of schools, the unilateral retrenchment of teachers in DET schools, and accorded school governing bodies in Model C schools unlimited powers, which perhaps included restricting the number of black students coming into schools.

Consequently, the existing patterns of disadvantage were entrenched as seen in the extended student and teacher school boycotts and protests in DET schools during this period. The 1991 and 1992 senior certificate examination passes and matriculation exemptions illustrate that not only did fewer blacks qualify to go to university than other racial groups, but that the percentage decreased in 1992.

Table 1.20 Senior certificate examination passes in percentage: 1991 and 1992

	1993		1992	
	passes	exemption	passes	exemption
Blacks	46	11	44	10
Coloured	83	22	86	21
Indians	95	50	95	49
Whites	96	41	98	42

SAIRR, 1994

The table indicates that, similar to the 1980s, the inequalities relating to the racially differentiated participation levels continued. The statistical data highlight that race remained the principal determinant of educational opportunity, and therefore of individual life chances.

Generally, between 1990 and 1994, student access was mainly driven by two developments: the change in the political climate and the decline in the economy. Although there was an increase in black student numbers, participation remained racially skewed. The proportion of black students at universities was still much lower than that of other races. The growth in student numbers, that is, in HDUs, distance education programmes and specified field, was racially aligned: The HDU-HAU divide worsened, as HDUs struggled to survive without the apartheid structures that had propped them up throughout the years. The quality of programmes offered in distance education was questionable. Finally, student growth was primarily in the arts and education fields with negligible numbers in science and postgraduate programmes.

Distance Education has played a significant role in providing access to university education for many students³⁵. Table 3.1, Chapter Three, illustrates that distance education institutions had the largest number of registered students compared to residential universities. A number of documents point out the significance of distance education during the apartheid era: the NCHE (1996), the National Plan (2001) and the SAIDE report (1994)³⁶. Thus it was expected that after 1994 distance education would assume a more central role in widening participation. Both the NCHE (1996) and the National Plan (2001), discussed in Chapter Two, emphasise the role of distance education to redress inequalities and promote access.

However, the poor quality of distance provision, pointed out in the SAIDE report is a matter of concern: 'What is called distance education in South Africa is essentially a correspondence education (SAIDE: 1994: xv)'. Of importance to this study are SAIDE's observations that 'DE is often thought of as an adjunct to systems that are otherwise not in need of radical change' (1994: 149). If open learning and distance education are to be

³⁵ For a detailed discussion of distance education provision in South Africa see: *Open learning and distance education in South Africa*, a report by SAIDE (1995); *A distance education provision for South Africa*, a discussion document prepared by the Distance Education media and Technology services department of Education (1996).

³⁶ See detailed discussion in chapters Two and Three

central to the reconstruction and development of South Africa then it is important that these structures be interrogated. Given that widening participation is proposed as a means of redressing past inequalities and addressing the country's wider social needs it is necessary to determine the extent to which access can be promoted or inhibited through ODL institutions.

Given this background it is clear that as the largest and oldest distance education university, Unisa, is expected to assume an even more leading role in providing access to university for the black disadvantaged majority. However, like all other institutions it carries the legacy of the apartheid past. The SAIDE report (1994) points out weaknesses in the quality of teaching and learning at Unisa: 'uninviting, dull and impersonal study guides' (44); 'low completion rates' (45). In the light of these concerns Unisa is an ideal case study for investigating the realities of widening student participation. This is confirmed by the findings in Chapters Four and Five which reveal that taken-for-granted institutional practices are likely to impact on access negatively.

4 Summary

The chapter outlined student participation in higher education between 1980 and 1994. It showed that, advanced as part of the state's apartheid policies, university participation between 1980 and 1990 was skewed as a means of organising society. For the period 1991 to 1994, the change in political and economic conditions brought about changes in the number of students accessing higher education. In both periods, however, inequalities related to the differentiated university system accompanied by their differential financial, material and human resourcing, including the language of instruction and the differentiated school system, were the main factors characterising student access. Other apartheid laws - the *Influx Control Act*, the *Separate Amenities Act*, the *Group Areas Act*, which pervaded every aspect of civil life, reinforced and extended racial inequalities. Consequently, partly as a result of the poor socio-economic environment, university participation was racially skewed.

The political changes between 1990 and 1994 resulted in South Africans instituting a democratically elected government in April 1994. For the majority of South Africans the elections paved the way for the removal of the educational, social and economic inequalities. But, as shown in Chapter Two the realities on the ground seem to indicate the contrary.

It will be seen in the next chapter that the development of the higher education system occurred with the advent of the African National Congress government (ANC) between 1994 and 2001. Underlying changes in the governance of universities during this phase were three policy imperatives: redressing past inequalities, economic considerations and the commitment to enhance standards in line with international competitiveness.

CHAPTER TWO

THE LEGISLATIVE BASIS OF ACCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: 1994-2002

1. Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the historical development of the higher education system between 1980 and 1994. It noted that racial inequalities in student participation, resulting largely from the segregated sector, were manifested politically, educationally and economically through apartheid policies. These marginalised black students in particular. Access to university was to a large extent a racial - and less an academic - matter. Statistically, fewer black students had access to higher education; fewer still were able to succeed in the system, compared to other racial groups. Structured as it was to exclude blacks from active participation, the apartheid system resulted in producing two extreme situations: on the one hand it advantaged a minority of the population and afforded them a greater chance of participating and succeeding in higher education: on the other hand, it disadvantaged the majority and denied them the opportunity to access higher education.

Consequently, the first democratic elections in April 1994 offered strong possibilities of far - reaching changes that promised to bridge racial inequalities and bring about an equitable system. In a country where race was a major determining factor of an individual's life chances, it was perhaps not surprising that the establishment of a democratically elected government, perceived as a clean break from a segregated past, raised expectations that inequalities of the past would be eradicated. These perceptions were reinforced by the institution of the Government of National Unity (GNU), a transitional government headed by the ANC in collaboration with the

National Party, which accorded legitimacy to the political, economic and educational transformation process (Naidoo, 1998).

However, the withdrawal of the National Party from the GNU in 1996 served to highlight the complexities and controversies related to the reform process. The differences and contestations, mainly regarding the extent to which inequities of the past should be redressed, reflected the schisms that existed in all other civil structures. The contentions between the parties presented he numerous barriers to achieving a general consensus on further developments in the reform process. More importantly, the split brought to light the enormity of the deeply ingrained roots of the apartheid legacy.

The prevailing economic crisis exaggerated the transformation process. The economic sanctions imposed on South Africa during the apartheid era, as well as the economic discrepancies resulting from apartheid practices, remained major obstacles to the reform process. But, perhaps, as several research reports have pointed out, the most significant of the economic barriers was 'globalization' – that is, world-wide economic changes which required the economy to respond to a rapidly changing world economy (Bawa, 2000; Moja et al., 2000). The South African economy, like those of many other countries, was confronted with the formidable task of integrating itself into the competitive arena of the international world market. According to Kraak (1995:1), the challenges 'interconnected and interdependent ... form[ed] a virtuous circle of mutually reinforcing pressures'.

The higher education sector was faced with multiple challenges, but two were of significance for broadening student participation. The first derives from the past. The inequalities in student access brought about politically, economically and educationally, were realities that had to be confronted. There was an undeniable need to enable the participation and success of students previously disadvantaged by the apartheid system, as shown in chapter one. The second derives from the present and the future. Circumscribing the reform context were economic concerns, which among

other developments had resulted in increased poverty levels, high unemployment figures and a greater number of households earning below average incomes (Subotzky, 1999; Statistics South Africa, 2002). Of major concern was that, as a legacy of apartheid policies, blacks seemed destined to a life of perpetual poverty and unemployment. Figures from the 1998 and 2002 *Statistics South Africa* point to racially skewed poverty and unemployment levels. In combination, the past, present and future constituted complex challenges that were likely to influence access and change in the South African higher education sector. Contrasting the higher education reform process in the United States and South Africa, Eckel (2000: 106) contends that the reformation of the university system in the South African context was exacerbated by multiple challenges of greater magnitude, speed and frequency.

Given the history of apartheid, it is clear that there must be redress in the higher education sector, as in all other civil structures. The questions are, can student inclusion and achievement be possible in the face of the multiple challenges which confront the higher education sector? To what extent can higher education reform be aligned to the social and economic issues facing the country? More specifically, can higher education address these issues by itself? Given its history, the higher education sector cannot remain neutral or be absolved from the broader political, economical and social challenges facing South Africa. If that is the case, to what extent should higher education institutions be expected to be part of the solution? These are some of the complex questions confronting the sector in its shift from a racially segregated system to one that is to serve all potential university students equitably. The questions interrogate the extent to which black student participation can be enabled and made possible in the present context.

This chapter focuses on the period 1994 to 2002 and explains the complex underpinnings in the efforts to restructure higher education. The analysis is provided within the framework of the ideals that have informed all South Africa's attempts to democratize: namely, redress, equity and equal opportunity. Student access was constituted as part of the broader political, educational and economic reforms that

were mainly aimed at redressing the past apartheid inequities, advancing economic development and enhance standards in line with international competitiveness.

2. The Phase 1994-2002

To address the inadequacies and inequalities resulting from apartheid policies, the ANC government instituted a set of broad reforms that were to provide the core driving force for transforming the country. As a result, like all other structures, the higher education sector was expected to address broader facets of the political, social and economic arena. Through the guidance of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE)¹, appointed by the Education Ministry in December 1994, several policy documents on higher education reform were produced². The NCHE points out that, in developing proposals for the transformation of the higher education sector, it was informed by various policy documents advanced through other government departments and agencies:

In developing its proposals, the Commission considered a number of key policy documents tabled since 1994: the constitution of the Republic of South Africa; White Papers on Reconstruction and Development and on Education and Training; The Labour Relations Act; The draft White Paper on Science and Technology; The Report of the Labour Market Commission and the new macro-economic strategy (NCHE, 1996: 1.3.1).

These are but a few of the numerous policy documents that impact on the transformation of the higher education sector. While singly the various documents proposed reforms in specific structures, in combination their impact on the higher education sector was profound. This meant that institutions were faced with numerous conflicting and controversial policy imperatives. For instance, the

¹ In developing its proposals the NCHE consulted widely with local, national and international constituencies. Various consultants from the USA, UK, Australia and New Zealand were influential in the development of the national qualification framework. In particular, international consultants played a crucial role in developing higher education policies. The Salzburg seminar held in 1996 is but one of the many international influences.

² The organogram illustrates some of the structures influencing higher education reformations:

proposed qualifications framework was a trans-departmental effort that required the Department of Education and the Department of Labour to co-operate and co-ordinate their activities. The policy initiatives are outlined in the next section.

2.1 The National Commission on Higher Education

A key feature of the higher education policy context was the Education Ministry's adoption of an incremental approach to the development and implementation of policies legislating the transformation of the sector. Leach (1982:10) defines this approach as 'a pragmatic piecemeal approach to change that takes as its basis for decision making the nature of the existing policies and considers only incremental sideways shifts from such policies'. This means that policies were developed progressively, based on prevailing circumstances. The ministry cites various reasons for adopting this approach which include the lack of systemic capacity in terms of both person-power and technical skills, the absence of an adequate information base, and the need to develop a consultative and interactive planning process at both the macro- and micro-level (RSA, 2001: 1.2).

However, developments in the higher education sector so far indicate that, contrary to government's expectations, the lack of a coherent national framework on implementation was open to various interpretations. The varied responses by the various universities, as Gultig (2000) and Jansen (2001) point out, only served to highlight and exacerbate existing inequalities among institutions. Universities set their own agenda in the face of competing forces and diversified in unplanned directions. According to Cloete et al. (2000:4), institutions were divided into those that were 'inward-looking', those that were 'outward-looking', and some which 'did both concurrently', while others 'did nothing'. Gultig (2000: 49-50) distinguished a 'new deracialised three-tier higher education system' consisting of English-medium universities becoming 'the African metropolitan university', the Afrikaans-medium institutions turning into entrepreneurial universities, while HDU's disintegrated. There are indications that the system evolved into various types of universities based

on institutional realities and histories. The developments confirm Leach's (1982) observations that an incremental approach tends to maintain rather than challenge the status quo³.

As a result of the ANC's adoption of the incremental approach to higher education transformation, several inter-linked legislative Acts, articles, and discussion documents have been developed since 1994. The key documents pertaining to students' access are summarised in Table 2.1 and abbreviations given for future references to these documents in this thesis.

Table 2.1 Key documents on higher education transformation

POLICY DOCUMENTS	OBJECTIVES
The National Commission on Higher Education: <i>An Overview of A New Policy Framework For Higher Education Transformation</i> (1996). (NCHE-Framework)	Proposed a reconfigured higher education system and formed the basis for subsequent legislation on the reshaping of the Higher Education sector
The Education White Paper 3 of 1997: <i>A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education</i> (WPHE).	Following on the NCHE Framework proposed that the higher education sector be planned, governed, and funded as a single and coordinated system
The <i>Higher Education Act</i> (Act No 101 of 1997)	Legislated the establishment of the CHE
The CHE's report: <i>Towards a New Higher Landscape: Meeting the Equity, Quality and Social Development Imperatives of South Africa in the 21st Century</i> (2000) (CHE: Size and Shape)	Proposed a three-tiered higher education structure
The <i>National Plan for Higher Education of 2001</i> (National Plan)	Outlined the framework and mechanisms of implementing the policy goals of the WPHE
<i>Report of the study team on the Implementation of The National Qualifications Framework</i> (2002) (NQF report)	Recommended ways in which the implementation of the NQF could be streamlined and accelerated
<i>A New Academic Policy of Programmes and Qualifications in Higher Education</i> (2002) (PQHE)	Proposed a new higher education qualifications framework

As an overarching document that steered the legislation on the transformation of the higher education sector, the discussion takes the NCHE-Framework as a starting point for exploring the policy imperatives of increased student participation. The

³ Critics of the incremental approach to policy-making and implementation argue that one of its weaknesses is its tendency to focus on 'change at the margin' and 'problem solution rather than goal achievement' (Stoten, 1982: 235) and as a result it tends to perpetuate the status quo (Leach, 1982: 10).

establishment of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE), in February 1995, laid the foundation for the formal restructuring of the higher education sector. Other legislative acts, policies and discussion documents that influenced the legislation on broadening student participation are interwoven in the discussion to bring greater insight into the complexities and contentions related to the higher education policy context.

The CHE functions, outlined in the *Higher Education Act* (no.101 of 1997) include the promotion of access to higher education and the establishment of a Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) to promote and audit quality assurance in the higher education sector. As a statutory advisory body to the Minister of Education, the CHE has had considerable influence on the development of subsequent policies on higher education (Cloete et al., 1998; Moja et al., 2000). The significance of the CHE in the development of legislation on higher education is highlighted in the *Higher Education White Paper 3* of 1997.

The Council on Higher Education will be a major statutory body established to provide independent, strategic advice to the Minister of Education on matters relating to the transformation and development of higher education in South Africa, and to manage quality assurance and quality promotion in the higher education sector (RSA, 1997a).

Increased and broadened participation is identified in both the NCHE Framework (1996) and the WPHE as one of the three key features underpinning the new higher education system. It was proposed as a three-fold process aimed at the 'expansion of student enrollments, feeder constituencies and programme offerings' (NCHE, 1996:1.3.2). This means that increased participation was conceived as a dual process comprising access as participation and access as success (Akojee, 2002: 2). In the first instance it involved increasing the number of students getting into universities by recruiting greater numbers of previously disadvantaged students. Secondly, it was intended that, once admitted, students should progress successfully through the system: 'they are provided adequate opportunity to succeed in these programmes'

(NCHE,1996:1.3.2). The NCHE report positions higher education as primarily constructed to redress past educational, social and economic inequalities.

The second feature underpinning higher education reform, that is, greater responsiveness to societal needs, is also closely linked to widening student participation. The NCHE proposed increasing access through forging closer ties between the higher education sector and the wider society. Where previously institutions tended to be insular and distanced from their environments, they were now expected to identify more closely with local and national needs. According to the NCHE (1996:1.3.2), higher education institutions were expected to recognize and show 'a heightened responsiveness to societal interests and needs'. In addition, they were to reflect this knowledge in the curriculum: 'Aspects of this context will have to be reflected in the content, focus and delivery modes of higher education programmes, as well as in the institutional missions and policies that are developed' (NCHE,1996:1.3.2). Consequently, access was linked to a quality assurance framework to ensure greater articulation between academic requirements and wider societal needs. The quality assurance framework, comprising closer ties between education and employment, a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and an Outcomes Based Education (OBE) approach, are outlined below.

The third feature, increased co-operation and partnerships, was proposed to promote student participation through closer articulation between the higher education sector and other structures: the state, institutions of civil society, and between higher education and within higher education institutions (NCHE,1996:1.3.2). To facilitate student access, universities were expected to forge downward, upward and sideways linkages with other institutions at various levels. This was a significant shift from the past, when institutions tended to be inward looking with little or no interaction with other civil structures.

However, although higher education institutions have created a number of regional consortia and partnerships, so far mergers remain problematic. Many institutions

have restructured individually despite government's proposal for institutional mergers to cut costs and avoid duplication:

there is little evidence of inter-institutional co-operation in regional planning between the existing consortia, despite many other areas of cooperation. On the contrary, unilateral planning within institutions such as downsizing, re-configuration and closing of departments as well as retrenchment of staff are happening on a wide scale (Reddy, 2000:86).

These developments will have an impact on widening student participation initiatives. However, the key challenge for most higher education institutions is how to proceed cooperatively in the knowledge that competition will remain an inherent aspect of the system, and to manage consequent tensions that are likely to arise.

In light of the considerations above, it is necessary to outline increased participation imperatives in relation to the broader higher education policy context. The analysis is advanced in two sections: the broader redress, equity and development mandates; and the education, training and quality assurance processes. First, increased participation is outlined in relation to the redress, equity and development policy imperatives proposed in the *Reconstruction and Development Programme White Paper* (RSA,1994). As a basis for broader national reforms, this White Paper has had a significant influence within the higher education policy context. Secondly, in line with the 1995 *White Paper on Education and Training* (RSA, 1995b), the NCHE Framework proposed broadening student participation through education and training, with explicit links between educational aims and skills training, according to employment requirements. To this end student access was advanced through a quality assurance framework proposed in the *South African Qualifications Authority Act* (SAQA Act) (RSA,1995a), which established the NQF and OBE stakeholder participation in standard setting and approval as well as education and training quality assurance (ETQA) mechanisms.

3. Increased Participation

3.1 *Redress, equity and development*

Although redress and equity policy imperatives are clearly a direct response to apartheid inequalities, it is necessary to examine how they are linked within the higher education transformation policy context. In this regard, the *Reconstruction and Development Programme White Paper* of 1994 is of importance. It introduced the notions of redress, equity and development as part of broader socio-economic reforms. Legislated in 1994, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) has been most influential in informing the transformation process in the higher education sector. Various higher education policy documents are explicitly located within the RDP's broader aims, suggesting that student access was envisaged as an extension of the principles espoused in advancing South Africa's socio-economic development process.

The NCHE unequivocally aligns higher education reform to the RDP Framework: 'The reconstruction and development policies and practices which loom large in South Africa's present transitional phase will have a pronounced impact on higher education' (1996:1.2.2). A year later, in the WPHET, the functions of the higher education sector are linked to the RDP White Paper pronouncements:

Higher Education has several related purposes. In the context of the present-day South Africa, they must contribute to and support the process of societal transformation outlined in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), with its compelling vision of people-driven development leading to the building of a better quality of life for all. (RSA,1997a:1.6).

The CHE *Size and Shape Report* (CHE, 2000), which also positions higher education reform along specific areas of social redress, quotes the *RDP White Paper*: 'Higher Education also has a crucial role to play in improving the quality of schooling, health

care, welfare services and other public services at national, provincial and local levels' (CHE, 2000: 3).

Likewise, the *National Plan*, described as a document addressing the implementation vacuum in the higher education policy developments (Asmal 2001), associated the aims of the higher education sector to wider social reformations: 'a quality higher education system, which responds to the equity and development challenges that are critical to improving the quality of life of our people' (RSA, 2001:1). The redress, equity and development theme common to all the higher education policies and references to the RDP emphasises that, like all other public and private institutions, the higher education sector is expected to address the past, present and future challenges facing South Africa as whole. The expectation is that redressing the past apartheid legacies should lead to the democratization of all civil structures and practices, including higher education

Similarly, the RDP White Paper abounds with terminology denoting its broad socio-economic and socio-political aims: 'the vision for the fundamental transformation of South Africa'; 'a plan to address the many social and economic problems facing the country which include inadequate education, lack of jobs and housing'; and 'an integrated, coherent policy framework [that] seeks to mobilise all our people and our country's resources toward the final eradication of apartheid and the building of a democratic, non-racial and non-sexist future' (RSA,1994). It is advanced as a policy that looks beyond redressing past inequities to one that impacts on practices at the institutional level, namely 'to develop strong and stable democratic institutions and practices characterized by representativeness and participation' (RSA, 1994). As part of the redress process the RDP was proposed as a policy that advances social justice 'to address the moral and ethical development of society' (RSA,1994). In general, the RDP was proposed as an integrated policy that would counter apartheid inequities and promote socio-economic development by addressing past, present and future national concerns. It is worth quoting it here at length:

The RDP integrates growth, development, reconstruction and redistribution into a unified programme. The key to this link is an infrastructural programme that will provide access to modern and effective services like electricity, water, telecommunications, transport, health, education and training for all our people. This programme will both meet basic needs and open up previously suppressed economic and human potential in urban and rural areas. In turn this will lead to an increased output in all sectors of the economy, and by modernizing our infrastructure and human resource development, we will also enhance export capacity. Success in linking reconstruction and development is essential if we are to achieve peace and security for all (RSA, 1994:1.3.6).

As an integrated policy framework the RDP proposed a two-pronged approach to eroding past inequalities and addressing current challenges: social reform and economic development:

The fundamental goal of the RDP is an employment-creating, labour absorbing economy which will ultimately lead to full employment. Secondly, redistribution must occur to alleviate poverty in the process of meeting basic needs. The RDP takes the view that neither growth by itself nor redistribution on its own will resolve the serious crisis South Africa finds itself in (RSA, 1994: 28-29).

From the extracts it is clear that the RDP was advanced as a cure-all for apartheid's ills. References to the RDP leading to the provision of 'services like electricity, water, telecommunications, transport, health, education and training' and 'meet[ing] basic needs and open[ing] up previously suppressed economic and human potential in urban and rural areas', as well as bringing about 'increased output in all sectors of the economy' (RSA,1994:2) indicate the extent to which policy rhetoric reigned over reality.

Proposed as a twin goal for advancing economic and social reform in parallel, the RDP framework has been criticised for being detached from the realities at the micro-level of the policy process. Various studies on the changing education context in South Africa highlight the possibilities of economic reforms undermining redress and equity concerns (McGrath, 1996; Kallaway, 1997; Morrow et al.,1998). In noting the RDP rhetoric, and the departure from change that prioritized social equity and

public welfare towards change that was to pursue economic reform post-1994, Kallaway states:

But there is no getting away from the fact that all the publicity and all the fanfare around the RDP in 1994-1995 has gone rather silent in 1996 as the hard realities of economic recession and the impermeability of class issues are negotiated (1997: 37).

The closure of the RDP offices on 28 March 1996 was perhaps partly an indication of the ANC's acceptance of the enormity of the past inequities, as it had become increasingly impractical to advance both economic development and social redress imperatives in parallel. Instead, the state took a more explicit stand, adopting a macro-economic policy of Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), whereby all change initiatives would be subjected to economic developments⁴.

As various studies have shown, the danger with economic - driven change is that it tends to relegate social concerns to the margins (McGrath, 1996; Donn, 1997; Naidoo, 1998). According to McGrath, contrary to policy pronouncements current social inequalities might be reinforced as more pressing economic reform imperatives arise. The impermeability of economic reforms to social redress are confirmed in a recent survey by the *Statistics South Africa* (2002), which reveals that individual household income patterns mirror racial disparities of the past. The findings show that the 1995 and 2000 income averages were racially skewed with African households the worst off. Of significance was that the average income in African households had decreased by 19% between 1995 and 2000.⁵ This meant that Africans continued to live in low socio-economic environments. In highlighting the ramifications of the working poor on social development Fourie, an economist and former head of the Department of Finance, asserts:

⁴ In June 1996 the Minister of Finance announced the state's intentions to adopt the GEAR framework. Its aims include increasing economic growth and the number of new jobs created. Trade unions were critical of the framework.

⁵ Average household incomes, arranged according to race, were: Africans, R26 000; Coloureds, R43 000; Indians, R96 000; and Whites, R137 000.

In South Africa unemployment is part of a larger problem, ... underdevelopment and poverty. In such a situation one also encounters the tragic situation of the working poor - those who do have work, but who are trapped in acute poverty (Fourie, 1997:361).

The findings suggest that, coming from low-income families, black students are less likely to take full advantage of the opportunity to participate in higher education. In highlighting the inconsistencies between increasing participation imperatives and students' economic realities, Bundy (2001) asserts, 'There persists a gulf between, on one hand, the policy imperative of broadening access, and, on the other the inability of many families to afford tuition and residence fees'.

In this respect, lessons from elsewhere that the ability to respond to educational opportunities 'depends upon a fundamental challenge to inequalities of power underlying the distribution of income' hold true (Brown et al., 1997:12). Citing lessons from sociology of education over the past twenty years which link family income and education opportunities, Brown et al. (1997:12) argue that, contrary to policy pronouncements poverty and instability generated by Western economies tend to widen inequalities in educational opportunity. Associating poverty to education opportunity, they point out that 'the lower the family income, the more educationally disadvantaged students are' (Brown et al., 1997:12). It is possible that the tradition in South Africa of no free university education also made it inaccessible to poor whites as well.

It is evident that poverty, unemployment and low-household incomes are part of the inherited apartheid legacy. The implications are that underlying broadening student access initiatives at the systemic level are poverty and unemployment considerations. These become even greater when increased access means that the proportion of students from poor families rises steeply, making more claims on the shrinking resources. Given that unemployment and poverty are a majority issue, and that government funding for student aid was less than 50% of the estimated R750 million

funding proposed by the NCHE (1996), prospects for increased student participation might be compromised.

Taking its cue from the RDP, which links poverty to employment opportunities, the White Paper on Education and Training (WPET) attributes racially aligned occupational structures to the historical divisions between 'education' and 'training': 'in South Africa such divisions have been closely associated with racial structures of economic opportunity and power' (RSA, 1995b: 15). To bring about greater articulation between higher education qualifications and economic development, the NCHE locates the increase in student access within an education and training context. The NCHE Framework expressly states the need to establish 'new relations between study and the work place' (NCHE, 1996: 1.2.2). The 1995 WPET, the cornerstone policy document on education reform, links education and employment. It describes the post-apartheid education task as building 'a just and equitable system which provides good quality education and training to learners young and old throughout the country' (RSA, 1995b: 170). The notion that education and training ought to be integrated with each other is an attempt to bring together the academic and applied forms of knowledge, as well as the education institutions and the economic world.

The NCHE Framework and the WPHE propose widening student participation through the recruitment of greater numbers of specified categories of students into the university sector. The NCHE-Framework abounds with terminology of student 'growth', such as: 'expansion of student enrollments', 'expansion of participation', 'greater numbers of students have to be accommodated', 'a transition from an elite to a mass system', and 'massification' (NCHE, 1996). In direct response to the apartheid higher education policies discussed in chapter one, both documents explicitly link student growth to 'Changing the composition of the student population' and 'feeder constituencies' (NCHE, 1996). Specific categories of students who are to be recruited in terms of their race and gender are identified: 'increase access for blacks, women,

disabled and mature students' (NCHE: 1996:1.13). The WPHE extends access to include increased participation in specific fields of study:

A major focus of any expansion and equity strategy must be on increasing the participation rates of black students in general, and of African, Coloured and women students in particular, especially in programmes and levels in which they are underrepresented (RSA, 1997a: 2.24).

Given past racial inequalities in student participation, it is not surprising that the expansion of the higher education system was envisaged as part of broader political, social and economic reforms. The WPHE explicitly locates increased student participation in broader reformations: 'Growth in higher education is essential to meet the imperatives of equity, redress and development' (RSA, 1997a). In the National Plan on Higher Education (RSA, 2001), the aim of increasing participation is stated as that of broadening access to produce graduates with skills and competencies necessary to meet the human resource needs of the country. This means that circumscribing widening participation policy imperatives are social and economic reformations which are expected to address past apartheid inequities for the country's present and future social and economic needs. However, as various research studies show, when change is conceived as part of wider restructuring processes, social issues, in this case broadening student participation, tend to be limited by political and economic imperatives (Kallaway et al., 1997; Morrow et al., 1998). According to De Clercq, a related weakness of broader national reformations is their failure to take into cognizance the realities at the institutional level.

They do not sufficiently take into account the context and dynamics on the ground and are unable to develop and influence reform processes and practices at the lower levels of policymaking. On the whole, they have an incomplete understanding of the structures, processes, actions and interactions between intended policies and what happens in the process of implementation (De Clercq, 1977: 143).

This assertion is confirmed by current enrolment trends that show that the NCHE's projected increase in student numbers 'from 20% in 1996 to 30% in 2005' (NCHE:

1996:1.4.1) was unlikely to be achieved. On the contrary, as pointed out in the *National Plan*, 'participation decreased from 17% in 1996 to 15% in 2000' (RSA, 2001: 2.1.2)⁶. Given the inequalities in student participation in the past, it is a concern that despite the system 'opening up', still only a smaller percentage of black students were getting into university. The failure to recruit the targeted number of students into university also has implications for the success rate: that is, the number of students graduating. If a smaller percentage of students than envisaged are getting into university, it means that fewer still are graduating. While the National Plan cited the lack of capacity as one of the main reasons for non-implementation (RSA:2001), the indications are that the decrease in graduate numbers will have a knock-on effect on the proposed advancement of wider social and economic developments.

To further the aims of the RDP, increased participation was also proposed through an integrated education, training and quality control context to counter the racially biased occupational structures. The education, training and quality assurance policy context is outlined next.

3.2 Education, training and quality assurance

3.2.1 The White Paper on Education and Training of 1995 (WPET)

A significant shift from a segregated education system was the integration of the entire education sector from primary school level to higher education, under the control of the Department of Education. The aims of the DoE outlined in the WPET include:

establishing a single national ministry responsible for education and training, to set national policies, norms and standards throughout the system, to

⁶ The numbers indicated include technician and university students.

undertake planning and provide budgetary resources for all aspects of education and training, and to manage higher education and training development (RSA, 1995b: 3.3.5.1).

Following up on the RDP White Paper proposals for economic development, education was linked to skills training. This meant that education would no longer be the sole prerogative of the Department of Education. Instead, it involved an interdepartmental responsibility and cooperation between the Departments of Education and Labour, to bring it into line with employment requirements.

To address the lack of articulation in the higher education sector, the NCHE proposed the establishment of a 'programme-based definition of higher education', as opposed to an institution-based one: 'Higher Education comprises all learning programmes leading to qualifications higher than the proposed Further Education and Training certificate or the current Standard 10 certificate' (1996: 2.4).

In terms of the NQF a programme comprises a planned combination of fundamental, core and elective outcomes that lead to a qualification such as a BA degree. Consequently, other related changes aimed at enhancing student access within the sector were introduced: 'the diversification of programmes, curriculums and qualifications', and the introduction of 'modular programmes and the accumulation of credits offering multiple entry and exit points' (NCHE, 1996:1.3.2). A qualifications framework was expected to facilitate access by making it easier for students to enter the system, to move and progress within it horizontally across the sector and vertically from school to tertiary level. The framework was expected to bring about greater articulation between what was taught in universities and other education sectors, as well as between universities and the work environment.

Linked to the qualification framework were two other proposals that a direct impact on broadening student access: the recognition of prior learning (RPL) and lifelong

learning⁷. The recognition of prior experiential learning, that is, learning achieved through informal and non-formal learning and working experience, was recognized as an acceptable criterion for admission to study at a university. According to the SAQA Act students can earn credits towards a degree, or a whole degree, through RPL⁸. Premised on the idea that people have their own views, ideas and knowledge about their lives, worlds and themselves, based on their experiences, the recognition of prior experiential learning at an appropriate level for university study or credit, brought higher education in line with the work environment (RSA: 1995). Lifelong learning, too, was advanced on the understanding that students would be able to access higher education throughout their lives, irrespective of their age and circumstances. It allowed for a flexible system where students could break off at any point in their studies and take up again where they had left off at a later stage.

RPL is a new and untested concept in the South African higher education sector. Very little is known about emerging RPL practices either within or across institutions. SAQA defines RPL as:

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) means the comparison of the previous learning and experience of a learner, howsoever obtained, against the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification, and the acceptance for purposes of qualification of that which meets the requirements (SAQA, 1998: 5).

RPL is therefore a recognition and accreditation of learning acquired in a range of other contexts, such as work and civil society, in formal education. It purports to examine, acknowledge and reward learning that has taken place in situations external to the formal system. To this end RPL, like OBE and NQF, is expected to address the inadequacies of the National Party's education system which tended to be inflexible and unsympathetic to students' circumstances; and generally acknowledged only

⁷ RPL and lifelong learning are two of the many new concepts that higher education institutions are expected to take on.

⁸ However, this is not possible in practice. This is in contravention with the *University Residency Clause* which state that 50% of the modules passed towards a degree must be

institution-based learning as the main criterion for admission to university or the gaining of credits at university.

However, as a redress mechanism the RPL policy has been criticised for being unclear and ambiguous. It can either enable or inhibit participation:

The recognition of RPL is particularly challenging because it seeks to reshape fundamental values, beliefs and paradigms for change in higher education. RPL forces the negotiation of two worlds – the world of experience and the world of academia. People who span both boundaries, who understand the culture of both worlds, are vital in linking formal and informal sites of learning in viable collaboration (Osman et al., 2001: 59).

Osman's observations suggest that the implementation of RPL requires a major shift in attitude to learning outside the formal education sector and learning that takes place within the education sector. These changes need to be reflected in practice : in the curriculum, methods of learning and teaching and in the perceptions of the nature of knowledge itself. Of concern, is that the main challenge institutions face in implementing RPL is the lack of academic staff who can traverse both sectors of the education context: the formal and informal. This is more pertinent in South Africa where the apartheid education system did not allow recognition of other educational contexts except the formal.

Given the diversity of student's educational backgrounds and life experiences it is clear that RPL in higher education is problematic. As Osman (2001) argues while some consensus has been reached on the significance of RPL, that it has to do with learning and not just experience, many questions arise: What constitutes prior learning and assessment of prior learning? What are the most appropriate processes to assist both students and staff to identify the learning from experience, and especially the knowledge component of it? (Osman et al.,2001: 58). Other questions focus what students do with the experience and how students apply the knowledge gained. Still others deliberate around issues of practice: how to assess prior learning, that is, how to determine if students are knowledgeable about what they are claiming.

In the light of these concerns it is clear that no single RPL process will be suitable for all individuals, departments or learning areas (Osman et al.,2001: 59). Of major concern is that RPL puts additional demands on staff who as assessors are often unaccustomed to working experientially with students (Osman et al.,2001: 58-59). These concerns are significant because they show that while substantial policy processes have been instituted by government , the higher education sector has not shaped a common understanding of the process.

In general universities have complied with the SAQA recommendations by instituting RPL policies. At Unisa too an RPL committee was formed in 2001 to look into RPL matters. To this end A *University of South Africa Policy on Assessment and Accreditation of Experiential learning* was formulated as a guideline. An RPL Office was established to steer the implementation process. Its functions include developing procedures and methods to implement policy and process of assessment and accreditation of experiential learning in collaboration with faculties and other stakeholders (Unisa (b): 2001). Two centers that liase closely with the RPL office are the Bureau of Students Councelling and Career Guidance (BSCCG) and the Bureau of University Teaching (BUT). The BSCCG is primarily responsible for making students aware of the RPL processes in the institution, while the BUT supports academic staff in translating RPL into practice and building it into their day-to-day activities⁹. The two centres are of particular importance to widening participation as students and lectures are central in determining the extent to which access will happen at the institutional level. But as pointed out earlier in this chapter the higher education policy process is contradictory and unclear. One of concerns raised by the Unisa RPL office is the lack of clear criteria on which to base their policy proposals (Unisa, 2001(b)). This is but one of the many challenges Unisa faces in attempts to translate higher education policies into practice.

3.2.2 *The South African Qualifications Authority Act of 1995*

The SAQA Act of 1995 established a body - SAQA - to set up the NQF to ensure a greater level of articulation between the various education sectors by integrating education and training into a single, coherent unified approach. In line with RDP principles it is intended to facilitate access, firstly, through integrating and articulating school, technical, technikon and university education; secondly, by redressing the past unfair discriminatory practices in education and employment opportunities; and finally, by developing the individual, the social and the economic fabric of society (RSA,1995a).

SAQA has both developmental and implementational functions. Its developmental functions include overseeing the development of the NQF and formulating policies and criteria for the registration of bodies responsible for establishing and monitoring achievements in terms of standards and qualifications (RSA,1995a). Other functions comprise overseeing the implementation of the NQF; the registration of standard setting and accreditation bodies; the registration of national standards and qualifications and ensuring international comparability (RSA,1995a).

To this end, SAQA comprises two divisions: a standards setting and a quality assurance office. The impact on higher education academic planning and curriculum design was that all qualifications had to be NQF aligned and interim registration with SAQA in OBE format by June 2000. The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the council on higher education is the sole education and training assurance (ETQA) body of higher education. It oversees the development and implementation of the qualifications frameworks, including the accreditation of programmes and institutional auditing.

⁹ Unisa students may apply for credit for up to 50% of a qualification on the basis of RPL.

The NQF provides the framework for linking education and training. It has a dual role. Firstly, as a strategy for transformation, it is endorsed in the WPHE as a key element of human resource development (RSA, 1997), emphasizing its link to the broader social and economic reforms. It is expected to open up learning and work opportunities for those previously discriminated against because of their race. Secondly, as a framework for the registration of standards and qualifications, it is expected to integrate education and training into a single, coherent unified approach (HSRC, 1995). It is intended to broaden access in various ways:

- to create an integrated national framework of learning achievement; to enhance mobility and progression within education, training and career paths;
- to improve the quality of education and training; to accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities;
- and to contribute to the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the nation at large (RSA,1995a).

From the varied roles it is expected to fulfill the NQF, like the RDP, is seen as a panacea to all access inequalities established by apartheid policies.

To facilitate access, the NQF divided the education sector into eight levels, which in turn were grouped into three bands: General Education and Training, Further Education and Training, and Higher Education and Training. Table 2.1 illustrates the Higher Education band, comprising four levels in relation to the other two, which consist of one and three levels respectively.

TABLE 2.2: The National Qualifications Framework (NQF)

NQF LEVELS	BAND
Levels 5 to 8 Universities Technikons	Higher Education and Training Band
Levels 2 to 4 Schools and FET colleges (grades 10, 11 and 12)	Further Education and Training Band
Level 1 (grades 1 to 9) (ABET levels 1 to 4)	General Education and Training Band

Levels 5 to 8 of the NQF are assigned to the Higher Education and Training Band, as illustrated in table 2.2. The table shows the initial structure proposed by SAQA (RSA,2001) as well as the revised one¹⁰ (RSA,2002:4.6.1). The NCHE proposed that all university qualifications be structured in line with NQF requirements to facilitate horizontal and vertical access across the sector.

TABLE 2. 3: The NQF Higher Education and Training Band

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATIONS (PROPOSED)	QUALIFICATIONS (REVISED)
8	Doctorates, further research degrees	8a Doctoral Degrees 8b Master's Degrees 8c Professional Master's; Masters Diplomas; Master's Certificates
7	Higher degrees, professional qualifications	Bachelor degrees and graduate certificates
6	First degrees, higher diplomas	Diplomas
5	Diplomas, occupational certificates	Certificates

The second major change proposed by the NQF legislation was a shift from a curriculum comprising isolated subjects of study to one where knowledge was

organized into twelve fields or learning areas (Table 2.3). The grouping into learning areas meant that subjects that were previously seen as unrelated were now linked in terms of organizing fields. For example, all languages are grouped under the Communication Studies and Language field. At school level each learning area have specified outcomes which had to be met. A qualification represented a planned combination of learning outcomes that had a defined purpose linked to wider national policy imperatives. At university level the focus has drifted to coherent programmes with clear purposes related to the knowledge, skills and attitudes relevant to particular fields of study.

TABLE 2. 4: Organising fields

FIELD	LEARNING AREA
1	Agriculture and Nature Conservation
2	Culture and Arts
3	Business, Commerce and Management Studies
4	Communication Studies and Language
5	Education, Training and Development
6	Manufacturing, Engineering and Development
7	Human and Social Studies
8	Law, Military Science and Security
9	Health Sciences and Social Sciences
10	Physical, Mathematical, Computer and Life Sciences
11	Services
12	Physical Planning and Construction

Incorporated under the *SAQA Act* is the OBE approach to education and training. Like the NQF, OBE was introduced to address and counter the inequalities brought about by the apartheid education system.

¹⁰ The proposed changes are reflected in the latest publication on higher education restructuring: A

3.2.3 *Outcomes based education*

OBE was proposed as a two-pronged approach: a reform strategy and a curriculum process. As a reform strategy it was aimed at improving educational outcomes in line with RDP pronouncements in support of the argument by Van Niekerk et al. (2002:90) that the OBE structures that had been established in South Africa were influenced strongly by the political notion of transformation. As a curriculum process it was proposed as a counter measure to the rigid exam-oriented, rote learning system promoted by the apartheid system. Through OBE greater emphasis is placed on 'outcomes' which are specified in terms of skills, knowledge and values, as opposed to rote memorization of content. The NCHE sums up the redress roles of an OBE approach:

To facilitate access: OBE is expected to remove the discrimination of institutions, particularly HDUs whose standards were regarded as inferior; access to the further studies and the labour market ... where the qualification that was obtained was more important than what the students actually knew and could do (CHE, 2002).

This view accords with Spady's assertion that OBE is a reform strategy aimed at improving education outcomes by organizing for results rather than for administrative convenience (Spady, 1988, 1994). According to Spady, whose work is of particular relevance to the OBE approach adopted in South Africa,¹¹ being student-centered, an OBE curriculum counters the structural inequalities related to apartheid education practices. The learning outcomes in OBE are based on the philosophy that learning outcomes will facilitate access to and mobilize progression within the education system. Its premises include that it will enhance the quality of education and training, accelerate the redress of unfair discrimination and contribute

to the full development of each learner. Spady (1988) argues that compared to conventional teaching and learning approaches, students' competencies at each band are measured in terms of specified outcomes that are made explicit from the onset. OBE is based on the assumption that if students can demonstrate the necessary outcomes for a specified band, then they are eligible to enter the next band of education and training on the NQF.

However, this was a simplistic view of education processes, as seen in varied responses to OBE. The contestations demonstrated the tensions related to education reform in general, as well as the views on what counts as education. The proceedings of two conferences, one at the University of Durban-Westville (Goolam et al., 1997) and another at the University of the Witwatersrands (Wits-EPU/CEPD, 1998) are two of the many debates held countrywide that revealed gaps between the perceptions of proponents of OBE, comprising mainly government officials and policy planners, on one hand, and on the other hand, academic staff as well as labour groups.¹² At one extreme were the DoE officials who obviously supported the view that OBE would counter the exam-oriented, rote learning and authoritarian system inculcated by apartheid education (Motala, 1997; Bird, 1998; Lolwana, 1998). To this end, OBE was seen as a key to education for those students who were previously excluded from the system. The expectation was that a combined OBE and NQF approach would even out the inequalities in education. At the other extreme, supported by academics and labour representatives, was the view that OBE was impractical and unrealistic. Pointing out the inconsistencies between the OBE philosophy and pedagogic realities, Jansen (1997), Breir (1998), Cooper (1998) and Christie (1998) representative of the academic community contended that on a practical level OBE was unrealistic.

¹¹ Spady and to some extent other consultants from Australia, New Zealand and UK was influential in the development of the OBE approach adopted in South Africa. Spady was invited to address various sectors of the educator system countrywide during 1997.

¹² The two conferences held in 1997, one at the University of Durban-Westville (Goolam et al., 1997) the other at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits-epu/cepd 1998) are but two of the many OBE debates that revealed wide variations in the views of individuals at the policy planning level, representing a macro perspective, and those at the implementation level.

A major criticism of the NQF and OBE policy is that it is narrowly conceived on the assumption that a national qualifications structure will remove all past inequities and thus facilitate access to education and training. This in effect does not address the implementation at institutional level¹³.

These observations refute the notion that a qualifications structure would be equitable if it did not exclude anyone from accessing education and training. Instead, as various studies argue in practice the status quo is likely to be maintained because the NQF could unintentionally replace the old racial divisions with class barriers if it is applied in a narrowly technicist and behaviouristic way (Kraak, 1997). Van Niekerk et al. ascribe the difficulties experienced in practice to the rhetoric advanced by the policy documents: 'This is the problem in South Africa because the official message about OBE ... contains a lot of ill-defined jargon' (2002:95). This view accords with Jansen's contention that '...this policy is being driven in the first instance by political imperatives which have little to do with the realities of classroom life' (1998: 323)¹⁴. The suggestion is that OBE, like the NQF and RPL, is viewed as a political tool which takes little cognizance of educational considerations, particularly the position of educators who are expected to implement the changes.

The contestations surrounding the NQF and OBE policy imperatives serve to highlight the fact that education is a complex process that cannot be limited to narrow solutions. The OBE and NQF rhetoric highlights the existing dichotomy

¹³ In support, labour representatives, Lugg et al. (1998) and Mercurio (1998), pointed out the need for a radical reconceptualization of the OBE approach and RPL, as these would lead to the exclusion of workers instead of increased participation. Noting the difficulties experienced in practice, Mercurio asserts:

We are left with some burning issues. One of them is the fact that 50% of the credit at the level of qualifications should come from fundamental areas. This will make it difficult for many workers in the metal and engineering industry to achieve a qualification. The reality is that presently people's levels of literacy and numeracy are particularly low. This requirement would make it impossible for many to qualify (Mercurio,1998:110).

¹⁴ Over the years Jansen (1997, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2002) has been very critical of the major role played by politics in leading the transformation of the education system.

between educational needs and political imperatives. But, while the viability of OBE and the NQF are problematic in practice, it is clear that the debates have given South Africans a voice in questioning and looking anew at current education practices. It generated for the first time in South African history open wide public debate about a common concern in education: the curriculum and pedagogy. This was a considerable shift from the past where individuals were denied the right to challenge contentious educational policies and practices and were rendered silent through repressive apartheid policies. The debates are likely to challenge both teachers and academic staff to start thinking more deeply about the implications of what transpires in teaching and learning situations in practice.

Generally universities have complied with the SAQA policy imperatives. Unisa too has to a large extent fulfilled SAQA requirements: all the course material has been adapted to comply with OBE and NQF directives; programmes have been modularised and registered with SAQA as required by law. To this end a Unisa SAQA Action Group was established on 1 July 1999 to steer the process. It had to ensure that Unisa's existing, recorded whole qualifications and new whole qualifications and programmes were NQF compliant for interim registration by June 2002 and that other recorded and unrecorded education qualifications or training programmes were appropriately recorded as unit standards. As a result the SAQA Action Group organised a number of information sessions with all stakeholders including the University management and staff. At Unisa the Bureau for University Teaching (BUT) is primarily responsible for academic staff development needs around the NQF.

On the whole Unisa has engaged intensely with NQF requirements. For instance, in response to requests by departments and staff to ensure a common understanding of SAQA, the BUT compiled a simplified glossary of SAQA terminology in November 2000. However, Unisa cites difficulties and frustrations in addressing SAQA/NQF policy imperatives. These include: a general lack of theoretical clarity, an inadequate policy framework and guidelines, and the cost of the entire operation to Unisa

(Unisa, 2000c). These concerns are consistent with the findings of the task team commissioned by the DoL and DoE to evaluate the NQF process. In the *Report of the Study Team on the Implementation of the National Qualifications Framework* (RSA, 2002), the task team points out weaknesses of the NQF which impact on implementation negatively: 'bureaucratisation of the NQF which prevents the majority of academics (and many others) from critical engagement with substantive conceptual and policy issues'; 'lack of coordination in the policy implementation process'; 'contradictions in policy and legislation governing the NQF and the confusion and rivalry this has created' (RSA, 2002(c): 21- 23). These concerns have implications on widening participation, particularly at the institutional level where the contradictions are likely to be exaggerated.

The contentions highlighted above suggest that the transformation process is based on a higher education sector with a common vision, a common set of understandings about its role in society. But, as shown in the previously this is not the case. This observation is confirmed by the findings in Chapters Four and Five which reveal that the misunderstandings are more likely to be magnified at the institutional and individual levels where change is expected to take place.

3.2.4 NQF and OBE realities

Universities and other tertiary institutions took the first basic steps towards the implementation of the NQF and OBE by interim registration of qualifications with SAQA in June 2000. All tertiary institutions have to meet the requirements of the DoE and CHE which, through a three-year planning cycle based on an approved institutional mix, will form the basis for government funding. This has wide implications for student access. In practice, adopting an outcomes-based approach to education requires that outcomes form the basis of all curricula, including educational qualifications, their descriptions and the assessment of students. All universities are required to be registered with SAQA on the NQF and to state the outcomes students will have to demonstrate in order for the qualification to be

awarded and the criteria that will be used in assessment. The assumption is that individuals at the institutional level will be able to meet the policy requirements. In reality, many lecturers, for instance, are likely not to have the expertise and knowledge to develop course material, appropriate assessment criteria and teach in a way that develops students' ability to demonstrate the required outcomes in line with OBE and NQF imperatives. This means that there might be a need to train lecturers to teach and assess differently. Indications are that with the present cost-cutting mechanisms in place the weight of the retraining is going to fall on the institutions with little assistance from the state.

Meanwhile, an increase in student numbers necessitates a proportionate increase in academic staff. With the cost-cutting measures employed, it is likely that no additional staff will be appointed, implying a massive increase in the workload of academics. Lastly, the present initiatives to increase access to universities are marginalised by three related developments, pointed out in the *National Plan*: the low retention and throughput levels, the decreasing university enrollment numbers and the poor matriculation levels (RSA,2001). These three factors impact on attempts to reach the targeted number of graduates at university. It is not clear how the NQF and OBE will address these factors to reduce existing racial inequalities and widen participation, when fewer academics have often to work with ill-qualified students.

Of note are investigations into the state of curriculum reform in schools, which show that the former black schools, mainly in townships and rural areas, are struggling with the implementation of the OBE curriculum. The central findings of a review of Curriculum 2005, the policy overseeing the implementation of the NQF and OBE in schools, revealed that although there was wide support for the curriculum changes, there were major flaws in practice. The gap between the policy aims and the realities in practice pointed out in the findings included the following: highly varied levels of understanding of the policy and its implications; basic flaws in the structure and design of the policy, in particular, the language which was often complex and confusing; inconsistencies in the quality and availability of the learning support; and

inadequate follow up support for teachers and schools (RSA,2001)¹⁵. In conclusion, the review cited the lack of capacity as a major obstacle to the implementation process. Considering the extent to which black schools were disadvantaged in the past, it is perhaps not surprising to note that it is the well resourced, former privileged schools which seem to have benefited from the curriculum reviews. Financial constraints in government spending have created a climate where inadequate resources are being allocated to improve the human and structural resources needed to transform South Africa's education and provide quality education for all.

Coupled with the inequalities in schooling is the socio-economic environment which continues to impact negatively on student access. Although various external variables impact on student participation, the socio-economic environment has been shown to be a key factor influencing access to university. The socio-economic status of blacks remains low compared to that of other racial groups. This was discussed above. The fact is that in informal settlement areas, with little or no infrastructure and with high levels of unemployment, poverty remain a reality. In rural areas the situation is likely to be much worse. While current government strategies focused on poverty reduction in the long-term, through creating an internationally competitive and high growth economy, are commendable, the indications are that these long-term strategies might be undermined by immediate crises. Of concern is the fact that with blacks constituting the largest percentage of the poor and unemployed, and the lowest paid group, the problem is a majority issue and as such is not likely to be resolved in the near future.

The variables discussed above are but a few of the numerous factors that influence the extent to which disadvantaged students can benefit from the broadened participation opportunities. As long as these factors remain unaddressed, student access might be inhibited. The continued low throughput levels (Akojee, 2002), high

¹⁵ The *Education Change and Transformation in South Africa* (RSA,2001) report gives a review and assessment of the education reform process in the general and further education and training bands.

drop out rates (Bundy, 2001), and disproportionate spread of students across the various fields of study (DoE, 2001), are worrying indicators of non-participation. Probably more condemning of the higher education sector are Cloete et al.'s (200) observations that 'Higher education is simply not producing graduates with relevant cognitive and social skills who can put South Africa firmly on the road to the next century'.

Within the framework outlined above, student access is influenced by several policy processes: the RDP and macro-economic policies, the NCHE and various higher education policies, which include SAQA, NQF and OBE processes. At present underlying widening student access is the macro-economic plan which influences how access will proceed. The limited resources and capacity are the key structural forces likely to impact negatively on initiatives to widen student participation.

Internationally, too there are limited experiences that South Africa can take lessons from. In comparing the South African qualifications framework with those of New Zealand and Scotland, Donn (1998: 82-84) notes that although there are similarities among the three, the exceptions in South Africa which include: the central role of trade unions in the policy-making process, the accentuated centre-local tensions between government and provinces, and its inclusion in higher education, complicate the questions on the likelihood of SAQA and OBE promoting access.

A central criticism of the education policy-making process in South Africa is that it fails to take cognisance of the realities at institutional level (De Clercq, 1997; Pendlebury 1998). The multiple contending policy imperatives are not explored (Moja et al., 2000; Meek, 2001). Instead the statements in the policy documents are consistently declarative and not elaborated on. Assessing the higher education policy context, Moja et al. (2000) point out its strengths and weaknesses. Regarding the policy rhetoric over reality, they assert: 'A major cause of concern is what a single co-ordinated system means in practice' (2000: 351). They cite various deficiencies in

the policy planning process which include: 'the inability to agree on how to advance the redress agenda', the 'liberal institutions' concern with what they might lose than about how to overcome the legacies of apartheid', 'the lack of adequate data ... [that] left many public policy questions ambiguous and answered', and the 'limited time frame' (2000:344-355). Drawing attention to the possible consequences on the implementation process Moja et al., further argue:

The abundance of transformation issues, the complexity of those issues, and the unlikelihood of their immediate resolution suggest that the work is difficult and people can become disenchanted if their hard work has little immediate and visible effect or believe that the task is too great (2000:355).

The extract confirms the observations by Enslin and Pendlebury (1998: 261) about the need to take into consideration the institutional context: 'where policy makers take little account of the context and agents of implementation policy may impede rather than enable transformation'. The observations are supported by developments in the sector which show that while major changes have occurred at the institutional level, there were yet other structural factors that tended to undermine initiatives to increase student access. In this respect current developments in South Africa are instructive, as Asmal (2001) pointed out in his address on the launch of the *National Plan*. While the past was instrumental in shaping what is distinctive about education in South Africa, it is only part of the problem:

South Africa is two nations, poor and rich. After apartheid when this two nation status is no longer kept in place by violence but by the workings of inertia and of continuing privilege, the higher education in large measure, continues to reproduce the inequities of the past (Asmal, 2001).

Current developments in the higher education sector reveal the complexities of the implementation process. There are suggestions that the forces at play at the institutional level might be impervious to the macro-policy context, despite the Education Minister, Kader Asmal's repeated press statements that he would enforce the implementation of these policies through legal means. The difficulties the state is facing with the mergers of universities (SAUVCA, 2001, 2002; Asmal, 2002;

Pityana, 2002) and the objections to the enforced use of English by some Afrikaans institutions (MacGregor, 2002), are but two of the many examples that show that institutions themselves constitute a different dimension of the policy context that might require to be addressed separately.

Generally, there have been significant changes in the higher education sector since 1994. For instance, with the recruitment of more black academics and students, the demographics in HAUs have changed and universities have registered qualifications have with SAQA. It is also evident that some of these changes have been instituted partly because of the legal implications of non-compliance. However, many policy goals have not been met because the reform process is substantially constructed by the extent to which material resources are available. This is particularly true of those changes related to redressing past inequities. So, while the higher education system has de-racialized significantly, other factors, including economic developments, seem still set to widen inequalities. On one hand it may be argued that it is still early in the process, and there is probably a need for more time to institute change. On the other hand, with the ANC government going for its third term in office, it is crucial that areas of past racial disadvantage be addressed as a matter of urgency. There is a danger that existing racial inequalities might be accepted as a norm, thus losing sight of their political roots. In a country where education has been openly used as a political tool to discriminate against a majority of the citizens, it is not surprising that it is equally seen as a tool to redress the legacy of racial inequalities. However, it remains to be seen whether a change in the education system can produce the envisaged number of graduates and contribute significantly to the country's economic development, as well as bring about social equality.

The realities of widening participation in ODL are pertinent to this study. Various higher education documents reveal a policy commitment to the adoption of Open Distance Learning (ODL) as the main mode of widening participation and addressing wider educational problems in general. The NCHE Report (1996) cites distance education as a critical player in redressing past inequalities and removing barriers to

access and success. It proposes that ODL institutions increase the number of registered students and accommodate students with varied levels of competencies at reduced costs:

The National Plan proposes the establishment of a single dedicated distance learning education institution to address the opportunities presented by distance education for increasing access both locally and in the rest of Africa. It will enable economies of scale and scope, thus ensuring advantage is taken of the rapid changes in information and communications technology, which in investment terms would be beyond the scope of one institution. (National Plan 2001: 8).

The efficacy of ODL in promoting access is premised on the notion that it can accommodate an increased and more diverse student population at reduced costs. The National Plan (2001) extends the NCHE proposals to include the creation of one ODL institution and to widening participation to include other countries in Africa:

A single dedicated distance education will be established through the merger of the University of South Africa and Technikon South Africa and the incorporation the distance education centre of Vista University into the merged institution. The Ministry will establish a Working Group to facilitate the merger, including the development of an implementation plan (National Plan, 2001: 8.1).

As part of the restructuring process the Minister of Education proposed a reduction in the number of higher education institutions. But the proposed merger of ODL institutions is exceptional in that the merger of Unisa and Technikon SA, the two largest DE institutions in South Africa, it is a radical shift away from the past where university and technikon education were distinctly categorised as different¹⁶. The ODL merger is expected to bridge the binary divide between university and technikon education.

¹⁶ As pointed out in Chapter One before 1994 tertiary education comprised of two separate systems, universities and technikons. The entrance requirements at universities were higher than those of technikons. However, technikons were racially constituted on the same lines as universities.

The mergers constitute another major area of contestation in the transformation of higher education provision¹⁷. For instance, the Minister of Education had to withdraw his intention to institute the establishment of a single ODL institution on 1 February 2002 because the Council of Unisa had taken legal action against the proposal. In his speech, Unisa's Principal, Prof. Pityana, argues that the implementation process was contentious and had very little to do with educational considerations as academics had been marginalised. He contends that discussions leading to the merger 'were highly political', 'higher education practitioners were not directly involved in the debates' and that there was 'very little discussion about open and distance education' (Unisa, 2002).

These concerns are supported in the SAIDE Report (1995)¹⁸, which notes the poor state of ODL provision in South Africa:

Taken as a whole, distance education's contribution to the priorities of education and training in the Policy Framework is variously marginal, inefficient and, in respect of the values sought for Democratic South Africa, dysfunctional (SAIDE, 1994: xv).

The SAIDE Report is particularly condemning of Unisa and Technikon SA educational programmes:

Unisa and Technikon SA should rationalize their course offerings and reallocate resources in the interest of greater efficiency. Unisa could operate effectively with a less expensive staffing structure. We recommend that these institutions participate in an organisational analysis to ascertain the nature of the contributions they can make to educational reconstruction and development in the democratic South Africa and the changes they would need to make to do so (SAIDE, 1994: xv).

¹⁷ The mergers proposed for 2002 had to be postponed. But most institutions have since begun talks and look to effecting the mergers in 2004.

¹⁸ The SAIDE report is referred to in Chapter One.

The transformation of higher education is expected to address most of SAIDE's concerns. So far Unisa has complied with the Higher Education Act and NQF/SAQA requirements. In addition it has to address other legislative acts including legislation on labour and employment. To this end a Unisa Project Committee was established to steer institutional transformation. The process of transformation at Unisa is outlined further in Chapter Three. Of significance for this study is that the findings in chapters Four and Five show that institutional attempts to widen participation tend to be marginalised by other policy considerations discussed in this chapter and the legacies of past apartheid practices outlined in Chapter One.

The policies on widening student participation raise pertinent questions about issues of equity and equality of opportunity in education. If student participation is to be widened, as proposed in the WPHET (RSA,1997a) and the *National Plan* (RSA,2001), what are the implications at institutional level? What do equity and equality of opportunity mean in the context of university education? Are universities equipped to compensate for and develop the social and economic fabric of society? These questions around the role of education in advancing equity and equality of opportunity in society are examined in the following sections.

4. Equity And Equality Of Opportunity In Education

The discussion so far has noted that the restructuring of higher education, in particular the widening and broadening of students access, is based on an assumption that there is a common understanding and acceptance of the notions of equity and equality of opportunity. There are indications that the realities of the present social and economic contexts are more complex than presented in the RDP and DoE policies. Lessons elsewhere show that the controversies on equity and equality of opportunity in education which have so far been unresolved, are universal and can be understood from many perspectives. Karabel et al. (1977) and Halsey et al. (1997) have documented various studies that highlight the complexities and tensions that

have been central to debates on the role of education in society and how it is influenced by societal structures in the UK and USA, in particular.

One view is that within the notions of equality, education is open to competition. With an emphasis on education as a commodity or a possession that can be vied for, it accords with the liberal notion that equality is an open concept. According to proponents of this view, redistribution has no place in the competitive world. In contrast to the RDP and WPHE proposals, which stress the redistributive and broader social role that education should play, they argue that education like any other commodity should be open to competition based on individual talent and ambition: 'the individual, and not the family, community or state – is the singular unit of society' (Bell, 1977: 616).

But in South Africa the notions of competition and 'level playing field' raise several questions about apartheid and equality of opportunity in education: a disregard for hegemonic practices that excluded the majority from active participation. Several studies show that individual talent and ambition are but two of the many factors that influence educational success (Karabel et al., 1977; Halsey et al., 1997). For instance, the role of language cannot be underplayed in determining student access in South Africa. With university education offered through the medium of only two of the eleven languages, and the system structured to discriminate against other official languages, it is evident that the majority are already precluded from equal participation. Research studies on language and learning have shown that one cannot learn effectively through the medium of a language that one has not fully internalized (Spolsky, 1989). This is of particular importance in South Africa where language was used politically to divide society and discriminate against other racial groups. However, language is only one of the many variables that preclude education from providing equal opportunities for all.

Another view holds that education cannot bring about equality because it inherently perpetuates inequalities. It rejects the liberal notions that tend simply to attribute

academic success or failure to individual talent and aptitude. Adherents of this view argue that, contrary to popular belief, education is not value-free but is structured to mirror society in reinforcing and perpetuating the inferior position of the disadvantaged by limiting access to educational opportunities. Studies by Bowles (1977), Bourdieu (1977) and Bernstein (1997) highlight variables outside and inside the education system that combine to reinforce and perpetuate these inequalities. Bourdieu (1977) accords educational inequalities to three forms of capital: cultural, social and economic (1997: 47). He argues that these constitute internal and external forces which interact to reinforce 'the dominant hierarchy within the institution' and 'the dominant hierarchy outside the institution' (1977:504). This suggests that the higher education system cannot be expected to eradicate social inequalities as it is designed to reflect societal structures that inherently perpetuate these inequalities.

Still another view attributes the impasse on what the role of education should be to the tension between individual and societal needs. Jonathan assigns the deadlock to 'problems of pluralism':

the dual functions of any system of education which is simultaneously charged with meeting the aspirations of citizens as persons – goals which vary with their different backgrounds and self-understandings - and the aspirations of citizens as citizens – goals for a common future in which all expect equally to share (Jonathan, 1998: 265).

According to Jonathan (1998) the tension results from the dual role that education is expected to assume: on one hand it is expected to address and serve individual needs and aspirations, while, on the other hand it is required to contribute to wider economic development and social equity. In this respect, what individuals need and value as important might not necessarily accord with national needs. The situation in South Africa, as Jonathan (1998) argues further, is exacerbated by its plural society and apartheid, which multiplied and diversified into individual needs, group needs and societal needs. Jonathan suggests that the education system was turned into a battle ground for many competing needs.

The controversy underlying the school-society and society-school debates reflect many unresolved societal dilemmas. It is the contention here that there is no clear demarcation between the two as both sectors are equally influential in determining access. Just as the school cannot totally shape society, society too cannot totally shape schools. However, it is necessary to find a balance. How this balance can be sought is not as yet clear as these debates show.

The discussion in this chapter noted the limitations of the current higher education policies at the systemic level. Implicit in all three views noted above is the fact that education is but one dimension of several conditions that determine social equity. Lessons from elsewhere indicate that various factors influence the ability of people to benefit from educational opportunities available (Karabel et al., 1977; Halsey, 1997). In addition, the debates highlight the controversial role of education in promoting social equity. It is important to note that equal access might not necessarily mean equal opportunity for all to achieve equal success. It is also equally important to emphasise the role of education in perpetuating inequalities and disadvantage in society.

5. Summary

It is clear that the context in which widened student participation is expected to take place is contentious, complex and not fully understood. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that these changes are expected to occur at various levels - the institutional, the programme and the individual levels. Each level contains numerous variables that determine the extent to which student access can be facilitated. At the institutional level many changes are expected to occur simultaneously: universities are required to reconfigure institutional policies in line with the *Higher Education Act*, SAQA, NQF and OBE requirements; institutions have to comply with other acts such as the *Labour Relations Act* and *Employment Equity Act* and *Skills Development Act*, which have made it necessary to revise many employment practices and develop

employment equity measures; in widening participation, institutions are required to accommodate greater numbers of non-traditional students from diverse backgrounds. All these changes have to be translated at the programme level where, for instance, it is required that course material is rewritten in line with the SAQA legislation. In addition, modularising programmes and the introduction of a semester system, meant a shift to mid-year registrations and examinations. At present the limited resources and lack of capacity have implications for the potential of institutions to implement the many changes envisaged for the transformation of the higher education sector.

These changes have to be translated into reality by individuals at the institutional level. This means that although policies are aimed at the restructuring of the higher education system in important ways, how they will do so will be strongly conditioned by institutional realities and the responses of individuals at the programme level. The meanings and understandings individuals that at institutional level give to the changing university context are important factors that will determine whether access is enabled or not. Given these levels it will be interesting to delineate students' and lecturers' views on the realities of widening policy imperatives. Therefore, the question pertinent to this study relates to the interpretations of students and lecturers, and their experiences and perceptions of access at the institutional level in the midst of multiple and contending policy imperatives. What, then, are the day-to-day realities of the widened participation policy imperatives? In what ways do these realities influence student access? These questions are addressed in the following chapters. A case study methodology, a dual process comprising of a research component and possible action route, is adopted to investigate the extent to which widened participation is realized at the institutional level from a students' and lecturers' perspective, as well as to look into possibilities of promoting student access.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: CASE STUDY APPROACH

1. Introduction

The previous chapters outlined the historical development of higher education provision in South Africa, in particular trends in student participation between 1980 and 2002. Chapter One noted that between 1980 and 1994 access to higher education was largely determined along racial lines as instituted by the apartheid structures that were in place. It delineated four areas of inequalities, which were influential in determining student participation in higher education: the racially differentiated university system, the language of instruction, the school system and the socio-economic environment. Furthermore, it pointed out that despite the changes in the political climate between 1991 and 1994, the structures established during the apartheid era remained powerful barriers to student access. As a result not only were black student numbers still very low in terms of the country's demographics, but also that retention and throughput levels remained poor and racially unequal.

Chapter Two outlined the post-apartheid higher education policy context between April 1994 and 2002. It noted that underlining the transformation of the higher education sector, including widening student participation, were broader national reform policy imperatives proposed by the RDP. The transformation of the higher education system was advanced as a dual process comprising social reform and economic development. Of significance, as noted in that chapter, was that the higher education policy context was contradictory, complex and of such magnitude that it was likely to marginalise student access initiatives.

The multiple policy imperatives highlighted in the previous chapter challenge many aspects of the university context. In what ways are universities aligning themselves to the changing context of a society in which for decades individual opportunity was largely racially determined? In what ways are institutions aligning widening participation to the structural constraints brought about by the volatile economic market? More specifically, to what extent were institutions reconciling social reform as outlined in the RDP White Paper, the macro-economic policy demands and widening student participation imperatives?

Lessons elsewhere indicate that the contentions and contradictions surrounding educational change are universal (Brown et al., 1997). In tracing the historical relationships between education, culture, economy and society, Brown et al. (1997) contend that 'commonly held assumptions about the role of education' have been under question internationally. The transformation of higher education in South Africa shows similar attributes except that the apartheid past renders the imperatives for change unique in specific ways. Therefore, while global lessons might offer invaluable guidelines it rests upon South Africans themselves to interrogate their past and come up with viable solutions that are specific to their context. However, Jonathan cautions: 'What is sought for public education is rather a solution to a problem still unresolved in established democracies, in which South Africa may lead the way precisely because it can neither evade nor disguise the issues' (1997:277).

The crucial question to this study concerns institutional responses to the multiple and contending policy imperatives discussed in Chapter Two. How are institutions reconciling the different aspects of the higher education policy context to accommodate an increased student population? There are no easy answers to this pertinent question. Each level - the institutional, the programme and the individual - constitutes unique challenges that combined have the potential to either enhance or marginalise access. At the institutional level, universities are expected to enrol greater numbers of previously disadvantaged students. At the programme level, the different departments with their varied entrenched practices and ethos have to be reconstituted in line with the institutional changes. Finally, at the individual and personal level,

students and lecturers are expected to translate the changes into reality. Not only do individuals have to contend with entrenched practices at the institutional and programme level, but also with the multiple policy imperatives outlined in the previous chapter. The expectations and interpretations at each level establish powerful contending forces that have the potential to facilitate or impede access.

The real test of whether student access is facilitated or not is therefore at the individual level. For this study the meanings and understandings students and lecturers give to the change process in practice are of particular importance in determining whether student participation can be enabled or not. Individual meaning in this context refers to the socially structured and constructed understandings determined by the past and present contexts of the higher education system in particular. Against the historical realities outlined in previous chapters the subjective realities of individuals in a society deeply divided, in many aspects - including by race, language and access to resources - are important in this regard.

The historical and social pressures of the changing education system are more acute at the institutional level where individuals' racially shaped educational experiences intersect. In highlighting the importance of individuals' understandings of change at the institutional level, Fullan (1991: 43) argues that the contradictions related to implementing policies are exacerbated at the institutional level because it is at this point that individuals' 'subjective realities' and contextual realities converge. Fullan further points out that the way in which these 'subjective realities are addressed or ignored' will determine the extent to which change can happen (1991: 43).

For this study individuals' understandings of the policy context are crucial in determining how change or non-change will proceed. The realities of change at the institutional level, as Fullan (1991) cautions, are always defined by the subjective realities of individuals, which might not necessarily be consistent with the objective realities envisioned in policy imperatives. In noting the failure and ineffectiveness of the educational reformations so far, Fullan (1991) warns against the continued institution of changes that only end up with 'tinkering' the surface and not addressing the real issues impacting on education. He calls for a 'new mindset about educational

change' (1991:2), because 'Without a shift in mind the insurmountable basic problem is the juxtaposing of a continuous change theme with a continuous conservative system' (Fullan, 1993: 2).

Studies elsewhere have shown that educational innovations have been unsuccessful because they tended to ignore institutional realities (Karabel et al., 1977; Halsey et al., 1997). These observations echo the criticisms raised against developments in the education policy context in South Africa that they are disconnected from immediate concerns of educational practice (Jansen, 2002). Jansen attributes the gap between the policy context and practice to 'political symbolism', that is 'the states preoccupation with settling policy struggles in the political domain rather than in the realm of practice' (2002: 4) He argues that underlying the transformation process of higher education are powerful political struggles which in general tend to override educational concerns. Jansen's observations support McGrath's (1996: 310) contention that a key weakness in the policy making process was the lack of 'the voices of participants at the grassroots level'. According to McGrath the present challenge is to go beyond policy theorising (1996: 118) and examine what actually happens at the institutional level. Given that the transformation of higher education implies challenging the existing hegemonic practices and structures it is necessary that bottom-up and top-down processes are allowed to intersect and inform each other. In this respect the involvement of students and lecturers is important in understanding the transformation process at the institutional level.

The current higher education policy context in South Africa shows signs of 'tinkering' where policy after policy is proposed but the implementation process shows very little understanding of the realities at the institutional level. For instance, the anticipated growth in student numbers has not happened nor have the throughput levels or the spread of students across various fields of study materialised. This is partly an indication of existing inconsistencies and contradictions between policy pronouncements and policy implementation processes.

In the light of these considerations this study adopted a case study approach to investigate the changing environment of higher education provision from the perspective of lecturers and students at the programme level. At present, the higher

education sector, like all civil structures, is expected to 'serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs, and to respond to a context of new realities and opportunities' (RSA, 1996: 2). More specifically, underlying widening student participation are three policy imperatives universities are required to address: redressing apartheid inequities, advancing economic development and maintaining international competitiveness. Underlying these imperatives are political, economic and social considerations that have an impact on institutional practices. Given this background it is clear that the understandings of lecturers and students are significant in translating these envisioned changes into reality.

For this reason the first section of this chapter outlines the relevance of a case study approach in investigating educational reform in South Africa. It notes that as a dual process that aims to contribute both to practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to further the goals of social science simultaneously, case studies offer greater possibilities to study a system and concurrently to explore in collaboration with members of the system in changing it into desirable action. In addition it shows that a case study methodology has the potential to bring deeper insight into the complexities of social settings as it acknowledges the participants as an integral part of the transformation process. In this respect case study research rejects the positivist conceptualisation of research that tends to marginalise the role of participants as insignificant to bringing more insight into "the what" of the transformation process. Instead, it validates the acceptance of their understandings as knowledge that is an essential aspect of the inquiry process. Thus a case study approach offers possibilities of 'democratising research and the production of ... knowledge' (Walker, 1989: 53) because 'it is grounded in the culture and values of the social group whose members are participants' in the transformation process (Somekh, 1995: 345). In addition case studies are likely to narrow the theory-practice divide by exploring possible action routes. This is an important consideration of the higher education reform because while knowledge which illuminates what is happening is necessary it is equally crucial that it goes beyond that and looks into possible channels for action, particularly in redressing the past imbalances.

The institutional discourse of transformation taking place at Unisa as a case study is outlined in the second section. Unisa provided a suitable case study because compared

to other universities it had an increased number of enrolled black students since 1994 as shown below. Furthermore, the WPHE (RSA, 1997) and the *National Plan* (RSA, 2001) identified open distance learning (ODL) as the main mode for increasing student participation. As the largest and one of the oldest universities in South Africa Unisa represented the ideal context for investigating the possibilities and constraints of widening access through ODL.

Next, the chapter outlines the data collection processes. It shows that data obtained through the interviews, questionnaires and participant observation are likely to illuminate those aspects of the day-to-day realities of institutional transformation that are often taken for granted and as a result remain hidden. Finally, the chapter evaluates the case study approach in this study. It presents a personal reflection on the possibilities as well as constraints of case studies.

2 The Case Study Approach

A case study approach was adopted because it offers possibilities of understanding the realities of widening participation at the institutional and individual levels. According to Yin (1994: 9) case studies are aimed at addressing the 'how' and 'why' questions about 'a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control'. Case studies recognise the particular contexts in which changes are expected to happen and look to describing and analysing the conditions in which policies are implemented. The day-to-day realities of the changing higher education landscape render it impossible to predict the direction and shape that change will take. The people and context constitute social structures that bring their own dynamics into the research process. It is therefore crucial that research focuses on 'contemporary phenomenon' as they occur, 'within its real life context' (Yin, 1994:13), 'when relevant behaviours cannot be manipulated (Yin, 1994: 8) to understand what is going on and provide routes for possible action. Therefore instead of focusing on only asking what the problem is, case studies question whether the right issues are focussed on and whether appropriate questions are being asked. This study aimed at determining the extent to which widening policy imperatives are realised at the institutional and individual level requires an approach that addresses contextual issues.

The defining characteristics of a case study approach include: 'a focus on relationships and processes'; 'spotlight on one instance in a natural setting' (Descombe's (1998: 3); 'an examination of an instance in action' (Miles at al. 1994: 25). These are crucial considerations in this study where there is a likelihood of a mismatch between the day-to-day institutional realities at the micro-level and policy imperatives at the macro-level. In practice there are numerous powerful factors at play at the micro-level. Not only are structural forces influential but the plurality of meanings that different individuals assign to the change situation also tends to act as powerful constraints. Case study approaches are significant in this regard because they are flexible and the design may be modified to accommodate the information gained to develop more in-depth understandings of the situation. As Bogdan et al.. (1992: 59) point out in a case study approach 'design decisions' are made throughout the study. This is more pertinent in the South African context where the current policies on widening participation are particularly based on contested political attempts to bring about broader social reforms.

2.1.1 The Significance of Participants

Case studies are significant because they acknowledge participants' perspectives as central to understanding the complexities of a given situation. This is of importance in this study because participants are likely to bring about a deeper understanding of the day-to-day realities brought about by the multiple and conflicting meanings of widening student participation. Considering that the present higher education policy context is aimed at greater articulation between various players at different levels in the institution - management, administrative staff, lecturers and students - it is still not clear how an integrated non-racial higher education system should look, or rather, if it is possible. These observations confirm Simon's (1998: 115) argument that because case studies are designed to bring out the viewpoint of the participants they increase possibilities of perceiving reality from the perspective of someone 'inside' the case study rather than 'external' to it.

According to Fullan (1996) lecturers and students are under-recognised as change agents in educational contexts. This study shows that at the institutional level they are

subjected to multiple policy imperatives that often render them powerless. Organised hierarchically, institutions tend to impose change from a top-down perspective. As a result, although the envisaged changes impact significantly on participants' day-to-day activities, they tend to be marginalised with very little opportunities to add their voice. As Fullan (1996: 170) contends students are more likely to be marginalised in change initiatives even though they are regarded as 'the potential beneficiaries of the change' process. They are rarely given the space to actively engage with and give their own meaning to change processes. However, if they are given a chance to articulate and develop an understanding of their roles they are likely to bring insight into the 'how' and 'why' of the changing context of higher education provision.

The advantages of seeking participants' perspectives are confirmed in studies involving students: 'In order to benefit from equity projects, disadvantaged students need an increased understanding of their social conditions and this increase in understanding would allow them to act to change these conditions' (Atweh et al., 1998:121). Although Atweh et al.'s study involved students in their final years in high school, it can also be applicable to undergraduate university students. Aimed at increasing the participation of disadvantaged students, the findings from the study reveal the importance of giving participants the opportunity to think about and reflect on their own situation. The knowledge gained is likely to inform the implementation process:

many of the causes of lack of participation are structural and cultural and not personal; views about the problem as experienced by people from the inside are likely to be of practical use, and have direct practical impact on improving university participation; they can also offer a fresh basis for reviewing expert views from the outside (Atweh et al., 1998: 120).

Lecturers too are rarely given the space to actively think about their own understanding of how change impacts on them. Particularly because in addition to their day-to-day activities they are confronted with a plethora of other policy demands that need their immediate attention. More often they do not relate the policies to their situation nor are they given adequate space and time to reflect on the implications of the proposed changes on their practice. This suggests that they follow directives and comply with little understanding of what is happening and why this is happening as

shown in studies by McPherson et al., (1998). But the consequences, as Fullan argues, have dire implications on how change proceeds: individuals develop a state of 'false clarity' where 'people have not changed but have only assimilated the superficial trappings of the new practice'; or 'painful clarity' where 'unclear innovations are attempted under condition that do not support the development of subjective meaning' (1991:35). These observations were highlighted in the present study that reveals the dilemmas lecturers face in aligning their practice to accommodate an increased number of students from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Finally, in attempts to answer why questions case studies increase possibilities of bridging the gap between policy and practice. It attempts to link past and newly arrived at understandings to investigate possibilities of change. This study aimed at an understanding of the impact of widening policy imperatives on the institutional context allowed participants to explore and question their day-to-day situation from the relative safety of research. In this regard it created a forum where students' and lecturers' understandings, which in the face of multiple policy imperatives tend to be marginalised, could be brought to light. Case studies provide a space to think about, articulate and bring to the fore how participant's understandings and practices are shaped by broader political and social conditions (Carr et al., 1986). Such a study is relevant in South Africa where current developments indicate that the context in which access is expected to take root is complex and not fully understood. The multiple policy imperatives and the speed with which change is expected to occur calls for a continuous monitoring and examination of the process with participants involved. The complexities are exacerbated by individuals 'have(in) had too little experience in defining their collective values' as pointed out in the White Paper on Education and Training (RSA, 1996:2).

An understanding of the complexities of the transformation process in South Africa requires inquiry that goes beyond only investigating and bringing to light the dilemmas posed by the reform process. But the urgency for reformation brought about mainly by the apartheid past and the present policy context require that individuals' experiences be examined, reflected upon and where possible changes be effected. A case study approach has the potential to do both: adding to existing knowledge on the 'subtleties and intricacies' (Denscombe, 1998: 35) of the present context as regards

student access at institutional level and investigating possible improvements through various action routes. Thus it increases participants' opportunities to influence their environment and in turn the policy context, as they search for the possible answers to their day-to-day dilemmas. In this respect, aimed at dealing with real-world problems and issues, typically at work and in organisational settings, case studies open up possibilities of democratising change from a bottom-up perspective.

2.2 Limitations of the Case Study Approach

Case studies have their limitations like all other research methodologies. Over the years this approach has been criticised both in terms of its general approach and the products of that approach. The criticisms reflect the constraints of conducting case study research in social contexts undergoing change. In addition they confirm the assertion that institutional contexts, like all other social contexts, are of such a complex and controversial nature that they cannot be completely understood through a single tool of inquiry.

A key criticism of case studies is that they are not generalisable because they make use of small samples (Yin, 1994: 10). But as Yin (1994: 31) contends case studies make no claims to be representative because they 'are not "sampling units" consequently they should not be chosen for that reason'. Instead the small samples constitute a strength because in contrast to other research approaches the samples allow the researcher 'to delve into things in more detail and discover things that might not have become apparent' (Denscombe, 1998: 31). This study does not intend to generalise to other institutions because the context in which wider participation is expected to occur is a complex process and each institution presents unique challenges. However, in line with Denscombe's (1998: 30) argument that 'although a case is in some respects unique it is also a single example of a broader class of things' there are some aspects of the case study that can be generalised. However, generalising beyond this study constitutes another research. It is beyond the mandate of this study because generalisations 'depend on how far the case study example is similar to others of the same type' (Denscombe, 1998: 36).

A related criticism of case studies is that they are subjective. In this study subjectivity cannot be avoided as participants are central to understanding the impact of widening participation at the institutional level. As O'Brien (1998: 56) points out 'the initiating researcher, makes no attempt to remain objective, unlike in other disciplines, but openly acknowledges their bias to the other participants'. O'Brien's (1998: 58) argument that the notion of researcher neutrality is rejected on the 'understanding that the most active researcher is often one who has most at stake in resolving a problematic situation', is relevant in this study where participants have vested interests in how change proceeds.

But subjectivity is not peculiar to case studies. The nature of research is such that subjectivity cannot be completely ruled out as Strauss et al., contend:

over the years researchers have learned that a state of complete objectivity is impossible and that in every piece of research – quantitative or qualitative – there is an element of subjectivity. What is important is to recognise that subjectivity is an issue and that researchers should take appropriate measures to minimise its intrusion into their lives (Strauss,1996:43).

These observations only serve to highlight the need for researchers to acknowledge that subjectivity is an issue and they need take appropriate steps to minimise its effects. To this end Strauss et al. (1996: 43-44) suggest several steps, which include thinking comparatively, obtaining multiple viewpoints and periodically stepping, back. A key strength of case study methodologies involves using multiple sources of techniques in the data gathering process (Yin, 1994: 78). In this study the use of interviews, participant observation and documents minimised the effects of subjectivity.

In general, the criticisms are realities that need to be taken into cognisance more seriously in case studies, in particular, because they tend to focus exclusively on people and their understandings of specific contexts. The possibilities and constraints of case studies are further examined, below, where a personal reflection on the research process in this study is made.

2.3 Multiple Research Approaches

A case study approach is a limited process that can only narrow the gap between theory and practice. The persistent theory-practice divide highlights the necessity of combining different research approaches to understanding the 'how' and 'why' of developments in the transformation process. Given the urgency of redressing past inequities in South Africa, it is important that as many routes for possible change be explored. The challenges posed by the apartheid legacy and the current economic climate call for drastic measures for facilitating change that can only be brought about through a range of research methodologies. In addition, different types of research offer more possibilities for disparate groups to interact and bring greater insight towards a better understanding of the impact of the transformation process on the higher education sector.

Kemmis's argument that a comprehensive understanding of a social context cannot be achieved through a single research process holds true.

the connection between social research and social action will not be resolved by simply changing to a different set of sponsors. Nor will it be achieved by simply improving research methods. It is achieved by doing different research, frequently with different purposes and substance and methodologies, with different people, in the service of different interests. A whole variety of kinds of research methodologies, is potentially relevant for such changed purposes (Kemmis,1993:5).

Kemmis further points out the importance of sharing the knowledge gained through other research approaches to bring about improvements that challenge the current inequalities:

Moreover, part of the point of these different forms of research will be to connect up different people and to work with them in pursuit of shared social goals of which the primary ones are discovering and superseding those of our current ideas and ideals which are incoherent, contradictory and mistaken; eliminating those of our current ways of working which have turned out to be ineffective, inadequate and harmful; and overcoming the myriad of forms of social injustice which are the necessary and inevitable accompaniment of the way our social lives are currently ordered (Kemmis, 1993: 5).

This study argues for the adoption of case studies to complement existing research and enhance current knowledge on the extent to which widening participation policies impact on the day-to-day realities at institutional level. It is clear that no single research methodology is likely to provide a comprehensive framework that can bring better insight into widening student participation imperatives. However, a case study research process offers promising components of such understanding. In this respect case study research does not work against other methodologies but aims at enhancing knowledge by highlighting different but essential perspectives of the transformation process.

To examine the extent to which widening participation policies impact on realities at the institutional level Unisa, a distance education institution was selected as a case study. The next section describes the discourse of transformation at Unisa, the programme level at work within Unisa and the individual level at which meanings and understandings can be delineated.

3. The Discourse of Transformation at the Institutional Level

As a case study Unisa offers possibilities of an in-depth, detailed study of institutional realities of widening student participation. As Yin points out a case study allows for deeper understanding of 'how and why' questions on a 'contemporary set of events' (Yin, 1994: 7-8). This is important for this study on how student access is realised at the institutional level and why it is experienced in that way. Furthermore, because a case study focuses on things as they occur naturally it has the potential to highlight the 'subtleties and intricacies of complex social situations' which students' and lecturers' have to contend with on a daily basis (Denscombe, 1998:39).

With a student population well in excess of 100,000, Unisa is the largest higher education institution in South Africa and one of the largest in the world¹. It is a multi-site open distance education institution with a main campus in Pretoria – housing the administration buildings, the library and the various academic departments and institutes – and regional centres located in various cities across the country. The six academic Faculties – Economic and management sciences, Humanities and social sciences, Law, Science and Theology and Biblical Religion – offer a comprehensive range of undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses as well as certificate and diploma programmes.

Like all other universities Unisa has to comply with the requirements of the Higher Education Act of 1997. Some of the developments and changes at Unisa were referred to in Chapters One and Two. In 1997 the Unisa Broad Transformation Forum (BTF) was established to work on the revised Unisa Act to comply with the requirements of the Higher Education Act of 1997. It set the process for the election and formation of a new senate, council and institutional forum. In 2000 a Unisa Project 2000 Steering Committee was formed to investigate ways in which Unisa could address the changing higher education landscape. The committee adopted a Seven-Point programme as an integrating framework for the implementation of various policies and initiatives within the university over three year. The seven focus areas were defined as:

- Core Business
- Schools, Programmes and Modules

¹ The historical profile of Unisa is detailed in Unisa's Self Evaluation Report for accreditation with the Distance Education and Training Council in Washington, D.C. in 2001: The University of South Africa was founded in 1873 in Cape Town as the University of Good Hope with an examining function only for Victoria College, Stellenbosch and the University of Cape Town. In 1918 it was incorporated in a federal University of South Africa and moved Pretoria. Seven constituent colleges, of which six years later became independent universities (HAUs, in Chapter One) were incorporated in the federal University of South Africa: the University of the Free State, University of Pretoria, Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, University of Witwatersrand, University of Natal, Rhodes University. In terms of Act No.45 of 1959, Unisa was made the guardian of the following colleges that later became universities (HDUs, Chapter One): Fort Hare, Western Cape, Zululand, The North, Durban Westville. The current University of South Africa exists and functions in terms of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996, the Higher Education Act of 1977, the University of South Africa Act of 1959, as well as the university's Statute and Rules.

- Equity
- Finance: Viability, Growth and Sustainability
- Commitment to excellence
- Marketing Unisa
- Resource Allocation

Although each area focussed on a specific aspect of institutional transformation there was much overlap between the different areas. Each focus area impacted on widening participation to various extents. For instance the Schools, Programme and Modules addressed various aspects of widening participation including: the development of quality learning materials and effective tuition through appropriate delivery strategies; defining programmes in terms of the NQF/SAQA prescriptions; restructuring of academic departments, centres and institutes; addressing anomalies created by very large or very small faculties; restructuring schools around a cluster of programmes; coordinating and managing the modularisation process to structure current course units into modular units (Unisa, 2000(b): B118).

To facilitate the process various committees, consisting of academic and administrative staff, were formed to steer subsections under each focus area². For example the Unisa SAQA Action Group was established to ensure that Unisa's existing qualifications and new qualifications and programmes were NQF compliant for interim registration by June 2000. To meet the SAQA and HEC requirements of international benchmarking of academic and business standard the committee sought international accreditation with the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) in the United States during 2001. As a result the 2001 Unisa audit report by the Higher Education Quality Committee was positive in contrast to the SAIDE report mentioned in Chapters One and Two³.

The transformation process requires that Unisa comply with the a multitude of legislative acts. These include: *the SAQA Act (Act 58 of 1995)*; *the National Framework (2001)*; *the Employment Equity Act (Act 55 of 1998)*; *the Skills*

² Some of the committees are referred to in Chapter Two.

³ Unisa staff were interviewed and learning material were evaluated.

Development Act (Act 97 of 1998). It also has to address laws and statutes that influence the university directly: *the University of SA Act 19 of 1959*; *the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996*; *the Higher Education Act, No 101, 1997*; *the University of South Africa, (Private) Draft Bill*. Furthermore, it has to fulfil other relevant legislation: *the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995*; *the Basic Conditions of Employment Act 75 of 1997*; *the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998*; *the Skills Development Act, OF 1997*; *the Occupational Health and Safety Act, no. 85 of 1993*.

In addition Unisa has to formulate and implement its own policies in line with the legislative acts mentioned above. Some of the Unisa policies that are already in place include: *the Unisa Tuition Policy (1998)*, which sees to it that all facets of teaching and learning are in line with SAQA/NQF requirements ; *the Unisa Language Policy (2003)*, to address academic and communication language issues; *Unisa Policy on Assessment and Accreditation of Experiential Learning (2000)*, which has to facilitate student access in line with the RPL requirements; *the Employment Equity Policy for Unisa (2000)*, which has to comply with the requirements of *the Employment Equity Act of 1998*. *Unisa Community Participation Policy (2001)*, addresses institutional community projects. The policy process at Unisa is ongoing and these policies are being developed further.

These developments had a profound effect on the facilitation of widening student participation in practice. It is clear from the discussion above that addressing the new landscape constitutes a mammoth task. Other developments compounding the situation are governments' proposed merger between Unisa and two other institutions, Technikon SA and Vista University. The merger has proved to be a disruptive and emotionally charged exercise⁴. Still other changes at the macro-level exacerbate the day-to-day realities at Unisa. For example, Unisa found its position as a leading institution in DE being threatened by increased competition from local and overseas higher education institutions. As a result it embarked on an intense marketing initiative.

⁴ The mergers are referred to in Chapter Two.

Other aggravating developments at Unisa are expectations that staff should drive the institutional reform process as pointed out above. While, on one hand, this is justifiable because as stakeholders staff too need to have a say in what happens and how it happens. However, on the other hand, it means that widening participation is not given the core attention it requires as it is lost among a plethora of other policies that tend to be more urgent. For instance as part of rationalization process Unisa offered staff early retirement packages. This had an impact on widening participation because student numbers increased considerably while staff numbers decreased.

The reform process has not been easy as the principal the principal of Unisa, Melck (2001) pointed out in his opening speech of the 2001 Academic year: 'there are policy imperatives that have been met, for instance financial stability, achieving demographic balance amongst staff, a growth in students numbers, affordable fees and better advertising'; 'those that are ongoing and will require further maturing, for example modular programmes have been developed and a semester system introduced to facilitate completion rates, learning materials are being rewritten in outcomes-based format'; 'those that need to be finalised, these include, institutional configuration into faculties and the new managerial structures'; 'others that need to be addressed for instance Unisa does not have an approved policy of dealing with the disparities in the backgrounds of Unisa students within South Africa itself and 'the slow postal services'.

These are the realities Unisa faces at the institutional level. The reform process is further explored with particular emphasis on widening participation. The discussion focuses on the medium of instruction, student numbers and the access programme.

As a dual-medium institution, using English and Afrikaans, most of the course material as well as official documentation are presented in both languages. This means that the study material is translated from English to Afrikaans or vice versa. The institution has been criticised in the past for its incompetence in translating study material, in particular from Afrikaans to English (SAIDE, 1994). With the exception of the African and foreign languages all courses are offered in English. Departments may apply to Senate for permission to offer courses in English only; that is, not to offer them in Afrikaans. While the present university language policy, drawn by the

Unisa Broad Transformation forum, points out the importance of promoting all eleven official languages, for practical reasons, however, English was adopted as the main language of communication.

Despite the institutions efforts to come up with a comprehensive language policy, language remains a major area of contestation: as revealed in the 1996 conference on Language Policy. In this regard Heese's comments on what this means in practice are apt.

My argument is that simply adopting a language policy – whatever it may be – will not be enough. What will it cost to take care our students' needs? To respond to this question only in terms of money would be to impoverish the debate. It will cost good teaching. It will cost dedication. It will cost effort. The cost in the end, will be excellence in distance education (Heese, 1996: 90).

Language remains a controversial aspect of Unisa's legacy of the past. The enormity of inequalities resulting from indiscriminate language practices was highlighted by staff at the conference on Towards a language Policy for Unisa (Swanepoel et al., 1996). On accepting an honorary degree at Unisa, President Mandela (Mandela, 1995) pointed out the significant role the medium of instruction played in facilitating access

Today, when we have to deal with a new reality of a university most of whose students are now black and predominantly rural or semi-urban, great challenges emerge. Not least is the vexing question of a language policy that should honour the preferences of students themselves (Mandela, 1995).

Similar sentiments were voiced by Bhengu (1995), the former Minister of Education and Ramphele (1995), the former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town, on separate occasions. Of note are Ramphele's observations of the consequences of the language of instruction in promoting access and the sensitivity surrounding the issue.

Of continuing interest however will be the question of the language of instruction – first language speakers of English in English medium universities are at an advantage compared to others. How one tackles this issue in the long-term is crucial (Ramphele, 1995: 3).

In line with affirmative action and equal opportunity policy imperatives the institution is at present recruiting more black academic staff to meet the legally stipulated racial quotas (NCHE, 1996; RSA, 1997). However, it has been observed that retaining qualified black staff is problematic as they are lost to the private sector, other institutions or the state. The competition between higher education institutions and the private sector for the small pool of black professionals has wide implications on the effectiveness of the present institutional affirmative action policies. The importance of retaining black academics in an institution which in the past actively excluded other races from its ranks cannot be overlooked. More importantly, with black students representing over 50% of the student population, it is necessary to recruit more black staff not only to balance the demographics but to influence changes that will take into cognisance the needs of black students .

The one dimension of access the institution seems to have overcome is that of increasing student numbers. In comparison to other universities Unisa has had the highest number of registered students over the years as illustrated in table 3.1. Furthermore, in contrast to with some universities that continue to show declining enrolments, Unisa's enrolments started to climb again two years ago. The high student numbers are attributable to various factors that include the following

- student access was less restrictive compared to other universities, both in terms of government control and entrance requirements
- lower fees compared to all other higher education institutions
- centrally located, Unisa is easily accessible to most township than HBUs
- as a distance education institution students could study while earning a living.

Table 3.1 Distribution of black students by type of university by percentage

YEAR	HBU's	ENGLISH-MEDIUM HWU's	AFRIKAANS- MEDIUM HWU's	UNISA
1981	39	11	0.8	49.2
1985	53	8	1	38
1988	54	6.5	2	37.5

Source: SAIRR in Badat, 1991: 81

The racial composition of student numbers at the institutional level presents a different picture. The number of black students constituted less than a third of the student population in the 1980s as illustrated in Table 3.2. The statistics are consistent with those across the higher education system countrywide and reflect the racially skewed participation rates during this period, as shown in Chapter Two. Only after 1995 did black student numbers increase significantly in terms of the country's demographics.

Table 3.2 The racial composition of unisa students by percentage

YEAR	% BLACK	% COLOURED	% ASIAN	% WHITE
1980	19	5	9	67
1985	23	5	11	61
1990	39	4	9	48
1995	47	4	9	40
1996	49	4	9	38
1997	49	4	9	38
1998	47	4	11	38
1999	44	4	12	40
2000	44	5	12	39
2001	47	5	12	36

Source: Unisa, Statistics 2002

The increase in student numbers was a result of several factors including: the increased marketing of the institution through media advertisements and the legislative drive to increase participation levels in higher education, in particular through distance education institutions. Both the 1996 *Higher Education White Paper* and the 2001 *National Plan for Higher Education* note the significant role distance education has to play in widening participation levels across the higher education sector. As the largest institution in this sector, Unisa is expected to cater for the majority of students previously excluded from the system.

The number of registered students has increased considerably at Unisa, but student retention and throughput levels have not matched these increases (Ogude, 1996; Rayner, 2000). According to Ogude 'although Unisa has always admitted disadvantaged students, there appears to have been very few measures to ensure retention and successful outcomes' (1996: 96)⁵. The efficiency of the different universities at retaining students is a key of concern as the *Higher Education White Paper* (RSA: 1996) indicated. Massification tends to focus participation towards the quantitative domain, admission statistics. In the past, success rates may have been easily overlooked, as this was not seen as an institutional problem but more of a student problem. But, now, with government's plans to tie funding to success rates and not to enrolment numbers the institution is compelled to address the issue of student retention and completion levels as matter of urgency (NCHE, 1996; RSA, 1997).

Another feature of the drive for student numbers is the unequal distribution of students across Faculties and fields of study. Unisa's 2001 statistics show that student recruitment has not been matched with an equal distribution of students across the Faculties. Although a significant number of incoming students remain concentrated in the Arts and Education Faculties, it is the Economic and Managements Sciences faculty which has the highest enrolment. However, the Science Faculty, which in the

⁵ Attempts to obtain official statistics of drop-out and failure rates were unsuccessful. Some of the reasons given were that it was difficult to trace students' progress because Unisa is an ODL institution. However, the percentage passed/registered shows that it is between 50 and 60%: 1998: 57.8; 1999: 55.2; 2000: 60.2; 2001: 58.4 and 2002: 54.4.

past had very few black students still has the lowest number of black enrolments. (Rayner, 2001). These are interesting developments which need further investigation.

The third area related to the massification of higher education is the increasing diversity of the student population. Through active marketing and advertising the institution has attracted a significant number of foreign students, mainly from the rest of Africa. On the one hand this reflects positively on institutional accessibility. But, on the other hand, it has put more pressure on the institution as it has to deal with a more diverse student population than before⁶.

In general, transformation at Unisa is an ongoing process as indicated in the Vice-Chancellor's year-opening and year-end speeches (Melck, 2000; Melck, 2001). In terms of recruiting students, Unisa has been successful as the student numbers indicate. But, whether the access can be turned into success, in terms of retention and completion rates, still remains to be seen. At the institutional level, as Melck (2000) points, out the pressures for change are enormous and demanding.

much remains to be done; too much in fact for the capacity that we have in some quarters. The demands made on management during this period of transformation are phenomenal; and many of these relate in some way or another to the human resource section of the university. To begin with, we are legally bound to comply with the requirements of the Labour Relations Act, the Higher Education Act, The Employment Equity Act, the Skills Development Act, the South African Qualifications Act; the Occupational Safety Act, our own internal agreements etc. Each of these makes particular demands on management (Melck, 2000).

In line with higher education policy imperatives Unisa has introduced a number of structural changes to address students access. The Access Programme was established in 2000 to accommodate and facilitate entry into degree programmes for students lacking the relevant university entrance qualifications.

⁶ The debates on the language of instruction are compounded by Unisa extending its services to students from other parts of Africa. Some of the students are French speaking with very little knowledge of English. For instance in 2000, 6266 of Unisa's 103 002 students were from other African countries.

Access courses were specifically introduced to create opportunities for students who did not qualify for university entrance in line with the CHE (1997) and National Plan (2001) requirements. The Access Programme at Unisa provides admission to students who do not qualify for direct admission. Any students with Grade 12 certificate, senior certificate, school leaving certificate or an equivalent qualification, but does not have any form of complete or conditional exemption from the matriculation endorsement, can qualify for admission to Unisa's degree studies through the access programme. The six faculties which offer access courses have different access modules from which students can choose two or three depending on faculty regulations.

There are eight access modules offered through the Access Programme at Unisa. The year modules have a duration of one year with one examination per year and the semester modules have two registration periods with an examination at the end of each academic period. Certain degree modules may also be used for access purposes. Students have to pass the required access modules before they can apply for a Senate discretionary conditional exemption certificate. They may then apply for registration for a Bachelors degree or diploma, but will retain credit for the modules passed. The registration numbers of students in the Access Programme shows that this could be one way of facilitating access for disadvantaged students. Student enrolments in the Access Programme have increased consistently: 2000: 34 769 and 2001: 41 218.

The next section outlines the Access Programme in which the students and lecturers who participated in this study were based. To protect their identity letter names are used: BDL for the department and CDL for the unit.

3.1 The programme level: CDL unit

To examine lecturers' and students' perceptions and experiences of the teaching and learning context the study focused on the access courses offered in the CDL unit in the Department of BDL. This Department is one of the 61 academic departments at UNISA. It offers a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, the latter comprising Honours, Masters and Doctoral degrees. At the undergraduate level,

teaching is constituted along team lines. A specified number of lecturers are assigned to a team at the first- second- or third-year level modules. The first-year level modules are further divided into two: one focuses on the core modules while the on access courses in the CDL unit.

The CDL unit was relevant for examining widening participation policy imperatives because it presented an ideal context for examining the extent to which the factors identified in Chapter One – language, school and socio-economic background-influenced student access at the institutional level. According to Denscombe (1998: 33) the selection of the unit of analysis can be based on suitability or pragmatic basis. First, the CDL unit was acknowledged institution wide as one of the main departments that should facilitate student access. As a result CDL students constitute the second largest group of access students registered at Unisa⁷. Second, unlike other access programmes which focus on the content of a specific subject, CDL modules are specifically aimed at addressing students' language and academic incompetence. Another, selection factor is that the majority of students in this unit are English second, third or fourth language speakers who expect that their language deficiencies. Finally, as a participant observer it was important that the researcher have access to CDL unit lecturers and students.

As a result of the modularisation and semesterisation of programmes, the CDL unit was assigned the responsibility of seven first-year undergraduate modules and three Access modules. The first-year modules are prescribed as foundation courses for a number of programmes in other departments across the institution. Access modules were specifically developed for students who do not qualify for direct admission to a degree programme as pointed out above. Unisa experienced a massive growth in the number of first-year and Access students partly because of its open admission policy to accommodate students who previously did not qualify for university admission. Student numbers increased consistently with each registration period: 2000: 4273; 2001: 5766 and in 2002: 6363.

⁷ For example of the 9031 access students registered at Unisa in 2000 39% were CDL students.

The majority of students in this unit are black and English Second Language speakers as shown in Table 3.5 on page 142. The modules the study focuses on have the largest numbers of students in the department. Table 3.3 illustrates the number of students registered in the CDL unit during the fieldwork period in 2001.

Table 3.3 Number of students in the CDL unit, first semester 2001

CDL MODULES	NUMBER OF STUDENTS
CDL 1	2482
CDL 2	3356
Other CDL modules	3999
TOTAL	9837

With the introduction of the Access course programmes in 2000 the number of students registered in the CDL unit increased. However, despite the unit serving almost fifty percent of the students in the department, it remains largely marginalised in terms of student-staff ratios. Less than a third of the thirty-six staff members in the department, both academic and administrative, are involved in the CDL unit. A comparison of student-staff ratios shows that the situation has worsened over the years. In 2001 four lecturers assisted by three contract workers were responsible for the 8537 registered students. In contrast, in 1994, eight lecturers serviced a total of 6265 enrolled students. The increase in student numbers has not been matched with an equal increase in resources.

The CDL unit is best positioned to provide insight into the realities of widening participation at Unisa because it is expected to play a significant role in addressing student access: compared to other units it has the highest number of enrolled students in the department and constitute one of the largest groups university wide; it is expected to play a significant role in enabling student access across the university by developing students' academic competencies, in particular, reading and writing skills. Students coming in without the required entrance qualifications are compelled to register for CDL modules concurrently with other modules.

4. Sampling

The themes identified in Chapter One – language, school and socio-economic background were useful in determining the sample. Each theme comprises categories or factors which are likely to impact negatively on the extent to which student participation can be facilitated or impeded. These categories are of importance because widening participation policy imperatives, discussed in Chapter Two, are specifically aimed at addressing the inadequacies identified under these themes. All three groups of participants in this study - students, lecturers and administrative – are central to the understanding of how these categories interact and influence the extent to which access can happen. The selection accords with Denscombe's (1998:15) description of purposive sampling: 'seeking out groups of settings or individuals where the process being studied are most likely to occur'.

The students in this study were selected on the basis of their status: they are English second, third or fourth language speakers; they were exposed to inadequate schooling systems; and they come from a low socio-economic background. Research has shown that language plays a significant role in facilitating access particularly if it is the medium of instruction (Pierce et al. 1995). Of significance is that students came in with varied language competencies which exacerbated the difficulties lecturers faced. In addition, coming from township schools students had been exposed to poor and inadequate learning environments. They lacked the necessary academic skills and background knowledge expected of first year students. Furthermore, as township residents students had little or no access to basic resources that are considered essential to facilitating academic success. They had very little or no access to taken-for granted resources such as such as water, electricity and study facilities such as a library.

Lecturers in this study were selected because they were expected to address students' inadequacies to facilitate participation. They were faced with teaching a majority of students who came in with deficient language and academic competencies. As ESL lecturers in the CDL unit they were expected to understand and address students' language, school and socio-economic background inadequacies. Administrative staff,

as the first port of call for students, are also expected address students' inadequacies. They were therefore expected to give meaning to and confront the challenges students' had to contend with as undergraduate students. The subjective meaning lecturers and administrative staff give to these challenges is crucial in determining whether access happens or not.

Non-probability sampling was useful because the aim of the study was to explore processes 'rather than make statistical comparisons or to infer causality' (Mason, 1996:97). It incorporated both convenient and purposive sampling (Denscombe 1998). It was convenient in that participants were readily available and accessible. The sampling was also purposive as selection was based on the fact that students and lecturers were central to the realities of widening participation imperatives, and offered greater possibilities 'to better understand the relationships that existed' (Denscombe, 1998: 169). Table 3.4 illustrates the composition of the sample.

Table 3.4 Composition of the student sample

Participants	Number
Students	60
Lecturers	4
Administration staff	4

4.1 Student sample

Sixty first-year black undergraduate students participated in this study. The first year is of significance as it is at this point that students' expectations are either realised or frustrated. This was particularly important in this study because, firstly, the students came from families where parents were likely to be semi-literate or illiterate and, secondly, they were first generation university attendees in their immediate families. In discussing the difficulties first-year students face in adjusting to their studies, Rayner (2001) cites students' family background as an important factor that influences

their success at university. Therefore knowledge of the perceptions and expectations of students beginning higher education has the potential to reveal those institutional practices that are likely to impact on access either positively or negatively (Meyer et al.: 1992). Another reason for focussing on students at this level was that, as Fullan (1991) contends, although regarded as the potential beneficiaries of the change process, they are seldom consulted. Instead, they are more likely to be marginalised in change initiatives. If widening participation is to be advanced as one of the central challenges of the changing context in university provision, it is important that students be given the space to actively give their own meaning to the 'what' and 'how' of the transformation process.

Table 3.5 shows that the majority of CDL students came from disadvantaged backgrounds. The table shows that 78% were black students as such given the historical background of South Africa in Chapter One they were most likely resident in townships and came from low socio-economic backgrounds. As ESL speakers (73%) they also more likely to have attended school in disadvantaged township schools. Over 50% of the students were unemployed an indication of that they considered further studies as a means of securing employment at a later stage.

Table 3.5 CDL students vs. students' sample

Profile	CDL STUDENTS	SAMPLE
Number of students	3 892	60
Number of black students	3036 (78%)	60
Number of ESL speakers	2860 (73.5%)	60
Number of unemployed	51.30 %	60
Medium of instruction	English	English

Source: Unisa Bureau for Management Information

Only students who had attended school at former blacks-only township or rural schools were selected, because they were regarded as representative of previously disadvantaged groups. This was a mixed group of students with ages ranging between 19 and 30. Some had just completed high school while others had been out of school for several years. Although they were registered at a distance education institution, students regarded themselves as full-time students, mainly because they were unemployed.

Students residing in townships outside Pretoria were contacted telephonically to take part in telephone interviews, in relation of the distance they would have had to travel to the main campus. Those staying in townships around Pretoria - Mamelodi, Atteridgeville, Soshanguve and Hammanskraal - were invited to take part in focus group interviews at Unisa. Established as blacks-only residential areas, the townships, like all other black residential areas were under-resourced in line with apartheid policies as noted in Chapter One. Statistics show that despite a new government in place conditions in townships have not improved significantly since 1994. For instance the informal settlements inside townships are worse off as they lack or have inadequate basic facilities including access to running water, suitable sanitation or refuse removals, electricity, a telephone system, libraries and postal services which are essential support systems for students studying in distance education. As Table 3.6 illustrates from a comparison of the population size of each township and the number of libraries and post offices available it is clear that the services are inadequate to serve populations of this size.

Table 3.6 Population, libraries and post offices

Area	population size	Number of Libraries	Number of post offices
Atteridgeville	46 127	2	2
Soshanguve	242 727	1	1
Mamelodi	174 565	5	5
Hammanskraal	6160	1	1
Total	470 029	9	9

Source: Statistics South Africa, 2000, Tshwane Metropolitan Council, Pretoria Main Post Office.

Further investigations revealed that unemployment levels in the townships tended to be high, as table 3.7 shows. This has implications on students' ability to afford the fees and the additional costs involved in studying at a university. For instance, they are expected to purchase their own textbooks and that they have telephones to contact the institution and travelling costs for attending group discussions and tutorials.

Table 3.7 Number of individuals by employment status

	Population size	Employed	Unemployed, looking for work	Not working
Atteridgeville	46 127	12 678	7 419	12 357
Soshanguve	242 727	60 437	38 518	56 777
Mamelodi	174 565	52 732	27 199	42 769
Hammanskraal	6 160	1 605	1 119	1 258
	470 029	127 453	74 327	113 161

Source: Census 1996, Statistics South Africa

4.2 Lecturer sample

Lecturers in the CDL unit also took part in the study. Although the unit comprised seven lecturers four only were involved in the informal interviews, discussions and responded to the questionnaire⁸. The four lecturers comprised three white permanent lecturers and one temporary black staff member. The white lecturers, L1, L2 and L3 were qualified second-language practitioners and had taught for more than ten years in the unit. The black lecturer, L4, had been with the unit for about year on a temporary contract that was renewed yearly. The lecturers were not only involved in the CDL unit but were also expected to teach in other modules in the department.

4.3 Administrative staff sample

Four administrative staff also took part in the study. They were selected because it was necessary to probe further the administrative issues that were raised from the students' and lecturers' interviews. The three administrative departments A1, A2 and A3 deal directly with students' inquiries and facilitate the interaction between students and lecturers. Although other administrative departments were identified the staff did not take part in the interviews because arranging meetings with them was difficult as they were either not available or were not a position to address the questions at hand.

⁸ It is not clear why the other three lecturers did not respond but one reason could be that as contract workers they considered themselves as 'outsiders'.

5 Research Tools

Data were collected through interviews, a questionnaire, participant observation and documents⁹. These techniques were identified as relevant in collecting data for this study because they offered greater possibilities of increased interaction between the researcher and the researched. This is important in a study which focussed on findings which reflected the day-to-day realities of the researched. Secondly, the techniques increased possibilities of investigating different perspectives of the same phenomenon. For instance, interviews brought in the perspectives of lecturers, students and administrative staff, participant observation that of the researcher and documents recorded evidence.

The organizing themes in Chapter One were also instructive in the selection of the research tools. The aim was to explore how categories under the three themes influenced widening participation. To this end three research tools - interviews, participant observation and documents – were useful. First, the factors require that participants reflect upon and provide their own understandings into the situation. To this end interviews were important as they allowed participants to reflect on and provide important insights about their day-to-day realities. As a result it was possible for the researcher to trace the development of widening participation realities as perceived by participants. The focus on participants' accounts of events, their responses to and interpretation of those events, and how they have negotiated with the sources of changes among themselves. any changes will be fresh in participants' minds and thus the reconstruction of events will be possible. In addition, through interviews the researcher could discuss in detail. In-depth interviews with multiple informants also allow a triangulation of findings across sources to test issues of validity and reliability.

Second, participant observation was relevant in this study because it allowed for an in-depth investigation on how the challenges brought about by language, school and

⁹ The fieldwork was conducted from January to May 2001. See Appendix 1.

socio-economic background were addressed in practice. The researchers' day-to-day experiences and interaction with participants increased opportunities of investigating institutional realities: how the challenges of widening participation were addressed and why they were addressed in that way. Finally, documents were selected because they provided details to corroborate and augment information from other sources (Yin, 81). In this study it was important to investigate the extent to which students' deficiencies related to language, schooling and socio-economic background were addressed or ignored.

5.1 *Interviews*

Interviews were conducted with students and lecturers in the CDL unit. Both semi-structured and unstructured questions were useful in this study¹⁰. On one hand, they allowed for a relaxed interaction between the researcher, students and lecturers that encouraged the emergence of individuals' subjective experiences, perceptions and expectations (Hakim, 1987, Wilson, 1993; Denscombe, 1998). On the other hand, they allowed for a flexible and open interaction between the interviewer and the interviewees. For instance, in this study the questions were structured around the course material and activities that students were expected to cover during the semester. To get insight into students' understandings the interviews were followed up with requests for students to elaborate on one or more of the aspects as they were raised.

Another benefit of interview data, pointed out by Hakim (1987: 28), relates to the potential to reveal patterns of associations between structural changes at institutional level and practice at the level of personal choices. This is significant in this study where perceptions were that, although claiming to be inclusive and consultative, the present institutional restructuring tended to be a top-down and authoritarian process. The data from interviews with both academic and administrative staff indicate that the institution tends to be highly structured, that is hierarchically organised, leaving little room for input from individuals at the programme level.

¹⁰ See Appendix 1 and 2 for students' interview questions and lecturers' questionnaire.

But interviews have their limitations. Firstly they tend to be biased in terms of the type of questions asked and the responses made (Yin, 1994). Bias, according to Wilson (1993:31-32), can emanate from procedural reactivity as well as personal reactivity. He argues that the former impacts on the reliability of data while the latter tends to influence validity. In this study personal reactivity, that is, the power relations between the interviewee and interviewer (Wilson, 1993; Denscombe, 1998) were of significance. The researcher's identity in this study, where change was partly about redressing racial inequalities was significant. The interviewers' race, gender and professional status presented potential biases. It was inevitable that some of the issues that came up during interviews had direct bearing on these biases. Although in one way this was an indication that the interaction was open, honest and flexible it also had the potential to raise tensions which could have a negative influence on the whole process. Thus the first few minutes of each interview session were spent negotiating and renegotiating the interview relationship. Although the researchers' status raised potential biases it was more important to focus on the issues at hand in accordance with Bogdan et al.'s (1982) argument that although bias cannot be completely eliminated its influence can be reduced.

5.1.1 Student interviews

The student interview questions were derived from literature and the researchers experiences as a participant observer during the fieldwork period¹¹ and academic. Studies on non-traditional students entering higher education were informative: learning styles and approaches to studying at university level (Entwistle, 1993; Tait, 2000); studying at university through a second language (Holliday, 1994; Pierce et al. 1995); innovation and change in education (Fullan, 1991; Halsey et al 1997); openness and closure in ODL (SAIDE, 1994; Stephens et al. 1997); first-year students' experiences of adjusting to university (Noble, 1989; Cochrane, 2000). These studies identify factors that impact on how student access is facilitated or impeded at university. In addition the data collected from the fieldwork session in January was also useful in determining student interview questions. As a participant observer the

¹¹ The fieldwork was conducted from January to May 2001. See Appendix 1.

researcher was in daily contact with students. Repeating and newly registered students either telephoned or came in personally requesting assistance with one or other academic or administrative matter. The researcher also visited two learning centres where students' queries were addressed. The contact with students highlighted institutional and other external factors that were likely to influence students' adjustment to the university environment and academic success. The questions sought to examine how the origin of undergraduate students affected their adjustment to and success at university.

Telephone and focus group interviews were useful in this study. The interview questions ranged from specific issues dealing with assignments that students had just submitted to more personal issues relating to students' expectations and aspirations. The interviews included questions on the following: assignments, the course material, contact with department and institution, student support and personal aspirations¹².

Thirty students took part in the telephone interviews. Students who telephoned with queries related to some aspect of their studies were invited to participate in the study. The benefits of telephone interviews in a distance education institution include that they save on time, effort, and money and also compensate for the geographical distance (Robson, 1993: 241; Yin, 1994: 74; Gillham, 2000a: 9; Gillham, 2000b: 77). Individual students were telephoned at a specified time and day between March and April. The number of students interviewed in a day varied between seven and nine. Each session lasted between 15 and 30 minutes. The issues raised by students in telephone interviews were noted and probed further in the focus interviews.

Thirty students took part in the focus group interviews. Five, one-hour sessions of focus group interviews were conducted between March and April. Students who participated in the focus group interviews were compensated for their travel costs. The overall response was positive; even those students who could not make it either came in personally at a later date or telephoned to indicate that they were unavailable. The focus group interviews were recorded. Some of the issues that came up were raised with lecturers and administrative staff.

¹² See appendix 2

Focus group interviews, in particular, were useful as they allowed the subjective experiences of students to emerge through an exploration of their collective views, experiences and perceptions (Robson, 1993: 241; Denscombe, 1998:115). In contrast to individual interviews, they place particular value on the interaction within the group as a means of facilitating information. Focus groups are interactive thus they allow for a better understanding of students' collective perceptions in one setting (Robson, 1993; Williamson, 1993; Denscombe 1998) and were also useful in revealing the inconsistencies and misconceptions as students challenged one another's perceptions during the interview (Lewis in Denscombe, 1998: 115). In this respect they revealed a different perspective of students' experiences and perceptions to that of telephone interviews.

One shortcoming of focus group interviews is the resultant group dynamics, that is, interviewees' reluctance to disclose sensitive, personal, political or emotional matters in the company of others (Denscombe 1998: 115; Gillham, 2000b: 78). In this study, the influence of the group dynamics was reduced by ensuring consistency in the profile of students. They all came from the townships and attended school at in former blacks-only institutions. In addition the rapport created at the beginning of each session was useful. Establishment of rapport was vital in this study where the environment tended to be alienating for first-year students. As a result the number of students in each group was small, between five and eight. Students were offered snacks to create a relaxed atmosphere and also in consideration of the distance they had to travel to the university. It took them between an hour and two hours to travel from their homes to Unisa on public transport. Another essential part of the process of establishing trust and rapport was a patient, non-confrontational and low-key approach, which meant periods of unfocussed chat in the initial stages of each interview. The questions relating to students' immediate academic concerns were also beneficial. For instance, the 'ice-breaker' question was based on their experiences of the first assignment, which they had just completed. This was of interest to them as they were eager to know more about the assignment and share their experiences of writing a first academic assignment. The researcher's status as a lecturer was also an advantage in establishing rapport.

The issues raised with students were used as a starting point and also formed the basis for the interviews and informal discussions with lecturers.

5.1.2 Lecturer interviews

Four lecturers participated in the study. Unstructured interviews were beneficial as they allowed for an open discussion of lecturers' experiences and perceptions of widening participation imperatives (Denscombe, 1998: 113). However, arranging interviews with lecturers was difficult because of various factors including time constraints mainly owing to the office hours they kept. These are normally between 08h00 and 13h00. This was exacerbated by the fact that in that time lecturers were required to attend to various institutional demands that were related to the restructuring process. Thus while they were present at work they would be absent from their offices for the whole day or part of it. Consequently interviews with lecturers tended to be impromptu and informal based on their availability. In this regard participant observation was useful as it allowed for deeper insight into lecturer's experiences through the informal interviews and discussions which took place at various times and places, tea-time or between meetings and other commitments.

In addition to the interviews lecturers were requested to complete a questionnaire as pointed out previously. Although a questionnaire tends to be used mainly for large numbers of respondents (Denscombe, 1998:88) it was necessary in this study for several reasons. Firstly, lecturers were given the space to reflect on and comment on the aspects students raised in the interviews. Secondly, it allowed them to elaborate on issues that they had raised during the informal interviews and discussions. This ties in with studies that show that data from detailed responses have the potential of revealing the 'depth' of individual experiences (Stacey, 1969: 75; Hegarty et al; 1985: 128; Yin, 1994: 80; Denscombe, 1998:113). This was important in this study where the aim was to get insight into individuals' perceptions and understandings of widening participation. Finally the questionnaire was useful in clarifying questions that came up during the reflection stages of the case study.

Students and lecturers raised administrative issues that required further clarification. To this end four administrative staff were interviewed

5.1.3 Administrative staff interviews

Four administrative staff were interviewed. Unlike those of lecturers, the interviews were formal and lasted about an hour. The questions focused mainly on aspects that came up during students' and lecturers' interviews. The crucial role played by administrative staff in facilitating access in ODL is highlighted in studies that show that students require adequate administrative support to succeed in this context (Colquhoun, 1996; Cochrane, 2000). The administrative staff in this study supported these observations.

5.2 Participant observation

Another research tool used in this study was participant observation. Its central features include the researcher becoming a member of the observed group, observing things that happen, watching what people do, listening to what is said and asking individuals to elaborate on certain aspects of their behaviour or practice (Denscombe, 1998; Gillham, 2000b; Silverman, 2000). Participant observation was useful in this study because the researcher is not passive but is actively involved in the daily lives of the people under study. This is in keeping with case study research that states that to gain deeper insight into own and others' practice the researcher needs to be an active participant in the research situation. The study was conducted with the full knowledge and permission of the researched, students and staff were informed about the objectives of the research and the researcher's role in the process; therefore, participation was overt. Where possible the recorded observations were discussed and verified with students and lecturers and their permission was sought for inclusion in study. They were also assured anonymity. These steps addressed the ethical problems associated with participant observation techniques (Denscombe, 1998: 151).

The fieldwork was conducted from January to May in 2001. As students registrations are in January and lecturers are also on leave during this month the researcher spent this time gathering information on past and present CDL students and also visited two learning centres in order to get a feel for the challenges students had to address. Students who were repeating the course and those who came into the institution with queries relating to some aspect of their studies also provided valuable information on various issues related to widening participation.

The use of participant observation as a research technique was relevant in this context as it opened up possibilities for a better understanding of 'participant perspectives'; that is, 'the assumptions individuals make about their practices as well as the issues they take for granted' (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982: 29). As an 'insider', the researcher had greater opportunities of observing staff and students in their natural context. In this respect, 'the informal reality of participants', their 'living experiences' and the effect on the day-to-day practices were brought into perspective (Gillham, 2000b: 28). A related benefit of participant observation is that it provides insight into behaviour that occurs naturally in a specific context. This opens up possibilities of identify issues and problems which, although participants regard them as crucial, are not usually articulated (Foster, 1993: 50; Denscombe, 1998: 151). This is more relevant in contexts where socio-political and socio-cultural issues are in contest.

The frequent and unrestricted telephone and personal contacts with students brought insight into their understandings of what studying at an open distance university entailed. It provided valuable data that highlighted students' perceptions, expectations and experiences. Involvement in the day-to-day activities in the department, which included addressing student queries as well as marking their assignments, was useful in refining the interview questions and verifying data and information from interviews (Denscombe, 1998:112). The discussions with lecturers during tea time, for instance, brought more insight into the how and why of their interactions with each other and with students as well as their concerns about institutional changes. More importantly for this study, participant observation provided a forum for closer interaction between the researcher and the researched.

One limitation of participant observation is its openness to potential biases (Yin, 1994: 89; Gillham, 2000b: 47). Bias is caused by various factors which include the 'observer effect', that is the probable influence an observer's presence might have on the observed (Denscombe, 1998: 156). As a result of the daily interactions with the lecturers and students the researcher was expected to adopt multiple roles including acting as a mediator between students and the study material, between students and lecturers, and also between lecturers and the institution. For example, students expected the researcher to address the problems they had with accessing the course material. Lecturers too were afforded an opportunity to express their frustrations with institutional structures. The lecturers and students were constantly reminded of the importance of the researcher's role as a facilitator. It was necessary to point out that, although the concerns that were raised were important, the research was not about determining right or wrong actions and practices, but to get a better understanding of why the situation that was developing in one direction and not the other; and what each individual's role was in that context. But, as Robson (1993:197) points out, issues of bias are delicate and need to be handled with sensitivity.

5.3 *Documents and records*

The third research tool employed in this study was documentary evidence. There are different types of documentary sources and they cover a wide range of material (Finnegan and Thomas, 1993; Robson, 1993; Denscombe, 1998; Gillham, 2000b). In this study the documents and records consulted comprised student material, public correspondence, private unpublished documents as well as research reports. These documents dealt specifically with internal and other confidential matters that had to do with the day-to-day institutional activities.

Documentary evidence is beneficial in case study research (Robson, 1993; Denscombe, 1998). First, it is time saving and cost effective, particularly in a single case study, as most of the data are likely to be within reach. For this investigation, the researcher was able to retrieve most of the documents referred to from various departments within the institution without incurring any extra costs. Second, because the documents were generally in hard copy, they were readily available and could be

consulted at any time for re-analysis as well as for reliability checks. This was important because the data collection, reflection and analysis processes were continuous.

Another benefit of using data from private documents is their potential to complement the material found in public documents by providing the 'fill bits' of the 'superficial view of reality that tends to be associated with public documents, (Denscombe, 1998: 162). The confidential research reports, memos and the internal correspondence, consulted for this study shed more light on the gaps in interview data and the processes at work at the institutional level. They were beneficial as they revealed the inconsistencies and overlaps between the lecturers' and students' day-to-day realities and institutional practices. Because of their sensitive nature these types of documents are normally not made available to outsiders. However, the researcher's status as 'an insider' in this context made it easier to access material considered 'private and confidential'.

Like other techniques, documentary evidence has its limitations. Finnegan et al (1993: 106-110), Robson (1993) and Denscombe (1998: 170) suggest reality checks in using documentary data which include evaluating their credibility, determining their original purpose and assessing their subjectivity. Finnegan et al. (1993: 106- 110) and Denscombe (167-169) suggest several questions that need to be asked in weighing, assessing and selecting documentary evidence. The questions such as - Is it a genuine article? Is it accurate? Who produced the document? - were valuable in determining the authenticity and relevance of the documents used in this study.

6 Data Analysis

Data analysis was an ongoing process that occurred throughout alternating between stages of data collection and reflection. Each stage involved the analysing of data from students' interviews, lecturers' interviews, participant observation and documents. The analysis of data is in keeping with the constant comparative method where the similarities and differences in the data on students' and lecturers' interviews

were made (Silverman, 2000:79); and the realist approach where the data from interviews were treated as factual statements (Silverman, 2000: 125). It involved grouping and categorising data that had similar units of meaning, forming new categories and continuously refining and generating new categories at each phase (Silverman, 2000: 125). For example data from students' interviews were grouped and used to categorise subsequent interview data with lecturers. The categories emanating from the factual statements were validated by data from administrative staff interviews, participant observation, the researcher's insider knowledge, and documents.

Thus the case study process in this study became a method for the analysis process as well as that of data collection. In keeping with Dey's (1993: 265) argument that 'analysis is not sequential in practice but iterative' and 'occurs in tandem with data collection' (Dey, 1993: 37). It is akin to a spiral which turns through successive cycles that loop back and forth through various phases within the broader analysis. As categories and patterns emerged, they became the basis for further data collection and analysis decisions. Each interaction drove the next one like a spiral in itself (Dey, 1993: 265). For example, the categories emanating from students' interviews after each session were reflected upon and used as a basis for further interviews with lecturers and administrative staff. Analyses at each stage generated further questions, which were modified as patterns or themes emerged. The similarities and differences were noted with particular attention paid to responses with respect to similar questions or constructs. The themes and relationships between the different data were sorted and grouped into themes related to academic, administrative and institutional aspects of widening participation discussed in Chapters Four and Five.

Every effort was made to reflect the realities as presented and to accommodate the multiple perspectives of all involved throughout the analysis. However, owing to time and institutional constraints the final data analysis was done mainly by the researcher with limited involvement of students and lecturers. This is in contrast to case study processes which indicate that the ideal would have been to involve the researched in every step from the beginning of each cycle to the next cycle including the analysing process. However, in this context it was not possible. Firstly, students' involvement was restricted because it would have been costly to bring them into Unisa for more

sessions. Secondly, owing to time constraints and institutional demands lecturers were not readily available to sit through all the stages. Although their views were sought in other areas, it was limited. Hence they were asked to complete a questionnaire to obtain deeper insight of their experiences and perceptions.

The techniques employed in this study were useful because the different sources of information provided corroboratory data through 'the development of converging lines of inquiry' (Ying, 1994: 92). For example the documentary material provided invaluable insight into the information gathered from the interviews and participant observation. Similarly data from lecturers' and students' interviews brought into better perspective the researcher's observations as a participant observer. Ying (1994, 92-93), points out the importance of triangulation strategies; that is, the use of multiple sources of evidence in single case studies to address 'the potential problems of construct validity' (Ying, 1994: 92).

Validity and reliability are the two main criteria that determine the quality and rigour of a research design (Yin, 1994: 18- 53; Mason, 1996: 21; Silverman, 2000: 90). Yin (1994:33) differentiates three types of validity: construct validity, internal validity and external validity. Each emphasises specific aspects of the research design. The constant comparative analysis was useful in addressing the validity of this study (Silverman, 2000: 79). Validity was also addressed through constant checks of the data through triangulation, that is, the use of multiple sources for investigating a specific situation (Yin, 1994: 91, Silverman, 2000: 301), 'because multiple sources of information essentially provide(d) multiple measures of the same phenomenon' (Yin, 1994: 92). Both theory triangulation, 'perspectives on the same data set', and data triangulation, 'perspectives among different data sources', as pointed out by Silverman (2000:177) were useful.

The validity and reliability of the study are further explored in the next section, which reflects on the researcher's experiences of the possibilities and constraints of case studies. Somekh (1995) points out the importance of this reflection process but also warns against its over-emphasis as it tends to turn the focus away from the actual data and objective analysis of the findings.

7. Reflections on the Possibilities and Constraints of the case study process in this study

In this study validity includes the researcher's professional and research ethic experiences associated with doing research in one's own work environment (Somekh, 1995; Webb, 1995; Holian, 1999). The experience of taking on multiple roles that of a researcher, a black person, and an academic was illustrative of the challenges individuals faced in giving meaning to realities of an institution undergoing change. Holian (1999) aptly refers to the multiple roles and role conflict as 'too many hats and coats'. The researcher's roles varied from that of an objective researcher to that of a participant observer who was actively involved in group and individual discussions, and increasingly taking on more tasks that included teaching, interacting with students and attempts to make sense of the various day-to-day institutional changes with lecturers. Confronted with the dilemma of identifying, working out and reconciling the different roles, the researcher was faced with a situation that Dick (1995:2) describes as 'ethically and occupationally challenging'. For instance, the issue of race could not be isolated and treated separately from the interactions with students and lecturers. The interaction with students and lecturers required one to become more habitually conscious of and reflective about the social, economic and political conditions underlying the day-to-day realities of the changes happening at Unisa (Webb, 1995: 8).

Students expected that the researcher, as a black person and a lecturer, should be more understanding and sympathetic to their needs than other lecturers. As a result they expected the researcher to provide the necessary but additional support and solutions to the difficulties they faced as they struggled to give meaning to what studying at a distance education university entailed. These were real concerns and expectations that could not be addressed at that point in time. This is perhaps an indication of a weakness in case studies, which while purporting to move beyond investigating issues to providing possible solutions, could not do so partly because of time limitations in this case. However, bringing up students' concerns with lecturers and administrative

staff probably had an effect because they agreed that these were genuine observations as shown in the findings. This was further evidenced when the researcher was invited to give input on issues related to students' concerns.

The interactions with lecturers too tended to be based more on an understanding of the researcher as a work colleague with common professional interests and as a black person who could offer a better understanding of the political challenges the institution faced. On one hand this was an advantage as the researcher was offered a forum to confront the 'undiscussable' (Holian, 1999) within the relative safety of the research environment. This was of importance for the researcher at this stage because in attempts to give meaning to the realities of the changes at Unisa unresolved conflicts of separating one's professional status from the personal identity emerged (Webb, 1995:8). But, on the other hand, expectations that as a black person and a lecturer the researcher would be able to merge the two roles and provide insight into the what and how of widening participation, including that of the changing academic context of Unisa, resulted in an ethical dilemma. The researcher was unprepared to deal with the extent of emotions that resulted from confronting the 'undiscussables'. Maintaining the boundaries between these roles required constant vigilance which at times, on reflection, resulted in uncertainty. The questionnaire that lecturers were requested to respond to, discussed in the previous section, was partly a way to resolve the dilemmas. It was an attempt to put into perspective what information could or could not be included in the study. These experiences confirm observations that case studies tend to put extra responsibility on the researcher (Yin, 1994). It involves the researcher in complex issues of judgement, fairness and integrity. However, as Farish (1995: 45) warns, it was important not to lose sight of the aim of the study to provide a realistic 'portrayal of things in all their complexity rather than target individuals and groups'.

Another challenge the case study process presented was an understanding of the 'why' questions. McFee (1993: 173) describes research as 'the practice of seeking to answer 'why' questions by gathering original knowledge and/or understanding in relation to some problem'. In exploring the understandings of higher education transformation the researcher came to an understanding of the 'why' questions by investigating the perceptions and experiences of both lecturers and students. In line with case study the

interactions highlighted the fact that if broadening student participation is to be translated into reality then it was of importance that students and lecturers be taken on board. Their actual experiences and perceptions are crucial in determining the possibilities of enabling access.

Both students and lecturers play a significant role in shaping the what, why and how of the knowledge on widening participation. Their participation pointed out the importance of engaging with difference and a variety of viewpoints as part of the deliberative process. This accords with Somekh's (1995: 349) observations that individuals play an essential role as agents of change as they already form an 'integral part of the power structures of their research setting'. In this respect students and lecturers are key to developments in institutional transformation. Their involvement has the potential to provide insight into the realities of the consequences of the apartheid policies, discussed in Chapter One, and a way to address and ultimately provide some measure of closure to the past as well as highlight present and future paths for widening participation at Unisa.

Despite the limitations, discussed the case study facilitated insight into the complexities and tensions prevalent in the transformation of Unisa. This is in line with Schon's (1983:132) assertion that although a 'situation comes to be understood through the attempt to change it, and changes through the attempt to understand it'. The individual experience is only the starting point the whole picture comes to a completion through a reflection process which focuses on 'the outcomes of the action, the action itself and the intuitive knowing implicit in the action' (Schon, 1983, 56). The fact that students and lecturers had an opportunity to express their fears and talk about their experiences openly indicates that case studies have the potential to initiate possible action routes for change. This accords with Farish et al.'s (1995:195) observations that the nature of interaction between the researcher and the researched can provide a forum where disparate and diverse experiences can be brought to the fore and examined to reveal commonalities and inconsistencies.

On the whole, the case study approach in this research process allowed for a richer development of understandings of the extent to which day-to-day structural and individual practices influenced access. It offered the space for participant's to develop

an understanding of their own meanings and others' meanings of the complexities of the institutional transformation. Because the process was in its initial stages, it was not clear whether these understandings would develop into change or non-change. However, the space could be regarded as a learning process where there was a possibility that 'through dialogue based on principles of honesty and equity' participants might come to a stage where 'they (could) develop shared understandings of the need for change, and continue to interact supportively ... to shape and effect change' (Somekh, 1995: 349).

The study had several limitations that are related to the case study approach. The most significant of which concern its scale, the sampling and the implications of these for the generalisability and wider applications of the findings. Clearly there is scope for larger-scale follow-up studies of different types of higher education institutions, with different organisational cultures, traditions and priorities and the use of samples drawn from a wider range of programmes. Such studies will have much to contribute towards presenting a fuller picture of widening participation in higher education in South Africa. Of more significance is the fact that the study highlighted the realities of the policy implementation process at the individual and personal level.

8 Summary

This chapter argued that case studies can enhance insights into the realities of transforming higher education provision in South Africa. Aimed at addressing the consistent gap between policy and practice at the institutional level, it acknowledges the significance of participants and the central role they can play in influencing and directing change from a bottom-up perspective. This is particularly important in the South African context because participants are expected to come to a common understanding of how change should proceed and to shape a future against a historical background where diversity, racial and ethnic differences were not seen as a strength but used divisively to maintain and perpetuate social, political and economic inequalities. As a people who have been denied the choice to voice their collective values, it is necessary that in the transformation of higher education lecturers and students, for example, start to voice and share their own meanings of what a reformed higher education institution should entail. Their day-to-day experiences, concerns and

practices are crucial to determining the direction and extent to which change can happen.

The case study approach also highlights the fact that the contestations of transforming higher education are compounded at the people level. It is at this level that individual, group, institutional and national needs are expected to take shape. For instance, students come into the institution expecting their individual needs to be met. Lecturers too bring different concerns mainly on what is required to meet academic standards. But both students' and lecturers' expectations are circumscribed by institutional realities which are, in turn bounded by national policy imperatives. A number of questions arise at this point. At the individual level: How do individuals and disparate groups which are still in many ways segregated begin to give a common understanding to what widening participation should constitute? In such contestations whose meanings are valid? What criteria will determine the shape that an institution must take? Is it the political, social or economic realities? Or the individual, group or national needs? Who decides what these realities should be? But, more importantly, how are these changes to be reconciled to the day-to-day practical realities? These questions indicate that it would be unrealistic to assume that higher education can meet the challenges of widening participation independent of society. Transforming higher education will be a long-term struggle.

The key question this study addresses is to what extent the structural changes in higher education can create access routes for those groups of students previously excluded from active participation in university. If university provision is to be transformed by overcoming disadvantages of various kinds and advancing economic development what kind of challenges will it have to address? More specifically, what are the realities of widening participation policy imperatives at the institutional level? These questions are addressed in the next two chapters which focus on the findings on students' and lecturers' experiences and perceptions of widening participation policy imperatives at Unisa. The findings on students' views are examined in Chapter Four and those of lecturers in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER FOUR

WIDENING PARTICIPATION: STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS

1. Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the rationale for adopting a case study to investigate the realities of widening student participation at the institutional level. It also described the context of the case study, Unisa a distance education institution, and the techniques employed for collecting data. In addition, it evaluated the case study process in this study.

As the largest university and ODL institution in South Africa Unisa offers possibilities of an in-depth study of the realities of widening participation at the institutional level. Over the years Unisa's student numbers have increased considerably as illustrated in Table 3.1, Chapter Three. In addition Unisa's significance in widening access is also becoming increasingly important as ODL moves from a marginal to an integral role in the provision of university education. To address these expectations Unisa introduced access programmes in 2000 (see Chapter Three) in line with the National Plan policy imperatives. The programmes are specifically targeted at first time entry students who have a minimum qualification of a senior certificate but do not qualify for university entry. Unisa statistics (see Chapter Three) show that in line with the widening participation policy imperatives it is mostly blacks and women who have registered for access modules.

To this end the CDL unit is significant as it is based in one of the departments that accommodate the largest group of access students. Student numbers in this unit have increased progressively since 2000 when access programmes were introduced. In 2000 there were 1320 students, in 2001, 3892 (10 060), and in 2002, 7565 (15 648). The progressive increase in student numbers in the CDL unit has implications on widening participation as the findings in Chapters Four and Five reveal. Students come in with a wide range of competencies and as a result do not get the support they need to develop effective academic competencies. The perceived cost-effectiveness of ODL is also a concern where fewer lecturers are expected to accommodate larger groups of under prepared students. Lastly, other aspects of institutional restructuring seem to take centre stage aligning access issues to the margins.

This chapter analyses the findings on CDL students' experiences and perceptions of the realities of widening participation policy imperatives. It shows that while student access might have been widened by increasing registration numbers, students were still not adequately prepared for transition to higher education, nor was the institution accommodating to these students. The findings reveal inconsistencies between, on the one hand, student recruitment through aggressive marketing strategies and, on the other hand, available student support and guidance structures. Student recruitment is based on the assumption that students could automatically fit into the existing institutional structures.

The findings show that student access is largely determined by dominant and taken-for-granted institutional practices that tend to preclude students from active participation. For instance, the increase in student numbers was not accompanied by an equal increase in academic and administrative student support structures. In addition, contrary to higher education policy imperatives, it is evident that open distance education might not be the appropriate medium for developing the academic competencies that are essential for second language speakers to succeed at university. Given the significant failure and drop-out rates in universities and ODL institutions, in particular, it is important that access should go beyond offering and taking up opportunities, and that these opportunities be used effectively. The findings

reveal a gulf between the policy imperatives of widening access and institutional responses to accommodating a diverse and increased number of students.

In addition, the findings echo the political, social and economic realities in South Africa. Underlying the increase in participation were students' socio-economic circumstances that were taken for granted at the institutional level. For instance, it was assumed that students had easy access to facilities that were essential in facilitating their academic development. However black residential areas, mainly townships, informal settlements and rural areas, still lack basic facilities such as libraries, telephones, computers and postal services. In addition, the hidden costs related to studying at a university and in an ODL context are beyond the means of many students. Travelling and contacting the institution involved extra expenses that were not normally factored into the costs of university studies. These are realities of the South African context which, although the institution might not be in a position to address at present, or even in the near future, are likely to impact negatively on student access.

These findings are consistent with studies elsewhere on student experiences of the accessibility, or non-accessibility, of higher education (Noble, 1989). They are also consistent with specific accounts of students' experiences of studying in an Open Distance Learning context (Colquhoun, 1996; Cochrane, 2000), which indicate that, because widening student participation challenges existing institutional structures, there is a need to re-examine and re-align academic and administrative structures to fit the new student population profile (Cochrane, 2000:33). Some of the key factors that have been identified as essential for facilitating student access in higher education include educational background, geographical situation, language, and ethnic and cultural characteristics (Tait, 2000:21). These experiences reflect students' 'learning journeys' which as Tresman (1997) argues are necessary considerations for widening access as they frame students' expectations and have been shown to have a powerful influence on whether or not access is facilitated. More importantly, in South Africa, access policies for first time entry university students are central to

policies of equity and might serve as good indicators of the direction and pace of change at institutional level.

In order to show the extent to which political, social and economic factors impacted on student participation the analysis is made in relation to four key themes that emerged from the findings: the teaching, learning and assessment context; student progress and achievement; academic support and guidance; administrative support and guidance. These are not isolated themes but, as the discussion shows, they are intertwined as each addresses the extent to which student access is facilitated or impeded on a day-to-day basis at the institutional level.

These themes have been identified as aspects that are likely to impact on the extent to which participation can be widened at the institutional level. These themes centre on institutional aspects that hamper or expand access to university. They were generated from categories that emanate from the data itself (Dey 1993: 97) and the theoretical perspectives raised in Chapters One, Two and Three. The themes are interconnected. The themes raised in Chapter One - language, schooling and socio-economic background - are re-emphasised in Chapters Four and Five. Chapter Two points out that the expectations of ODL as a catalyst to educational access and part of the machinery for social reform are complex and contradictory. These themes too interact in complex ways such that while none can be ignored none can be given overall priority. The themes are of significance in this study as they question Unisa's capacity to bring about large-scale reform through widening participation.

2. The Teaching, Learning and Assessment Context

Learning for ODL students starts from the first day of registration, as students in this study showed. They referred to difficulties they experienced with the study package they received on registration. The package comprised material on general

administrative information and specific academic material¹. Thus, from the outset students were presented with information they found complicated, incomprehensible and confusing. In contrast to the learning situation in contact universities, they were required to become acquainted with the academic as well as administrative aspects of their studies with little or no help from the institution. Academically, they had to make a number of decisions, including which semester to register for and which courses to take². This was exacerbated by the institution aligning with the higher education policy requirements (see Chapter Two) that require that university studies be defined in terms of programmes (See Chapter Three).

In changing to the semester and modular system in line with the SAQA requirements there was an overlap in the course material. Students who had registered the previous year had to be accommodated to complete the course, while at the same time the semester system was being phased in. Whereas this was not much of a problem for the incoming new students it had in the process complicated matters, particularly for those students who were repeating the CDL module. They were expected to work out the academic requirements of each course they registered for, a task that entailed going through various documents which, as first year undergraduate students with little or no reference point of what higher education entailed, they found perplexing³.

Another choice students had to make was that of registering either in January or in June. From observations and students' telephone inquiries, they had problems understanding how the semester system worked. Some were surprised to learn that after they had failed in one semester they were expected to reregister and pay the full

¹ The study package comprises three booklets and two brochures. It contains information regarding general rules, qualifications and programmes offered, the subjects and syllabuses, and examination timetable. The academic material consists of study guides for each module and tutorial letters which contain the assignments, assignments due dates and other departmental information.

² The findings are confirmed by Ryner's (2001) report on the marketing of Unisa, that shows that the transition to programmes and modules resulted in students experiencing difficulties during the registration sessions. According to the report students were not academically equipped to make informed choices regarding the modules on offer.

³ Student registrations end sometime in February and they write examinations around May/June. This means that students have effectively four months, between February and May, in which to go through the university brochures and the calendar, which contain general administrative information, as well as the study guide and tutorial letters covering specific information on the course. Some students find the extensive reading material overwhelming and confusing.

fees for the second term. The findings show that as first time university entrants in their families, they found the experience overwhelming and confusing. This has implications for widening access because without the necessary information on what was expected of them, they were likely to drop out or repeat the course several times as shown in the findings⁴.

The difficulties experienced with the administrative issues were exacerbated at the programme level. In response to the question on which aspects of the learning and teaching context they regarded as important in widening participation, students identified assignments as of major importance in their interaction with lecturers and the institution. Situated at the interface between learning and teaching, assignments serve multiple functions:

- they are the main evidence that learners have understood and can apply their knowledge
- they are a medium of contact with lecturers
- they serve as revision aids for the work covered in the study guides
- students find them useful in preparations for the examination
- in some instances assignment marks are used as credits for admission to the examination⁵.

In any text-based system of education students' reading skills and prior knowledge of the subject matter are prerequisites of their success. In distance education, in particular, students are expected to find their way through the study material and apply the knowledge gained in writing assignments with little or no interaction with the lecturer. In this respect the ODL context, according to Delpit (1995), constitutes a

⁴ Statistics on student's drop-out and failure rates are useful indicators of throughput levels. But, in this case attempts to get Unisa's official statistics were unsuccessful. The CDL statistics were, however, useful in this respect (see Chapter Three).

⁵ Previously admission to the examination was based on assignment credits. This rule has over the years been relaxed. For some courses students get automatic admission to the examination, while in some they have to obtain 100 credits before they are admitted. However, in general, assignments marks or credits do not count towards the examination mark. The department is at presently looking into ways of crediting assignment marks as a percentage of the final examination mark.

linear teaching and learning context in which the content mediates the relationship between the lecturer and the student. This can be illustrated as: lecturer → content → student (Delpit, 1995: 139). Understandably, coming from an underprivileged education background, students had difficulties identifying with a linear learning environment in which teaching and learning was primarily mediated through the printed material. Students required additional support. These comments are representative of students' expectations: 'I thought we attended weekly lessons with the lecturers' (F5); 'Why do we not meet the lecturers at least two days in a week' (F7); 'I came to stay with my uncle in Garankua to attend lessons' (T10). Other students, from remote and rural areas, went to the extent of seeking rented accommodation in Pretoria to be near the university premises. These comments suggest that because the academic support they expected was not likely, students were at a disadvantage and their chances of successfully completing their studies were already limited.

A good indication of the inconsistencies between widening participation and institutional realities is how students viewed the assignments that were set. Two assignments were set for the CDL modules: a computer marked, multiple-choice question assignment and a self-assessed portfolio⁶. Both assignments were developed partly as a response to the increased student numbers and thus were also a means of reducing the marking load for lecturers⁷. Considering that assignments are the main mode of contact between students and lecturers' they play a significant role in facilitating students' academic competence, which has implications for access.

⁶ First year assignments are primarily multiple-choice questions. The problem with these assignment is that they not seen by lecturers but go straight to the computer department where they are marked and sent back to the student. The portfolio is mainly self-assessed with one or two questions marked in full.

⁷ The department appoints external markers to assist with the marking of assignments and examinations.

2.1 Multiple-choice question assignments

Some students perceived the multiple-choice question assignments as undemanding and easy because answers were readily available, suggesting that not much effort was required in reading the material.

I had no problem with Assignment 01. It was not difficult. All the answers were supplied. I only had to choose the correct answer from those given. Most of the answers were in the study guide. (F4)

I think Assignment 01 was very easy. All I did was to choose which answer was the correct. It does help to have answers ready. I only had to double-check my answers in the study guide. (T9)

However they were not as confident, when further questioned on how the MCQ assignment would enhance their performance in the examination. They admitted that they might have problems with the examination if the comprehension passage were very different from that of the assignment.

Multiple choice questions are much better than the other assignments. I passed the assignment but I'm not sure if I will pass the examination. I hope you will give us the passage for the examination. (F11)

I did not understand some of the questions but I have passed the assignment. If the examination is the same as the assignment then I think I will need to go through the assignment again with the lecturer. (F15)

I read the passage several times but there is much that I did not understand I do not think I could have answered the questions on the passage correctly if I did not have the options. I had to guess some of the answers for the difficult questions. But what matters now is that I passed the assignment. (F8)

It was noted that students put more emphasis on the credits and percentages but when further questioned they admitted to having had difficulties understanding how they were graded. A few indicated that they would probably have failed the assignment if they had to come up with the answers, suggesting that they might be employing surface learning strategies which focus on the recall of factual information and less

on comprehension⁸. Multiple choice testing is a form of objective assessment and it is often regarded as more reliable than other types of assessment that incorporate subjective marking. However, one weakness of this type of assignments, which also came through during the interviews, is its tendency to promote surface learning. Because they lacked the skills to interact at a deeper level with the texts, students tended to focus on scoring more points. Some associated multiple-choice questions assignments with the factual recall of the study material.

One could argue that students' perceptions reflected the education system they came from. Understandably, students considered passing assignments as an achievement. In a way this negated their past experiences of failure in schools which depicted them as incapable of learning. The students' fixation with 'passages' is also indicative of the examination-centred thinking that prevails in the country's schooling system, and of a teaching approach that puts more emphasis on content and recall of information. This conception can be traced back to the school context where teaching is largely examination-oriented and promotes the reproduction of factual knowledge. This also reinforces students' views that academic competence is about knowing (or rather guessing) the correct answer. This was evidenced in particular in the section where they had to answer questions based on a comprehension extract. Several students came in for consultations requesting assistance with the reading and an explanation of the assignment comprehension passages in preparation for the examination. Again, during the interviews some identified this section as the most problematic. The extract looked like a simple read but further discussions with students revealed the contrary. Their uneasiness with the use of comprehension passages was also evidenced some time before they commenced writing the examination. They made requests for copies of, or information on, the comprehension passage⁹. It is shown in a number of studies that the type of assessment strategies employed by lecturers

⁸ The assignment was divided into two sections: questions requiring the recall of factual information contained in the guide and secondly, comprehension questions based on a given passage. But the passage required much higher thinking skills. An examination of how students fared in the two sections would have brought more insight into the benefits of this type of assignment, but this was beyond the scope of this study.

⁹ Student assessment at Unisa is primarily summative rather than formative. For instance, assignment marks do not count towards the examination marks. However, there are initiatives to look into this practice.

influences students' approaches to learning tasks, that is, 'they invite, even demand, rote learning' (Entwistle and Ramsden in Benson, 1997: 102).

This raises a number of questions about the use of comprehension passages in developing academic reading and writing skills. Firstly, one can ask whether the content or the passage itself was appropriate for students at this level. This is difficult to determine as there are no mechanisms in place to determine students' previous knowledge, level of language competence, reading and writing aptitude or communication abilities. The importance of students' previous knowledge in accessing texts was highlighted in Pierce et al.'s (1995) study where prospective first year ESL students' language competence levels were tested¹⁰. They concluded that there were inherent difficulties in dealing with comprehension passages where students and lecturers were from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. They point out the importance of shared expectations in assigning meaning to texts where multiple choice questions are used in tests. Multiple choice tests tend to ignore the significance of multiple meanings in language comprehension. They only realised in discussions with students afterwards that the meaning they attached to the texts were different from those of students. This suggests that with very little interaction between students and lecturers, multiple choice question assignments might in fact limit student access in the CDL unit¹¹.

Secondly, this questions the effectiveness of the assignments in developing second language learners' academic reading and writing skills. Although ESL research and theory is inconclusive on the effectiveness of instruction on second language

¹⁰ This is an interesting and relevant study which has implications for teaching and learning in South Africa. In the study black township students were able to critically engage in a text from a perspective which the test-makers, Wits lecturers, were unfamiliar with. Unfortunately the implications have not (or rather cannot) been addressed.

¹¹ The findings on the multiple-meanings, in the Pierce et al. (1995) study, resonate with Cotazzi et al. (1997) contentions on how hidden assumptions about culture infuse teaching and learning. They define culture as 'principles of expectations and interpretations which are often taken for granted and therefore overlooked'. They conceptualise the cultural implications in terms of academic cultures, cultures of communication and cultures of learning. According to Cortazzi et al. (1997) these assumptions have implication on the extent to which lecturers make their intentions explicit. They point out that in many instances this results mismatches in the cultures of learning. There are parallels between students' experiences and perceptions in this study and Cotazzi et al.'s (1997) notions of 'hidden assumptions about culture'.

learning, partly because it tends to place too great an emphasis on the conscious learning of rules only (McLaughlin, 1987; Ellis, 1991), there is evidence that under certain conditions instruction does improve language competence. According to McLaughlin (1987) instruction can be effective where teaching and learning are based on an integrative approach that incorporates instruction, exposure and practice. However, in a distance education situation it is unlikely that all three conditions can be met. The findings show that students are expected to read and comprehend the study material on their own, with little or no interaction with lecturers. Their exposure to the language of instruction is primarily limited to the study material, with minimum input from the lecturers. The duration of the course and the type of feedback students receive lessens the opportunities of putting into practice and assessing their learning. This suggests that the use of multiple choice assignments, although a cost-effective strategy as proposed in the National Plan (RSA: 2001), might constitute a barrier to student access.

2.2 *Self assessment assignments*

Some students experienced difficulties with the self-assessment assignments because they could not relate to the concept. They were unfamiliar with what self-assessment entails. They regarded as inadequate the definition provided in the study guide:

an evaluation, judgement or estimation of your own value or of the value of your work. This word comes from the verb, assess (EDL1).

One of the benefits of self-assessment is its potential to develop students' judgement skills. From these students' comments, however, it is clear that they were unfamiliar with this type of assignment assessment:

I do not understand why only one question of Assignment 02 was marked. I answered all the questions as required but only part of the assignment was marked. (F15)

I was very disappointed with my Assignment 02 results. The lecturer marked only two pages. I spent hours writing the assignment and making sure that I

answer all the questions but only to find that not everything was marked. How does this university work? (F23)

The only problem with the course is assignment 02. The lecturers did not mark the entire assignments. I feel you should mark all the questions. That will help us to see what we did wrong so we should improve on the sections to prepare for the examination. (F20)

Some students pointed out that they did not see how self-assessment assignments benefited them:

The lecturer did not mark the entire assignment. After posting my assignment I waited and I was worried about the marks I got. But it was not marked. How do I revise and improve on my work? (F8)

I do not understand why assignments should be self-assessed. Why should I write an assignment, post it and again mark it myself. It does not help us students. (F16)

I need to know where I went wrong and what I need to do to improve. I got most of the answers correct in the assignment. I still need to get some comments. Are lecturers not paid to mark our work? (T10)

Although other students had no problems with the self-assessment assignment, they still expected the entire assignment to be marked in full. They felt it was the lecturers' responsibility to correct assignments, not theirs:

I enjoyed answering the questions in the assignment. I think the course is very helpful. I think more exercises should be added to this course to give us practice. But all the assignments and questions should be marked. Lecturers are there to do the marking, it is their work. For us to this will be helpful. I want to see where and why I was wrong. Is that not what teaching is about? or is the university different? How do I correct my mistakes if the questions are not marked? This is not fair on students. (F18)

Their responses show that they consider the evaluation or assessment of their assignments as more of a lecturer's responsibility than their own. This student's comment encapsulates the extent to which students' in this study considered self-assessment as a task beyond their capabilities: 'how do I know that answers are right or wrong? If I had I would mark my assignment before sending it in and ask the

lecturer to give me feedback on my marking' (T3)¹². In the CDL1 assignment students were asked to evaluate an essay they had written and identify for themselves what their strong points are. A study of the extent to which students evaluate themselves comparison to the lecturers' evaluation is currently underway. However, preliminary findings indicate that some students, ESL students in particular, tend to overrate themselves

Students' reluctance to assess their work could be attributed to the lack of confidence in their own ability to self-correct. Their perceptions were confirmed by the lecturers, who pointed out that students tended to overestimate or underestimate their abilities (*see* Chapter Five). This suggests that assessment is a complex exercise that requires the use of the very reading and writing skills students lack. Studies by Habeshaw et al. (1995) and Biggs J. (1999) show that if the benefits of self-assessment assignments are to be exploited, as well as assisting lecturers in coping with the increased student numbers, then a number of steps need to be taken:

- students need to be informed beforehand;
- they need to be given full, explicit and unambiguous information about the criteria;
- and they should be provided with adequate training and practice.

But it is clear that institutional structures were not in place to give the type of support students required.

2.3 *Feedback on assignments*

Assessment is closely linked to another teaching and learning area students identified as of importance, that is the feedback on assignments. They viewed the feedback and comments on assignments as a key component of their interaction with lecturers, this student's comment shows: 'It is through the feedback on my assignment that I learn

more about my lecturers and what they expect from me'. This comment suggests that students expect the feedback to be much more than a measure of their performance, rather a means of communicating with them. Feedback in the CDL unit comprises specific comments on students' essay assignments, as well as a tutorial letter that contains answers to the computer marked and self-assessment assignments, commentaries on difficult questions and guidelines to the examinations.

Other students expressed difficulties in relating to the limited feedback they received for assignments. In the tutorial letter this practice is justified:

In this department, we believe that it is lots of writing, not lots of marking that improves your English. Consequently, we mark only limited sections of your written assignment. Your tutors use the marking code given in the tutorial letter when they mark the assignment. Please study it very carefully so that you understand what the symbols mean (CDL1).

The statement is based on the assumption that students would be able to understand and thus effectively make use of the marking codes to evaluate their own work. However, the findings show that students experienced difficulties understanding the marking codes used for the essay assignments (CDL1). Some were at a loss because they believed that they could not do anything if they had problems with understanding the marking code. As this student's comment indicates, it meant struggling in isolation:

I have not tried to contact the institution. If I have problems with the assignment I go back to the study guide and try to check if I missed something. I was fortunate I passed the first assignment. I am not sure about the second assignment. I have not received it. But I hope to pass. (T5)

I tried using the marking code to edit my work but I was not sure what to look for. Are we going to get it in the examination? (T13).

Those who failed the assignment, in particular, were concerned that the lecturers had not seen their assignments:

The multiple-choice questions are a problem. I failed the assignment. It is difficult for me to understand where and why I failed. I did get the tutorial letter but I want to know why my answers were not correct. (F7)

I only got a note regarding my first assignment. I don't understand what it means. It seems none of my lecturers even looked at my work. I do not understand this. Don't you check our assignments first before you mark them on the computer? (F10)

The first assignment was a multiple-choice assignment and I did not get any feedback on why I went wrong. It is not easy to understand some of the answers I got. I think it will be better if the lecturers looked at the assignments during the group discussions.(F18)

Students felt that the type of feedback they received was very important, not only to show how they had performed but also to help them in revising those sections of the study guide they had difficulties with:

I was not happy with assignment 02 of this course. It was not marked and I did not understand the section in the guides. I did not know what to write as a result I failed the assignment. (F10)

Some students were worried that they were not allowed to resubmit assignments. The CDL unit policy clearly states:

You may not re-submit corrected assignments, but if you have problems concerning your work, please phone us, visit us or write to us. Remember that queries should be sent under a separate cover. Do not enclose letters with your assignments. (CDL1)

However, it was observed that in some instances lecturers ignored the policy and allowed students to bring in their assignments for remarking and resubmission. In such instances students found the interaction with the lecturer fruitful:

My assignment was marked but I did not understand what I had done wrong. I came to see a lecturer. After the lecturer had read through my essay and pointed out my good points and the areas where I did not make sense I felt much better. But I was more satisfied that I could write the essay again and try to make the changes we talked about and also bring in my assignment for marking again. (F12)

But this was an exception. In general this practice was not encouraged, mainly because of the high lecturer-student ratios. It was impossible for CDL lecturers to give individual attention to students (*see* Chapter Five). Instead, students were

requested to make use of alternative means for addressing their enquiries: by telephone, personal consultations or in writing. However, some students found this arrangement unsatisfactory as it did not address their problems:

I telephoned to make an appointment to consult a lecturer about the assignment I failed. But I was told not to worry as I had another chance to get credits for the second assignment. But I wanted someone to see my assignment and tell me what I did incorrectly. It was not clear to me. (F15)

Students' experiences of limited and unsatisfactory feedback on assignments suggests that they were not getting the necessary support to promote and improve their academic competencies. This meant that students' needs were compromised to accommodate lecturers and institutional structures to cope with the increased number of students. This has implications for student access because, without the adequate support, students' chances of achieving the required academic competence to succeed are limited.

2.4 *Assignment turn-around-time*

In the interview students raised another aspect closely related to the feedback on assignments, that is the turn-around time, or the time lapse from the point when they send out their assignments until they get them back from the institution. An earlier report of the findings on a students' survey of UNISA shows that the delay in assignments has been a general complaint from students over the years. Students' concerns were justified because, as noted previously, assignments were important for examination preparation and revision.

Student inquiries about unreturned assignments increased towards the examination period. These students' comments indicate the frustrations students experience as a result of the delays:

I have not received my assignment in the post. I am writing the examination soon. I have to start revising but I cannot do anything without my assignment. (T22)

Two weeks ago I made in inquiry about my assignment from dispatch in the administration. I was told that it was in the post. I have not received it. I don't know what to do. The examinations are in a few weeks time. (T24)

When I telephoned the department about the tutorial letter and assignments I did get back I was transferred to another department. But no one was there to help me. I need my assignment for the examination. (T27)

The slow assignment turn-around time has implications for students' academic development as it means that students do not receive prompt feedback. ESL theory on student feedback shows that language learning is most effective if feedback occurs immediately after the learning process has occurred. The delays in returning assignments varied, but the minimum possible return date was a month after the due date for submission. Delays result from a number of factors. As illustrated below, the circulation of student assignments normally includes four postal operations:

student posts assignment



administration: assignments are sorted out and registered at the assignment section and sent out to the department



department: assignments are recorded and allocated to staff for marking



staff: assignments are marked and returned to assignment section



administration: marks are recorded and assignments posted to students

The process involves an external agency, that is the post office, and internally it includes both the administrative and academic departments. A delay at any point slows down the whole processes. This is exacerbated by the inefficient and

inadequate provision made for postal services in the townships. It is not unusual to find a small post office serving a township comprising several thousand residents. To solve some of these problems the institution has designated private assignment postal boxes in several areas. But this student's comment shows these are only located in the major cities and towns, and the services are not extended to townships.

In Garankua we have only one post office. There are no post boxes around the township. So I always go to the post office in town. (F13)

The slow assignment turn-around-time has implications on student access in an ODL context in particular. Considering that communication between students and lecturers is primarily through assignments and tutorial letters it means that student support is compromised. Of most concern is that, although the delays have been a problem in previous years, seemingly very little has been done to address them. The delays have consequences for students' progress and achievement.

3. Students' Progress and Underachievement

A distinct feature of the CDL unit was students who year after year register for the CDL module and fail¹³. Since 2000, when the module and semester system were introduced, some students have had to repeat the course several times. This was a concern for CDL lecturers as well, and as a result they established a Veteran Project¹⁴ as an attempt to improve students' language competencies through frequent input.

The students repeating the modules were to be categorised into four groups. The first group comprised students who had failed the assignments as well as the examination. These students acknowledged that they had problems with the assignments and that the feedback they received was not helpful. they had expected to pass and did not understand how they could have failed the examinations:

¹³ This is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

My problem is studying the course. I do not understand some sections in the study guide. I have read the study guide from the first page to the last and did all the exercises. The information looked simple but I did not pass the examinations. (F26)

I am repeating the course, but I aim to pass this year. I am not sure how I failed. It might have been the language. (F29)

I still do not understand why I failed this course last year. I am now doing it for the second time. (F23)

The second group of repeaters had passed all the assignments but did not make it through the examination. They were also at a loss as to why they had failed:

I think I worked very hard. I did all my assignments and passed them. I still do not understand how I failed the examination. I wanted to have my script remarked but I did not have the money to pay for it. Is it not possible for me to get my examination script? I really want to see where I went wrong. I think there was a mistake. (F27)

One student cited a possible discrepancy between what was expected in the assignments and in the examination. Students had used the assignments as yardsticks to determine their potential to pass the examination. It was found that they believed that in passing the assignments they would make it through the examination:

It is very easy when I read the study guide and write the assignments. But when it comes to exams it is very difficult. I am not allowed to use a dictionary in the examination. So what do I do when I get words I do not understand. It is better to make assignments difficult rather than examinations. (F16)

However, students held these expectations despite the warning in the tutorial letter that there was little correlation between assignment marks and the examination:

Obtaining 100 credits does NOT guarantee that you will pass the examination; it merely earns you admission to the examination (BDL).

¹⁴ The Veteran Project is a CDL unit initiative to address the needs of those students who repeatedly fail the CDL module.

The third group of repeaters were students who had registered for other modules in different departments. They were also surprised that they had failed the EDL module and could not understand why they could pass other courses but repeatedly failed this module. They found it difficult to reconcile their continued poor performance in the EDL modules with the success in other modules:

I have passed all my third year courses but I cannot graduate because of the English module. How is it possible that I can pass a third year course in another department but fail a first year course in this department? The examination was not difficult. I am also surprised that I always fail with a 43% mark. (F15)

I failed for the first time and got a 44%. I was worried but then decided to register again as I was confident that I would make it for the second time. But I failed the examination again getting 44%. I asked for my script to be remarked but the results were the same. I do not understand how this happens. (F16)

It was noted that some students continually got the same percentage¹⁵. ESL theory attributes repeated failure partly to 'fossilisation', that is, a process in which incorrect linguistic features become a permanent part of the way a second or foreign language speaker speaks or writes a language (Ellis, 1985). According to Ellis (1985), this results from students' lack of exposure to the target language speakers as a correcting model; and is confirmed in a number of studies on second language learning which show that the use of second language under restricted social and psychological contact limits language development (Spolsky, 1989). Students at Unisa are more at a disadvantage as they are less likely to have any contact with lecturers in a university that remains largely print-based. Efforts to improve students' language competence are exacerbated by their reading patterns. It was noted that they did not experience reading as a major source of language learning, it being mainly restricted to prescribed textbooks and the course material, and they were less likely to read a book for pleasure. Further discussions with students revealed that they had very little or no access to other reading material, partly because significant areas of the country either lack or have inadequate and sparsely equipped libraries. This has implications

¹⁵ In a study on students' performance it was found that the percentages of most failures varied between 35 and 45%.

for the access by those students regarded as linguistically incompetent, because without exposure and easy access to a varied range of reading material they are likely to remain incompetent.

3.1 *Shortcomings of the study material*

Some students attributed their failure to the study material, which they found difficult to understand. They were unable identify specific problem areas in the course material:

The assignment was not difficult but I do not know if I answered the questions as I was required. I read the study guide and did all the exercises. But when I came to the assignment I was not sure. (F24)

The assignment questions seemed easy to me but I was surprised that I got a very low mark. I worked out all activities in the study guide. I do not know about the assignment. I am lost. (27)

Others were more specific and identified the terminology in the assignments as their weak point for a start they were unfamiliar with the term 'portfolio':

I find it difficult to understand some of the words used in the assignments, for instance in the second assignment we were asked to write a portfolio but I did not know what that meant. It was only after I had telephoned twice that I was told to just answer all the questions. (F23)

Still others singled out their limited vocabulary as a problem. They welcomed explanations or translations into their first language¹⁶.

¹⁶ Each lesson in the student guide is prefaced with an explanation of the objectives in four languages, English, Isizulu, Afrikaans and Sepedi. Although this is a major first step in recognition of the two African languages, Isizulu and Sepedi, much groundwork still has to be done. Firstly, to be fair to all students, all nine African languages should be recognised. Secondly, teaching and learning should look into building on students' prior knowledge of languages, particularly at first-year level.

I think the course is useful, but we need more activities to be added in some difficult lessons. I speak Tsonga. It will help us if you include Tsonga in the beginning of every lesson so that I can understand better. (F24)

For some the lack of improvement in their essay writing was worrying. Some of the students were allowed to resubmit their assignments, enabling them to develop. However this had to be stopped as more students came with requests to resubmit.

I tried my best to improve my essay writing. But I do not understand why I cannot do it right. I have read through the study guide and tried the activities in the study guide. The lecturer told me to keep on practicing my writing and that the more I write then I will improve. This is not helping me. (29)

These findings might be an indication that the criticism raised against the study material at Unisa have not been adequately addressed (See discussion on SAIDE Report in Chapters One and Two). They show that students' expectations have not yet been met. This has implications for students' retention and throughput rates. For these the likelihood is that they will drop out, particularly as they felt they were not getting the necessary support from lecturers and the institution. The difficulty as noted previously is that at the time lecturers were not in a position to offer the individual support these students required. Indications are that students are reacting to the problems of the new system. In addition the language issues raised in chapter One have not been adequately addressed. Student still come in with inadequate language competencies which the institution is not addressing adequately.

3.2 Limitations of the semester system

Students expressed concerns about the limited time they were allowed to complete the course. As part of the restructuring process, the institution introduced a modular and a semester system, two systems specifically implemented to facilitate student access (see Chapters Two and Three). While previously students were required to do an entire course for one year, they now had an option of either registering at the

beginning of the year and writing the examinations in May/June, or registering in June/July and sitting for examinations in October/November. This meant that students had in effect three months to go through the CDL module, which before 2000 had been taught in more or less ten months. While some students benefited from the semester system, the findings show that this practice created difficulties for CDL students, some of who were overwhelmed and confused by the demands put on them in the short period of time. They expressed the need for more time to go through and reflect on the study material and assignments:

I did not have enough time to fully complete and understand the course thoroughly. The time we have is not enough. I am writing examinations but I am not ready. I have not received my assignment back. (F21)

The course helped me a lot with my language, which I failed to adopt at matric level. But I could not get the prescribed books. Some sections in the study guide were long. It took me a long time to read a lesson and to do the exercises. Sometimes I had to do read the lesson again because the exercises were difficult. (F17)

The course was difficult. There were things I did not understand and the due date was very short. I had to write the two assignments in one month. It was not easy reading all the sections in the study guide and after to write the assignments. Now I have to write the examinations. (F20)

The findings indicate that the semester system impacted negatively on students' adjustment to the academic environment in which they had to study. They found that the amount of material on administrative and academic matters they were required to go through was daunting and disconcerting. The semester system had had a ripple effect on the system as a whole and the findings on its limitations (see Chapter Five) resonate with those of lecturers, which shows that it precludes students from getting the required academic support and guidance to enhance access. Because of increased workloads and demands, lecturers had less time for marking, providing feedback on assignments and attending to students' inquiries. In the discussion above the limitations of computer marked and self-assessment assignments on ESL students' academic development were shown. The semester system also has implications on the mailing of study guides and assignments. The delays are multiplied as more assignments have to be sent out in a shorter time. More importantly this affects

examinations negatively, as some students pointed out. They have to sit for examinations without having had their assignments returned, which they view as essential for revision purpose¹⁷.

While the on one hand it is clear that the semester system has without doubt benefited students who have been excluded from actively participating in higher education, and affords them an accelerated route to getting a degree, on the other hand its effectiveness for students who have previously been disadvantaged academically, linguistically and socio-economically is questionable. Although proposed as a system that was flexible, students were still expected to follow the programme, rigidly contradicting theories on ODL.

This has implications for the adoption of models for widening participation from elsewhere, which tend to take little cognisance of the local infrastructure. In the UK, for instance, widening participation through ODL has been accompanied by student support systems where individual students are assigned personal tutors who not only take the initiative to make the initial contact but also monitor their progress. In contrast, at Unisa widening participation has put pressure on the available resources, resulting in a decrease in the much needed student support. For instance, the increased workloads and demands on lecturers have been addressed through a decrease in student support.

The findings indicate that existing academic support and guidance neither meet CDL students' expectations nor address their needs adequately. If students are to develop into independent learners and acquire the expected self-study and coping skills required to function in an academic environment, they must be supported in various ways. From the findings it is clear that, to facilitate access, student support should form an integral part of the teaching and learning context from the onset. The fact that some Unisa students opt to register concurrently with private institutions that offer contact tuition, indicates the need for a more structured and effective student

¹⁷ Unisa has aligned its course material to SAQA/NQF requirements (See Chapters Two and Three).

support system¹⁸. The gaps between existing academic support structures and students' expectations have implications for student access, because without the expected critical academic support student failure might be inevitable.

The findings on the quality of academic support and guidance are examined in three areas: telephone interactions, consultation with lecturers and group discussions.

4. Academic Support and Guidance

4.1 *Telephone consultations with lecturers*

As one of the main mediums of communication between students and lecturers, the telephone plays a vital role in facilitating student access. Students rated it the second most important medium of interaction between themselves and the lecturers, after the study material and assignments. Its advantages in an ODL context are that it facilitates direct communication with lecturers, provides negotiation of meaning, immediate and direct feedback, and is readily available and affordable (Simpson, 2000: 58). However, students' experiences of telephone interactions with both academic and administrative staff revealed the contrary. On the one hand, some students did find that contacting the institution was not difficult:

The one time I phoned the department I did talk to the lecturer. We discussed my questions about the assignment and everything was explained to me very well. I did not have a problem. (F7)

I phoned the department and I spoke to a lecturer. I made an appointment to see the lecturer the next day. (F6)

However, others found that, although getting through to the institution was unproblematic; getting hold of a specific lecturer was not as easy as they had been

¹⁸ Some private institutions, for instance, Damelin and Midrand Campus, offer contact tuition to Unisa students at an extra cost, which exceeds Unisa tuition fees significantly and are beyond the means of an average student from the township.

made to believe. Some students expressed concern that they had to wait for a long time while they were unsuccessfully transferred from one department to another:

When I phoned to find out about my assignment I was told to hold on. I was put through to someone who could help me. But the phone just kept on ringing for a long time. No one answered. I was cut off as my money was not enough. This frustrated me as I missed my lunch to make the call. It seems no one cares about us students.(F10)

Every time I phone someone does answer the phone. I do not have a problem with that. My problem is that I use a public telephone. I cannot wait for a long time to speak to someone. I was made to wait for a lecturer. But my money was finished in the end I had to give up without talking to the lecturer. I think this is not fair for students. We spend a lot of money and time on the phone. (F18)

For others, meanwhile, even getting through to the institution proved to be difficult. For them the long wait and answering machine proved discouraging and costly.

I phoned many times but could not get any reply. I also asked my sister to phone for me from her work. But luckily I got through. I was told to hold on as I was transferred to another the department. The telephone was still ringing but I waited for a long time and no one replied. Then someone answered but she also told me to hold on. I forget how may times this happened but in the end I gave up. It was useless. (F25)

The delays in transferring student calls was evidenced during the observation period, it being noted that some students who called, commenced their discussions with desperate pleas for assistance:

Please do not transfer my call again, I have to speak to someone. (T12)

I have been holding on for the last twenty minutes you have to help me. Do not put me through to someone again. I have run out of money. (T17)

Further investigation revealed that students had been on the line for ten minutes or more while waiting to be transferred from one department to another. The delays were partly related to the limited office hours in which students could access

lecturers and administrative staff¹⁹; to students not being able to differentiate between academic and administrative matters²⁰; and to the unavailability of the relevant lecturers at specific periods of the academic year²¹. It was observed that the number of student calls increased during two specific periods, before the due date for assignments and just before examinations.

Some students pointed out that, at times, getting through to the institution during office hours was difficult:

I think the telephone system in the institution is faulty. Many times during working hours there is no reply . (T15)

I tried phoning my lecturer once but there was no reply. It was at nine in the morning. I did not phone again as I had asked for my neighbour's phone and I was made to pay. I though I would find someone to help me during that time. (F8)

In my case I spoke to the lecturer on the phone. I think I spoke to the secretary first, who after listening to my question put through to a lecturer. But the lecturer seemed not to understand what I was talking about. I tried explaining my problem. But at the end I was lost. The phone too was cut off. I could not phone back as all my money had run out.(T18)

Some students expressed difficulties with calling at the specified official working hours as they did not have easy access to a telephone during those times:

I am not allowed to use the phone at work. The only time I can phone is after 5.00 when I arrive home. I tried phoning during lunchtime but the time was too short and the line of people was very long. So I gave up. (F17)

¹⁹ Academic staff office hours are normally from 8h00 to 13h00. A flexi-time system has been introduced which makes them available beyond the set times. Administrative staff hours are between 8h00 and 16h00. These hours exclude the times when staff goes for lunch, meetings and other related commitments.

²⁰ Sometimes students cannot differentiate between academic and administrative inquiries. This is exaggerated by the number of sub-departments in the administration department. For example, there are the Assignment Section and the Examination Department and Despatch Department which students find confusing. In some instances there is an overlap in what are regarded as administrative and academic matters.

²¹ There are specified times when the department is run by limited staff, normally during school holidays. Often the lecturers responsible for a specific module would be away on leave.

I asked my mother to phone from her work . But she also has to ask her employer to phone and ask the questions for me. I gave her my student number but sometimes she finds that it is difficult to talk to the lecturers because they do not understand her. They tell her that I must phone myself. (F9)

I do not have a telephone at home. I use my brother's phone at his house. He only comes at home after 6.00. The only time I can use his phone is when he comes home from work or during the weekends. (T12)

I can only phone the lecturers in the afternoon as I am working. But I always find that I am not able to get through or the phone rings for a long time with no reply. Sometimes I only get an answering machine. (T10)

Where I stay there are no public telephones near us. To make a call I have to take a taxi to the nearest post office where we have public telephones. Sometimes I find that the phones are not working. So I have to get another taxi and travel to town. I spent money on two taxis and the travelling takes a long time. What worries me is that after getting through to the lecturer, I cannot explain what my problem is. I just get confused. I have now given up and do not phone anymore. (T20)

In some instances, attempts to return student calls were unsuccessful as they were being made from public telephones or, as further investigations revealed, the telephone numbers they supplied on registration either belonged to a friend or were non-existent. Students felt that they had to supply a telephone number on registration, despite not having access to one.

Cellular telephones have partly made it easier for students to contact the institution at any time from any location. However, it was costly, as this student's comments show: 'Calling from a cellular telephone is even much more expensive than using a public telephone. It costs me three times more to phone from a cellular telephone' (T10)²². This is exacerbated in instances where students struggle to explain what their difficulties are or when they have to hold on for long periods of time.

²² When cellular telephones were first introduced in the country, they were aimed at facilitating communication, particularly for those people who were previously disadvantaged as far as accessing telephones. But they have turned out to be even more expensive than the ordinary telephone. This is a good example of the existing tension between economic growth and redistribution.

The institution has launched two initiatives to improve communication with students: The Call Centre, and Students-on-line (SOL). Since calls were centralised through the Call Centre, more were able to get through to the university. However, some pointed out that the centre was only operational during office hours and dealt mainly with administrative issues. Students academic inquiries still had to be put through to lecturers. This was problematic as staff at the Call Centre pointed out. They raised concerns that attempts to contact lecturers about academic matters were met with resistance²³. While lecturers' disgruntlement indicates the rift between academic and administrative staff, it also has the implications on widening participation.

The SOL programme, on the other hand, despite some teething problems, has proved to be very popular. But the findings show that it only benefits one sector of the student community. Very few, if any, of the students located in townships and rural areas have access to a computer. Coming from low socio-economic environments, students are excluded from active participation. This raises questions about equal opportunities where it is clear that students are far from attaining the level of equality that is likely to enable them to compete successfully for access. In addition, as the findings on lecturers' experiences show on-line communication with students puts more demands on lecturers who are already overburdened. This suggests that the current infrastructure is inadequate to provide the necessary support for widening access.

One other observation regarding student calls was that some found it a distressing experience. Their nervousness and anxiety came through while talking on the phone. Attempts to explain their difficulties to a lecturer seemed to exacerbate their problems:

I telephoned and I was put through to my lecturer. But I could not tell what my problem was. The lecturer kept on saying what do you mean? Can you repeat that? I do not understand you. Speak more loudly. I just got more confused . I put the phone down before I could say what I was phoning about.
(F7)

²³ The head of this section was interviewed.

The staff are sometimes very impatient with me. I try to explain my question but they sometimes just cut me short without listening properly. I know sometimes my language is not right. But I do try. (F10)

I prefer coming in personally. It is difficult to explain on the phone what the questions are. I was at a public telephone and trying to talk and listen with all the noise around was difficult. The lecturer was saying I must speak louder but I could not. I could not stop the traffic noise or tell strangers to keep quiet. I was cut off trying to explain what was happening. (F4)

Students' hesitancy and nervousness could be attributed to their lack of experience in making formal calls and limited exposure to, as well as practice of, speaking in the target language, a condition termed 'culture shock'. For these students, phoning the institution is a stressful experience as they are expected to adhere to specific codes of conduct. In attempts to overcome their limitation, some sound aggressive while other just give up.

The findings show that while the telephone might have the potential to enhance and support students' academic development, it has its limitations which invariably have implications for student access. These findings are confirmed in the SAIDE report (discussed in Chapters One and Two), which notes that internationally the telephone has been shown to be an ineffective medium for addressing students' academic difficulties (SAIDE, 1994: 143). According to the report, the disadvantages of telephone tutoring are worsened by students and lecturers not having a good knowledge of each other (SAIDE, 1994:46). The findings suggest that student access might be marginalised if existing academic support channels are limited and not aligned to their needs.

4.2 *Face-to-face consultations with lecturers*

Students expressed a need for more and frequent face-to-face interactions with the lecturers. Their responses indicated that their conceptions of what distance education incorporates were different from those of the institution. Comments such as 'I did not realise that we did not have any lectures' (T15) or 'I thought we attended on a daily

basis' (T19) were quite common during telephone discussions with students. Some expressed the need for contact tuition because they experienced difficulties with the study material. They were thus disappointed to learn that daily lectures were not offered:

I registered with this university thinking that I could attend lectures everyday. It was only after I had registered that I found that we do not have lectures everyday. I am finding it very difficult to read and understand all the work on my own. I think we should have at least three lectures every week. (F1)

I also thought we had classes everyday. I bought a monthly ticket for the train so that I can attend the lessons. But, I was surprised that there were no classes for us. (F11)

I think the study guide was quite easy, but some of the lessons were tough. I needed someone to explain and show me how to deal with the lessons. (F23)

The responses show that students were under prepared to deal with the academic demands and did not understand the academic model offered by Unisa. Considering that students came from disadvantaged backgrounds, it is clear that they lacked the understanding of what it took to succeed in higher education.

Even those students who had access to weekly tutorials at the learning centres regarded contact with the lecturers as of great importance²⁴. They found the hour-long tutorial sessions inadequate:

I attend tutorials once a week every Saturday. But the time is too short and I am not able to talk to the tutor about the questions I have. I think we need more than one lecture on this course for students who are in tutorial groups. We need enough time to talk to the tutors at the end of the lecture. This will help us to achieve very good results in the examination. (F7)

Can you organise more than one lecture a week on this course. The tutorials are only an hour long and this is not enough. We do not have enough time to do all the sections in the study guide. (F10)

²⁴ The institution has established a Tutorial Support Programme to provide weekly tutorials, which are aimed at providing additional support for students. For an additional enrolment fee students attend the one hour-long tutorial sessions. The tutorials are taught by external tutors appointed by the institution.

I am learning a lot about the course from the tutorials. But I think some extra classes during the year will also help us to understand better. We also ask lecturers to come to the tutorials. Sometimes the tutors do not know the answers. (F14)

Some students found attending the tutorial costly, as they had to travel long distances to the nearest centre²⁵.

I find my studies very difficult. I thought we could have class discussions I very disappointed to learn that we do not have any. I was told about the learning centre but I have to pay extra fees for attending. Then I have to get money for travelling because the centre is far from my home in Garankua. The distance and financial problems are making it difficult for me. (F17)

I would like to attend the tutorials. But I am not working. I cannot pay the tuition fees. The taxi to travel to the centre is an expensive for me. I have to spend at least R20.00 to get to the centre every Saturday. I tried applying for a bursary but I was told that I did not qualify, it was not available for access students. Why can't we have a centre in Hammanskraal? It will be easier for many students. (F2)

A visit to one of the learning centres indicated that the weekly tutorials were very popular. It was noted that the venues were overcrowded and after each session students had to leave as there would be another class coming in. This they found unsatisfactory as it meant that they could not to see the tutor privately. Others expressed concerns that the tutor could not help them with some of their problems and referred them to the lecturers at the main campus. Thus they welcomed the presence of a lecturer at the sessions. Their inquiries ranged from academic queries related to unreturned assignments, to administrative issues on tutorial letters and unavailable textbooks.

Some students suggested an increased number of assignments to compensate for the lack of face-to-face tuition:

²⁵ The areas in the above quotations Garankua and Hammanskraal are townships outside Pretoria, where the learning centre is located. For these students attending a tutorial normally involves a long costly journey by public transport to the centre.

I found most of the chapters helpful. But it would be useful if we could have more assignments to send in. The feedback will make it easier to see what we need to do to pass the examinations. (F16)

For me to pass the course I request more guidelines, especially for exam guidance. The study guide is easy but the questions are very tricky sometimes. More assignments will give me more practice. (F23)

The findings indicate that face-to-face interaction with lecturers provides the ideal academic support for facilitating student access. However, the high lecturer-student ratios preclude this type of interaction between lecturers and students. The findings resonate with those of lecturers which show that the CDL lecturers cannot cope with the large numbers of students they have to cater for (as discussed in Chapter Five). This means that in the present context, students' expectations are less likely to be met. The findings have implications for widening participation, because if students do not receive the necessary support the present drop-out and failure rates will worsen.

4.3 *Group discussions*

Group discussions constitute a form of contact tuition the university offers to students once or twice a year (see Chapter Three). In contrast to tutorials, which are conducted by external tutors, group discussions are led by lecturers. The high attendance levels show that students rate these lectures highly. As one student pointed out: 'This is the only time we get a chance to meet with the lecturers' (F3). However, group discussions are held mainly at four regional centres Durban, Cape Town, Pietersburg and Pretoria. As a result, students situated in remote areas are excluded from attending and felt isolated because they were not provided with the same support as those who stayed near the regional centres:

We need more discussion classes on the assignments. Group discussions should be offered to all students. Classes should not only benefit students in Pretoria. I stay in Tzaneen and the Pietersburg centre is very far from my home. Could you arrange for lectures come to our town. (T4)

I have not been to any of the lectures because all were held in Pretoria and Cape Town. I live in the Free State. We do not have lectures in Bloemfontein. Why is that? We pay the same fees as the students in Pretoria. (T25)

I could not come to the lectures as it is very far from Mafeking. I could not get accommodation. Is the university going to make other arrangements for us? (T17)

It was noted that some students were confused because a tutorial letter was sent out informing them of the dates and venues for the group discussions. They travelled to the regional centres only to be told on arrival that accommodation had not been arranged for them and that they were expected to arrange it privately.

Do lecturers know how far I had to travel to the discussion classes? I was disappointed. The university did not arrange any accommodation for students. (T25)

I received a letter informing me about the group discussions. But I was surprised that when I came there was no accommodation for us. (T15)

Other students complained that they had missed the group discussions because they received the information about tutorials late:

I only received my letter regarding the group discussion a week later. Important academic information should be sent on time. We should receive it with the study guides when we register. (F6)

Students should be told in time about group discussions. I only received the group discussion tutorial letter three weeks after the event. (T3)

It was noted that although students' responses to the group discussions were positive, they could not all be accommodated. In fact some had to be turned back because the lecture hall was already filled to capacity. Those who stayed expressed their dissatisfaction with these arrangements:

I took leave from work to attend the group discussions. I was disappointed at the lecturers. The venue was too small, I left because I was standing at the back and could not hear what the lecturer was saying. I had no desk and I did not receive the handouts with the exercises. The lecturers kept on

apologising. I do not understand because they knew that we were coming and they should also know how many students they have. (F18)

I travelled all the way from Nelspruit to attend the group discussions. But was very disappointed. How does UNISA operate? I did not get any of the handouts. I think the discussions were irrelevant. No one said anything about the assignments or the examinations. I could not even talk to the lecturer afterwards about some of the problems I have with the study guide. (F12)

I attended the group discussions but did not receive any handouts. It was difficult to follow the lecture which was part of the handout. (F2)

The group discussions were a disappointment. I thought we would discuss the assignments or the examination. But nothing was said about that. (F19)

Students valued and looked forward to group discussions because they provided a chance for meeting the lecturers:

I think group discussions will benefit all students. We all want to meet our lecturers. I think three or four group discussion classes will be enough. (F15)

I work from Monday to Saturday so I have to study by myself. I wish we could have group discussions in our area. I want to see the lecturer and also talk to other students doing the course.

Some expressed the need to spread the number of venues to other areas:

Students in the Free State cannot attend group discussions. There should be more group discussion classes. We want to see the lecturers in our town. (T23)

Can lecturers come to Tzaneen for the group discussions. I cannot travel to the Pietersburg centre. It is very far and there is a problem with finding accommodation. (T11)

In sum, students had mixed views about the group discussions. On the one hand they welcomed the opportunity to interact with and get to know their lecturers: on the other hand, they found the actual experience disappointing. They were dissatisfied with the overcrowded lecture rooms, the lectures that did not address assignments and examinations, and the shortage of handouts. In addition the specified venues were inconvenient for some students and they found it frustrating that they were

expected to travel long distances and make their own private accommodation arrangements as well.

Related to the academic support and guidance theme was the administrative support and guidance provided for students. The findings indicate that students lacked adequate information on the university's expectations, rules and regulations, their rights and privileges, and range of academic choices they could make. It was clear that students lacked vital information on the options available for facilitating their entry into the institution. They had not made use of available student support facilities because they were unaware of them. In addition, existing amenities were inaccessible to some students as these were mainly located at the main campus. While the on one hand it could be argued that at tertiary level it is expected of students to take up the responsibility of acquainting themselves with institutional requirements, on the other hand it was equally the institution's responsibility to see to it that information on these facilities is readily available and that these are easily accessible to students. This is particularly valid in this instance, where students come from an impoverished educational background and low socio-economic environments.

5. Administrative Support and Guidance

5.1 *Student induction process*

The long queues during the registration session added to students' confusion. Despite the institution offering alternative means for registration, through the post and on-line, students still opted to register in person. They cited the inefficiency of the postal system as one of the reasons they chose to come in personally. For those students who stayed in informal settlement areas, postal services were inconsistent, unreliable or non-existent. Calls from students complaining about the late or non-arrival of their study material by post confirmed their frustration: 'I registered by post two months ago but I have not as yet received my study material. When are the assignments due?

What should I do? Do I have to come personally to collect my study material? ' (T12). The inefficiency of the postal services also had an impact on the general academic student support. It resulted in delays in students receiving tutorial letters, which were essential for examination revision: 'I am writing examinations in two weeks time and I have not received my assignments and the feedback. Can I fetch it personally? Where do I go and who do I see? ' (T10). The CDL unit was at a loss as to how to address students' concerns. As a result the tendency was to refer them to the administrative departments with the hope that someone there would assist them. The on-line system was useful in addressing students' queries about the delays in getting the study material and tutorial letters, as these could be electronically sent to them. But only a limited number of students benefited from the on-line system. For instance, none of the students in this study had access to a computer at work, home or locally in the township.

Students had mixed views about the registration period. While they expressed their excitement at ultimately getting the opportunity to study at a university, they also found the registration session confusing and daunting, offering inadequate support for non-traditional students. Some found it difficult to get the personal attention they had expected:

I was not prepared to wait in a queue for those many hours. I came arrived at 9:00 and only finished at 2: 00 in the afternoon. I wanted to ask question about the course I was told to register for. But the queue was too long and I eventually gave up and left without making the inquiry. (F5)

When I registered in January there was a long queue of other students. I was not sure which course to take. When I went to ask for help I found another long queue. I decided to register for this course because it was advertised in the newspapers. I had to register on that day as I did not have enough money to travel to the institution again. (F9)

I could not ask any questions about the course. The queue was too long and I felt I was being unfair on other students if I asked too many questions. All the assistants were busy and I thought I would be wasting their time and my time because I was not sure what I wanted to do. There were many students it was confusing. (F20)

I wanted someone to tell me about the different courses and explain the different choices I can make. I did not choose to do this course. I was told this was the only course I can take for first year. I complained afterwards but that did not help. (F23)

Some students were dissatisfied with that they were told to register for the CDL module. As these comments indicate, they could not relate the CDL module to the careers they wanted to follow:

I want to do social work. I still do not understand how this course will help me in getting the social work degree. (F17)

I want to do a degree in computers. CDL is about grammar and is for students who do English. I do not see how why I was told to do this module. (F 3)

It was noted that a number of students did not have enough information on what the modules they had registered for entailed. Their comments show that even though the information on the course content and aims was included in the study package received on registration, they were still at a loss. In fact some students found the study package overwhelming: 'I received lots books and documents. I did not know where to start reading. In the end I decided to only read the assignments' (F20). The confusion students experienced with the study material they received on registration was a concern, as noted previously. Although the material contained important information about all administrative and academic aspects of their studies, students found it confusing and did not know where to start. As a result they tended to focus mainly on assignments, leaving out equally vital information on institutional expectations.

In general, the findings identified factors that students regarded as important in facilitating their academic success, as well as those that were impeding their progress. In addition, they reveal that those aspects students identified as important in promoting academic success, for example, frequent and detailed feedback on assignments, accessibility of lecturers either for telephone consultations and personal visits, increased and frequent face to face tuition and group discussions, could not be adequately addressed under the present circumstances. This suggests that, although

the institution had instituted several changes (see Chapter Three) to accommodate the increased number of students, these fell short of addressing students' needs.

The findings highlight the concerns raised in various studies on the effectiveness of ODL in promoting access for disadvantaged students (Evans et al., 1996; Stephens et al., 1997; Manning, 2001). In pointing out the likelihood of the study guide material hindering independent and critical thinking Unwin et al., argue: 'Distance education courses, because they are in print, have a status and authority in excess of the verbal lecture' (1997: 92). They argue that because ODL 'centres around self-contained course materials' it tends to have immense powers. According to Stephens et al. the situation is complicated by 'The involvement of outsiders, tutors, external markers and course developers' as they bring in their individual views which 'can be seen as a step towards greater alienation of all parties involved (1997: 91). It diminishes responsibility and ownership of the teaching and learning process.

A case is made for a more critical understanding of the complexities of distance learning which, at one and the same time, can be seen as a catalyst for educational access and part of the machinery of social reproduction. (Stephens et al, 1997: 79).

The findings also support Stephens' caution against the uncritical advancement of student access through ODL.

Considering distance learning in relation to access and equal opportunities is rather like looking at one of those visual images which continually oscillate between one percept and another depending on what the viewer chooses to focus on as a foreground or background. Distance learning can appear as either an extension of educational opportunity, or part of the machinery of its restriction. Viewed in different ways it can be foregrounded as a social equalizer, or as an instrument of inequality (Stephens, 1997:92).

Of significance are the added implications of ODL in higher education. According to Marland while research shows the advantages of open learning in primary and secondary school 'Currently there is insufficient evidence to confirm the benefits of open learning in higher education' (Marland, 1997: 71). In South Africa, SAIDE, has been instrumental in promoting quality distance learning²⁶. But, as this study shows there is need for more studies that focus specifically on higher education institutions. This is imperative because various contact universities are now also offering distance learning programmes.

Donn's cautious reminder of the possible consequences of unmonitored and insufficient support for growth in the higher education sector is apt: while 'redress is a crucial starting point for any strategy of growth in the South African higher education system' (1997:185), it is equally imperative to keep in mind other equally key factors which include 'the importance of relating growth to capacity, quality and the human resource needs' (1997:186). This is a necessary consideration because although ODL does play a crucial role in promoting access other dynamics including the factors outlined in Chapter One (SAIDE, 1994, 1995 and Swift, 1993, 1994), the policy contradictions delineated in Chapter Two and the context of change at Unisa since 1994 examined in Chapter Three, are likely to perpetuate existing inequalities.

6. Summary

This chapter analysed the findings on students' experiences and perceptions of the realities of widening participation at Unisa. It revealed that, although the institution had established several changes to accommodate a diverse and increased student population, these were inadequate. This was shown by the inconsistencies between students' expectations and institutional responses to the increased student numbers. The findings also indicate a persistent gulf between the policy imperatives of widening student participation and institutional responses to a diverse and increased student population.

²⁶ SAIDE is discussed in some detail in Chapters One, Two and Three.

The findings also revealed the strengths and weaknesses of a case study approach in an institution undergoing change. On the one hand it brought more insight into the challenges facing students struggling to get to grips with a new situation, that of adjusting to an academic environment. It highlighted a range of issues which, despite being of importance in determining the extent to which access could be enabled, tended to be taken-for granted and were likely to remain hidden, unnoticed and unaddressed. On the other hand, the findings also highlighted the limitations of conducting a case study with students in a higher education setting. The limitations pertaining specifically to students' involvement, as pointed out in Chapter Three, included the time constraints as students' availability was not guaranteed, and difficulties in determining the extent to which students should be involved. In addition, as a participant observer the researcher was drawn into assuming more responsibilities of counselling students and acting as an intermediary between students and lecturers, as well as between students and the administration. These constraints constitute some of the dilemmas arising from case studies which have as yet not been addressed.

However, students represent one dimension of the day-to-day realities of widening student participation. Lecturers constitute an equally important aspect of these realities. The next chapter analyses the findings on lecturers' perceptions and experiences of the day-to-day challenges of addressing an increased and diverse student population in a changing educational context.

CHAPTER FIVE

WIDENING PARTICIPATION: LECTURERS' EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS

1. Introduction

This chapter analyses the findings on lecturers' experiences and perceptions of the impact of widened student participation policy imperatives at the programme level. The findings highlight the day-to-day challenges lecturers face in teaching a diverse and increased number of disadvantaged students, as well as reconciling teaching functions to the departmental and institutional demands. It identifies the barriers, concerns and strategies they employed to accommodate an increased and diverse student population.

The value of these findings is that being at the interface between students and the institution, lecturer perceptions are useful in determining the extent to which access was enabled. They reflect the institutional realities of the day-to-day practices of the teaching and learning context, which under normal circumstances tend to be overlooked. But more importantly they bring to light how individuals at the institutional level were responding to and addressing the policy imperatives outlined in the higher education and NQF policy documents.

The dilemmas lecturers face in the changing context of higher education provision, especially in respect to widening participation, have been a focus of several research studies (Evans and Abbot, 1998; Henkel, 2000; Doring, 2002). The studies show that because lecturers occupy a controversial position in the institution, they reveal a different dimension of the impact of increased student numbers at the institutional level. This is partly a result of the different and conflicting roles they have to assume

in the change process as employees, professionals and individuals. On the one hand they are required to protect their interests as individuals, while on the other hand they have to follow directives that require implementing policies that sometimes negate all pedagogic considerations. But as Doring (2002:146) points out, of most significance is that in 'Shifting their work to respond to the demands of the university they have in the process become victims of change'. Lecturers are put in a position where in their attempts to address students' needs and expectations they are also required to actively participate in and address institutional restructuring processes.

The findings on students' perceptions, from the previous section, were used as a basis to further investigate the realities widening participation from the CDL lecturers' perspectives (noted in Chapter Three). Owing to time limitations lecturers were also asked to respond individually to these questions as a follow up to the informal discussions with the researcher during the fieldwork period:

- What do you want CDL students to learn from the course?
- To what extent does the course achieve this?
- Where and why does it fall short?
- What other factors are constraining your ability to teach effectively?
- What strategies do you employ to address CDL students' needs?

These questions are significant because they focus on lecturers' day-to-day interaction with students at the programme level. The questions centre on lecturers' experiences and perceptions to delineate how shifts in institutional functions and practices are accommodating a greater and more diverse student population, as well as an understanding of how these changes adapt to the taken-for-granted institutional practices. In addition, this chapter interweaves findings from the data on participant observation, interviews with administrative staff and documents.

The findings are categorised into three themes identified as defining the day-to-day realities of CDL lecturers' experiences and perceptions: the teaching and learning demands, departmental demands and the institutional demands. Each theme was further categorised into sub-themes which show that massification, which has produced a much wider diversity in the profile of students, and wider national and

institutional restructuring processes have set new and contending demands on lectures at the institutional level. These themes emanate from the data (Dey1993: 97) and the theoretical insights raised in Chapters One, Two and Three (Yin, 104). As they address questions on which aspects of ODL will hamper or expand access to university? they reflect the capacity of Unisa to bring about large scale change.

2. Teaching And Learning Demands

2.1 *Catering for diverse students' needs and competencies*

During the fieldwork period the five lecturers were responsible for over 8000 students, including about 1500 CDL1 and 3500 EDL1 students¹. The increase in student numbers indicates the successful recruitment and marketing strategies by the department and the university. It is also a result of the institution's open admission policy which, in line with the NCHE (1996) and WPHE proposals, was aimed at making university education accessible to all students. However, this resulted in lecturers having to deal with students with different competence levels. It was observed that although assumptions were that CDL1 students were academically more competent than EDL1 students, in reality the two groups experienced similar academic difficulties. This lecturer's comment confirms the observation that despite differences in qualifications the two groups of students experienced the same academic difficulties:

At present the registration is 1533 as opposed to the EDL first semester which is 3543. You are indeed correct in your assumption that there is not much difference between the two groups of students wrt language competence and difficulties experienced. The main difference is that the CDL1's managed that University entrance requirement while the others have matric only. In theory

¹ The CDL unit offers ten modules, of which seven are presented half-yearly as semester courses, and the rest are year modules. It was noted that although each lecturer was assigned the responsibility of two or three specific courses, sometimes more, this was mainly for administrative purposes; on the whole, they functioned as a team and shared the teaching responsibilities for all ten modules. One of the benefits of the team-teaching approach was that students had a greater chance of being attended to by any lecture available regardless of the module they were registered for.

then the former should be better but in reality not much difference is visible. I accept your statement that the majority of these students live in the townships and were schooled there but do not agree that they come to the institution with expectations which tend not to be met. (L1)

Considering students' views from the preceding chapter it could be argued that the comment indicates a limited knowledge on students' educational background and academic competence. This is not surprising because lecturers do not get to meet students, nor are they involved in making decisions on whether students are capable of meeting the course demands. Clearly, with no structures in place to determine individual students' academic capabilities, it is unlikely that lecturers can adequately predict and cater for students' academic incompetence. The comment confirms Entwistle's observations on lecturers inability to assess students' academic competence that 'Staff often underestimate the substantial differences in the knowledge base which students have when starting any course' (1998:186).

Lecturers' day-to-day teaching activities can be classified into three main areas. Firstly, teaching involved the development of all the course material. Lecturers were expected to write, revise and edit the study guides and tutorial letters as well as set the examination and assignment questions. The material mentioned comprises mainly the printed matter that is sent out to students as part of their study packages. In the second instance lecturers had to address student related matters. These included the marking of assignments, giving lectures during group discussions, attending to students' personal and telephone inquiries, e-mail queries and correspondence. The last aspect of the teaching activity was related to the administrative duties. This involved liaising with other individuals on matters related to their teaching, for example, tutors, external markers, contract course developers and administrative staff. The main challenge for lecturers was to find a balance in addressing all three aspects of their teaching context.

Lecturers cited the range of administrative tasks - teaching, departmental and institution related - incorporated into their daily work as major time-constraints and, as a result, sources of frustration. The following comment encapsulates lecturers' experiences of the day-to-day realities in the face of change:

To give you an idea of our day to day experience - on my desk at this moment is the application to renew ... contract, my Durban group visit schedule (3 X 2 hour lectures plus meeting with tutors), the ... guide to go to the graphic artist (with changes made to unit 1), ... guide to read, the markers' appointments, the ... second semester exam (the 6 first-semester exams have already been done), my ... exam to compile and the marking is still coming ... Yesterday it was Faculty meeting the whole day, Monday was sub-faculty and DEC. ...and so it goes ... Then there are also individual students - what I would like is to make them the first priority. (L1)

This comment shows that, with the increase in student numbers, teaching was increasingly channelled into administrative duties. This was aggravated by the institutional demands that required that they serve on committees set up to drive institutional transformation processes. These additional responsibilities resulted in the marginalisation of their teaching commitments, which included developing new course material and attending to individual students' queries.²

A further view from lecturers was that the increase in student numbers had resulted in a greater diversity of students' competencies that they could not adequately cater for. On one extreme was a group of students who found the course material far too easy³, unchallenging and repetitive. For these students the CDL course was very elementary and as a result unchallenging: 'Another problem is that the course is too easy for students who are actually working and are familiar with the basic skills taught in the present ... course. They do not really learn anything new when they do

²The key academic activities are described, in the institutional policy, as a three-fold process comprising teaching and learning, research and academic citizenship. As part of the institutional restructuring process there has been an increasing shift towards centring academic citizenship, that is community participation, at the same level as the other two at both the institutional and the departmental levels. This shift is significant in the drive to facilitate access in a number of ways. Firstly, unlike in the 1980s, it is an acknowledgement of the importance of the influence the social context in the development of the higher education sector. Secondly, the interaction with the wider community, in this case locals, in the formal and informal institutional structures has the potential to demystify higher education provision and make it more open to public scrutiny and knowledge. Finally, the findings on both students' and lecturers' experiences of access in this study, show the necessity of including aspects of community participation as a way of enhancing teaching and learning.

³ The wide range in ability among those enrolling for this course makes it difficult to pitch the course at a precise level of difficulty. The student sample illustrated these disparities as discussed in Chapter Three.

the course' (L3). In his opening speech of the academic year in 2001, the principal echoed the same concerns, indicating that there might be a need to review current practices: 'The disparities in the backgrounds of Unisa students within South Africa itself make it imperative to deploy a wider range of strategies and media than ever have been necessary in more traditional distance education institutions'⁴.

Another challenge lecturers faced was to rewrite and register the CDL modules with SAQA as legislated. This entailed a rethinking of each module in terms of the SAQA prescriptions, which included redefining the module objectives in terms of outcomes⁵. Thus lecturers responses to the question: 'What do you want CDL students to learn from this course?' reflect the competencies and skills students were expected to have developed at the end of the course: academic reading and writing skills. These are regarded as essential skills that students require to succeed academically.

I want students to learn how to read and write well enough to cope with first year university studies or whatever courses they are taking; e.g. business, law, science. In terms of reading I want them to develop their vocabulary systematically in order to be able to comprehend better. I also want them to read in a more purposeful way, not giving equal weight to every word and every idea. I want them to be active as they read and take notes that will help them to process the text and remember the ideas for future reference. In terms of writing I want them to plan before they write and edit once they have written. (L2)

I would like them to learn how to write effective business documents. It is a basic course and it has been designed for students with very little knowledge of business writing. (L3)

⁴ Speech by principal on the opening of the academic year 2001.

⁵All courses and modules at Unisa have been modified in line with NQF/SAQA prescriptions. The outcomes for the CDL1 and EDL1 modules are stated respectively as to develop ability to read critically with comprehension and insight, to improve students' linguistic competence and develop an ability to write logically and effectively, and to equip learners to cope with university level studies by improving their reading, writing and language skills. The discussion in Chapters Two and Three shows that Unisa has aligned all its course material to meet SAQA requirements. Indications are that most institutions have also complied.

It is important that students in an ODL context develop proficient reading and writing skills because teaching and learning occurs primarily through printed material. Their success is dependent on their ability to comprehend the study guides and all the other reading material they receive on registration. But what does the teaching of reading and writing in a second language learning context entail? Research shows that reading and writing are multifaceted processes that put various demands on students (Hedge, 2000). The studies are inconclusive about the effectiveness of reading and writing instruction in a second language context, as noted in Chapter Four. There is, however, evidence that under certain conditions instruction can facilitate learning. These include adequate time to practise; frequent and immediate feedback; and knowledge of the students' prior knowledge and competence level. The CDL unit has difficulties in meeting all three requirements, suggesting that the course has limited potential to develop students' reading and writing competencies.

One way of determining whether or not the outcomes were met was to evaluate the effectiveness of the course. In response to the question: 'To what extent does the course achieve its aims? Lecturers cited the feedback from students, students' performance in assignments and the examination. These are discussed in turn.

2.2 Effectiveness of the CDL module

Lecturers cited the feedback received from students as an indication of the level of success of the course. This comment reflects CDL lecturers' views:

I have had feed back from students who have said that the course has helped them to write better business letters and that their knowledge of business writing has improved. I would thus say that the course is helpful for students who have very little knowledge of business writing. (L3)

It was observed that students' evaluation of the course was not normally practised. It was noted that the input from students was not built into the programme in the same way as, for instance, assignments and examinations. Neither the CDL unit nor the Department had any formal structures in place for getting feedback on students'

evaluations of the course on a regular basis, either yearly for year long courses or half-yearly for the semester courses. Instead evaluations were likely to be initiated by students themselves, or in some cases it was generally conducted on a rather ad hoc basis as a separate research activity not directly linked to the day-to-day teaching and learning activities. In most instances students expressed their views by contacting the lecturers personally, by coming into the department, telephonically or by letter. The students' evaluations of the course material are important as they have the potential to highlight the taken-for-granted meanings and thus practices that impact on effective teaching as shown in the SOL⁶ exchange between students. However, from time to time, students' views are sought through questionnaires, for example, in the EDL module, where students' experiences of the course material were elicited through questionnaires at the end of the course⁷.

It was observed, however, that despite the lack of formal structures to elicit students' views on the effectiveness of the course, lecturers did take cognisance of students' feedback and comments in some instances. These informal evaluations were taken into consideration when addressing future developments of the CDL unit. The importance of students' feedback on the teaching and learning context, where access is still a contested area in terms of what access entails and how it should be addressed, cannot be sufficiently emphasised.

Lecturers also determined the effectiveness of the course in terms of students' approach to learning, mainly the amount of time students spent on the activities in the study guide and the number of assignments they had submitted:

⁶ The students-on-line programme (SOL) has made it possible for students to express their experiences of the course openly with both lecturers and fellow students. This e-mail exchange is one such example that serves to highlight the effect the slow turn-around-time of assignments has on students' approach to learning: 'Why bother doing the assignments if you get it back 2 days before the exam (if you're lucky)? It does you no good then. It's all good and well setting up a due date, but the lack of response is no incentive to send in the next one' (SOL, 25 March 2002).

⁷ The EDL1 module was an exception in that a study conducted in 2000 elicited students perceptions of the course. The findings from the questionnaire show that while in general students were satisfied with the course material, some had difficulties which had not been addressed.

I think that for the diligent student putting in the required number of hours and doing all the assignments these outcomes are attainable. However, I think many students skimp on time when these modules are compulsory and they often do not do the assignments, which are not compulsory, so they are clearly inadequately prepared when it comes to the examination. (L2)

Students' approach to learning is based on a quantitative measurement of student performance and serves as a useful yardstick for determining the success or failure of a course. However, with regard to the qualitative aspects of the course it fails to show why some students did well and others not. It assumes that the problem lies with the student and not the course material. On the contrary, it was observed that a number of students came in regularly requesting individual support as they experienced difficulties in understanding the course material. It was noted that the same students had put in the required number of hours and worked through all the activities, but still performed poorly. For these students the feedback on the activities in the study guide were not helpful. This suggests that for some reason they still found the course material incomprehensible. But again as pointed out previously, without an adequate system in place to determine students' competence levels it was difficult to conclude where the problem was: whether with students, the course material, or the lecturers. The only entrance criteria used are the matric certificate that students present on registration. These have been shown to be inadequate as they do not adequately reflect students' academic competencies. One likelihood is that students bring with them different personal histories that lecturers are not well placed to recognise or empathise with, and are therefore not in a position to give students the necessary support.

Another lecturer based the success of the course on the examination results: 'I believe that our examination is a fair indication of reading competence achieved' (L1). The examination results for the period that the study was done indicate that examination results are an unreliable criterion for evaluating the course. The examination passes exclude the drop-out rates and also fail to reflect the influence of other variables⁸.

8

COURSE	STUDENT REGISTERED	STUDENT WROTE
CDL1	1482	1326 (508 failed)
EDL1	3056	2580 (1592 failed)

2.3 *Strengths of the CDL module*

Lecturers were content that the present course material was addressing students' needs in terms of the skills they lacked:

I think that the language and learning skills we teach in the way that we teach them are all valuable. In the access modules we have a couple of lectures that introduce students to the university environment, corresponding with the university, contacting the university in person or on the phone, using the Services and Procedures brochure and so on. We also have lectures on using the library. (L2)

One other positive aspect was that the material fostered independent learning:

Our systematic approach to learning which engages the student in self-directed activities and enables him or her to proceed through the material at a pace which h/she determines. With all the pressure, I believe this unit still puts the student first. (L1)

Another pointed to the course material as an adequate foundation course that could be improved to address a more diverse student population.

I think the present module is very good as a basic introduction to business writing. So I think it could be kept as it is, but it needs additional information, such as a language section. (L3)

In response to the question: 'where does the ESL course fall short?' lecturers identified a number of factors which were constraining their ability to teach effectively, thereby limiting their ability to achieve the learning outcomes outlined above. They identified as factors directly compounding the difficulties at the course level the semester system, the assessment strategies, the multiple question assignments, the textbooks and diverse student competencies. The limitations are discussed next.

2.4 *Limitations in meeting course objectives*

Semesterisation and modularisation are aimed at facilitating access by making course programmes more flexible to accommodate students' circumstances⁹. With registrations in January and July, and examinations in June and October, it means that a semester system spans a period of more or less four months. Students are expected to go through the study material, work through all the activities, submit two assignments and receive feedback before writing the examinations at the end of the semester. But the findings in Chapter Four show that students have difficulties with the time span as it did not allow them to adjust to the learning environment.

Lecturers pointed out that students did not get adequate practice as the semester limited the number of assignments they could submit. In addition, they found it difficult to provide the frequent and immediate feedback students required. Consequently assessment was summative with students given little chance to respond to the feedback on assignments. Both students and lecturers were denied the time to gain a better understanding of how learning was proceeding in this unit. This suggested that, because of time limitations, the monitoring of the whole teaching and learning process was relegated to the margins to fit in with institutional structures.

More specifically, the semester system did not allow a teaching and learning context that catered for a diverse student population. This had a major impact on CDL students:

Personally I feel that the semester system does not really help the very weak students. There is not enough time for them to do several written assignments to sort out their problems. They submit a poor assignment, get feedback and go into the exams without really having had the time to establish if they have understood our tutorial comments. Many of them fail the exam or just manage to pass it and I can see that they do not really understand how to write a report, or get the tone of their letter all wrong, or fail because their expression is so poor that the business document is of a very poor standard.
(L3)

⁹ In compliance with SAQA/NQF requirements the CDL module is offered as a semester course. Semesterisation and modularisation are discussed in Chapters Two and Three.

In skills-based language courses a semester is too short a time in which to upgrade reading and writing skills. We cannot set a number of compulsory assignments that would ensure that students worked through the course. We have to rely on students putting in the requisite number of hours and they don't. Many students have fossilised at the level acceptable for standard grade senior certificate (as low as 35%) and they cannot improve without masses of comprehensible input and a reasonable amount of output. (L2)

The 103 guide needs to be improved. Students need additional material. We have done this for 104 which now has 10 additional exercises per unit. The semester system is too short a period for the weak students. The semester system also restricts the number of assignments possible and makes a quick turn around time vital. The challenge is to get the numbers of student scripts that arrive at once attended to at the level we wish our response to be. If we delay at all, the scripts could reach the students after they write the exams. (L1)

Another concern lecturers raised was related to the deficiencies of the course material. They acknowledged the need to revise the present course material to cater for a more diverse CDL student population:

We do not include language teaching in this module and many students need language teaching as well as the teaching of business writing skills. I would like to have a brief language section in the course. This could focus on aspects such as the correct tense to use in various documents, wordy expressions that need to be avoided, and sentence and paragraph structures, etc. In this section we could refer to specific types of documents to illustrate the language usage being explained. I would also like to introduce a more advanced business writing module for students that already have the basic writing skills taught in the present ... module. (L3)

They commented on the need to do away with the textbooks, on which the study guides are based, and to offer the course over a year:

For a start core modules should not be wrap arounds of textbooks; so we need to rewrite such courses. However, we are fully stretched with teaching so it is never that easy to write simultaneously. Second, we need to lobby to have the modules presented over the year not just a semester. We need the staff and the markers to be able to set and mark more assignments and give timely and meaningful feedback. (L2)

Further inquiries revealed that the revision although necessary would put on more pressure on teaching as more time and staff would be required. Rewriting also has

implications for the lecturers' workload as they would be expected to take on more administrative duties:

Increasingly we seem to take on the role of academic administrators co-ordinating marking panels and external writers... The trend at the university at present is towards contract appointment which are fixed term. Increasingly we seem to take on the role of academic administrators co-ordinating marking panels and external writers. (L1)

2.5 *Limitations of assessment strategies*

One other aspect, related to difficulties experienced with catering for a diverse student population, which lecturers raised were the assessment strategies employed by the CDL unit. They were concerned about the effectiveness of the self-assessment assignments in teaching. As noted in chapter four, students had great difficulties understanding the assessment codes used in evaluating the essay assignments. Lecturers pointed out their concerns regarding students' inability to assess their own writing¹⁰. They compared the assessment of good and weak students. The weaker students, as noted in the previous chapter, were inclined to overrate themselves:

About ... yes, I did find that the weaker students tend to give themselves a much higher mark than we would give them. I don't know why this happens. I think some of the weak students really believe that what they have written is good and because they are unable to identify their own errors, they give themselves an unrealistically high mark. Another reason could be that being a weak student, he does not really understand the evaluation notes that he had to read and can therefore not really revise and improve his original essay. (L3)

In contrast, the good students seemed to underestimate their abilities:

I also found that the good student tends to give himself a mark that is lower than the mark we would give him. Once again I don't know why - I can only guess. Maybe he knows what good writing looks like and having high standards, he does not feel that his own work compares favourably with what

¹⁰ Further discussions with lecturers indicated that this was of such major concern that they intended taking this matter up with the Faculty.

he considers to be a well written piece of writing. It could also be that some of the good students do not want to appear to be arrogant and therefore they give themselves a slightly lower mark. (L3)

The importance of self-assessment in promoting independent learning, and also as a technique for addressing large groups of students, was discussed in the previous chapter. Some of the advantages of self-assessment include the potential for learner independence, and more specifically, in this context, self-assessment reduces the marking load resulting from the increased student numbers. However, self-assessment has its limitations. In this situation students seemed not to understand the meaning of the marking codes used in the partially marked assignments. The comments above also show that students were finding it difficult to assess their own work, despite being supplied with the marking codes. This has implications for the use of self-assessment as a teaching technique.

Another difficulty lecturers experienced with assessment was the use of multiple-choice questions in examinations:

I believe that our examination is a fair indication of reading competence achieved. I am worried that we test ... only by means of MC and would love to go over to a 50/50 split with an essay included as well. We are thinking of doing this next year when the new modules comes into force but are still working on the guide stage. (L1)

One other limitation was students' lacking textbooks. Students are expected to purchase their own textbooks, but it was found that this was not the case:

In courses that focus on the student using a textbook as well we often encounter problems as students do not buy the textbook. Without the textbook they cannot pass the exams. (L2)

Textbooks are a vital part of the teaching and learning process, as most courses are wrap-arounds of the prescribed textbooks. The procedure regarding textbooks is that students get a list of prescribed textbooks which they have to purchase. However, it was observed that the availability of the textbooks was not monitored by either the lecturers or the institution. In one instance lecturers only became aware that the

prescribed textbook was out of print after they were inundated with desperate telephone calls from students. This is one difficulty resulting from the division of duties between the academic staff and administrative staff. Students were confused as to whether they had to report the problem regarding the unavailability of textbooks to the lecturers or to the administrative staff.

2.6 *Compensating for students' language anxieties*

Other student factors influencing teaching and learning were linked to their status as second language speakers. Lecturers pointed out that some students found the institution and lecturers daunting and as a result they experienced difficulties when they had to state their problems, being very nervous and anxious. One lecturer takes this view further and relates it to her own experiences as a second language speaker:

I've noticed that students have trouble expressing themselves in English (spoken and written). It could be insufficient vocabulary since most of them admit that they are not really keen on reading. I personally feel that they lack confidence in expressing themselves (do you remember the Affective Filter Hypothesis?). Maybe it is because I used to be like that sometimes (might still be, in a way), when I am very nervous, I find expressing myself very difficult. This state is even aggravated if the language in question is not Zulu. (L4)

These lecturer associated students' difficulties to the schooling system and socio-economic environment:

Another problem is that students are not used to this independent study. They have to be solely responsible for their studies and plan their lives to cater for other aspects of their lives. Time management is also a problem for these students. They have become so used to being spoon-fed and having a teacher behind their every move, commenting, commending and rebuking. Teachers actually made sure that the work (which would eventually help them pass) is done. I encourage students to familiarise themselves with the library. Group discussions also does a lot of good, it seems. (L4)

Another problem is that of lack of exposure. There are a large number of students who are not exposed to the knowledge all around us. Others because of pure ignorance of knowledge they encounter but others because of their location. We can only encourage students to visit the learning centres and

internet cafe places if possible. For those to whom this is not possible, whatever media available would do, including radio and printed media. (L4)

This view had been echoed by students in the previous chapter. They found it difficult to cope with the complexity of the university environment, which was often quite different from their previous experience. More importantly, some found it difficult to adjust to a system that provided them with less support than they had experienced at school. To address the limitations, lecturers identified a number of strategies they employed to facilitate access.

2.7 *Increased interaction with students*

Another strategy lecturers employed was to see students more often, and to interact more frequently with them. This gave lecturers the opportunity to hand out more practice exercises to supplement the deficiencies in the course material:

The best I can do is to encourage students to come and see me personally so that I can sort out their problems. I sometimes get the students to do relevant exercises ... as additional work. I then mark and evaluate these exercises. I also have many e-mail from the students and I try and give them as much help as possible by means of an ongoing correspondence between the student and myself. (L3)

It was observed that in addressing students' queries at course level lecturers adopted an open door policy. lecturers accommodated students who turned up without appointments. However, the support was limited as they could only attend to a limited number of students because of the high lecturer-student ratios. This was compounded by the office hours they kept, which did not accommodate students who could only be available in the afternoons owing to it being outside the official working hours, that is, 8h00 to 13h00. After those hours only a few lecturers were available, though a considerable number of students still came in or telephoned, inquiring about one or other aspect of the study material¹¹. In addition, it was observed that staff meetings, normally held during office hours, also limited the time

¹¹ The findings confirm the findings of a survey on Unisa students' perceptions of the institutions (Unisa: 1996) which reveal that a significant number of students preferred to have access to lecturers in the late afternoons, evenings and weekends.

for attending to students. An efficient student support system is an imperative in a distance education institution which aims at facilitating student access.

Another strategy lecturers employed was to make the course material more student-centred by simplifying the language used in the study guides, as well as taking cognisance of the significance of students' first language¹²:

In the one module we have translated the advance organiser at the start of every lecture into three South African languages. We try to keep the language level of first-year modules fairly straightforward. We attended an instructional design course where we learnt about the Fog Index. We try to make instructions as clear as possible. For the sake of transparency one of the things we teach is the meaning of words such as 'discuss' and 'explain' that are used in questions. (L2)

Lecturers addressed students' linguistic deficiencies by using compensatory strategies to facilitate communication:

I think we try to accommodate the sociolinguistic aspects of oral communication with ESL students. It is necessary to allow students to go through certain phatic rituals before they get to the point so as to put them at their ease. We speak slowly on the phone and articulate clearly. We rephrase information if it is clear students do not understand. (L2)

One other strategy employed to address the diverse student population was to appoint tutors at the various learning centres¹³. However, as pointed out in the previous chapter, some students found the location and the scheduling of the tutorials not accommodating to their situation.

We employ tutors who work with students at learning centres throughout the country. The tutorials attract the weaker student. The tutorials are offered for most large first year modules. (L2)

¹²As shown in the previous chapter, the EDL1 module incorporates the use of Isizulu and Sepedi, two of the nine Black African languages, as advance organisers to facilitate student understanding of the course objectives.

¹³Tutors go over the lessons as well as the activities in the study guide with students. In some instances they also address the difficulties students experience with the assignments.

More importantly, as the comment below points out, access is about viewing teaching holistically, considering the affective aspects of students' learning. An emphasis is put on taking time to build a trusting and open relationship with students and letting them know that they are important:

How do I solve this? Well, nothing beats a smile and actually telling the student to relax and that everything will be fine and talk about life in general. I guess that is why I spend more time with the students. I think this works in writing as well, judging from the success of the Veterans' Project. By the way, we started the project again this year and students are very excited about it. I think they do not feel so alienated. (L4)

In relation to the comment about the Veterans' Project, discussed further below, it was observed that the staffing situation in the unit was likely to limit lecturers engaging in other activities beyond their immediate call of duty. However, they had instituted several initiatives to enhance student support. One such initiative was the Veterans' Project where students who were repeating the course were invited to correspond directly with specific lecturers. Lecturers established the Veteran project as an attempt to give students' repeating the CDL course additional academic support¹⁴. These students, as shown in chapter 4, reregister many times with the hope that they will eventually pass.

2.8 *Voluntary student support*

Lecturers embarked on the project to support students by giving them more opportunities to interact with lecturers:

We have started up a writing project for failures with the one module that has a large number of students falling into the 30-40% range during each examination, a clear indication that such students have fossilised. This is a labour intensive project but it gives students a chance to write regularly if they are diligent and keep up with the project. (L2)

The Veterans' Project is seen as a medium that has the potential to allow lecturers and students to enter into a relationship that transcends academic boundaries and

interact on a more personal one-to-one basis, that is, a relationship that promotes a 'student-as-a-person as opposed to student-as-a-number'¹⁵ view. For example, in corresponding with the lecturers, students are encouraged to write about anything that matters to them. These excerpts from some of the students' letters show that the Veterans' Project might be one means of lecturers getting to know and maybe understanding students' conditions better:

I am a male between 36 and 39 years. To be open to you I'm one man who don't know the exact date of my birth. The reason is that my mother has not educated. She could not even read or write... After my father passed away we left to the country where my mother comes from. Obviously I grew up with my grandmother, grandfather and my mother's brother. The birth date that appears on my ID document is just my estimation... I am a married man with two kids a boy and a girl. I'm doing all I can to pave the future for my children... (V1)

About my family. I was born from a very poor family. My parents wasn't working and uneducated. Later on my father passed away years ago... When my father was alive he wasn't working. They lived at the farm under the place of the European farmer. My mother told us he used to go the farmers place to help him. It was no payment for that help because we are at his place and we stay for free. After my father passed away my mother was an struggle to look after eight children with no income. She was battle to find some money to buy fruit and vegetables. She used to sell on the road and at schools to raise some money to survive our lives...For that hardship my mother was had; we also got no work to help her. Today we finished at school. There is no money to study for our qualifications. As I am doing my access course is too difficult for me to pay at university because I am not working...(V2)

As you asked me about myself and the place where I live. I don't know where to start...I am working as a maid... 8 Am I must go to her office do some of her work. When I finish go clean the house, cook lunch and supper then clean the car. Everyday I get so tired...where I live now is another trouble in my life...I am paying rent. There is no water in this house toilet is not flushing no light I am using candles to do my work...I would like to send my one son to school, give him nice time what he don't get now, and support my family because I am coming from the very poor, poor family I would like to give them a nice time in future...(V3)

I grew up in a family of three living with my grandmother...I started school at...I was walking about nine kilometer every morning. I had be late and

¹⁴ The veteran project is discussed in Chapter Three

¹⁵ A former lecturer's reference to the types of relationships formed between students and lecturers in distance learning. (L8)

tired. Before I can concentrate or cope and I have to rest first. I did breakdown during my schooling because of family and financial crisis. I have to recapture standard five after four years breakdown. I manage to do well from standard five until matric without fail. Again I breakdown due to financial crisis. (V4)

I am staying in a Squatter Camp. The place is full of disorder and suffering with no electrical lights as well as water...(V5)

These extracts reflect the daily realities of students' lives which, although lecturers are not likely to have any knowledge of them, are important considerations in widening participation. These extracts are more telling of the barriers that are likely to impact on students in the course of their studies at the institution: the additional family responsibilities they have to carry, the poverty they experience on a daily basis, the lack of basic facilities and their hopes for a better future.

These letters also reflect students' frustrations with having to repeat the course several times. They are at a loss because, despite following the advice they were given, they still found it impossible to succeed:

I will be glad if you could solve this problem regarding to this module ... because I failed twice ... In this semester I used to go to the local library to read novels, magazines, historical books for politicians and watch English programmes and I was also making my own vocabulary ticking the words that I do not understand and check them in a Dictionary. (V6)

Some ascribed the poor performance to their incompetence. They still believe, as they are informed in the study guide, that it is only through hard work that they can succeed. But in this case hard work for them seems not to be paying off as most end up repeating the module several times:

I enrolled in the first semester 2001 and I failed this module with a dismal (35%) 35 percent. I have a hope of working more harder than I did to get a successful mark. (V7)

I passed communication last year and I failed (module E) that is my problem that worries me so much it trouble me so badly but I heard about your concern that you will help me out. I will not miss my

chances ... My result in module F from:1998, 37%; 1999, 45%; 2000, 45% , and 2001, 37%. (V8)

More importantly for some students, the inability to pass this module precludes them from continuing with their studies. It means the end for them, even though they have passed one or two other modules:

I have to pass this course so I will continue doing other subjects. I'm stuck I can not move unless I've passed this module. (V8)

Last year ... I was doing Introduction to theory Law 102 and 101 and I passed these modules but I failed module EDL and they told me that to do this module EDL and pass it in order to continue with my LLB degree that I intend to do at Unisa. (V6)

I did what I was told with a belief of making it ... But failed module E with (36%). Then I was given second chance with a last warning if I failed I must forget. (V9)

This extract sums up the frustrations of the students doing the course:

I do not feel confident about my study methods cannot easily pick out the key words and topic sentence in a text. I do not know when to start a new paragraph. I do not know how to write an introduction and conclusion. I do not know how to write an academic essay. I do not know how to cite my references. I do not know how to draw up a bibliography. (V6)

While lecturers' efforts are commendable, taking into consideration that involvement in the Veterans' Project is additional work that they have volunteered to do beyond their call of duty, they still fall short in many ways of addressing students' real problems. This implies that the Veterans' Project should go beyond the present exchange of letters between lecturers and students. The advice to students would not be very different from the contents of the tutorial letters and course material, which as several studies point out, tend to view language as a natural, neutral transfer of skills (Tollefson, 1995; Pennycook, 1995).

For these students, as Potts et al. (1999:133) argue, dropping out 'not merely means an admission of academic failure but also a return to situations and circumstances

from which they have longed to escape'. This view is echoed in this lecturer's comment, which proposes the advancement of community involvement as a more visible part of the teaching obligations. The lecturer calls for lecturing that goes beyond the confines of the institutional structures:

To conclude, I think as lecturers we need more outreach programmes including group visits. The communities must know about us, we are there for the people. The business sector must put something back to the community. An internet cafe, maybe. To make sure these people would not end up in the street, hungry and desperate enough to resort to crime. (L4)

The involvement of lecturers in students' communities is important, particularly in addressing students' needs. However, it is difficult to imagine how five lecturers can accommodate additional responsibilities, particularly since their experiences show that in addressing the daily teaching demands, students' needs and realities are increasingly relegated to the fringes.

In general, the findings showed that at the programme level the increase in student numbers presented lecturers with real dilemmas in their day-to-day practice. They identified the difficulties they experienced in adequately addressing the needs of an increased and varied student population. Their comments on the problems related to the self-assessment assignments, while the need to revise the study guides and the alternative academic support strategies they employed, reveal the shortcomings of the present teaching and learning context. Lecturers' experiences of teaching an increased and more diverse student population indicate that they approach each day as a crisis. They realise that CDL students require more directed and personal academic support which under the present circumstances they cannot provide. In addition, they have little knowledge of students' prior learning experience and competence levels which are necessary to determine the type of intervention students require to achieve academic competence.

The findings are also consistent with students' expectations for more support and interaction with lectures (discussed in Chapter Four). There is a disjunction between the learning environment and students' needs and expectations. According to

Entwistle (1998) this type of environment results in students assuming a surface approach to learning. Citing research on the effect of teaching environments on learning in higher education, Entwistle argues 'The research shows that a deep approach, depends not just on the students' prior educational history, but the whole learning environment provided by the course of study' (1998:190). This implies that adequate structures are not yet in place to accommodate an increased and diverse student population at the programme level. The findings also question the viability of DOL in widening participation.

In addition to the factors at the programme level, lecturers attributed the increased demands on their time to departmental and institutional demands. In response to the question: "What other factors are constraining your ability to teach effectively?" lecturers cited departmental and institutional demands as major factors that put more pressure on their time. These are examined in turn.

3. Departmental Constraints

3.1 *High lecturer-student ratios*

One of the constraints lecturers identified in relation to meeting the departmental demands was the short staffing in the unit. A comparison of the CDL unit with the other units in the department reveals discrepancies in student-lecturer ratios. Despite having to accommodate the largest percentage of students, the unit had the least number of lecturers compared to the other levels in the department, as pointed out above. The shortage in staff is not unique to the unit itself or to the department. It is partly a consequence of the institutional restructuring process where lecturers were offered early retirement packages (See Chapter Three). However, as lecturers pointed out, the shortage of staff in the department was more acute in the CDL unit. They were unanimous that the basic difficulty in providing for the increased and diverse student population was the high student-lecturer ratios:

Staffing is the main problem. Our team is wonderful but we are all pushed to the limit. At a departmental level, we have the usual understaffing of the CDL unit as the main problem area... we have a 2500 / 1 student to staff ratio in the unit and this means that we are severely pressured. It also limits what we can do to almost fully automated distance education. We have some exceptions, e.g. the Veterans' Project but our students deserve better. (L1)

The short staffing compounded the difficulties lecturers experienced in meeting the CDL module demands:

We are short staffed and the present semester system is so rushed that we have to mark assignments, then exams and within a short space of time the next semester's batch of marking hits us. There is thus NO TIME to sit down and rewrite a new or modified course. (L3)

Coupled to the short-staffing, lecturers cited the departmental attitude towards the CDL unit. Newly appointed lecturers in the unit were transferred to other units in the department. CDL lecturers found that attempts to address the staff shortages in the unit by appointing new staff were frustrated as the new appointees were likely to 'move up' into other sections of the department. This was evidenced during the fieldwork period, when two CDL lecturers indicated intentions to 'move up' and be more involved on other levels. The perception was that the unit was used as a springboard to other levels:

Many people get into the first year CDL modules when they first start here but their real interest is in other courses so we lose their services. (L2)

While the move to other levels could be attributed to the fact that the interest of some lecturers might be more inclined towards those courses, it is, however, also partly related to past practices that tended to devalue the academic status of the CDL unit. As pointed out by a former CDL lecturer, historically the value judgements attached to teaching in the unit have resulted in a number of practices that included 'new and junior members of staff ... assigned to teach the ... course as a type of stint in the saltmines and in training in humility' (L7). Consequently, the new appointees were looking towards moving out of the unit to teaching what was regarded as 'real' academic courses. This view is also partly related to the introduction of the course, as further inquiries into why the CDL unit was started revealed. From the start CDL

courses were not introduced as viable academic courses per se but were initially envisaged as a 'watered down version of the... [main courses] to address the language deficiencies of CDL students' (L6).

Of most concern is that this view is still prevalent as was observed during the fieldwork period. While CDL unit lecturers were involved in teaching in other units, none of the other lecturers were involved in the CDL unit. As this lecturer points out, they were increasingly drawn into servicing other courses within the department, despite the increased student numbers in the unit.

High student-lecturer ratios, about 2000 to 1. Not only spreading ourselves too thin here because of student numbers but also because we keep getting pulled into other modules. (L2)

Further inquiries revealed that, historically, lecturers were unlikely to voluntarily opt for a transfer to the CDL unit. Moreover, observations reveal that over the years the perception has persisted, regardless of indications that there was a growing need for a course or courses that would address student academic needs. Two indicators in particular were most evident: the massive growth in students registering for the CDL course and the increase in the number of departments institution-wide requesting the department to assist in improving student academic competence levels. While this expectation from other departments reflects the extent to which student incompetence was experienced as a problem institution-wide, expecting a single department to address this aspect shows that the departments were either unwilling or at a loss as to how to address students' difficulties. More importantly, it reveals that, despite opening doors to an ever increasing number of non-traditional students, the department and the institution attribute academic incompetence as a student problem and not that of the institution.

Lecturers mentioned the departmental sabbatical and leave arrangements as another constraint linked to short-staffing in the unit. Like all other employees lecturers are entitled to their leave but in turn proper structures are not in place to ensure continuity to promote access:

Staff also go on sabbatical, leaving others to pick up the load. However, we may now appoint contract workers to fill the gaps so there is a physical presence but perhaps a loss of expertise and management ability. (L2)

Another departmental practice that tended to impact negatively on the CDL unit was the group discussions arranged for students. The group discussions, which are arranged at the departmental level, did not accommodate and serve CDL unit students adequately. The co-ordination and planning of group discussions indicated that the department had very little knowledge of what transpired in the CDL unit. For instance, CDL students were invited to attend group discussions without adequate lecture venues arranged for them (as shown in Chapter Four). It was observed that the one lecture venue arranged for CDL students was too small and students had to be turned away. Both CDL lecturers and students were inconvenienced. Lecturers could not provide a one-to-one interaction with students as more students than estimated had turned up.

Lecturers cited the departmental restructuring process as another factor that put more pressure on them. As part of the institutional restructuring process, departments are required to review and develop departmental policies in line with institutional and national legislation (See Chapters Two and Three). The process required a review of multiple issues including the establishment of departmental democratic structures. As a result, several committees were established to investigate and develop the necessary policies (See Chapter Three). It was observed that the involvement of CDL lecturers in the committees meant that they had little time for their teaching commitments. They now had even less time to attend to students' inquiries and other related aspects of their teaching.

The findings show that lecturers had difficulties reconciling the departmental and teaching demands put on them. Despite teaching an increased number of students, they were also expected to attend to more urgent departmental issues. In addition existing departmental practices marginalised teaching in the CDL unit. This suggests that the realities of accommodating an increased and diverse student population have been aligned to fit in with departmental demands with little considerations for what teaching these students entails.

4 Institutional Constraints

The restructuring process has increased the pressure on lecturers to fulfil a variety of functions that tend to marginalise their teaching functions. Lecturers identified multiple policy imperatives that affected them directly. To facilitate the reform process at the institution level, committees, mainly staffed by lecturers, were established to carry through the policy mandates. Lecturers are, however, faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, representation in the committees are necessary to create democratic structures that guarantee representation and ensure that their voices are heard. On the other hand, in addressing their commitments to the restructuring process, they tend to spend more time outside the department, which means that their teaching obligations are compromised.

During the fieldwork period, two lecturers were appointed to serve on the institutional committees. One was seconded to serve full time on a committee while the other, although not pulled out of the unit, had to serve on the committee in addition to continuing with normal teaching duties. These appointments exacerbated the staff shortage in the unit and in turn affected teaching as the workload had to be shared among the three remaining lecturers. Lecturers also expressed concerns that although the appointment of temporary lecturers, external markers and external writers alleviated the situation, it however, resulted in lost expertise and continuity as it was mainly the experienced senior staff involved in managerial aspects of the course who were seconded to other sections (L1, L2). The external and temporary appointments increased their administrative responsibilities:

Institutional transformation is vital but has impacted very negatively on this section of the department. The university has been involved in a huge administrative task to get all its qualifications registered in SAQA format. This impacted on me in the sense that I had to manage without ... - and for a lot of last year I had to manage both sections of the unit. We have now split and have an CDL and EDL section with CCs and deputies in each. Our staffing is deeply problematic. I spend a great deal of time trying to renew contracts for staff for the Access unit (3 of whom are on contract). (L1)

The university functions through committee work, which pulls senior staff members into meetings. Sometimes ... (this committee work might lead to a secondment for a period. In effect the department may use the person's salary and ... in particular this has benefited the department by bringing in talent ... or having the money to have CDL written. In other ways it is detrimental because the department loses ... managerial skills. (L2).

The recruitment of outsiders like the temporary staff, external markers and writers, has the potential to benefit the unit. The outsiders brought new insight into students' understanding of the course material. Because they had adequate time to go over the study material the markers and tutors highlighted weaknesses in the course material. Tutors had more frequent contact with students as a result they were also able to raise specific difficulties students experienced with the course material and the institution. For instance, they made lecturers aware that students were experiencing problems in getting the prescribed textbooks. But, as lecturers pointed out, the increased administrative duties accompanying the recruitment of outsiders put more pressure on them.

Another institutional practice that affected teaching and learning was the inclusion of the CDL module and other modules as fundamental compulsory modules in all new programmes institution wide. As a result an overwhelmingly large number of students were channelled into registering for the CDL modules. The modules are regarded as essential in developing basic academic skills throughout the institution.

The Higher Education Act's focus on redress and SAQA's core, fundamental and elective structure for programmes as well as their critical cross-field outcomes has led to the inclusion of CDL modules in all the new programmes. The relevant outcome is that people must be able to communicate effectively. (L2)

While this might be pedagogically justifiable, it has however resulted in a considerable increase in student numbers in the CDL unit. But, as lecturers pointed out, this increase had not been matched by an equal increase in staff numbers.

Closely related to the increase in student numbers was the drive to market the institution¹⁶. The recruitment of students into the institution had been successful but there was a lack of structures to advise students properly on registration. Students do not understand how the semester and modular systems function:

I believe that the students are not given adequate advice at registration. The present semester modular system is also being reconsidered and we are in favour of going back to the year module. This is at present the focus of a faculty investigation. The semester system benefits the strong student but in a developmental course, it impacts negatively on the weaker student.(L1)

This view is echoed in a report, from another Faculty at Unisa , commenting on the marketing of the institution¹⁷:

The message concerning the registration process is that Unisa must simply improve the information and advise on subject choice – either by making the system easier to understand, or by employing more subject advisors. The large choice of study possibilities presented to students, many whom have little experience of universities, together with additional complications of modularization and semestrisation have made the system of choosing study programmes extremely cumbersome (Rayner 2001).

The third aspect affecting teaching and learning raised by lecturers was the proposed merger of higher education institutions. As part of the higher education restructuring process, the government is in the process of merging institutions, partly as a way of cutting costs and addressing the duplication of services resulting from the apartheid past¹⁸. But the developing controversies and tensions – both at government and institutional level – were not only affecting lecturers' morale, as they were uncertain about their future, but the resultant rifts between the institutions' management committee and the Minister of Education had a negative impact on their teaching commitments:

¹⁶ See Chapter Three

¹⁷ The report (Rayner, 2001) shows that about two thirds of the first-year undergraduate students interviewed in 2000 were not provided the assistance they required in selecting subjects.

¹⁸ The mergers are referred to in Chapters Two and Three.

The proposed merger with Technikon SA and Vista Distance campus has also caused uncertainty, as have the feuds between the minister of education and Unisa's head of Council. (L1)

In general, the findings reveal that at the institutional level lecturers were mainly distracted from their teaching functions by the increased pressure to respond to other institutional restructuring demands. As a result they tended to devote less time and attention to addressing aspects of the teaching and learning situation that were crucial to facilitating access. Thus while they focus on time and numbers as constraints there are other dimensions influencing access. Their perceptions that the courses are good if students spend the time perhaps assumes a neutrality in language teaching and in approaches to teaching that does not exist. They are locating their problem at institutional and possibly student level but the findings reveal a need for a broader and contextual understanding of what confronts students. The findings also highlight the controversial position lecturers occupy in the changed situation. This suggests that institutional structures are not yet ready to accommodate an increased and diverse student population.

5. Summary

The findings relating to the lecturers' experiences and perceptions of the widened student participation imperatives reveal that lecturers are faced with a dilemma in reconciling the day-to-day demands at the programme level, those at the institutional level and wider societal needs. On the one hand they are required to accommodate an increased and diverse non-traditional student population at the programme level. The findings on students in Chapter Four indicate that to provide a teaching and learning environment that adequately addresses the academic competencies of non-traditional students requires a knowledge and understanding of their educational and socio-economic background: their prior academic experiences, their linguistic strengths and weaknesses and their ability to access the necessary facilities to enhance academic skills. More importantly, as the letters from repeating students showed, in their day-to-day interaction with students lecturers might need to get more insight

into students' expectations of the teaching and learning environment and why students' have these expectations.

While the findings on students' perspectives indicate that issues that they come up with are not directly related to the teaching and learning context, they do however bring a better understanding of the realities of the apartheid legacy that students have to contend with on a daily basis. These realities comprise an important aspect of students' academic development about which lecturers in this study seemed ignorant. However, the findings also show that lecturers cannot be expected to address these realities adequately because of limited institutional resources and constraints, and also because these concerns are generally regarded as beyond their academic duties. More importantly, an increased and diverse student population has resulted in an increased demand on lecturers' time.

On the other hand, lecturers are also expected to participate actively in the implementation and translation of the higher education policies into institutional realities outlined in Chapters Two and Three. The legal implications of not complying with the requirements and the need to democratise the transformation process, compels institutions to draw lecturers into the transformation structures through various committees (see Chapter Three). However, underlying the implementation process are tensions emanating from departmental, institutional and system level that are placing greater demands on lecturers' individual capacities. These tensions highlight the controversial role lecturers occupy in the transformation process: balancing the programme demands to facilitate access and those of the institution and system to transform the higher education sector.

On the whole, the findings reveal that the restructuring process is stretching the already limited institutional capacity, while at the programme level lecturers are drawn from the departments to service the institutional restructuring committees. These realities confirm the Education Minister's assertion that the lack of capacity tends to undermine the restructuring process. The reforms designed to widen student participation have imposed heavier workloads on lecturers.

It may be argued that individual experiences are, however, reflections of the widening student participation imperatives. It is true that findings reflect only a small section of the realities of the changing context of higher education transformation at the programme, institutional and national policy level. But, underlying the findings are the broader tensions and struggles reflecting the South African socio-historical context outlined in Chapter One. The real issue of access lies in considering the individual experiences in the light of the wider social implications. What then does this mean for the claims being made about widening access if student access is to be established in a stronger and more visible position at the institutional level?

The findings also echo the questions on the role of Open Distance Learning (ODL) in facilitating access raised in Chapter Four. If ODL institutions are supposed to overcome disadvantages of various kinds, representing barriers to a traditional university study, what type of challenges will they have to overcome? What are the practical implications for students and lecturers who are involved in ODL which will have to be assessed if ODL is to be integral in facilitating access?

The next chapter analyses the implications of widening student participation imperatives in the light of these findings. The findings on students' and lecturers' perceptions, in chapters Four and Five, are examined to determine the extent to which student access can be enabled and the possibilities of adopting a case study process to investigate educational change from a bottom-up perspective.

CHAPTER SIX

SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

1. Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the extent to which widened policy imperatives have been realised in practice. To this end a case study approach was adopted to determine individual interpretations of widening participation at the institutional level. The findings in Chapters Four and Five were useful in highlighting institutional realities of widening participation. They show that widening participation is intrinsically linked to other related issues pertaining to the historical, social and economic realities outlined in Chapters One and Two. In illustrating the complexity of these connections Candy (1996) aptly refers to them as the 'downward linkages', 'sideways linkages' and 'forward linkages' the institution forges with the wider society. The implications are that if individuals who are in the forefront of widening participation imperatives are not consulted, access is likely to be marginalised as other broader political, social and economic reforms issues occupy the centre stage. Political reforms alone cannot bring about change. Moreover, current developments show that the consequences of the apartheid legacy will continue for a long time and cannot simply be eradicated by a change in governance. In fact, the reality is that some individuals might never overcome the effects of the past segregation policies and that these will continue

to impact on their lives. The biggest challenge for institutions is to create conditions that will promote the retention of disadvantaged students.

This chapter provides an overview of the study by drawing on the findings - in Chapters Three and Four - and the issues raised in Chapters One and Two. The findings identify critical areas that need to be addressed in order to promote widening participation at the institutional level. The challenges for widening participation are complex and numerous. The measurement of access in particular is difficult as it extends over several domains: academic, administrative, social, economic and political. The issues discussed in Chapters One and Two mirror the broader political, social and economic realities surrounding widening participation at the institution level. The real issue of participation lies in considering these categories in combination. The examination is presented at the three levels, which influence 'access with success': the programme, the institutional and the system. The discussion at each level interweaves the past apartheid legacy with the current higher education policy imperatives outlined in Chapters One and Two. The chapter concludes by exploring the theoretical and methodological contributions of the case study and offers recommendations for the critical areas that are to be addressed in order to maximise the benefits and minimise the drawbacks of widening participation.

2. Implications of Widening Participation

2.1 *Realities at the programme level*

The mismatch between existing academic support structures and access realities at programme level reveal that critical areas of widening participation have not yet been addressed. Students have a greater need for academic support than can be provided. They are unlikely to succeed without the required academic support. The programme realities and practices, identified in Chapters Four and Five, the high student-lecturer ratios, varied range of student competencies, teaching and assessing through multiple

choice questions, formative as opposed to summative assessment, limited and delayed feedback to students; limited interaction between students and lecturers – all have implications for 'access with success'. Providing high quality, relevant and sufficient academic support is of critical importance to enable student access, particularly for students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds.

Other external factors account for the inadequate academic support, but of greatest significance are those emanating from the apartheid legacy, raised in Chapter One, and the present higher education policy imperatives, discussed in Chapter Two. The apartheid past has had consequences that still impact on access at the programme level. These include, poor schooling, language incompetence and low socio-economic conditions. The findings in Chapters Three and Four show that these remain elusive, considerable and complicated. One reason for this could be the existing perception that with a democratic government in place the past inequalities will simply disappear. On the contrary, as the findings show, that this is not the case and in fact the situation might deteriorate if not addressed as a priority.

The post-apartheid higher education policy imperatives also impact on access. Various factors, including incorporation of the semester system and the modularisation of programmes, open and uncontrolled student enrolments, and demands for compliance with SAQA requirements, all have implications for 'access with success'. For instance, the time limitations prescribed by the semester system and the limited contact students have with lecturers all negate ESL theories, which argue that the development of language competence is a process that cannot be subjected to time limitations as noted in Chapters Four and Five. This is of particular importance for students who, as first generation university entrants in their families have little or no knowledge of what university education entails. In addition, they have little or no access to the financial, material and emotional support necessary to enhance success at university. Bundy's

(2001) assertion that South African universities have not adequately addressed the implications of teaching a majority second language speakers holds true in this respect.

The realities of widening participation at the programme level are that access is advanced through technicist practices. The overall result is that lecturers are compelled to employ these practices to address large student numbers. The weakness with technicist practices is that they tend to subsume a deficit theory, which implies a problem with students. This tends to shift attention away from the programme and institutional structures. As Smith (1991:1) asserts, technicist strategies cannot address issues of inequality as they are likely to 'leave relatively untouched the role of the organisation and the environment in producing the results' because they are based on 'assumed institutional perfection and student incompetence'. They perpetuate the status quo and protect institutional practices and thus fail to address the disadvantages with which students arrive with at university. The main problem is that existing structural constraints remain unquestioned, resulting in a gap between established academic practices and the required academic support.

It is clear that to widen participation there is a need for improvement of the quality of academic support. But the demands placed on lecturers as change agents on the one hand and as providers of academic support on the other are enormous, and at times contradictory. This dissonance indicates that lecturers cannot be mere rubber stamps of decisions made elsewhere. They need to articulate their understandings of their realities before they can begin to be actively involved in providing adequate academic support to facilitate widening participation for disadvantaged students. As individuals they have limited capacity. They are unlikely to address the problems identified in Chapter One, in particular the poor school system and low socio-economic conditions that perpetuate the cycle of disadvantage. The poor living conditions, fuelled by high unemployment levels, impact on students' potential to succeed at university. It is clear that these problems cannot solely be addressed at the programme level or through institutional

structures. They are perhaps at present beyond its mandate. However, academic support structures can be improved to enhance 'access with success'. These are discussed in the section on recommendations below.

2.2 *Realities at the institutional level*

The implications of access at the institutional level show that there are gaps between access realities and administrative support structures at the institutional level. Current administrative structures do not provide adequate support for facilitating 'access with success'. Practices which include lack of pre- and post- entry orientation programmes for students, induction programmes to acquaint students with fundamental institutional requirements, inconsistent and uncoordinated interaction between academic and administrative staff, unlimited student intake with little consideration of institutional capacity to provide adequate academic and administrative support all decrease opportunities for 'access with success'. This suggests that access is based on administrative and institutional requirements and less on academic realities at the programme level.

In addition the effects of the apartheid past make widening participation elusive. For instance, the location of learning centres outside townships requires additional travelling costs that are not factored into the study fees. This is exacerbated by the lack of basic facilities, such as telephones and computer facilities in townships, that are prerequisites for making 'access for success' possible. The costliness of university studies is increased by the hidden costs that are not calculated into the fees. This shows a wide discrepancy between institutional expectations and the socio-economic realities of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Closely linked to these realities are expectations that ODL should be the main medium for facilitating access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Although on the one hand it is true that ODL offers opportunities for many students, on the other hand, for many others it raises false hopes. This accords with arguments in Chapter Four that show that ODL does not necessarily widen participation for disadvantaged students (Evans et al., 1996; Stephens, 1997; Manning, 2001). The studies argue that that the level of academic and administrative support students from disadvantaged backgrounds require cannot be adequately provided for through distance education. Studying in an ODL context does not necessarily translate into lower fees as shown earlier. On the contrary, considering that students tend to be unemployed and live in informal settlements where they have limited access to essential and basic facilities - like electricity, computers - an ODL context only serves to compound their disadvantages.

The present administrative structures do not adequately cater for the wide range of students' needs which are now acknowledged to exist as noted in the findings. Institutional practices still conform to and operate on rules that are based on the requirements of administrative convenience rather than academic and pedagogic needs at the programme level.

2.3 *Realities at the system level*

The dissonance between higher education policy imperatives and institutional realities also impacts on 'access with success'. Some of the problems at the policy discourse level have been discussed in the preceding sections. Broader higher education issues influence the institution's ability to provide adequate access. Indications are that other transformational demands are taking centre stage and competing with access issues. Several developments including cuts in funding and uncertainties brought about by institutional mergers have resulted in institutional instability as they involve staff

retrenchments and downsizing; incremental policies have resulted in staff working within a system that is still not itself complete. The implications for access are that these changes are mainly borne by academics, the lecturers who have to drive the process of widening participation.

This confirms the observations, noted in Chapter Two, that changes are being driven by external factors such as time limitations that tend to negate institutional realities. The frequency and number of policy imperatives circumscribing the transformation of higher education only serve to exacerbate the situation.

Without doubt there have been many achievements in terms of widening participation since 1994. It is clear that the current initiatives to promote access have made it possible for many students to study at university. This is of particular importance for those capable students who were previously excluded because they did not have the required entrance qualifications. These have now been afforded the opportunity to fulfil their aspirations through further studies. To this end they have proved themselves capable and competent students.

But many more challenges remain in terms of 'access as success'. One of these is the continuing discrepancy between student registration and the throughput rates as shown in Chapters Two. Much work has been done but more is required to provide an education system that delivers opportunity for all deserving students.

In general, the thesis has brought to light the nature and magnitude of the challenges faced by an institution undergoing change, and the limitations of the policies of access and equity. It has reflected on the challenges, difficulties and complexities of moving from policy to practice and for enabling widening participation to take on a more central role in the transformation process.

The findings verify observations that policy and legislation on their own have limited transformatory power. As shown in Chapter Two they do not necessarily bring about change but only serve to provide guidelines that are to be translated into reality at the micro-level. In South Africa, in particular, policies provide a basis to bring about a long-awaited democracy and opportunities to right the wrongs of the apartheid past. But in practice, it is individuals who will determine how these changes will come about. To be effective, education policies and innovations need to take cognisance of the everyday realities of lecturers and students. However, individuals cannot bring about change on their own. They are bound by broader political, social and economic norms and values which are complex and often in contention. But paying attention to these issues provides the opportunity for improving participation. As shown, though, this is not an easy task because it challenges established and taken for granted practices.

The theoretical and methodological contributions of this study were discussed in chapter Three where the possibilities and limitations of the case study were noted; and in Chapter Four and Five where the range of issues raised in the findings supports Kemmis' (1998) observations that with its focus on practice research is not detached from the social, political and moral implications of change.

The study of practice is a study of connections - of many different kinds of communicative, productive and organisational relationships between people in socially, historically and discursively constituted media of language (discourse) work and power - all of which must be understood dynamically and relationally (Kemmis, 1998: 32-33).

2.4 *Theoretical and methodological significance of this study*

This study contributes to our understanding of the extent to which widening participation policy imperatives are realised at the institutional level. It highlights the importance of investigating bottom-up approaches if widening participation for

This study contributes to our understanding of the extent to which widening participation policy imperatives are realised at the institutional level. It highlights the importance of investigating bottom-up approaches if widening participation for disadvantaged students is to become an important component of the restructuring of higher education system in South Africa. Subjective interpretations at the micro-level provide insight into informing top-down processes on what is of essence in promoting access in a coherent and co-ordinated manner. The commitment to widening participation requires a close examination of institutional practices. The study reveals the advantages of participant's views in understanding and coming to grips with the challenges they face in addressing educational change. Individuals at the micro level expressed and reflected upon their experiences of change through a self-analysis of their day-to-day practice. The range of aspects raised supports Somekh's (1995) observations that participants bring to light those aspects of practice that tend to remain hidden as they are either ignored or considered insignificant.

A further result of the study is the realisation that it will take time to establish a truly racially representative student input and output rate. Clearly, more must be done to fully address issues of widening participation. It is also important to realise that difficulties will arise when attempting to understand such an enormous task. It must be an ongoing process. What develops will further illustrate the need for continuous dialogue and inquiry. It would be simplistic to believe that in the ten years since apartheid a definitive solution has been forthcoming, not only because of institutional inability to find common understandings, but also because these understandings are based on broader political, social and economic realities. Fundamental reinvention of a social system will take much longer than ten years. Moreover, it should be noted that circumstances will change from year to year, for example students are transient and lecturers are likely to leave at any time. The fact is that when so many changes are expected to occur simultaneously they create additional complications. It is, however, important to create the necessary conditions that will further promote and encourage 'access with success'.

The study partly addresses the concerns about the lack of research on the realities of ODL contexts raised by Stephens et al.: 'Research is needed to examine the fine grain of student experience of the postulated "openness" of distance education' (1997:93). A shortcoming of the study is, perhaps, that as a case study it cannot be generalised as Stephens et al.'s argue: 'the claim of equal opportunities needs to be tested by research findings which can be meaningfully generalised across populations' (1997:93). This is an important consideration in South Africa where there is an urgent need to counteract past segregation practices.

South Africa today needs a unifying force so that, despite differences in interpretation and the retention and development of these, there is still a common thread to advance access for the common good. What is called for is a process that is more sensitive to the multiplicity of differences that have evolved over decades and an interrogation of these differences. A case study offers such possibilities as it emphasises the importance of ongoing, shared dialogue. In addition it underscores the need to foster team teaching to address the plurality of meanings that arise in multilingual teaching and learning contexts as shown by Pierce et al. (1995) and Cotazzi et al. (1997) in Chapter Four. In his address to the Unisa community Melck (1998), the former principal, highlighted the significance of team teaching:

Just as the university does not publish research that has not been subjected to peer review, it should not publish learning materials that have not passed similar tests' (1998).

The interventions of the Bureau of Learning Development in supporting lecturers to develop study material at Unisa are commendable. However, as the findings show these are inadequate and more needs to be done.

The study also highlights the limitations of case studies in research. Some of them were noted in chapter three. It takes time, effort and energy to conduct a case study. The time constraints in this study, resulting partly from the short fieldwork period and institutional conditions, made it impossible to follow through on some of the issues that were raised. It was difficult to arrange a common time at which all involved individuals were able to meet. Understandably, the interviews did place a new set of demands on participants and prevented some from giving their full participation. It was particularly difficult in the case of lecturers and administrative staff as they had other pressing concerns to address.

This study also demonstrates the difficulties inherent in working with disparate groups of individuals. As Atweh et al. (1998: 133) argue: 'It would be naive to assume that all participants shared identical agenda'. Each group had its own interests and expectations. Lecturers tended to focus on the pressures they experienced as professionals and employees; students were more interested in getting information on how to get through the programme; and administrative staff were more concerned about their strained relations with academic staff. The fact the case study relied on the commitment of individuals also exacerbates the difficulties. Not all individuals were interested in participating or wished to engage in access issues.

Through this study the researcher developed an understanding of the challenges of widening participation at the institutional level. The ideal would have been to involve individual groups in a joint session where possible action routes could have been investigated. However, as noted earlier, this was not possible.

It is not easy to determine whether the involvement of lecturers and students made an impact in practice because numerous factors influence the transformation process at the institutional level. But because the study focussed on the context and the individual

realities, it can be assumed that the process has opened up discussions at the programme level on new ways of addressing widening participation, particularly within an ODL context. For instance, there are initiatives to examine the limitations of the semester system as a way of advancing access, particularly for those students with poor academic and language competencies; there are plans to utilise the tutor system in a more effective way; and additional, contact writing workshops have been organised for access students.

To this end the study suggests additional steps that could be taken to widen participation at the institutional level. It moves from research findings to some speculation and recommendations suggested by the research. The recommendations cannot be generalised. They apply to the case study, UNISA. They are based on the view that ongoing monitoring and shared dialogue between individuals at the programme, institutional and systemic levels will promote the retention and success of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

3. Recommendations

- **PROGRAMME LEVEL:** Formal structures that continually evaluate, monitor and review the effectiveness of existing academic support structures should be established.

Procedures for evaluating current academic support structures are inadequate or non-existent. The Findings in Chapter Four reveal that student's needs are not met. There is a need to compile a comprehensive up-to-date database on students' performance that should be disseminated among lecturers and tutors. It is also important that the institution develop multiple ways to increase the frequency of interaction between students and lecturers or tutors. To this end the issue of repeated failures should be addressed as a matter of urgency. It is unethical, as the findings in Chapters Four and

Five show, to allow students to reregister several times even though they have very little chance of succeeding. One way to solve the problem would be to allow students who have passed two or more modules from other programmes to register for further modules and to continue doing the CDL module at the same time. The semester system introduced as part of SAQA/NQF requirements, discussed in Chapter Two and Three, has reduced the academic year considerably. Language and academic competencies cannot be developed in three months. As the ESL theories discussed in chapter Four show these are processes that improves with time. The more students are exposed to academic reading and writing activities the greater the chances are for developing their academic and language competencies. However, those students who cannot even progress through any of the other modules should be referred to alternative structures. The further education sector which has been proposed by the Minister of Education (see Chapter Three) could be one possible alternative.

- **INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL:** Academic and administrative structures should be aligned to offer optimum student support.

Student intake and numbers should be controlled to match available academic and administrative capacity. The exceptional growth in student numbers (see Chapter Three) in the CDL unit without a related increase in academic and administrative support is unacceptable. Although the present marketing initiatives attract large numbers of students they only serve to raise students' expectations unrealistically. The institution should be able to predict the impact of student numbers on academic support. The findings in Chapters Four and Five reveal that the present structures are not equipped to address this aspect. This calls for closer interaction between lecturers and administrative staff on one hand, and a knowledge of the range of competencies students come in with, on the other hand: that is, students' competencies should be established at admission. Although it is true that not everybody can be accommodated, it is, however, essential that those students who have the potential be given the necessary support that will

enable them to realise their aspirations. To this end that could be the pre-entry information gathered through diagnostic tests or interviews, for instance, is of importance. This information is crucial at the programme level where teaching has to be structured to provide appropriate academic support.

The appropriateness of the current administrative structures should be reviewed to improve interaction between students and available administrative support. Several developments, for instance, the Call Centre (see Chapter Three) do provide the necessary support. But, the long telephone delays and the shuttling of students from one department to another (discussed in Chapter Four), for example, are unacceptable practices. The effectiveness of initiatives introduced to facilitate student support should be continually evaluated and monitored to identify the successes of their impact and areas of improvement be addressed. Poor communication of information to students should be addressed. It is important to note that some students do not have easy access to basic facilities that are taken for granted. These students still have to deal with the legacy of the apartheid structures discussed in Chapter One. However, improvements can be made to ensure that students are aware of the support available to them and know what is expected of them academically prior to, at and post registration.

Since ODL remains the obvious and available mechanism for widening participation for disadvantaged students there is a need to establish learning centres in townships, not only to cut travelling costs but also to address apartheid inadequacies (discussed in Chapter One) by exposing locals to a university environment. It is clear that the effects of the apartheid legacy cannot be removed overnight but will remain for a long time in the future. However, establishing learning centres and computer centres in townships can make facilities easily accessible to students and also bring the message to township communities that a university is not an ivory tower but a reality and possibility for those who aspire to and have the potential.

Reading and writing competencies should be developed from school level. The school system, as shown in Chapter One and Two, is still struggling to address the effects of the past apartheid policies. Since schools are not well equipped to address this problem it calls for a closer working relationship between teachers in schools and lecturers. To this end lecturers might offer teachers retraining through workshops. Current developments in schools show that teaching and learning in a second language are problematic and there is an urgent need to address ESL instruction at this level. Considering that English plays a crucial role as a scientific, technological, commercial and international language it is clear that it will remain the primary medium of instruction for the distant future. It is an asset and perhaps the unifying force for the disparate groups of South Africans. But, its use should not be to the detriment of the development of the other ten languages or for the students' learning.

Current efforts to introduce black languages, as languages of instruction are commendable and promise go a long way to facilitate access (see Chapter Four). However, for the near future English will remain the main medium of instruction. This means that efforts to develop academic competence should be strengthened to the level that English is no longer viewed as a problem but an asset. This calls for closer interaction between universities and schools. Given the multilingual status of the country the ideal would be to foster multilingualism. Hopefully, South Africa will come to a point where students can have a choice. Where the questions will be : What language will I use for this purpose? Which language will permit the best representation of what I want to convey for my purpose? These questions move away from which language is more important and focus on the best possible ways of communicating information.

- **SYSTEMIC LEVEL:** The institution, the Ministry of Education, other departments and organisations should work towards better ways of addressing differences to ensure stability and consistency at the micro-level.

All these changes will be difficult to implement unless there is closer co-operation between the Ministry of Education, the DoE, SAQA, the CHE, the Department of Labour and all the stakeholders at the institution. As pointed out in Chapters Two and Three the contradictions and contentions in the transformation of higher education are exacerbated at this level because ODL is linked to the broader political and social restructuring of South Africa. The strained relations between the various departments and structures that fall under the Ministry of Education and Ministry Labour (see Chapter Three) only serve to further demoralise staff and take the focus away from access issues. The findings in Chapters Four and Five reveal that the process is more complicated at this level it is imperative that better mechanisms for addressing differences need to be established.

4. Conclusion

The challenges of widening participation at the institutional level are complex and enormous. Of most significance is that for widening participation to take on a more central position in the transformation of higher education provision particular, attention be paid to not only the more obvious issues at the macro-level, but also to taken-for-granted practices at the micro-level: that is, the way individuals interpret policies in their day-to-day experiences. Paying attention to micro-level issues increases opportunities for widening participation in a more meaningful way in the interests of the higher education sector and society at large.

This study can only conclude that until this is done policies will not be implemented effectively in higher education and changes to widen participation will not occur or will be inadequate.

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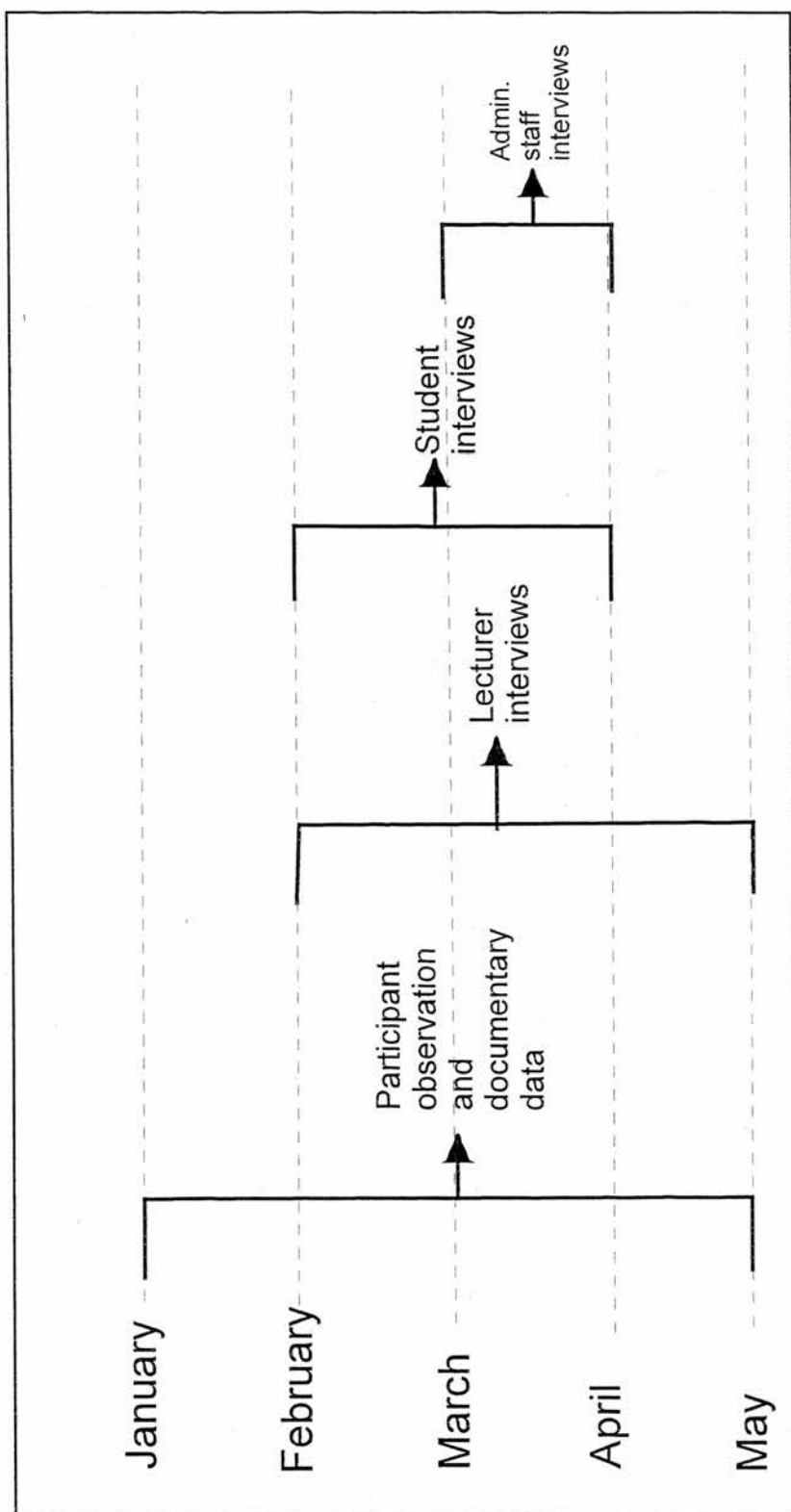
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Appendix 1

Fieldwork period

Duration of each process



Appendix 2

STUDENTS' INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- Assignments : Which aspects of the assignment questions and instructions were easy to work out and which were difficult to follow? Why? How did you resolve your difficulties? Which aspect of the marking and feedback was useful? not useful? Why?
- The course material: Did you find the course material easy or difficult to follow? Was it what you had expected? Why?
- Contact with department and institution: Did you at any point contact the department or institution regarding your assignments or studies? What type of response did you get? Do you know what is expected of you as a university student? If you are dissatisfied with some aspect, of your studies what channels do you follow?
- Student support: What type of assistance did you receive during the registration period in terms of your choice of courses, planning of degree programme, the course material and institutional requirements?
- Personal aspirations: Why did you choose to study at this institution?

LECTURERS' QUESTIONS

- What do you want CDL students to learn from the course?
- To what extent does the course achieve this?
- Where and why does it fall short?
- What other factors are constraining your ability to teach effectively?
- What strategies do you employ to address CDL students' needs?