Student perceptions of the use of contact time in Distance Education: The case of Educational Administration and Management students at The Natal College of Education (NCE), 1996.

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Abstract

Distance education in South Africa is rapidly becoming a highly favoured mode of teaching and learning with its potential to reach great numbers of previously disadvantaged learners. The enthusiasm with which it is embraced is underscored by the proliferation of organizations offering distance education courses, particularly within the field of teacher education. The 1995 South African Institute of Distance Education (SAIDE) audit of teacher education has revealed serious shortcomings of the distance education sector, particularly with regard to the poor provision of learner support. Even in Colleges of Education which received relatively favourable evaluations, the provision of student support is not strongly grounded in theory, nor are there clear models of effective contact. The literature on distance education reflects divided opinions on student support, particularly where face-to-face contact is concerned. The literature also focuses largely on perspectives of teaching and learning that reflect the views of teachers and course designers. There appears to be very little emphasis on finding out what students' perceptions are or what they might mean for the development of effective student support systems. What students believe to be the reality of their learning experience is most certainly influenced by the perceptions they hold.

This study attempts to analyze and interpret student perceptions about the contact component of a newly developed further diploma in educational administration and management at the Natal College of Education, Pietermaritzburg. Data from focus group discussions and a follow-up questionnaire showed that students' perceptions about the value they attach to contact time, and the functions they believe it should serve, differ from the original intentions of the course designers. Students show relatively weak independent learning skills and strong dependence on group activities, both of which have negative implications for the effective

use of distance learning materials such as interactive study guides.

There are indications that a superficial evaluation of contact time might suggest that students and lecturers have similar perceptions about the value and functions associated with it, however, the interpretation of data reveals more differences than are first apparent. This points to the danger of course designers making assumptions about student perceptions which have not been tested.

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I am also grateful for the patience and support that my wife, Patti, and my children, Michael and Catherine, have offered. They will no doubt remind me that I no longer have such a good excuse to claim so much time on the family computer!

I must also acknowledge the contribution of the students who made up the research population for this study. It was their enthusiasm and commitment that encouraged me to pursue the direction that I chose. As the pilot group of students in this new course, their contributions have been very important in allowing me to learn as much as I have in the two years of our association.

This whole dissertation, unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text, is my original work. Sources used and quotations have been acknowledged.

Table of contents

Chapter 1 - The research problem

1.1   Statement of the problem and the rationale for the study

The Natal College of Education (NCE), as a provider of distance tuition for teacher education, is committed to using face-to-face contact with students as an integral part of the curriculum. The current policy that all its distance education courses must engage students in face-to-face contact does, however, recognise that the value and nature of contact is disputed. This is reflected in a growing concern within the College about the optimal levels and frequency of contact, and what the nature of the contact should be to maximise the effectiveness of distance-taught courses.

The College policy of engaging students in face-to-face contact is loosely grounded in distance education theory, and the perception held by the College management that contact is especially important, given the learning background of the majority of students enrolled at the College. The problem with this approach to contact in distance education is twofold. Firstly, there are different theoretical schools of thought regarding the nature and function of student support, not all of which support face-to-face contact on a regular basis. Secondly, perceptions about the necessity and value of contact, whether held collectively, or individually by the College management have not been tested against student perceptions. In the light of the rapid growth of distance education in South Africa, the absence of research on student perceptions about support for students in general, and actual contact time in particular, is seen as a significant gap in understanding how best to develop an efficient system of distance education. It is widely acknowledged that perceptions are extremely

powerful in influencing what people experience as the reality of their circumstances.

The Further Diploma in Education on which this study is based was developed from a particular notion of contact in distance education and illustrates some of the perceptions that are held within the institution, as well as more widely. Significantly, student perceptions were not specifically considered during its development.

The rationale behind the design of contact time for this course was based primarily on two unique features, viz. the modular and semesterized structure of the course and the nature of management as an area of learning.

1.1.1 Modularization and semesterization

In brief, the FDE: Educational Administration and Management[1] is offered in eight modules, run over four semesters of eighteen weeks each. Two modules are run concurrently in each semester. The main impact of this is that the modular and semesterised format of the course sets practical limits on the time that can be devoted to contact.

1.1.2 The nature of management

The essence of management and leadership lies in interaction with people, and from the outset the course writers were concerned about how a course which aimed at improving educational management skills could be taught successfully through a distance education mode. College policy insists that each diploma course must offer at least one contact session

at the College as well as two regional meetings[2] during a calendar year. This model of contact was designed for year-long courses and large student numbers. Coupled with the practical unsuitability of this model, was a perception held by the course designers that more time was needed for students to interact with each other. It was largely on this premise that four residential weekend courses were planned as the contact component of the FDE: Administration and Management (Secondary School). This study aimed to explore how students perceive the function and value of these contact sessions.

1.1.3 Further considerations

The proliferation of distance-taught courses, particularly those prepared for teacher education, reflects a widely held view that distance education is a central strategy for solving some of the most pressing problems currently facing South African education[3]. The poor quality and serious shortcoming of the majority of distance education courses and facilities was exposed by the SAIDE audit of teacher education[4]. A critical aspect of the audit was the extremely poor provision for student support. While the audit considered the Natal College of Education as one of the exceptions to this norm, this does not imply that the system is perfect. College management has continued to stress the need for ongoing development of an effective means of student support.

1.1.4 The South African context

A problem that is endemic to South Africa is the influence of previous educational and academic experience. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 separated institutions of learning

8

according to colour and defined the goals of education for population groups. Specific limitations were placed on academic opportunities for Black people, with the express purpose of relegating them to positions of inferiority. For many distance education learners, the legacies of this policy include weak academic backgrounds, poor models of learning and impoverished management skills which have far reaching consequences. Holmberg (1989) reports that the distance education student frequently can, and does, ignore special provisions such as face-to-face contact. This is probably not true of the majority of distance education learners in South Africa because it is frequently the *only* means of education available to them, providing the kind of courses they deem suitable or appropriate for their needs. The entrance to distance education programmes is thus not a matter of choice between alternatives.

1.1.5 Perceptions of student support

The SAIDE audit of teacher education[5] raises serious problems with the lack of student support, and the manner in which contact is used but it does not explore how students feel about contact. Similarly, the literature on distance education reflects a lack of research into student perceptions of support in general, and face-to-face contact in particular.

This study was designed to examine a case of student perceptions about a particular form of contact. It was anticipated that the potential for different perceptions was high, particularly between the course designers and the students, but possibly also among students themselves. The Natal College of Education (NCE) has been engaged in developing, writing and running distance education courses since 1987, and as new courses come on line and numbers of

students increase, so the function of student contact has become a growing issue of debate and the logistics of organizing it more complex. In the light of international experience and the current literature, the problem of contact with, and support of, distance-taught students is perceived to be a complex issue. Without an understanding of how students perceive the function and value of contact time, the effective development of models for unique circumstances seems most unlikely.

1.1.6 The aim and objectives of the study

The broad aim of this study was to determine student perceptions of the function and value of contact time in a distance education course. The literature suggests that it is not possible for distance education materials to bridge the gap between the institution and individuals without an intermediary (Sewart (1995), Keegan (1990)). The role of the intermediary has variously been described as pastoral, instructional and facilitator of student learning. The aims and objectives of the FDE: Educational Administration and Management are set out in Chapter 2[6] and favour the function of facilitating student learning, both individually and collaboratively. The value of contact, as perceived by the course developers, lay in facilitating creative interaction which would promote effective problem solving strategies and the development of critical management skills.[7]

The first specific objective of this study was to record student responses to questions designed to elicit their perceptions on the issues set out above. The second objective was to identify areas where students shared, or differed from, the course developers' perceptions about contact time.

10

A third objective of the study was to compare student perceptions of the study guides with views held by the course designers. The contact sessions were designed to complement the study guides, and to provide opportunities to engage students in discussions and exercises related to their personal experiences of management. These activities were seen to support and encourage *critical reflection* which Evans and Nation (1989) suggest lies at the heart of learning, whether through a distance or traditional mode of delivery. This implies that both elements of the course (guides and contact) were perceived by the course designers as providing a complete learning environment, rather than being discreet or separate aspects of the course.

A fourth objective was to identify why students might have perceptions which were different to those of the course designers. The effective development and implementation of a programme of contact time in a distance education course must inevitably hinge on *shared* perceptions of its function and value. An understanding of why certain perceptions might differ would at least provide a starting point for the evaluation and adaption of an existing programme.

Before attempting to understand student perceptions about the contact component of this diploma course, it is necessary to explain the background to course development at the College in general, and the actual process which led to the introduction of the FDE: Educational Administration and Management (Secondary School). This is provided in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2 - Background

2.1   Background - A brief history of the Natal College of Education

The Natal College of Education (NCE) is a distance education college which was established

in February 1986 when the former Natal Training College (NTC) and College of Education

for Further Training (CEFT) were amalgamated. CEFT was opened in 1977 and its prime

purpose was the upgrading of Natal Education Department teachers with three year teaching

diplomas. The Natal Training College had been a pre-service teacher training college since

1912, but since 1976, it catered for pre-primary and junior primary teachers only. The

reason offered for the final closure of NTC at the end of 1987 was the decreasing demand

for white teachers and the need to fill the underutilized facility that had been built at

Pinetown (Edgewood College of Education). The first and second year students at NCE

whose training was incomplete were transferred to Edgewood at the beginning of 1988, and

only the external studies section of the Natal College of Education continued to function.

Under legislation governing the provision of teacher training[8], Colleges of Education

administered by the former white provincial departments carried responsibility for teacher

training in the primary school sector, while provision for teacher training in secondary

schools was within the jurisdiction of universities. For this reason, all courses developed at

the Natal College of Education focused on the primary school sector and the college wrote,

taught, examined and awarded diplomas in this field.

The life expectancy of the College, as an institution serving white teachers employed by the

Natal Education Department was limited. The Rector at the time, Mr Stuart Wallace asked

that the College be permitted to enrol students from all race groups. Permission was granted in 1988 and marked a shift from government policy at the time. The decision, however, only reflected a recognition of the exceptional circumstances of the contract between the College and the Kwazulu Department of Education and Culture, and was not a general open admission policy.

2.1.1 NCE - The current status

NCE presently operates as a fully fledged distance education institution[9] with a student enrolment of three thousand one hundred and fifty two. Of this enrolment, 89% are Black students from the former Kwazulu Department of Education and Culture and the Department of Education and training. A total of 54 academic staff, representing fifteen subject departments, offer a total of 59 courses to teachers presently in service. (A further 20 courses are currently being written). The courses range from entry at a level of Matric plus one year of training, (DE 2 Certificate) to exit at the Matric plus five year level, (Further Diploma of Education). The administrative wing of the College currently has fourteen staff members.

The College is a semi-autonomous state college with a full Senate and Council in place. The Council determines student fees which the College collects and administers. The academic curriculum is controlled by the Senate and is implemented through the College management structures. Close links are maintained with the Kwazulu-Natal Department of Education and Culture and the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg (UNP). The College is also engaged in special projects with NGOs[10] such as Toyota Teach and the Joint Education Trust (JET).

2.2 Policy on contact and development of management courses at NCE

2.2.1 NCE policy on contact in distance education

From the inception of distance education courses at the College, contact was organized in the form of regional meetings, where the entire academic staff travelled to centres throughout the province of Kwazulu-Natal to conduct face-to-face, group lectures and work sessions. With student numbers having grown from two hundred and fifty in 1988 to over three thousand (in 1996), and the staff complement having expanded to fifty four, the logistics of planning and timetabling this exercise have become complex. In terms of the time available for individual subject departments to meet students, and increased timetable clashes for students, the model of regional meetings has become unwieldy. The model of contact that has been developed for the FDE: Educational Administration and Management (Secondary School) is significantly different to that used elsewhere in the College. Subject departments at the College are engaged in exploring alternatives to the present system through a committee set up to monitor and organize regional meetings. Some subject departments are likely to consider the model offered by this Further Diploma, thus there was seen to be considerable value in a close examination of student perceptions of this particular model of contact.

The College has not engaged in research on student support beyond a single questionnaire designed to gather student preferences affecting the organization of regional meetings.[11] Further, the process followed in designing, preparing, producing and presenting courses at NCE is not subject to strict controls or well defined principles. These factors support the

need for a study such as this.

2.2.2 The first management course - for primary school personnel

Part of the agreement to allow students, other than whites, to enrol at the College was a request from the Kwazulu Department of Education and Culture that a course in school administration and management be established for principals of Kwazulu primary schools. The rationale behind this was that principals in this department received little or no preparation or training for principalship and a Further Diploma in educational administration and management would provide specifically for their needs. Because the diploma was to be offered through a College of Education, entry was limited to primary school personnel only. Further, the Kwazulu Department of Education and Culture stipulated that only applicants holding permanent promotion posts were to be accepted into the course because this was where the greatest need lay.

The course was prepared and written by staff employed on contract to the Kwazulu Department of Education and Culture and based at NCE. This course was first offered in 1991 and was staffed until the end of 1995 by contract lecturers. One substantive post was approved by the Kwazulu-Natal Department of Education and Culture and advertised in January 1996. The post was filled in November 1996.

2.2.3 A second management course - for secondary school personnel

In 1992 a request for a secondary school course in school management came from both the

Department of Education and Training (DET) and the Kwazulu Department of Education and Culture[12] (KDEC). The motivation was presented to the Faculty Board[13] of what was then the Faculty of Education at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.

This motivation indicated that the diploma was to be "offered by the University of Natal, and taught by the Natal College of Education, Pietermaritzburg" to address the " the lack of expertise in administrative and managerial skills in their schools"[14]

A letter signed jointly by the Rector of The Natal College of Education and the Dean of the Faculty of Education, Pietermaritzburg,[15] also acknowledged that the need for such a diploma was perceived by The Centre for the Advancement of Science and Mathematics (CASME), which helped the College to compile an appropriate syllabus.

The suggested aims of the course[16] were to provide students with:

*   *an overall understanding of the nature of principalship;*

*   *an understanding of the fields of educational management, educational administration and organizational development;*

*   *an understanding of the professional issues confronting principals in South Africa today; and*

*   *skills emanating from the above which assist them to run their schools more effectively.*

A further, undated document[17] provides a detailed outline of the Further Diploma in Education: Educational Administration and Management (Secondary School). Two paragraphs are of particular interest because they refer specifically to contact with students.

1.3 Duration of the Course

A two-year distance education course, with two one-week vacation courses each year.

1.4 Nature of the Course

Students will be expected to submit written assignments and involve themselves in local group activities. These group activities will take the form of problem solving exercises.[18]

An overarching agreement[19] between the University and NCE was initiated to formalize the articulation between the two institutions. A staff member was appointed at NCE in January 1993 on a contract sponsored by the Kwazulu Department of Education and Culture, to oversee the planning and initial course development. In October 1993 the decision was taken to advertise two permanent posts, sponsored by the Kwazulu Department of Education and Culture to complete the writing and prepare the course for its first intake of students in 1995.

Messrs Neil Avery and Alex China were appointed in January 1994 to prepare a course designated as the Further Diploma in Educational Administration: (Secondary School) and given the course code 14FA.

The primary and secondary management courses (12FA and 14FA) functioned independently of each other for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the secondary school course had structural links with the University which the primary course did not. Secondly, the secondary course curriculum, devised by NCE and CASME, differed from the primary course curriculum. Thirdly, the primary school course was prepared specifically for students who were principals, or who held senior management positions and the supervisor of this course felt that it would be inappropriate and contrary to the wishes of the KDEC to offer it to students other than those occupying senior management positions in Kwazulu Schools. From the outset, the developers of the secondary school course materials envisaged an eventual opening of this course to all experienced teachers, including those in management positions, acting positions and level one teaching posts. Fourthly, the primary course was not developed along the lines and principles of distance education, but rather as correspondence materials. The distinctions between correspondence and distance education are not always clear and some clarification of the stance taken by NCE is necessary. The UNESCO terminology suggests the following differences:

Correspondence education

> Education conducted by the postal services without face to face contact
> between teacher and learner. Teaching is done by written or tape-recorded
> material sent to the learner, whose progress is monitored through written or
> taped exercises sent to the teacher, who corrects them and returns them to the
> learner with criticism and advice.

Distance education

Education conducted through the postal services, radio, telephone or newspaper, without face to face contact between teacher and learner. Teaching is done by specially prepared material transmitted to individuals or learning groups. Learners' progress is monitored through written or taped exercises, sent to the teacher, who corrects them and returns them to the learners with criticism and advice.

Titmus *et al. 1979* ***Terminology of Adult Education***. Paris:UNESCO

Significantly, these rather dated definitions do not associate face-to-face interaction with either correspondence or distance education. The emphasis on contact with students has however, been stressed recently in the South African context. The Natal College of Education has adopted the stance that face-to-face contact with students is an integral feature of its distance education methodology, but its teaching is otherwise still largely limited to what can be delivered through the postal services. The description of this College as a fully fledged distance education institution must be seen in the context of a system that is developing to meet specifically South African needs.

A major influence on the development of the secondary diploma was the suggestion that, in the interests of articulation between NCE and the University of Natal, some credit towards a B.Ed at UNP be built into the course structure and content. This necessitated a re-working of the proposed curriculum to bring the course into line with the modular and semesterised B.Ed. that the university was offering. The major effect of this was to create an eight

module further diploma from the approved five-course FDE. Two foundation modules, based on the B.Ed foundation modules were added to the existing five courses and a module on Research in Education was introduced. The content of the original five courses was adapted and rearranged to accommodate the structure of the B.Ed modules, Educational Administration and Leadership 110 and 120. This was necessary because the envisaged credit was planned to include both foundation modules and the two university electives mentioned above.

2.2.4 The conception of contact in the course

The effect of the decision to modularise the secondary course (14FA) was that it required a replanning of how assignments, contact with students and semesterised examinations were to be structured. The course was to be the first offered by NCE in this format and there were no precedents at the College on which the course developers could draw. The decision taken by the course developers to offer two weekend contact sessions per semester was arbitrary. It was influenced by the College policy that students enroled for a FDE were not expected to attend the regional meetings that formed the major contact component of all other courses offered by NCE and also by the course developers' perceptions that contact was particularly important for a management course.

As a result, a decision was taken by the course developers to offer two weekend contact sessions per semester. The duration of these sessions was planned to be a two hour session on a Friday night and a seven hour session (including tea and lunch) on Saturdays. At the time that this decision was taken, there had been no final decision about what form the

contact sessions would take or how they would be structured. The initial intention was to observe sessions run by the primary course supervisors to guide the planning, however after attending a session in November 1994, the decision was taken by the course developers to develop an independent model to suit the different circumstances of the new course.

2.2.5 Further development of management and administration courses

In August 1996 the primary and secondary courses were formally brought together into a single subject department and from 1997 the primary course will also be offered in a modular and semesterised format. The guides will be edited versions of the secondary school modules, with the exception of two specialist primary oriented modules, dealing specifically with the delivery of the primary school curriculum. A permanent post was advertised in September 1996 and filled in November 1996 which completed the staff ration of three lecturers in the Department of Educational Administration and Management. The aim of the department is to develop a range of elective modules covering levels of management to cater for teachers in the primary school classroom to head office personnel.

2.2.6 Course development process

During the preparation and development of this course, curriculum development at NCE was not structured or monitored in a coherent way. Once the approval to offer a new diploma course had been obtained from HEDCOM[20] and staff were appointed to carry out the development, there was neither policy in place nor were there mechanisms for the effective guidance or monitoring of the process of course development.

None of the original documents referred to above was made available to the course developers who took over the preparation of the study guides and planning of the logistics of the course in January 1994. These documents only came to the attention of the writer during the course of research for this dissertation! This gives a clear indication why much of the planning of this diploma appears to have been arbitrary in nature.

2.2.7 Aims and objectives of the course

The full aims and objectives of the FDE: Educational Administration and Management (Secondary School) were never explicitly recorded, however there were clear principles which were frequently discussed by the course designers. Writing down the aims and objectives of the course for the purpose of this study might seem artificial and give the impression that they were never discussed or used to guide the process, however, this was not the case. The following is an attempt to reconstruct the aims and objectives as accurately as possible.

The aim of the course was to provide students with an opportunity to bring together the theory and practice of school management and to develop new and effective practices through effective leadership. The objectives which the course designers set for themselves included the following:

* to prepare appropriate, interactive and user-friendly study guides.

* to provide the means and opportunities for students to constantly reflect on their current management practices.

22

*   to set assignments and examinations which tested application rather than recall.

*   to provide interaction with lecturers and colleagues in creative, challenging and student-centred contact sessions.

*   to encourage students to solve their own problems individually and collectively, rather than to seek ready-made solutions.

*   to encourage the development of skills and expertise appropriate for the management of change in South African Education.

*   to develop collaborative management practices rather than autocratic ones.

NB.   The learning objectives for students are implicit in the above, and specific learning objectives are listed at the beginning of each study guide.

2.2.8 The development of course materials

General direction for the development of the course was gleaned from personal discussions with College management, discussions with university colleagues, observations of the functioning of the parallel diploma for primary principals, and the personal experience and convictions of the two course developers, neither of whom had experience of course development.

On appointment to the permanent staff at NCE, there was no formal induction programme or staff development in the skill required for distance education. The two course developers took a conscious decision to become informed about techniques and methods of distance education. The main source of information on the preparation of course materials was the

23

literature of Derek Rowntree, particularly *Teaching Through Self Instruction* (1990). It was the only reference source immediately available in the College library and was recommended by colleagues involved in rewriting and developing new materials. Once again, this suggests the arbitrary nature of planning. The decisions taken by the course designers were frequently based on "commonsense" and thus not always appropriate. The practical guidance of this source was used extensively and was supplemented by the purchase of works by Race, Lewis, and Lockwood.[21]   A workshop on writing distance education materials was organised jointly by the University of Natal and the Natal College of Education in May 1994 and this provided some practical experience. The limited preparation for writing distance education materials and the lack of clear policy mentioned earlier resulted in early attempts at producing interactive study guides being a difficult and frustrating exercise. This serves as a strong indicator of the need for specialist training for distance educators.

The task of preparation was made more difficult by the time constraint of enroling the first student intake in 1995. It is generally accepted that the preparation of effective distance education materials is a time-intensive exercise and Rowntree suggests that the norm for this activity may be as high as fifty hours of preparation time for every hour of student time. Clearly, the one calendar year allocated for staff induction, self-training and the writing of a complete eight-module FDE fell considerably below this norm.

The literature on educational administration and management is considerable, however the selection of appropriate materials to meet the objectives of the course proved difficult and time-consuming, because little of it was designed for the mixture of first world/third world education systems which characterise South African education at the time of writing. While

some guidance was offered by university colleagues, it remained the final responsibility of the course developers to select appropriate course content and present it through interactive study guides.

When the decision was taken to include the two foundation modules required to bring the diploma in line with the course structure of the B.Ed offered by the university, only two of the eight modules had been completed. The writing of the foundation modules was undertaken by a university lecturer and a senior head of department at NCE. Both writers were well versed in the principles and practice of distance education, and the guides were edited and prepared for printing by the course supervisors at NCE. Both writers of the foundation modules worked under extreme time pressures to complete the materials and some deficiencies of design, presentation, accuracy and layout were evident in the guides used by the research population. This draws attention to the quality of the study guides that were used and it questions whether they fulfil the function of complementing the contact sessions to provide a structured learning environment. Preparing effective distance learning materials is conceptualized as a systemic and sequential set of procedures, yet it is clear that the production of materials for this course seldom adhered to this. For example, there was no regular involvement of informed instructional designers. If the guides do provide a comprehensive set of learning materials to complement contact sessions, then it is a matter of good fortune rather than good planning!

The remaining four modules (to be offered in the second year) were written concurrently with teaching the first four. The process of completing the writing was complicated by the transfer of Mr China and a succession of temporary appointments until the post was

permanently filled in April 1996. The final study guides were completed and printed a few days after the commencement of the final semester of the course (July 1996), and this is an indication of the constant pressure to stay ahead of the students. While the process of developing good distance education materials[22] was, by this stage, familiar, the factors already mentioned in this chapter resulted in some weaknesses in the materials. The importance of instructional design, careful editing and the trialling of materials are features which Rowntree[23] stresses in the process, yet none was satisfactorily carried out. An independent, external editor was used for two early modules, while the remaining editing was done internally, and somewhat hurriedly. It was the researcher's perception that while the modules have been assessed as suitable by moderators appointed by the School of Education (University of Natal,)[24] there is considerable scope for further development and improvement.

Chapter 3 - Literature review

3.1 Introduction

The review of literature in this chapter aims to examine the theoretical perspectives surrounding the issue of contact as an aspect of student learning at distance. However, the literature reveals very little about learner perceptions of this issue, which are critical to the assessment and development of contact components in distance education courses. Whatever the source or accuracy of these perceptions, an understanding of what students perceive to be the value and function of contact is important. If course designers and students have different perceptions about the value and purpose of contact, the potential for learners and teachers to work at crossed purposes is high. The impact that this could have on the realization of learning objectives is self-explanatory. Consequently, it is necessary to examine what the literature has to say about the status of contact in theories of distance education, and to identify specific concepts within the theory which will be useful in developing a methodology to explore student perceptions about the model of contact used in this study.

3.2 Defining distance education

The concept of distance education has grown out of a practice of learning from printed material while being spatially separated from the originator of the writing and fellow students, and dates back about a hundred years. Until recently, this mode of education has not had a well defined theory to draw on and as Keegan points out, " From Otto Peters to today the search for a well grounded-theory of distance education has been an arduous one."

(Keegan 1990:107). His focus on the school of philosophical analysis, represented by R.S. Peters, Paul Hirst and Michael Oakeshott as a suitable basis for a theory of distance education is based on the assumption that this school attempts to identify the nature of teaching and learning. What is of interest is that these theorists "see education as a reciprocal act that is impossible in the absence of a learner". Keegan (1990:108). The stress on the reciprocal nature of the act suggests that the relationship between teachers and learners is subjective and is basically a group activity. This brings into question whether this reciprocal act can be achieved at a distance. Keegan argues that this is possible by re-integrating the act of teaching which is divided by spatial and temporal distances. He proposes that this is done by linking carefully developed materials to the learner in ways that achieve as many of the characteristics of interpersonal communication as possible. The nature of such interpersonal communications is a contested issue which is directly linked to the way in which distance education is conceptualized.

In an analysis of modes of teaching and learning it becomes clear that distance education is not easily or simply conceptualized. It is not always recognized or described in the same terms and there is debate about whether it is generically different to traditional face-to-face education, or whether it lies on the same continuum. Much of the literature on distance education tends to focus on the description of systems of teaching rather than on theorising student learning (Robinson, in Lockwood, 1995:221). This is possibly a result of much of the literature favouring the view that distance education is a generically different mode of teaching and learning. The conceptualization of distance education is also complicated by the debate about differences between correspondence learning theory and current distance education theory. Correspondence learning, in its worst sense, implies the separation of

teacher and learner and is carried out through extensive use of postal communications, where learning materials are characterised by formal and dense text; substantial extracts from academic sources; the absence of interactive exercises and dense typographical presentation. Distance education cannot be simply defined as Keegan, in Sewart *et al.* (1988) shows. He examines four different definitions in an attempt to extract the main elements of a definition of distance education:

* *the separation of teacher and learner which distinguishes it from face-to-face lecturing*

* *the influence of an educational organization which distinguishes it from private study*

* *the use of technical media, usually print, to unite the teacher and learner and carry the educational content*

* *the provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue*

* *the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialization purposes*

* *the participation in an industrialized form of education which, if accepted, contains the genus of radical separation of distance education from other forms.*

(Sewart *et al.* 1988:30)

However, the debate about generic differences also exists within the field of distance education itself. This is highlighted by Sewart's departure from narrow definitions such as that given in the 1979 UNESCO study which implies that distance education is generically different to conventional education (Keegan 1990:45).

An opposing school of thought rejects the notion of generic differences and Sewart maintains that there is a continuum between one-to-one, face-to-face and pure distance education. Each particular distance education system places itself somewhere along this continuum. Sewart's thinking has largely informed the Open University practice of tutor support for distance education students which is widely acknowledged as a leading model in the field. Even where student support is acknowledged to be important, there exist different conceptions about the functions and values attached to it. There is an important dichotomy between these two schools of thought, particularly with regard to the perceptions of support or contact that various participants in the process have. If distance education is seen as generically different, issues such as the personal intervention of teachers or tutors, or face-to-face contact with students assume a lesser significance than they would if it were conceptualized as being on the same continuum as conventional or traditional education, which is far more dependant on these modes of communication.

With regard to the specific issue of learner support in distance education, Robinson (in Lockwood, 1995:221) reports that the literature focuses on description and prescription rather than empirical enquiry and research. Her review of the literature reveals mainly loosely related propositions and studies that are not linked to any theory. There has been very little testing of propositions, theories or findings and a large number of topics appear to have been

researched in isolation from previous work. This suggests that there has been little effort to formulate theoretical explanations. She goes further to say that:

"learner support is weakly conceptualised. So looking at the research on learner support, we cannot claim to have a theory or theories, or even be close to it."

(Lockwood 1995:227).

She maintains that there does exist a broad spectrum of research in learner support, but it is found largely in internal reports, discussion papers and other institution-bound sources. Much of this is of an action-research nature and while it may not have much impact outside the institution in which it originated, the potential for internal impact is great. The absence of literature actively written up for publication suggests that learner support has not been a major focus of research and hence not an area that has been given a great deal of attention in the process of developing a theory of distance education.

3.3   Central concepts relating to contact in distance education.

By definition, distance education also separates the learner from other learners. However, this should not suggest that they are insignificant players in the process of learning at a distance, or that problems relating to the effects of distance cannot be overcome. One approach that addresses the issues of distance is limited and structured face-to-face contact with students. The literature on distance education gives rise to a number of important concepts that need to be explored in examining the functions and values that students attach

to face-to-face contact in distance learning. The four concepts that this study focuses on are:

* Distance

* Communication

* Learning

* Freedom and autonomy

3.4   The concept of distance

The concept of distance encompasses more than spatial separation and includes temporal, cognitive and perceptual aspects as well. Moore (1991) claims that the first attempt to define distance education and to articulate a theory was his effort in 1972. This he named as the theory of transactional distance in 1980. As Moore suggests, the spatial separation also implies distances in understandings and perceptions. It is noteworthy that Moore is one of the few writers in the field who emphasise the importance of perceptions, particularly those held by the learners. This must be considered as a significant gap in the literature in view of the consistently held view that students have to take responsibility for their own learning in distance education. For Moore, all these distance-related issues are potentially problematic and need to be overcome by the learners, the teachers and the educational organizations if effective, deliberate and planned learning is to happen.

Moore's concept of transaction was derived from Dewey and "connotes the interplay among the environment, the individuals and the patterns of behaviour in a situation'" (Boyd and Apps, (1980)). For Moore, it is the physical separation that leads to psychological and

communication gaps for the learner. This he sees as a space of potential misunderstanding between the teacher and the learner. Moore's observations of transactional distance over twenty years suggest that transactional distance is a continuous, rather than a discrete variable and is a relative term rather than an absolute one. In any form of education there is some element of transactional distance, even in the most conventional of face-to-face settings. Distance education, however, lies towards the opposite end of the continuum and often involves the separation of teacher and learner in ways which affect their behaviours significantly. When transactional distance is perceived to be particularly great, special teaching procedures and organizational arrangements need to be made to mediate its effects. Moore refers to two clusters of special teaching procedures which he calls *dialogue* and *structure*. The determination of *distance* in a programme is a function of these two sets of variables. The extent to which face-to-face contact with students mediates across the distance between learners and effective learning is of particular interest for this study.

Morgan (in Lockwood, 1995:58) intentionally does not draw a distinction between distance education and what he calls proximal education. Like Moore, he views distance education as lying on the same continuum as the more traditional, face-to-face mode. Holmberg (1989), however, argues that it is generically different, being particularly suited for individual learning because it is based on personal work by an individual student, more or less independent from a tutor. This argument suggests that Holmberg does not view spatial distances as problematic for learners. He goes on to report that the distance education student frequently can and does ignore special provisions such as face-to-face contact. However, it does not follow that it is any less suitable for groups, or individuals, who take advantage of the face-to-face contact that may be provided. Sewart (1988) sees distances

33

between students, their colleagues and the providing institution as problematic and claims that the effects of distance are felt particularly with regard to the absence of swift feedback that conventional education provides. Like Daniel, (in Sewart *et al*. 1988) he stresses the need for an intermediary to bridge the gap between the individual and the institution. He cites as the debits of a distance education system the following concerns which imply spatial, cognitive and perceptual distances for students:

1   no measure of progress available

2   no framework of study for the distance education student

3   no peer group clarification or pressure

4   no benchmarks on progress or failure

The negative effects of distance, in all its forms, are most strongly articulated by those who focus more on a *student learning imperative* (such as Moore, Sewart and Daniel) than those who propose elaborate structures based on a behaviourist model of learning. Rowntree and Holmberg are strong advocates of the view that well constructed learning materials can bridge the gaps but Evans and Nation (1989), in particular, are highly critical of these approaches which they claim serve only to insulate teachers and learners from each other.

The various conceptions of distance and their potential to influence the structure and delivery of distance education courses are strongly linked to educational philosophies of how teaching should be conducted and how students learn, as well as the kinds of communication that are used.

3.6   Communication

Keegan (1990:38) traces the development of definitions of distance education from Dohmen (1967), Peters (1973), and Moore (1973) which stress the separation of teacher and learner, to more recent adaptions which refer strongly to two-way communication.   Keegan's synthesis of definitions suggests, "the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialization purposes" (1990:38). Keegan and Evans and Nation distinguish between information technology and two-way communication by suggesting that students must be able to *initiate* the dialogue rather than just being passive recipients.

Sewart argues that a teaching package which is able to realise intellectual pleasure and study motivation without personal intervention is unrealisable (Keegan 1990:90). Daniel shares this view that an intermediary is necessary between the student and the package and their arguments support the rationale of planning contact time with distance education students. Sewart (1988) maintains that the need for intermediaries is to compensate for the absence of a learning group against which the learner can measure himself. However, he does not go far enough here, because although he recognises the importance of a learning group, he does not advocate actual contact between students themselves. Failure to recognise the need for contact is cited as the cause of the lack of esteem that some distance education institutions experience[25].

Bååth (in Holmberg, 1989) is particularly concerned with two-way communication and his analysis of teaching methods was through research conducted into the applicability of the

35

teaching models of psychologists to correspondence education (in this sense, a sub-set of distance education). He looked at B.F. Skinner, E.Z. Rothkopf, D.P. Ausubel, K. Egan, J. Bruner, C. Rodgers and R.M. Gagnè.

While Bååth writes largely about the possibility of two-way communication within the learning materials, he also speaks positively of the importance of the role of a tutor. He suggests that distance learners need special assistance with the start of their studies and with study motivation in particular. The tutor can also play a role in linking the learning materials to learning - by trying to relate the materials to the learner's previous reinforcement patterns (following Skinner); or previous knowledge and cognitive structure (Ausubel); or previous comprehension of the basic concepts and principles of curriculum (Bruner); or by concentrating on the task of establishing a good personal relationship with the learners (Rogers). In summary, the findings of his research were:

*   that models with stricter control of learning towards fixed goals tend to imply, in distance education, a greater emphasis on the teaching material than on two-way communication.

*   That models with less control of learning towards fixed goals tend to make simultaneous communication between student/tutor more desirable. (In the case of this study, through face-to-face communication)

This suggests that different level of communication in distance education may be desirable and equally effective according to what is to be taught and how it is to be learned. The

behaviourist school of thought does not necessarily take this into account when it argues that communication with students can be conducted almost exclusively through learning materials which simulate interpersonal conversation. In dealing with the matter of face-to-face contact, Holmberg (1989) does so with reference to non-contiguous and contiguous communication which is suggestive of generic differences. He argues that while there is often a case for supplementary communication in group and face-to-face meetings, there is no doubt that the use of face-to-face sessions is not exclusively based on rational decisions. He claims it is also related to the power of tradition and to negative prejudices about the applicability of non-contiguous forms of study.

Holmberg (1989) refers to a number of studies which have shown that in both cognitive objectives in general, and some psychomotor objectives, distance education students performed as well as students studying through conventional means. An early study by Childs, (1965) suggests that there is little evidence that show that correspondence students do less well than classroom students. Other research, however, suggests that many psychomotor objectives and objectives in the affective domain are more effectively obtained by personal contact. These findings are likely to have lead to many distance education institutions using contact sessions less for subject matter learning and more for the purpose of:

1   *practising psychomotor skills in laboratories and under similar conditions; also verbal skills belong here;*

2   *facilitating the understanding of the communication process and human behaviour;*

3   encouraging attitudes and habits of relevance for the study;

4   mutual inspiration and stimulation of fellow students;

5   training in co-operation;

(Holmberg, 1989:93)

The control of learning towards fixed goals raises questions about what and how students are expected to learn. Moore, (1991) in writing about the concept of transactional distance, refers to two clusters of special teaching procedures which he calls *dialogue* and *structure*.

Dialogue in Moore's view, refers to the interaction between learner and teacher when one responds to instructions given by the other. The extent and nature of the dialogue is determined by the educational philosophy of those responsible for the design of the course, the personalities of the learner and the teacher and the subject matter of the course, as well as environmental factors. Dewey's influence is noticeable here in the implicit guidance that is provided and maintained by the teacher. Keegan's (1990) view of dialogue is more narrowly seen as a two-way communication in which students should be able to initiate the dialogue as well as be receivers. While Evans and Nation (1989) are also critical of models which reduce learner involvement in dialogue, for them it is much more than a two-way communication. Engagement in dialogue is much more closely linked to their conception of critical reflection which is seen to lie at the heart of all education.

The *structural* set of variables that determine transactional distance are elements in the course design, including the ways in which the teaching programme is structured so that it can be delivered through the various communications media. The structure describes the extent to

38

which a programme can accommodate or be responsive to the learners' needs. It is clear that the amount of dialogue and structure varies from programme to programme.

The nature of communication with students learning at a distance is thus dependent on the philosophy of learning that a particular institution follows, rather than on specific needs, articulated by learners themselves. With learners coming from a very wide range of previous experience in the South African situation, the need to understand their perceptions would seem to be very important.

3.5   Learning theory

Despite the preoccupation with the description of systems of distance education that was reported earlier in the chapter, a common concern expressed in the literature reviewed is that student learning is central to the process of distance education, however, there are different and often weakly conceptualized views about how students learn effectively in this mode.

From the work of Morgan (in Lockwood, 1995) and Moore (1991) particularly, one can identify three imperatives in the research into student learning. The first is a *perceptual imperative* which suggests that student approaches to learning in both distance and proximal systems are similar. The second is a *practical imperative* which is reflected in the changes that are occurring in the conventional setting and which are blurring the distinction between the forms, because self-study materials are increasingly being introduced into conventional education settings. Thirdly, a *learning imperative* is identified in the need to improve student experiences by helping them to adopt 'deep' approaches to learning (Marton and Säljö, 1976,

in Lockwood, 1995).

Morgan's (in Lockwood, 1995) reference to 'deep' approach to learning is more clearly explained by Evans and Nation (1989) who take the stance that *critical reflection* is what lies at the heart of distance learning, just as it does in conventional or traditional methods. Moore argues that engagement in *dialogue* encourages this reflection and Biggs (1995) identified interaction with others, student motivation and learner activity as critical aims of intervention which is designed to improve student learning. What Morgan, Moore and Biggs are supporting is a kind of dialogue that aims at helping students change and develop their conceptions of learning and which mediates the influence of spatial and temporal separation. It follows that contact time which allows students to engage colleagues and teachers in dialogue and debate should strengthen their reflective practice in a distance education course. It further reduces the insulation that Evans and Nation (1989) speak of and serves to encourage critical reflection as a fundamental principle of academic discourse in distance education.

Conversely, the school of thought which conceptualises distance learning as generically different tends to favour a behaviourist approach which suggests that structured learning materials can fulfil most of the functions of the teacher in a face-to-face environment, and engage the students in critical dialogue. Rowntree (1993) and Holmberg (1989) are particularly strong proponents of this view and they suggest that well constructed learning materials can bridge the gaps effectively. While both support the notion of maintaining a dialogue with students, it is conceived as a conversation constructed and maintained through a variety of materials, not face-to-face interaction. For Rowntree, distance learning is:

...learning while at a distance from one's teacher - usually with the help of

pre-recorded, packaged learning materials. The learners are separated from

their teachers in time and space but are still being guided by them.

<div align="right">

Rowntree (1994:29)

</div>

Rowntree's concern is for maximum efficiency through perfectly designed materials and he claims that this can be achieved if an accurate profile of the target population is compiled in advance of the preparation of materials. This rather mechanistic approach comes under criticism from Evans and Nation (1989) who adopt a critical stance to what many consider to be the best examples of distance education. Their criticism of the Open University's educational technology, which they call *instructional industrialism*, is based on the concern that some theories of learning promote teaching practices that treat learners as passive receivers of information. It is also their contention that "it is inescapable that the nature of text and text production processes are central to instructional industrialism". (Evans and Nation 1989:245) This is reflected in the elaborate structures based on the behaviourist model of learning which is mediated by forms of text production. Evans and Nation maintain that this tends to maximise the teachers' control over curriculum and pedagogy, as they can regulate the forms of discourse in which the students can engage. Their argument is that in this kind of situation, distance teachers and learners are insulated from each other by spatial and temporal distance.

Holmberg (1989) has a more humanistic approach and he argues that the only important thing in education is learning by individual students. He favours maximum freedom and far reaching autonomy in the distance education process in a system which allows for free

pacing, free choice of examination periods and plenty of two-way communication for tutorial and feedback purposes.

His view of distance education stresses that it is a process of "guided didactic conversation" (Holmberg, 1989:28). The rationale for doing this lies in his recognition of the intention of establishing a feeling of personal relationship between teacher and learner which leads to intellectual pleasure and study motivation. While it can be argued that Holmberg was largely referring to the capacity of interactive texts to engage students in 'conversation', his argument does not suggest personal contact has no role to play. While Holmberg does acknowledge that the conversation concept can be built into the media available to distance education (cf. Rowntree), his emphasis is firmly placed on a system that has a high regard for the affective and social concerns of the learner. His references to feelings, pleasure and personal motivation argue that these concerns are inseparable from successful, organised study. This places him closer to the thinking of Moore and Evans and Nation than might initially seem evident because he makes a basic general assumption that real learning is attained only through an internalizing process. Holmberg views the internalizing process as something which occurs through the simulated conversation which encourages what he calls individual text elaboration. An essential difference, however, is that Holmberg believes learning is primarily an individual activity which can be achieved in the absence of others. Moore, and Evans and Nation express similar concerns for this internalizing process which they call *dialogue* and *critical reflection* respectively, but they differ on the capacity of learning materials to achieve this end. Similarly, David Sewart's approach to distance education has been summed up as a continuity of concern for student learning. He does not, however, share as strongly as Holmberg the belief that distance education materials can do

all that is done in a face-to-face teaching environment. Like Daniel and Bååth, he stresses the need for an intermediary to bridge the gap between the individual and the institution. He believes that the introduction of the human element in distance education study is necessary to counteract the effects of various distances referred to earlier in this chapter.

This view is more strongly stated by Smith (in Keegan, 1990) who makes reference to an Australian model of integrating internal and external teaching by full time faculty staff, Smith suggests that:

systems which rely solely on the stamina, perseverance and intellectual capabilities of the students to survive the rigours of external study without assistance do not fulfil their academic responsibilities.

(Keegan, 1990. p.98).

For Smith, concentration on the learning package can lead to a dehumanizing of the learning process, which he regards as a social experience. This is a contradiction of Holmberg's view that learning is primarily an individual activity facilitated by the guided didactic conversation.

In a field where theoretical perspectives are not particularly well developed, one of the most clearly articulated theories of distance education comes from Holmberg (1989), and is worthy of further consideration. Apparently, for Holmberg, students who do little text elaboration do not secure new learning matter very successfully. Those who engage in a lot of broad elaborating seem to risk difficulty in retracing the text information in the multitude of

connections that they have made. Thus, moderate use of text elaboration seems profitable. (Mandle and Ballstaedt, 1982 in Holmberg, 1989, p.44). Holmberg claims that these considerations are behind his concept of guided didactic conversation, the qualities of which he describes as follows:

1   *Easily accessible presentations of study matter; clear, somewhat colloquial language, in easily readable writing; moderate density of information.*

2   *Explicit advice and suggestions to the student as to what to do and what to avoid, what to pay particular attention to and consider, with reasons provided.*

3   *Invitations to an exchange of ideas, to questions, to judgements of what is to be accepted and what is to be rejected.*

4   *Attempts to involve the student emotionally so that he or she takes a personal interest in the subject and its problems.*

5   *Personal style including the use of personal and possessive pronouns: I, my, you, your etc.*

6   *Demarcation of changes of themes through explicit statements, typographical means, or, in recorded, spoken communication, through a change of speakers (eg. male followed by female) or through pauses. (This is a characteristic of the guidance rather than of the conversation.)*

Building on this conceptual development, he believes he has developed a theory which implies that course presentations which follow the principles described are attractive to students, support study motivation and facilitate learning. Holmberg expects this to apply to most learners at all levels, but particularly those with little or modest experience of study and limited independence.

Holmberg's main formal hypotheses, based on the general postulates and the assumptions about what constitutes guided didactic conversation, are summarised as follows:

1   *The stronger the characteristics of guided didactic conversation, the stronger the student's feelings of personal relationship between them and the supporting organization.*

2   *The stronger the students' feelings that the supporting organization is interested in making the study matter personally relevant to them, the greater the personal involvement.*

3   *The stronger the students' feelings of personal relations to the supporting organization and of being personally involved with the study matter, the stronger the motivation and the more effective the learning.*

4   *The more independent and academically experienced the students, the less relevant are the characteristics of guided didactic conversation.*

3.5.1 Learning as a social or individual activity

Reference has already been made to this issue and the extent to which learning is seen to be a group or individual activity varies in proportion to the value that is attributed to face-to-face contact. John Daniel sees distance systems operating as a fusion of activities in which the student works alone (independent activities) and those that bring him into contact with other people (interactive activities). Rowntree, Holmberg and to a lesser extent Sewart, focus on individual learning where the learner remains separated from all other sources of human contact save occasional meetings with a tutor. For Daniel, socialization and feedback are the most important functions of interactive activities (contact). The feedback role is considered crucial for adult education while the socialization function is seen to be less important in adult education than in the education of children. It is reasonable to suggest that Moore's *dialogue* and Evans and Nations' *critical reflection* are more likely to occur successfully among interactive groups of student with little or modest experience of study, than individually, as Holmberg suggests. Socialization into methods of effective learning may be a planned consequence of organised and structured contact time with groups of students. The degree to which such effective learning can be inculcated through interactive media and the absence of personal interaction has not been convincingly described in the literature.

It would appear that a major challenge to distance education systems is to get the right balance between individual learning and student support. This balance has major implications for the administration and the economics of the system because student support implies a greater complexity of organization and additional expenditure on human resources. It also

suggests that the needs of different institutions and students may vary considerably.

3.6   Freedom and autonomy

Holmberg's (1989) view that studying through distance education is particularly suitable for individual learning, based on personal work by an individual student, suggests that he believes learning does not depend on face-to-face contact with others. His humanistic view that the only important thing in education is learning by individual students explains his support for maximum freedom and far reaching autonomy which allows for free pacing, free choice of examination periods and plenty of two-way communication for tutorial and feedback purposes.   One of his main hypotheses claims that the more independent and academically experienced the student, the less relevant the characteristics of the guided didactic conversation become.   Daniel disagrees, arguing that the more freedom a learner has over pacing, exam periods and tutorials, the less likely he will be to successfully complete the course.   The conflicting positions they take may be linked to interpretations of the meaning of freedom and autonomy.   Autonomy, although defined in terms of 'the freedom to act as one pleases' (Cassel Pocket English Dictionary) has implications of a mature and reasoned independence in the way Holmberg uses it.   Freedom, in Daniel's usage, implies something more like obeying a whim than following an independently and logically chosen course of action.   It is in the consequences of acting autonomously, or freely, that the difference is most marked.   The differences in the understanding and usage of these concepts is particularly relevant for this study.

3.7 A model for the methodology and interpreting the findings

The review of literature gave rise to a wide range of questions about student perceptions of contact in distance education. These questions were synthesised into categories and further refined to develop specific questions for use in the gathering of data. The review also raised four specific theoretical issues which are fundamental to the interpretation the findings of this study. The way in which the reviewed literature conceptualizes *distance, communication, learning theory and freedom and autonomy* were instrumental in the choice of research tools and serve as conceptual tools for interpreting the findings. This process is explained in the following chapter.

Chapter 4 - Methodology

4.1   Introduction

This examination of student perceptions has been designed as a case study of a group of

students who were exposed to a particular model of contact in a distance education, further

diploma course at the Natal College of Education.   As a preface to the description and

explanation of the methodology followed in this study, a brief description of the research

population is included to contextualise the research design.

4.2   The Research Population - a description

The study was conceived as a case study of the first intake of students for the FDE:

Educational Administration and Management, and their perceptions about face-to-face contact

as part of a distance education course. The group studied was dominated by males (21) with

only 3 females registered for the course.   The majority (15) were aged 31-40 years of age,

and 7 participants were aged 41-50 years. One was aged less than 30 years, and one older

than 60. The composition of this intake was predominantly African men who held appointed

management positions in the Ex-Kwazulu Dept of Education and Culture and Ex-Department

of Education and Training.   There were relatively few women because promotion posts in

secondary   schools   at   the   above-mentioned   departments   were   dominated   by   male

appointments.   Thurlow reports that in 1993, 91.7% of principals in post-primary schools

in the KZDEC were males, while the figures for deputy-principals and heads of department

were 70.1% and 66% respectively[26], in favour of males . There was a fairly high attrition

rate during the first year of the course. There was an approximate 30% dropout rate from the initial intake as a result of financial constraints, personal time management problems, communication breakdowns with the College and poor academic performance. Students who proceeded to the second year of study were generally those who had been successful with the initial four modules of the diploma, but not exclusively so. A number of students registered for the second year opted to repeat a variety of first year modules, but also to proceed with the second year modules. Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that they are students who have a fairly strong record of success in a distance education course. The perceptions they have about face-to-face contact as it is experienced in the FDE: Educational Administration and Management, may not be generalizable to students who dropped out of the course at an earlier stage.

4.3 The Instruments

In the light of the literature reviewed and the objectives of this study, the two specific instruments selected to gather data from the research population were the focus group discussion and questionnaire. The reason for this choice lies in the types of data that were required to explore student perceptions of the function and value of contact sessions they were engaged in. This research was therefore designed to elicit largely qualitative data in the form of rich descriptions of student perceptions related to this issue. It is acknowledged, however that the questionnaire also provided quantitative data in the form of numerical scores of students' responses to particular items.

4.3.1 Strengths and weaknesses of the focus group discussion (FGD)

The focus group discussion (or interview) was developed by Merton and Kendall in 1946 as a means of allowing the interviewer more control in the kind of questions used and to limit the discussion to certain parts of the respondents experiences[27]. The focus group discussion is a form of group interview in which the interviewer acts as a facilitator. The group members are given the opportunity to talk freely and spontaneously about a particular topic. The purpose is to gather in-depth information about perceptions and ideas from the group members. Merton and Kendall described the purpose in the following way:

> *The actual interview is focused on the subjective experiences of the people who have been exposed to the situation. Their responses enable the researcher both to test the validity of her hypotheses, and to ascertain unanticipated responses to the situation, thus giving rise to further hypotheses.*

<div align="right">Cohen and Manion (1996:289)</div>

The focus group discussions used in this study followed these principles but were also used to develop and formulate appropriate questions for a more structured questionnaire.

Merton and Kendall established a set of criteria by which productive and unproductive interview material could be distinguished. The following points give guidance on maximizing productive material in focus group interviews.

    1   *Non-direction: interviewer guidance should be minimized.*

2   *Specificity: respondents definitions of the situation should find full and specific*

expression.

3   *Range: The interview should also maximize the range of evocative stimuli and*

responses reported by the subject.

4   *Depth and personal context: The interview should bring out the affective and*

value laden implications of the subjects' responses,...

Cohen and Manion (1996:290-292)

Specific advantages of this approach include the flexibility and freedom to explore participants spontaneous remarks which help to develop research hypotheses. It allows the respondents to raise issues which the researcher had not previously thought of when planning the study. Data from spontaneous responses are also likely to be more valid than answers suggested in options from which informants must choose (as in closed questions or questionnaires).

The choice of the focus group discussion as the initial means of data gathering was based on the assumption that an exploratory and open-ended group interview would help to clarify what the case study population felt about a range of issues related to face-to-face contact as an integral part of a distance education further diploma course. Open ended questions have a number of advantages in exploring student perceptions. They allow the researcher to probe in greater depth if required and to clear up misunderstandings relating to the questions. They also enable the researcher to test the limits of the respondents' knowledge and they encourage co-operation and a positive rapport. They also allow the researcher to make a truer assessment of what the respondents really believe. The unexpected or unanticipated answers

52

that respondents give may also suggest relationships or hypotheses that had hitherto not been thought of.

Tuckman (1972) in Cohen and Manion (1996) favours the use of indirect questions in focus group discussions, where respondents offer their views on selected issues. Tuckman suggests that by making the purpose of the questions less obvious, the indirect approach is more likely to produce open and frank responses. He also argues that non-specific questions are less likely to alarm respondents than specific questions that cause the respondents to become guarded or cautious and give less than-honest-answers. A further distinction that he makes is between questions inviting factual answers and those inviting opinions. By presenting statements to the respondents, rather than questions, inaccuracy and bias can be minimized. However, it must be conceded that both fact and opinion questions can yield less than the truth: factual questions do not always produce factual answers and opinion questions do not necessarily elicit honest opinions.

Although the researcher has little control over unstructured responses, they do ensure that the respondents have the freedom to give their own answers as fully as they choose, rather than being constrained by the nature of the questions or limited response choices.

Among the disadvantages are the potential influence that the interviewer can have on the respondents. While this cannot be controlled during the interview, the use of an impartial observer can be employed to ensure that the range of criteria established by Merton and Kendall are observed. The difficulty of analyzing data from open ended questions lies in the problem of establishing validity. Cannell and Kahn (1968), in Cohen and Manion (1996)

suggest that inferences about validity are made too often on the basis of face validity. One way of validating data collected from focus group discussions is to compare the interview measure with another measure, such as data from a questionnaire completed by the same group. Data collection from recordings of the discussions delivers a great deal of information, which is time consuming to process. Recordings are not always distinct and do not capture non-verbal data such as body language and facial expressions.

4.3.2 Strengths and weaknesses of the questionnaire

Among the most common types of instrument used in qualitative research are questionnaires and interview schedules (Frankel and Wallen, (1993)). The major difference between the two is that the questionnaire is self-administered, whereas the interview (or in this case the focus group discussion) is administered and facilitated by the researcher. The questionnaire is particularly useful in gathering closed-ended questions as it delivers standardized data that can easily be scored and analyzed provided that the questions are well worded. Scaled response items in a questionnaire provide a useful balance to the unstructured questions that characterise the focus group discussion. Ranking responses provide usable data that can provide information about an overall rank order of the alternatives that are presented to the respondents. Checklist responses which require respondents to select from the alternatives that are given yield nominal measures which indicate general trends and the extent to which a particular response might be favoured. Inferences can be drawn from the pattern of such responses. Open-ended questions allow for more personalized responses, but they can be difficult to score and are challenging to write. However, in a questionnaire used to collect data from respondents about their perceptions of contact sessions in distance education, it is

essential that some open-ended questions are included to collect an accurate and comprehensive range of responses, as well as to provide some measure of the validity of questions used in the discussion schedule. While the scoring of open-ended questions can be difficult if quantitative data are required, the interpretation of such responses from a qualitative perspective is no more subjective than data gathered from the focus group discussions.

4.4   Some general issues surrounding the use of discussions and questionnaires

As pointed out in the discussion of the weaknesses of the focus group discussions, the validity of qualitative data from group discussions (and questionnaires) can be questioned. As Cohen and Manion (1996:281) argue, one of the most practical ways of achieving greater validity is to minimise the amount of bias as much as possible. The sources of bias include the characteristics of the interviewer, the respondents and the substantive content of the questions. Cohen and Manion report that it is a common tendency for interviewers to seek answers that support their preconceived notions, or to have misconceptions about what the respondents are saying. They also report that studies have shown that race, religion, social class and age can be potent sources of bias. Careful formulation of the questions and thorough training of the interviewer are cited as two of the most useful means of eliminating bias. This is particularly difficult to control in a first-time study such as this one, however, acute awareness of the potential problems is a significant step along the learning curve. In an attempt to maximise the validity of the data, an impartial observer (referred to later as a recorder) sat in on the discussions with a specific brief to report on instances where the validity could have been compromised.

Kitwood (1977), in Cohen and Manion (1996), draws attention to the conflict between reliability and validity that is generated by the use of the focus group discussion as a research tool. He argues that where increased reliability of the discussion/interview is brought about by greater control of its elements, this is achieved at the cost of reduced validity. The solution to the problem of reliability and validity is linked to the conception the researcher holds about the use of the discussion/interview. Kitwood suggests that in one sense, reliability and validity become redundant notions for'

every interpersonal situation may be said to be valid, as such, whether or not it conforms to expectation, whether or not it involves a high degree of communication, and whether or not the participants emerge exhilarated or depressed.

(Kitwood, 1977)

There are also problems surrounding the people to be interviewed (or engaged in a discussion). Tuckman (1972), has observed that when compiling questions, the researcher has to consider the extent to which a question might influence respondents to show themselves in a good light, or to anticipate what the interviewer wants to hear. Similarly, interviewing procedures are based on the assumption that respondents have insight into the cause of their behaviour, however, it is now widely acknowledged that this kind of insight is rarely achieved.

The interview is frequently compared to the questionnaire by virtue of the common features they share and yet it is in their differences that their combined strength lies. Where the

reliability of the interview can be questioned, this is considered a strength of the questionnaire. The questionnaire encourages more honesty than the interview because it is anonymous, and it is more economical in terms of time and money, yet it is subject to low percentage returns. The researcher cannot determine if there have been different interpretations of the meaning of some questions (as can be achieved in the interview) or how much care has been taken over the completion of the questionnaire. Interviews can be conducted at an appropriate speed, while questionnaires are often filled in hurriedly.

The rationale in selecting the focus group discussion and questionnaire as the research tools for this study is underpinned by their similarities and complementary strengths.

4.5   Procedures

The theoretical perspective developed in the review of the literature was used to conceptualize a set of broad research questions[28] and to frame specific questions for inclusion in the discussion guide and the questionnaire. This set of questions was further developed by the researcher to investigate student perceptions of contact on the basis of: personal experience with distance learners; experience of writing and using interactive materials and designing and running contact sessions to support these materials.

These broad questions were subjected to scrutiny, and a set of questions[29] was itemised in eight categories. These were later developed into twenty eight specific questions used in the discussion guide[30] and thirty seven items in the questionnaire[31].

4.5.1 The discussion guide

The discussion guide was designed with two purposes in mind. The first was to ensure that appropriate data was gathered and the second was to ensure that there was a high degree of reliability in the phrasing of questions to the two groups engaged in the focus group discussions. The interview schedule was intended to facilitate a loosely structured discussion in which flexibility in timing and order was allowed. Several prompt questions were included in the interview guide. (Many additional prompt questions were in fact used to encourage or develop responses.) It was considered important to allow great flexibility in the discussions because the researcher wished to use the discussion in an exploratory manner as well as to elicit responses to predetermined questions. In general, the items were open-ended and designed to allow for unrestricted responses. The discussion schedule[32] was prepared for use by the researcher. A copy was also given to the recorder at the beginning of the discussions.

4.5.2 The Questionnaire

As indicated earlier, the questionnaire was developed after the focus group discussions were conducted and initially analyzed. The questionnaire was intended to deliver both qualitative and quantitative data. The questionnaire was trialled with a first year group of Administration and Management students who had also experienced contact sessions of the type that the research population had been exposed to. The finalised questionnaires were posted to respondents together with a covering letter and a self addressed, stamped envelope. The complete questionnaire included 36 items and was designed to be completed in no more

than thirty minutes. Owing to the length of the questionnaire, it has been included in Appendix 5.

4.5.3 The case study population

The selection of the group of students to constitute the research population was not a matter of choice. The group of students enrolled for the second year of the FDE: Educational Administration and Management was the only group who had sufficient experience of the type of contact identified for investigation. It was necessary to secure the approval of individuals in the group for their willing involvement in the study. They were first informed of the researcher's intentions to conduct an investigation of this nature at a weekend contact session in October 1995. At this time they were engaged in the process of selecting topics for their own research projects which constitute a full module of the FDE. There was a general expressions of willingness to participate in the study, as well as a broad understanding of the implications. They were informed that they would be asked to complete a consent form which would allow the researcher to gather data from group interviews and questionnaires.

The student population was approached in February 1996 and the detailed purpose and procedure of the research was outlined at that stage. All students were asked to participate in the focus group discussions. They were reminded of the nature of participation and were asked to sign a consent form. All thirty students who had enrolled for the second year of study, thus identified as the research population were willing to participate and signed a consent form. The group studied was dominated by males (21) with only 3 females registered

for the course. This reflects the predominance of males in secondary school management positions that is found throughout this sector. The majority (15) were aged 31-40 years of age, and 7 participants were aged 41-50 years. One was aged less than 30 years, and one older than 60.

4.5.4 Application of the instruments

Of the total student population of thirty, twenty six students attended when the focus group discussions were held at the Natal College of Education in May 1996. Two time slots of 75 minutes were built into the programme of the weekend contact session that was scheduled at that time. The group was divided into two sub-groups of thirteen students each, randomly selected by alternating student admission numbers.

The interview with the first group was conducted while the second group was engaged in routine course activities with the researcher's colleagues. At the completion of the first interview, the two groups exchanged places. The discussions were held in one of the two venues frequently used during weekend sessions and respondents were seated around a low table which held two small tape recorders. The setting was a familiar one and the organization of a round table discussion group reflected an activity that the respondents had become very familiar with during the preceding eighteen months. A recorder (a former lecturer and co-developer of the course) was seated outside the circle and his presence was explained to the group. As a familiar and trusted individual, it was felt that his presence would not inhibit the discussion, and his knowledge of the content and delivery of the course would allow him to provide a reliable assessment of the conduct of the discussion. His task,

which was made clear at the beginning was to note any instances of the interviewer leading the respondents, misinterpreting responses, deviating from the interview guide or otherwise affecting the validity of the process. He was also asked to make observations about responses and general group behaviour during the discussion. Inadvertently, he served another function when the researcher noted that during the second discussion he had omitted to turn a cassette tape over and thus missed about 10 minutes of recorded discussion! The questions asked during that time were identified and the recorder was asked to write down his recollections of the responses. This independent record was used to supplement the researcher's memory and it was felt that most comments were reasonably accurately reported.

In the use of the focus group discussion in this study, it must be noted that some difficulty was experienced with the transcription of data as a result of relatively poor quality recordings. The two tape recorders that were used relied on built-in condenser microphones. In a trial run, this proved to be satisfactory, however, the trial was not conducted with a full group of people seated around the table. Problems arose with interference caused by shifting chairs, coughs, quiet voices and occasional interjections. While these problems were not fully anticipated, there was not a significant loss of detail. Occasional indistinct responses are indicated in the transcription and a few, brief comments have been omitted as unreliable because key words in the responses are too indistinct to ensure accurate recording of the response. Multiple affirmative or negative responses are recorded as a single response in some places, however, they are referred to and interpreted in the analysis and interpretation of the findings. It is estimated that less than 5% of responses were affected in some way, other than the failure of the recording as mentioned previously. There was sufficient

accurate recording to ensure that the objectives of the procedure were met. The data collected through this research tool proved illuminating and provided significant direction for the compilation of the questionnaire and qualitative analysis and interpretation.

Generally, responses were freely given and all members of both groups participated to some extent. Fortunately neither group was dominated by an individual or individuals. This might in some way be attributed to the level of familiarity they share as students who have been together for +/-18 months. The discussions were characterised by a relaxed and informal atmosphere which is indicated by the humour and laughter that was evident. The lack of experience of the researcher resulted in some problems. Despite wide reading and an awareness of the potential pitfalls it is inevitable that some deficiencies in the application would be exposed. The researcher underestimated the time required for dealing effectively with all the questions on the interview schedule. This may, in part account for the brevity of responses to some of the questions that is shown in the transcription. In retrospect, fewer questions should have been used and fuller responses encouraged. In another sense, the fullness of some answers was illuminating and suggests that the discussions were at least successful in getting a variety of responses. There is some concern that despite efforts to avoid it, there are some responses which are likely to have been made to please the interviewer, rather than address the question specifically or completely honestly. This reaction was noted by the recorder who interjected on two occasions to make this point to the respondents. While this action was not planned or anticipated, it had the effect of generating more open comment on the question under discussion at least. The potential for respondents to react in this way was, however, anticipated and the literature on interviews frequently cites this as a potential drawback. Consideration of this has been taken in the

following analysis, but this type of response may, in itself say something about the nature of contact and student perceptions of the relationship between lecturers and students. This issue will be explored further in the analysis and interpretation.

The focus group discussions explored student perceptions of the eight different areas[33] relating to face-to-face contact as part of a distance education course. Responses from the participants in the discussion is reflected in these eight broad categories. Not all eight categories were explored in detail in the discussions and two reasons are offered for this. The first was the time constraint set by having too many questions in the discussion schedule. Without glossing over some questions and leaving others out, the interviews would have been excessively long, The second reason is that some areas of investigation were better suited to data collection through the questionnaire.

The data gathered from the focus group discussions was thus used to develop a questionnaire. The discussions gave an indication of broad areas of student feeling about contact sessions and also served to sensitize the researcher to other areas which were not originally anticipated. In general, the same questions that were used in the focus group discussions were reframed or differently stated, in some cases to elicit more detailed responses and in some cases as a means of testing the reliability of the participants' responses.

The questionnaire was posted to participants who were asked to respond and return it in the self-addressed, stamped envelope. Twenty four of the thirty participants responded and six questionnaires were not returned by the final deadline, despite a reminder which was sent out.

A descriptive data analysis of the questionnaire was considered necessary to complement the quantitative evaluation of responses. This was done in order to build on the interpretation of the focus group discussions, as many of the items in the questionnaire were developed from an initial analysis of the interview transcripts. A detailed, item by item numerical analysis of responses, together with a summary of additional comments to the questionnaire is found in Appendix 5.

Chapter 5 - Presentation of data and analysis

5.1   Presentation of data and analysis of the focus group discussions

The data presented in this chapter are summarised and organized around the eight categories of questions which were identified in the previous chapter and which arose out of the review of literature.   The presentation of data is largely descriptive but it includes a first level analysis which is necessary to explain and understand the context of some of the responses. A further interpretation of the data (a second level analysis) follows in Chapter 6.

5.1.1   Introduction

The first question in the discussion guide required students to scan two excerpts of similar content, one of which was presented in traditional textbook style and the other in interactive distance education mode[34].   Students' responses showed that the participants readily recognised the differences between the two styles.   In both discussion groups it was evident that respondents were initially reluctant to commit themselves to responses that could have been interpreted as contentious or challenging.   The researcher had to use a number of prompt questions to draw the respondents into fuller and more freely offered answers.   They reported a positive reaction to the approach of the interactive style, particularly with regard to the conversational tone and simplicity of language.   There was an indication that text arranged in an interactive manner encouraged students to engage with the content in a way that traditional academic texts did not. A response from a student illustrates this:

I think example B is quite alright because it helps your own thoughts. It whets your

appetite as far as the subject is concerned. So in other words it sort of motivates you

into thinking in advance and it sort of gives you all the facts as well.

Responses to a question which asked participants to identify the possible sources of such examples suggested that participants readily identified the example of interactive text with their study guides. Similarly, the traditional text was generally accepted to be the kind of writing that one would find in a textbook prescribed for conventional, face-to-face teaching. Participants were able to verbalise this clearly and a response to a question asking which style was perceived to be more useful, indicated a recognition of the interactive nature of the material:

I think example B because the manner in which it is drawn up leaves space for

activities and when someone tends to read, then one is tempted to put down his or her

ideas and it involves the active participation as opposed to example A which is

reading material... uh , in example B it has things like a structured block to give your

responses so I'd say that example B is more appropriate in our study.

Group members showed general agreement with this individual's comments through affirmative murmurs and head nodding. Where there was strong agreement, participants also confirmed their agreement by responding directly to the speaker, or to colleagues on either side of them.

It was felt appropriate to further explore the issue of student reaction to activity spaces

created in the course guides. Students reported generally low levels of activity and infrequent efforts to give full answers to the questions posed in the guides. Responses tended to be guarded and tentative, indicating that there was an almost apologetic recognition that the activities were neglected. When the question was initially asked, there was general silence as participants looked at each other in the hope that someone would answer for them. One or two of the more mature students who had emerged as leaders among the group during the whole course seemed to feel that they had a responsibility to respond to such questions. There was a clear indication that participants did not want to offend the researcher by suggesting that there was a negative perception of some tasks in the guides. By focusing on circumstantial reasons why students were not always able to complete the tasks (eg. time constraints, pressures of work) attention was diverted away from the materials themselves. Tactful answers from one particularly mature member of the group were strongly affirmed as representative of the group in general and there was a sense of relief that the question had been successfully dealt with. The sensitivity about potentially giving offence was further illustrated by group reactions to a few participants who felt confident enough to answer independently and critically. It was notable that when a forthright answer was given (as in the example below), there tended to be attention given to how the researcher responded. Slightly embarrassed smiles and glances exchanged among participants frequently accompanied comments viewed as critical. As the discussion progressed participants felt less inhibited in their responses, yet a desire to please the researcher persisted. This is illustrated by one particular reaction which led to a number of affirmations of this perception about responding to questions in the guides:

Sometimes I don't do them, sometimes I find it time consuming and when I am trying

to read it fast, uh.., I find it takes too much time. Then later on I can go back to the activities, but also sometimes you find that there are some answers, eh.., to the activities, so sometimes there is the tendency to say .. I think there are some answers, let me don't worry myself because at the end you get the answer, so there is the temptation not to do the activity.

5.1.2 The physical parameters and early perceptions about contact.

Questions in this area of investigation explored reactions to actual attendance at contact sessions; pressure on students to do so; the frequency of attendance and the choice of distance education as a learning style. The second question in the discussion guide asked for participants' reactions when they first became aware that there were planned contact sessions. The question elicited a number of responses and a range of early perceptions, but in general it was clear that most had not anticipated the kind of commitment that they were faced with. This question was seen as safer ground for frank comment because it dealt with negative reactions to a past situation and a strong support for the system that had developed.

With me I have a contact with some other students and I know that they also go for contact sessions, I also thought it won't apply to us because we are different altogether so I really didn't think we were going to have to come. When I heard that we were going to have to come, knowing I was committed I thought when is the work going to get done if it is a waste of time?

An immediate reaction to this comment came from a number of students who seemed to suggest that they recognized the difference between distance education and pure correspondence learning. Two illustrations seem apposite here:

With me, I thought it would be easier to cooperate or to go along with this course if I go to see some of the people involved in this course and decide that having in mind that if ever there would be times at that meeting for that sort of sharing of ideas or getting other peoples opinions, as compared to the other courses where there was correspondence and then writing the exams.

I once felt that it could be a waste of time when I compared that I once remember a certain course when I was registered at UNISA and then I wasted my time travelling all the way from Bulwer to Durban only to find that the lecturer came, and I was meeting the lecturer for the first time, and the last time and then coming in just showing us his face and telling us that he's late and just telling us to concentrate on this and that, now at the beginning of this course I thought that such a thing could happen, meeting people who are going to tell us that they are late and already having their flights booked and all those problems and then decide to leave us. But coming once I realise that this is different.

This anecdotal comment was greeted with laughter and vigorous approval. While it indicates a strong support for the manner in which contact has been conducted in this course, it was clearly perceived by the participants, in general, as the right thing to say.

5.1.3 Personal learning background

An exploratory question about what students understand about learning confirmed that they had assimilated and adopted aims and objectives very similar to those which had been identified in the planning of the diploma course. Whether these perceptions about learning had been internalized before entry to the course is not clear, but is not relevant for this study. However, what is significant is the manner in which participants responded to a question which asked how the group had experienced learning during previous studies. There was not as much negative reaction to past methods of learning as the researcher had anticipated. The researcher's perception that participants were likely to comment at length on the problems of rote learning and memorization was not strongly supported in their responses. Two responses serve as illustrations:

I think that in the past we didn't get the chance to internalize the particular things we were learning - most of the time we were reading and regurgitating so when I was looking at this, (referring to example B) I wasn't sure I was saying it is good because of the guides or because of internalization that has gone on. Learning only becomes your thing when you can do things when you put into action things you could not do in the past.

I would add that theory and practice were too far apart. Here we get theory and then we practice it. It is .... more efficient.

In an attempt to clarify the participants' conceptions of methods of learning, they were asked

to comment further on their earlier experiences of learning and any perceived differences in the course they were currently engaged in. Responses did reflect an exam orientation and an awareness of content based memorization, particularly in school subjects and early College experiences. In reaction to a question asking participants to characterise the learning they were currently involved in, there was little reaction which suggested that what had been said earlier was indeed what was important to them now, and that earlier learning experiences did not impinge much on their present perceptions. One participant responded in a way which suggested he was aware that the researcher was expecting something else, and it is possible that the researcher had given the impression that this was what he was looking for. The comment below seems to support this:

I think it is somehow student centred, but I am not sure, my colleagues can help.

Further confirmation that participants' recent learning experiences were not perceived as inhibitors to their present learning was reflected in the following responses:

I think it is a fifty -fifty. The fact remains that we still have exams and everything is geared towards the exams, that's my personal view of what this course is. Because of the exams we still have to memorise, no matter how much discussion we have, but certain things we have to take in and when we look at the question paper we must apply in the school situation, we still need to know the theory and that involves memorization so I still feel that, for example when I was at varsity we were geared towards the exams for the qualification at the end so I think there's not much difference from when I was at university about fifteen years ago, as compared to the

71

course today.

I think this course is more of an eye opener compared to the days when I was at university. There it was more of memorising without any application and here we get a lot of application which is a good thing. I feel that this application part of it is very very important because it gets you thinking, you want to get the solution all the time. Of course you cannot get away from it that at the end of the course there has to be some theoretical perspectives.

5.1.4 Relationships in contact

The issue of relationships was introduced in an indirect way through the exploration of what students found pleasurable or unpleasant about the course, and contact sessions particularly. A question asking if students achieved any pleasure from the course elicited the definite response that the actual implementation of things that were learned during contact sessions particularly, was a source of great satisfaction. When it was suggested by the researcher that there must be things that they could not implement, this was affirmed, however the sense of frustration that was reported was also tempered by optimism. This was reflected in the acknowledgement that present circumstances were changing and when the time was appropriate, they would be able to respond,

"at least you know the knowledge is there. You can practise at another time."

A specific question which asked what was considered pleasurable about the contact sessions revealed that group discussion among the participants was highly rated, especially the elements of close, informal *chatting* and getting views on solutions to problems from colleagues. References to the value and importance of discussion were frequently recorded throughout the discussions and the focus was primarily on problem solving. Time that was given to group work on scenarios and case studies was repeatedly welcomed because participants felt that such situations came closest to their own experiences. The development of theoretical models was always supported and acknowledged to be important but the need to share the problems which seem to be unique to the Black South African (and particularly rural) situation was overriding.

When the issue of what students felt was the worst part of the course was addressed, it was initially greeted with a slightly embarrassed general laughter. Participants were reluctant to initiate discussion about negative perceptions and they tended to raise what could be considered 'safe' issues first. For example, there was general agreement that elements of the foundation module LDS1 were inappropriate and thus confusing at the beginning of the course. This issues had previously been discussed at one of the contact sessions and the lecturers had acknowledged that there were some problems. However, once the apparent embarrassment or sensitivity about reflecting on negative aspects of the course was dissipated, there were some extremely keen personal perceptions made by the respondents. Once again, respondents reported more readily on their own shortcomings rather than organizational or administrative faults that might have been experienced. For one participant it was a personal issue of getting himself organized.

I enjoy it a lot when I am here, I feel as if I could stay with all my comrades for the good of the year, but once I am out there by myself, getting myself organized, haai, it becomes a problem!

A fellow participant supported this perception, adding that he felt *very alone out there* and that contact sessions *take a bit too long to come around.* Another reaction was to the pressure of time in terms of personal and professional commitments.

A further comment relating to the usage of time suggested that the course should move away from examinations based on the content and theory and towards assessing what students are actually doing. This appears to indicate a real concern for the acquisition and practice of skills and suggests that some students at least, have recognised and identified with the objectives of the course.

The link between the study guides and the writers of these materials was directly explored and responses were fairly predictable in that the respondents felt it was advantageous for the students to meet the writers of the guides. Reasons offered for this included: reducing misinterpretations, enhancing clarification and insight into possible exam questions and getting used to a writer's style. One comment in particular drew a direct link between the writer, the text and the reader.

As an example the guide that was written by Mr Comrie, when I read it the first time it was just like talking to him.

This was greeted by an overwhelming affirmation, with laughter and head nodding. Participants responded as though this was the last word on the matter. The relationships between students themselves, particularly with respect to comparative performance, revealed that they were partly reassured and partly challenged by the idea of assessing their progress in relation to that of their peers. There was little evidence of competitiveness between students at any stage and comparisons usually focused on the respondent's own performance rather than on that of others.

Competition sort of motivates you, but healthy competition - once you get exposed to other people and how they perform and so on you sort of tell yourself I must pull up my socks because I don't want to be beaten by them.

The lack of competitiveness was also coupled to a sensitivity about the performance of others. Marks on assignments and examinations appear to be treated as very personal issues and there was very little evidence throughout the course to suggest that students compared marks as a matter of course.

You feel good about it. Another thing I think is we don't condemn each other.

Responses about competitiveness were reserved and thoughtful, whereas respondents spoke freely and enthusiastically about their reactions to the group discussions which characterised much of the contact time. There were clearly expressed feelings of increased confidence in group problem-solving situations and there was a strong affirmation that individuals were not concerned about inadequacy or embarrassment. This was succinctly summarised by a

comment that signalled strong group consensus on the matter.

I think we have transcended this thing of laughing at each other.

No clear reasons were offered to suggest what participants actually wanted from group discussions, or what they expected group work to achieve. What was most apparent, however, was a sense of security in having the group to fall back on. A comment from one respondent suggested a feeling of individual insecurity that group support might alleviate.

Sometimes I want to settle a problem alone and later say it to the group, but sometimes I just want to start with the group, it just depends on the problem, but finally I must have the group and hear what they have done.

Comments about what made respondents most anxious or worried about the course did not reflect concerns about personal relationships. Problems relating to passing the examinations, the relevance of the qualification outside education and difficulties of implementing different management principles dominated the discussion. Throughout the contact sessions and the discussions there was a strong harmony among the participants, which developed with time. Evidence of this was the increasing willingness to discuss sensitive issues such as political party influence in local education matters. The development of human relationships emerged as a considerable strength of the contact sessions.

5.1.5 Learning styles

In response to a question which asked respondents to reflect on different styles of learning, (face-to-face as opposed to distance study) two opposing perceptions were given. The first suggested that face-to-face tuition neglected personal contact and discussion which was described as *the richness of the course* (i.e. the course participants were currently doing).

The second comment focused on a respondent's view that the study guides did not engage him fully and his feeling was that face-to-face lectures would provide him with more information. This respondent affirmed that he would have preferred to take a course like this on a full-time basis. These two reactions are responses to the two main features of the course. The first, in dealing with contact time, stresses the value of personal interaction with fellow students and the second refers to the study guides which are designed to simulate dialogue. The general affirmation of these views by the groups was an indication that both perceptions are widely shared, and are not, in fact, contradictions at all.

Two examples of possible examination questions were presented to the groups and they were asked to comment on their preference. The questions covered the same content but the styles reflected, on one hand, a traditional one-item, 50 mark essay and on the other, a multiple part, self-design and application type question. Responses indicated an initial favouring of the application type question, particularly because it was divided into smaller parts. A later reaction to this suggested that the application type question was more like an assignment which required far more effort. This was seen as a disadvantage in an examination where time constraints would play a role. There was a recognition that the two questions called for

different styles of thinking, however the two groups reacted quite differently when they were asked to indicate which kind of question they would prefer to answer in an actual exam. The first group voted 10/3 in favour of the traditional question and the second group indicated 8/4 in favour of the application type question.

This item did not fully explore the issue of different learning styles and their appropriateness, possibly because the items did not successfully reflect distinctions between factual recall and application, but it did show that participants felt the constraints of the terminal examination quite strongly. Drawing further conclusions from this item was not considered valid.

On the issue of language as an element of learning, students were adamant that the presentation of the course in English was desirable. It was felt that added explanation and casual comments in Zulu were generally helpful, however, it was noted that not all students were fluent in Zulu. An interesting comment suggested that different cultural perspectives were also likely to influence a common understanding and that it was best to operate through a single medium.

Respondents were asked to justify why they continued with the course in the light of new salary banding which would make it most unlikely that they would receive salary category recognition once they had been awarded the diploma. This was a policy change which was not in place when they first enrolled for the course. The question was put to them from a 'devil's advocate' position in an attempt to avoid respondents simply opting to give a socially acceptable answer. Responses acknowledged the dual purpose of enroling for a Further Diploma and there were fairly strong statements arguing against a perception that they were

pursuing the 'paper chase'. One such comment follows:

In fact that's one of the factors that is destroying our teaching, that most of the teachers improve their education only for salary purposes and then you find that in the end whatever a person has done it is not of any use to the children, but with this course I don't think there is any one of us who can say whatever we are getting here has got no use to the institution he or she is working at. It is unfortunate that we are, or most of our teachers improve their education only for salary. To such an extent that some after hearing that some qualifications would have no effect decided to stop their studies which is a bad thing.

When responding to this issue of salaries, an intensity of feeling was noticeable. Respondents felt that a salary matter would always be important but if one was serious about learning, it would be a secondary issue. They were acutely aware that much criticism has been levelled at the work ethic of teachers recently.

5.1.6 Student views about the institution and its demands

During discussion about what respondents found to be anxiety producing, one response focused on the quantity of learning materials presented in the course. The respondent felt that it was overloaded as a part-time course. He also indicated that the University's position influenced the workload. This elicited some debate as respondents differed on the perceptions that the University dictated the programme to the College, however there was strong support for the role of the University.

I think it gives a very positive image of the relationship, I think it is rather a good

thing. What I don't know about is the issue of overloading, but I think it is OK.

Further comment about the desirability of credit being awarded for this course in later University study[35] supported the positive perceptions of the articulation between the two institutions.

Respondents showed an awareness of other institutions offering similar courses and at least two indicated that they would have preferred to follow degree courses, rather than a College diploma. Reasons for this were not offered. There was, however, a general agreement that the majority had wanted to do a management course. In response to a question about the differences between NCE and other distance education institutions there was a clear perception about the advantages of contact sessions in providing the opportunity for discussion. Responding to a question which asked if the nature of contact work at NCE had made a difference in student choices of an institution through which to study, one student had the following to say:

The distance is what has been called the sacred land between the students and the

lecturer. In other institutions there is a no-go area between the learners and the

lecturers, unlike here. Even though there is a distance but still there is that closeness

that links us with the lecturers.

This appears to be a strong affirmation that some students, at least, are conscious of the differences between learning styles and the way various institutions practise them. Other

respondents confirmed that they had investigated issues related to financial implication and curriculum design before making a choice.

Respondents appeared to be reluctant to engage in debate over perceptions about standards. The general silence and body language of a number of participants who began leaning back in their chairs seemed to signal a withdrawal from this matter. While there were comments relating to institutional and traditionally ethnic differences it did not seem appropriate to pursue the issue beyond their initial answers. The polite, but clear indication that they did not have much to say on the issue was sufficient motivation for the researcher to abandon it.

5.1.7 The content of contact sessions

One of the questions that was initially designed to examine methods of learning proved to be more useful for examining perceptions about what happens at contact sessions, largely because respondents tended to focus on what they had already experienced at contact sessions. In response to a question regarding the proportion of time spent on course content and discussion activities, the general trend was once again to favour the discussion aspect of contact sessions. One student suggested a 60/40 % split in favour of discussion activities. Another argued in favour of a balance between the two without attempting to quantify it.

Surely the discussion will at the beginning, you know, it's based on the content, so in fact, I think whatever may be discussed must originate from the content part of it and the practical part of it as well as we are also relating what we are discussing

with the situation at our schools.

A response which challenged the earlier support for more discussion activities drew attention to the nature of discussion which had not been referred to before.

I think that there should be a balance of some sort between the content and the discussion because in some cases from last year up to now I sometimes feel that what we are here for really was not worthwhile because there was a lot of discussion over things that were not really up to what I regard as a standard. That's why I really believe that there should be somehow a balance between the content and the discussion.

5.1.8 A summary of the findings

Participants in the focus group discussions gave a clear indication that their attendance at the planned contact sessions was pleasurable and rewarding. There was no indication that they experienced negative attitudes or a reluctance to give up the time to attend. The participants perceived their recent learning experiences in generally positive ways, which supported their desires for skills and professional growth. Respondents were most comfortable in reporting on their perceptions of the strengths of the contact sessions. There was a greater hesitancy to engage in criticism of the system in place and this tended to come across in guarded or tentative responses. The most noticeable area of criticism was related to the printed study materials which were reported not to engage the students fully in the interactive process. This was despite their recognition of the principles and objectives of the design of the study

guides. They were not inhibited in talking about their own failings within the system, however. The most persistent remarks and comments reflected their perceptions about the value of group activities, particularly discussions around case studies and scenarios. This was coupled to a perception that the contact sessions provided a forum for the resolution of actual problems confronting them in the workplace. Although not openly articulated, there was a sense of insecurity about their present ability to deal with, and make decisions about the problems facing them. The strength of the informal nature of personal interaction was clearly stated, and the potential for competition between students was firmly dispelled. Participants demonstrated that they were very comfortable with the current model of contact as an environment which engaged them in reflective learning rather than more socially oriented relationships.

5.2   Presentation of data and analysis of the questionnaire

The presentation of data and the analysis of the questionnaire follows the analysis of the focus group discussion and the major issues arising from this analysis.

5.2.1   The physical parameters and perceptions about attending contact sessions

The feelings of pleasure and the rewarding nature of the contact sessions that was reported in the focus group discussions was substantiated by data from the questionnaire.
The living environment for the majority of students was far from ideal for engaging in distance study, with only 12 respondents indicating that they had telephones at home. Even fewer (8) had telephones at work and none had computers or fax machines. Most members

of the group were required to travel some distance to attend contact sessions, 6 of whom reported journeys of more 200km, however, the subsidised costs of attending contact sessions at the College were not considered to be worrying factors[36]. All 6 respondents who reported a higher degree of concern for transport costs were those living at the furthest distances from the College. Strong support was shown[37] for the present system of two weekend contact sessions per semester. A preference for only one contact session came from 3 of the participants who are required to travel the furthest distances to attend.

Most participants (18) reported that on starting the course they had very little, or no idea about distance education as it is practised at NCE. This confirmed the findings of the discussions which showed that early perceptions about the nature of contact were very limited.

Participants generally reported little pressure to attend contact sessions[38] (in both items used, only 4 responses showed a perception of pressure). The complete rejection of the notion that lecturers would penalise students for non-attendance at contact sessions was affirmed by a 100% response suggesting that students enjoyed the sessions and always learned a lot. There were two examples of direct contradiction in this item where participants indicated support for directly opposing positions. These may be a result of carelessness/haste in completing the questionnaire.

5.2.2 Personal learning background

The focus group discussions showed that participants did not have strong negative perceptions

about their previous learning experiences and that they were more concerned with their personal and professional development than with simply improving their salary categories. This was confirmed in responses to the questionnaire. The diploma referred to in this study is not a post graduate course, neither will it automatically qualify the majority of participants for a higher salary. Participants were not aware of the salary restrictions[39] at the time of registration, however they were informed about this before the data were collected. A total of 17 participants have university qualifications and a further 4 have some university course credits. This is a high proportion for a diploma course and seems to support the view that students enrolled for this course mainly for the purpose of improving professional skills. This is verified by responses which show all 24 respondents supporting the aim of improving professional skills as of great importance (21 rated it as of very great importance)[40]. There was a strong indication that salary improvement had been a motivation at the time of registration, (13 responses - of great/very great importance) and this tended to contradict the views expressed in the discussions. The least favoured reason for studying further was for reasons of increased personal status, however, this was only marginally less important than salary considerations.

In the statement of the research problem[41] reference is made to the widely held perception of poor standards of education existing among teachers as a result of apartheid policies, however this sample population does not reflect that position in their responses to the questionnaire[42]. A high proportion of university credits and degrees is reported by the participants who also indicated that their recent learning experiences were not negatively perceived[43].

These perceptions are not fully supported by the focus group discussions which suggested that the nature of their present diploma course was significantly different and superior to their earlier experiences. There was a focus on earlier educational experiences which the researcher pursued in the discussion, and this may account for the different perception being reported in the questionnaire. During the discussion, one participant in particular suggested that this course was not different to his university experience.

5.2.3 Perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of contact sessions

The discussions showed that participants reported freely on the strengths of the planned contact were considerably more circumspect about perceived weaknesses. This observation was related to their avoidance of comments which might offend the researcher/course designer. This impression was confirmed by responses to an item in the questionnaire[44] which listed six statements about contact sessions, where respondents were asked to express their view of the importance of the statements about contact sessions. The analysis of this item showed a uniformly high perception of the importance of all the statements and was thus not very revealing. The statement suggesting that contact sessions provided an opportunity to meet colleagues, was rated lowest on levels of importance, and one respondents rated it 'of no importance at all'. Perhaps the task of placing the statements in rank order might have been more useful. The strong support for the statements about contact sessions does, however, coincide with the enthusiasm that was expressed in the focus group discussions.

One of the strongest negative perceptions that was recorded in the discussion was the failure of the printed study guides to engage the students fully. In responses to the questionnaire,

the least strongly supported way of studying was shown to be working individually with the study guides at home[45] as only 10 of the 24 respondents rated this as very useful. The strongest support was recorded for listening to lecturers/tutors at weekend sessions, and group work at the sessions (19 out of 25 rated this as very useful). The discussion groups acknowledged that students accurately identified value in completing interactive exercises but that this was seldom done. The same perceptions were supported in the questionnaire. Of the 24 respondents, only 13 reported that they sometimes or seldom did the exercises, while 22 viewed them as quite important or very important[46]. Written comments suggested a variety of reasons for this. Time management problems were frequently cited but more importantly, participants said they did not do the exercises because the answers could be found later in the guides. This may also reflect a serious weakness in the quality of the actual exercises. Some reported that they *should* do the exercises to test their own learning and mastery of the material, but felt it took too much time. Additional written comments indicated some negative feelings about working at home on the guides, while others felt that it was important as a preparation for group discussions. A positive reaction to the effectiveness of small, localised peer groups was interesting because these groups were initiated and organized by the students themselves. Frustration with local peer groups was reported by two respondents. They felt that the potential success of the groups was undermined by a lack of commitment to meeting dates and times.

The questionnaire attempted to explore student preferences for the degree of autonomy they valued in their learning environments. This issue was not directly explored in the focus group discussion and on its own, the questionnaire item[47] seems to reflect a clear preference for making their own decisions about planning and pacing their study. There was no

evidence of this perception elsewhere in the focus group discussion or the questionnaire.

This suggests that students have a misconception about what learner autonomy is, and that they may be confusing it with the popular notion of *freedom*. This is an issue which will be more thoroughly dealt with in the interpretation of the findings.

5.2.4 Relationships in contact

The value placed on personal relationships and interaction was the most powerful and persistent feature of the discussion groups, and comments related to other issues invariably gravitated towards the importance of the relationships that had developed between lecturers and students and within the student group itself.

Part of the function of early contact sessions was to introduce students to the course presenters and writers. They met all the writers, yet they were not explicitly informed who wrote which study guides. The practice of course writers leading contact work on the guides they had prepared probably led to students making these connections in an implicit way. The guides do not carry the names of the writers, and a few guides were the product of collaboration by two writers, however, the impression that certain modules are the product of a particular writer is widely held by both the students and lecturing staff.

This contributed to the participants' affirmation that they were aware of the people who wrote the guides they were using. As mentioned earlier, an observation supporting this finding was made with specific reference to a module and the actual writer.

As an example the guide that was written by Mr Comrie, when I read it the

first time it was just like talking to him.

The questionnaire showed that of the 24 participants, 13 reported that they were always, or often aware, while 2 were seldom aware and 1 never, of the people who wrote the guides[48]. The effect of these levels of awareness strongly supported the view that it makes the guides easier to follow (19 out of 24 responses)[49]. This suggests that personal relationships between students and lecturers may be carried over into course materials with positive consequences.

Participants rated their personal participation in the activities of the weekend sessions as very important (22 responses) and this was verified by the items which examined the activities during contact sessions that were viewed as most important[50]. Repeated references to the perceived value of group discussions characterised these responses. The overwhelming unanimity of these responses is verified by the persistent references to the necessity and value of group discussions and problem solving activities that was reported in the discussions.

5.2.5 The content of contact sessions

Participants were asked to rate a selection of activities and functions of contact sessions according to the level of satisfaction they elicited. Most highly rated were activities relating to problem-solving through interaction with colleagues and lecturers. Receiving extra notes and being given lectures did not provide equally high levels of satisfaction. Participants strongly rejected the notion that getting away from school provided some satisfaction for

them. No allowance was made for reporting why they felt this strongly about it. While interaction with colleagues was very satisfying, it was professional activities that were valued rather than the more social function of meeting people and making friends. This was consistent with the findings of the discussions.

When asked to rate the usefulness of things done at the contact sessions, the perceptions recorded above were generally confirmed. Group discussions that centred on case studies and scenarios were most highly rated, whereas individual exercises received relatively less support. The usefulness of notes and handouts was seen to be more highly rated than in the previously mentioned item. It is possible that respondents related the use of handouts to the presentation of case studies and scenarios listed in this item, rather than the more general usage that was implied in the previous one. Once again, the social function of meeting colleagues informally was not as highly rated as the problem solving activities. This does not imply that it was always considered unimportant or of little use, as only 5 such responses were recorded.

Respondents were given the opportunity to record why they rated some things as more important than others. This confirmed views expressed in the focus group discussions that identifying management problems and seeking solutions is what many participants perceived as the strongest features of contact sessions. One response stated that the study guides did not offer answers to specific problems, whereas discussions frequently did. Comments also referred to feelings of reassurance and enrichment as a result of these activities. One respondent noted that there was no great need to socialize.

The penultimate two items in the questionnaire asked respondents to indicate what lecturers *did* mostly during contact time and what they *should do* mostly. A high degree of concurrence was reported for lecturers facilitating learning and motivating students. In reporting what lecturers should do, relatively greater emphasis was placed on the facilitation of student learning. This seems to be consistent with the earlier expressed view that problem solving discussions with colleagues were a high priority.

5.2.6 General comments

The final item provided an opportunity for respondents to make extra comments. Nine of the twenty four respondents made use of this, some only to express positive sentiments about the course in general. Specific requests for information about the 'scope' of the examinations were reported in 4 comments. Suggestions that weekend sessions close at lunchtime on saturdays instead of 15h00, because of fatigue or travel commitments were repeated on 3 occasions. The importance of the opportunity to apply theory to practical situations in the contact sessions was reinforced and appreciation was expressed for the receipt of copies of legislation such as the Schools Bill and the South African Constitution. A suggestion was made that Head Office personnel be invited to attend contact sessions so that they would be aware of what was being done. It was also suggested that this would also provide an opportunity for them to explain the processes of transition from the departmental perspective. An appeal was made for the use of locally filmed and produced videos. Many of these comments confirm the participants' focus on problem solving as a necessary activity during contact sessions.

Chapter 6 - Interpretation of the findings

6.1 General observations

What has emerged from the findings is that student perceptions of contact have a very powerful influence over what actually takes place during these sessions, and what value is placed on the planned activities. The findings show that at times, students have different objectives to those set by the lecturers, and what they perceive the objective to be, tends to influence what is actually achieved in contact sessions. It is also important to recognize that the assumptions made by course designers and facilitators of contact are not always an accurate reflection of what the students think. While participants in the focus group discussions reported that they enjoyed the sessions and always learned a lot, the really important questions are, why do they enjoy them and what exactly do they learn?

The interpretation of the findings attempts to synthesise the issues raised in the review of literature, the research findings and assumptions that underpinned the planning and development of the course.

6.2 Learner background

One assumption made in the preparation for this study was that the background of inferior educational experiences of Black South Africans (Since the Bantu Education act of 1953) would be a serious impediment for them in studying at a distance because it was characterised by rote learning and passive, non-critical acceptance, all of which run counter

to generally accepted requirements for successful self-study. While it is widely accepted that much of the distance education currently offered in South Africa has still not developed beyond this approach[51], the capacity for distance teaching and learning to encourage what Moore calls *dialogue*, and Evans and Nation *critical reflection* is not disputed by the findings.

In attempting to explore the participants' perceptions of the influence of their learning background on their experience of studying at a distance, it became clear from the data that there were relatively few who had negative perceptions of their recent learning. Participants reported[52] experiences that favoured the acquisition of important skills, and the opportunities to practice them; teaching which focused on the learners; and a low incidence of learning that called for a lot of memorization. While these responses did not reflect the assumption made above, they are influenced by the large number of respondents with University degrees or degree courses. Of the 24 respondents, 17 have University degrees, while another four have some university course credits as well as teaching diplomas[53]. This distribution does not reflect the norm in schools in Kwazulu-Natal, where the problem of underqualified and unqualified teachers is widely acknowledged. While it can be argued that not all university study is student-centred, or encourages what Morgan calls 'deep' approaches to learning, it is reasonable to suggest that exposure to longer periods of study and different institutions will influence the way students perceive their own learning. The personal commitment to extensive study that is illustrated by the research population also suggests that they perceive learning as intrinsically valuable. Responses to the questionnaire showed that the research population attached very great importance to the acquisition of professional skills in their learning.

The SAIDE audit of teacher education reported a very poor quality of pre-service and in-service teacher training but the circumstances of the case study population is markedly different. This is shown by their perception of a high exposure to courses which addressed their needs; favoured a skills-based approach; and focused on outcomes-based teaching, which the COTEP[54] document on teacher education suggests is characteristic of effective learning. Participants in this case study frequently verbalised their desire to engage in learning that would improve their practice of management and prepare them for the management of change. Despite this unusually high level of qualification for students enrolled for a Further Diploma in Education, respondents reported some difficulties with reading and understanding the study guides and responding to assignment and exam questions[55]. The implication of these findings is that if this degree of difficulty is experienced by highly qualified learners, it is fair to assume that learners with more limited learning experiences will encounter much greater difficulty in engaging with distance education materials than Holmberg suggests they should.

The initial assumption about learner background was also one of the strongest motivations for developing face-to-face contact sessions to supplement the study materials in the FDE: Educational Administration and Management (Secondary School). This was based on a further assumption that distance education was not generically different to the more conventional face-to-face mode of delivery, but required the same kind of critical reflection that Evans and Nation suggest characterises all effective learning.

The perspective that Holmberg and Rowntree suggest, i.e. that in successful distance education, re-integrating the act of teaching can be done by linking carefully developed

materials to the learner in ways that achieve as many of the characteristics of interpersonal communication as possible is not supported by the findings. In their view, it is possible for well designed media to take the place of face-to-face teaching. Holmberg suggests that the feelings of personal relation between teaching and learning parties promote study pleasure and motivation, particularly for learners with little or modest experience of study and limited independence. His assertion that this can be achieved through well developed self-instructional materials, as well as suitable two-way communications is refuted by the data. The following student perceptions about the instructional materials are particularly pertinent.

6.3   Perceptions about the printed materials

The findings suggest that students do not readily engage with the printed study guides, despite their recognition of the value of doing so. In both the discussions and the questionnaire there were clear indications that they found the material in the guides reasonably accessible and the interactive exercises valuable and challenging, yet they offered a variety of reasons for not doing them, mainly time and work pressure related. Some respondents, in suggesting that they could find the answers to the activities elsewhere in the guides, might well have identified a valid design weakness, however, the fact remains that the majority of students in the research population do not readily engage with the printed materials in the way that Holmberg's argues they should. This study suggests that, however well designed materials are, unless students and teachers share similar perceptions about methods of learning, the danger exists that students will not respond as teachers expect them to. While respondents reported a desire for improving professional skills, their perceptions about learning do not support it. Despite the fact that the interactive spaces in the guides

were designed to allow for personal opinions, observations and applications, rather than factual content, comments about the 'answers' being provided confirms the view that students in the case study population still have a perception about the existence and importance of narrowly conceived 'correct' answers. During the preparation of the guides the course writers were conscious of attempting to create scenarios and situations which would encourage a variety of personal responses appropriate to the students' own circumstances and environment. The course writers' attempts to encourage critical reflection and dialogue were ignored or misinterpreted in favour of a content based, rote learning approach. Student assignments also showed that they are more concerned with the perception that there is a *right answer* which must be given, than with developing the process of engaging with the text to explore a variety of possibilities, as might be done in face-to-face conversation. The students show considerable support for critical reflection in their comments about contact sessions. Group activities which are directed at the exploration of scenarios and problem solving are perceived to be the most valuable and important part of contact sessions. This strongly suggests that face-to-face contact is able to engage students in the kind of critical reflection and dialogue that Evans and Nation and Moore write about, however a further implication is that Biggs and Morgan are correct in arguing that personal interaction is instrumental in fostering the process rather than the learning materials.

This raises the issues of whether the interactive guides actually support the principle of extended conversation in print, or merely confirm a belief that they should contain a set of answers that will satisfy the lecturers/examiners. The study guides in which students most readily recognised the conversational tone and persona of the writer, and which prompted the comment,

As an example the guide that was written by Mr Comrie, when I read it the

first time it was just like talking to him,

were part of the module they experienced the greatest difficulty with at the beginning of the

course. While these perceptions about the study guides are important for this study, they do

not represent a complete analysis of this aspect of the course and do not claim to do so.

6.4   Didactic and socialization needs in contact

Sewart and Daniel claim that some of the weaknesses of distance education are that in the

absence of a peer group, students have no measure of their progress, they lack a framework

of study and there are no benchmarks on progress or failure. Similarly there is an absence

of peer group clarification or pressure. Essentially, these are socialization needs which

cannot be accommodated without some form of personal interaction.

The school of thought that places the emphasis on the learners, focuses attention on what

their needs are, and to what extent teaching arrangements provide for these needs. The

argument in the previous section is supported by John Daniel who sees distance education

operating as a fusion of activities in which the student works alone, and those that bring him

into contact with other people (in this case, the planned contact sessions). For Daniel, the

most important functions of contact are socialization and feedback. The feedback role is

considered crucial for adult education while the socialization function is seen to be less

important in adult education than in the education of children.

Responses to the questionnaire confirm this and show a much higher perception of the

importance of feedback than of socialization [56]. In fact, the questionnaire item which asked students to rate reasons for satisfaction at weekend courses indicated that respondents rated socialization the second lowest of nine alternatives[57]. Similarly an item used to assess the usefulness of things done at weekend sessions rated the meeting of colleagues socially and informally as the least useful of six alternatives[58]. The findings are slightly ambiguous with regard to the social needs of the students and it may be a weakness of the research design that a limited view of socialization has been presented. Extra comments about why respondents rated some things as more important than others showed that while there is a perception of reassurance in the contact with other students, there was no perceived need to socialize. The relatively low emphasis placed on socialization is in a sense contradictory, especially when the group discussions placed such strong emphasis on the good relationships that existed between participants and lecturers. It is clear, however, that students have different perceptions and attach meanings to professional relationships and social relationships. It is probable that *socialization* has been interpreted in a literal way to mean something quite dissociated from work. In this sense it possibly implies an avoidance of work. Participants in the discussions were critical of the work ethic of many of their colleagues. In a broader sense the participants did recognise a very important social function of the contact sessions. This is reflected in an overwhelmingly positive reaction to group activities which is interpreted as socialization into a different culture or style of learning. This is consistent with student perceptions of the value of contact as an opportunity to explore the complex social environment and multi-level relationships that are associated with school management.

In the focus group discussions, considerable emphasis was placed on the strength of

relationships that exist between lecturers and students and among students themselves. This offers strong support for the views of both Smith and Sewart who argue that concentration on learning packages without some form of personal intervention can lead to a dehumanizing of the learning process. The value that is placed on contact sessions is frequently reported in the focus group discussions and particular emphasis is placed on group activities and problem solving activities.

6.5   Individual and group learning

Distance education, by its very nature, implies that many students operate in isolation from each other for long periods of time. It follows that course materials should be designed for individual learning. It is interesting that students in the research population place greater value on group work than they do on independent study. The basis for this preference lies in their reported desire for skills and solutions to make their immediate jobs easier. The study guides present theoretical perspectives and the opportunities for students to assess their current practices against these. The guides do not offer solutions to particular problems but rather aim at analysing theories and developing skills which should empower students to deal with their own problems in a unique way. In this sense, the guides focus on individual learning and the contact sessions use group work as a stimulus to individual learning, as well as an example of how collective thinking can provide a powerful management tool.

The course objective of encouraging collaborative decision making processes in schools, rather than autocratic management were well supported, yet not for the reasons originally supposed. The course designers' perception that autocratic management was the dominant

style in schools represented by the students was reinforced throughout the course. However, evidence from the discussions suggests that the choice of this style is not based on the participants' confident belief in it. Rather, it suggests that school managers have very little confidence or security in an autocratic style. The discussions also show that a lack of knowledge, or misconceptions about alternatives have been major obstacles to effective change. Collaborative work at contact sessions is not approached as a simulation of how schools can be managed in general, (i.e. a process of individuals developing competencies), but is rather seen as a way for the group to find practical solutions to specific problems that individuals experience in their own schools. While there is undoubted value in this type of activity, students and lecturers perceive its purpose differently.

The participants' overwhelming desire for solutions that would make their jobs easier was not entirely expected by the researcher. While it does seem to be an affirmation that the objectives of the FDE[59] and the contact sessions specifically, are being realised, the heavy stress placed on the search for ready made solutions to problems is also a contradiction of the objectives. Debate and group discussions were highly rated by the respondents, yet it is not clear to what extent they reinforce individual learning. The frequent references to group dependence suggest that some students report positive perceptions about contact on the basis of other people offering solutions to their problems. What comes across strongly is a perception of insecurity in individual decision making. With regard to the planned activities during contact sessions, students reported relatively lower preferences for individual exercises than for discussions relating to scenarios or case studies[60]. More significantly, the reasons they offered for this[61] included statements such as 'some of our school problems are solved'. Respondents also commented positively on the reassurance they received from their

colleagues and the relevance of the discussions to the reality of their jobs. One student quite bluntly stated that the study guides did not offer solutions to the specific problems he experienced.

The implication of this is to suggest that the planning of contact sessions should take into account needs which are articulated by the students. Rowntree's advocacy of a profile of the target group of learners only goes part of the way in preparing an integrated learning environment of materials and student support. This study illustrates that the perceptions of the course designers and the student group are, at times, at variance with each other, even though there may be mutual expressions of satisfaction with the process in general. The potential for contact sessions failing to meet the learning objectives of either the lecturers or the learners is a very real danger.

6.6   Autonomy and freedom

Moore suggests that it is important to interpret students' perceptions about the relationship between *dialogue and structure*. The extent to which the students' experience of transactional distance can be mediated depends on the balance that is achieved between dialogue and structure. The structure that Moore speaks of implies the whole learning environment in which students are engaged, including the contact sessions. In this study, the interactive guides provide a large measure of structure, but they also attempt to engage the students in dialogue, through the interactive exercises in the text. It is apparent that students do not make extensive use of these activities, and in some cases, ignore them completely. The contact sessions were designed to provide extended dialogue aimed at providing greater

direction for the students. The findings suggest that contact sessions provide the *only* dialogue for some students. The way that students respond to this direction is related to their perceptions of freedom and autonomy.

Daniel argues that the more autonomy a learner has over the pacing of learning the less likely he will be to successfully complete the course, while Holmberg maintains that the more independent and academically experienced the student, the less relevant the characteristics of guided didactic conversation become. A basic premise of the course referred to in this case study is that an impoverished learning background, with little experience of personal autonomy, will have an even greater negative impact on the effectiveness of distance learning because students, who have never done so before, will need to take charge of their own learning. It has already been suggested that despite the unusually high level of academic experience of the research population, they do not show well developed, independent decision making or learning characteristics.

In the focus group discussions participants showed a strong preference for group work during contact sessions. The questionnaire revealed even greater support for opportunities for them to engage in collective problem solving activities[62]. The dialogue that students prefer is not an interaction between student and lecturer (as Moore interprets it), but rather between students themselves. In this sense there is a high level of group autonomy in relating to particular problems that are common to the case study population. They do not perceive the study guides or the lecturers as providers of solutions or as sources of critical input into this aspect of learning. This is not, however, individual autonomy over their learning experience, but rather a dependence on collective insight which provides a collective security which is

not reflected in individual behaviour.

This comes across strongly as a perception of insecurity about making decisions and solving problems. It appears to be a problem rooted in disempowerment, brought about by a lack of skills, knowledge and expertise. Throughout the discussions respondents were generally tentative in their responses, suggesting a lack of confidence in what they were saying. The language skills of the group were generally very good, and did not appear to inhibit the verbalization of ideas. Rather, it was dealing with the ideas themselves that caused the insecurity. The tentativeness to engage in vigorous debate may also have cultural implications which have not been explored in this study.

An item in the questionnaire which asked students to rate the level of importance they placed on different styles of learning[63] was designed to identify preferences for student autonomy or lecturer-directed styles of learning. A clear tendency was shown towards making their own decisions about what/how/when to learn (17 rated this as very important/important). Similarly, 15 respondents rated lecturers leading students step by step as of no importance/of some importance. While this should suggest a strong leaning towards autonomy over learning, it is not supported by the findings on dependency on group activity and the lack of strong, independent methods of learning. Holmberg's conception of autonomy is based on his view that the most important thing in education is learning by individual students. Thus he favours a system with free pacing, free choice of examination periods and plenty of two-way communication. This is clearly not the kind of autonomy that the respondents refer to.

What is far more likely, is that they are referring to a perception of *freedom* that they

103

experience in this course. There are opportunities for students to make inputs into the content and style of their learning during contact sessions and this is interpreted as a kind of academic freedom that was not strongly reflected in their comments about previous learning experiences. Participants' reports of the convivial and informal relationships that exist between lecturers and students, and among students themselves, is interpreted as a freedom from the formal and distant relationships that they spoke about in the focus group discussions.

There is also a sense of freedom from restricted access to, and participation in quality education that has come with the demise of apartheid in the 1990's. For students such as those represented in the case study population to achieve full autonomy over their learning, as Holmberg envisages it, would require institutional changes as well as changes in student methods of learning. The evidence of data collected in this case study suggests that changing learning styles is a task of some magnitude if one considers the cumulative effect of the inferior schooling and teacher training that great numbers of teacher, who are currently employed, have experienced. It is these very people who will be most likely to utilize distance education in their attempts to improve their skills and competencies.

6.7   Implications for contact in distance education

The level of educational experience reported by the participants in this study is not representative of the teaching corps in Kwazulu-Natal. Despite reflecting a considerably higher level of attainment and learning experience in the research population, the findings suggest that even these students experience some difficulty with the study guides and have

different perceptions about contact. Whether their negative perceptions about the interactive study guides is a reflection on the quality of the guides or their ability to make full use of them is not clarified in this study. Similarly, the absence of negative perceptions about their recent learning experiences might not reflect the extent to which their educational backgrounds were affected, and to what degree the effects persist.

In this context, the majority of learners who study through distance education can be expected to encounter difficulty with this mode of learning. If distance education does require the re-integration of the act of teaching as Keegan and other imply, learners with such a poor background will be at a serious disadvantage. Tuition which relies solely on postal correspondence between teacher and learner will reinforce the worst features of a poor learning tradition such as rote memorisation and uncritical acceptance of the printed word. If outcomes-based distance teaching is to support more effective learning there is a need for intervention between the learner and the learning materials. The SAIDE audit of teacher education argues that one of the greatest weaknesses in South Africa is the lack of student support. This suggests the need for a strong emphasis on face-to-face contact with distance education students in order to facilitate the re-integration of the act of teaching.

Despite differences in teaching and learning theories that this study refers to, a general assumption that is reinforced in the literature is that real learning is primarily an individual activity and is attained only through an internalizing process. Holmberg views the internalizing process as something which occurs through the simulated conversation which encourages what he calls individual text elaboration, while Daniel and Evans and Nation see the need for wider experiences of dialogue and critical reflection. Holmberg suggests that

while there is often a case for supplementary communication in group and face-to-face meetings, the use of face-to-face contact is not exclusively based on rational decisions. This study suggests that there are rational reasons for supporting the need for regular contact with students, particularly in the context of South Africa's history of educational inequalities and backlogs.

Chapter 7 - Summary and conclusion

7.1   Some issues raised by the study

In the introductory remarks at the beginning of this study, the rationale for examining student perceptions was linked to the lack of research into this aspect of distance education, as well as the researcher's assumption that there could be different perceptions held by students and lecturers. Further, the influence of student perceptions cannot be underestimated. This study has confirmed that student perceptions have a powerful influences over how students engage with each other and lecturers during contact time. Despite the fact that contact sessions are structured and planned with certain processes and outcomes in mind, what students actually do is strongly affected by their own perceptions. What students perceive about contact sessions becomes the reality that they experience.

The question that this raises is what should be done about different perceptions of the learning environment? Should students be encouraged to change their thinking or should course leaders change their approach to suit the learners? This study does not claim to fully explore this tension, however the findings do support the notion that it is important to recognize the very real influence of student perceptions in the practice of planning and using contact in distance education. It also suggests that there are disjunctions between established theories and the practice of distance education, particularly with regard to what students say about contact. It is possible that the importance of contact is becoming an orthodoxy in the South African context, without an adequately demonstrated justification.

107

The study also draws attention to the value of relationships in the learning process. The extent to which distance education and conventional face-to-face teaching are perceived to be generically similar or different, influences the type and nature of relationships that develop between those involved in the process. This study reveals the central place that interpersonal relationships occupies for the research population. Tensions between the value of individual and group learning experiences have also become evident and can conceivably be linked to cultural factors which have not been explored here.

While an attempt was made to investigate perceptions about the function of contact in relation to the study materials, more question have been raised than answers given. Responses which suggest that the study guides are not used in the way that they were planned do not explain conclusively why this is so. Whether this is a weakness in the instructional design of the guides or a problem related to learning styles, learner background or competence, is not revealed here. What is clear though, is that however good the learning materials, they only form part of the whole learning experience of individuals. Distance learners have other links to the institution and the way they perceive these links impacts on the whole learning environment.

7.2   Further research

Some of the questions raised by this study require further research if the tensions are to be more fully explored. Research priorities that spring from this study are listed below:

*   An evaluation of specific distance education materials in relation to the way that

students use them.

* South African student methods of learning and the influence of prior experience on distance education.

* How student perceptions can be used in designing and developing models of contact in distance education.

* An investigation into a much wider range of existing models of student support, with emphasis on the perceptions of all the stakeholders.

The field of student perceptions in distance education is under-researched at present and there is great scope for utilising it to develop effective learning programmes.

Endnotes and references

1. The history of the development of this diploma is given in greater detail in Chapter 2

2. See Chapter two for a description.

3. Education White Paper 2 (1995)

4. The national teacher education audit - Synthesis report (1995)

5. The national teacher education audit - Synthesis report (1995)

6. Chapter 2.2.7

7. Ibid.

8. National Education Act of 1969

9. The issue of what constitutes distance education is problematic. A distinction is drawn between correspondence education, distance education and extension education. See pages 18/19.

10. Non Governmental Organizations

11. Questionnaire designed and analyzed by R. Tonkin - Chairman of the regional meeting committee at NCE (May, 1995)

12. Referred to in Annexure 7 (dated 13 August 1992) and in the Minutes of the Faculty Board meeting dated 3 August 1992.

13. Appendix 7 - Annexure (dated 21 July 1992) referred to in the Minutes of the Faculty Board Meeting (dated 3 August 1992)

14. "This diploma has been requested by both the Department of Education and Training and the Kwazulu Department of Education and Culture, owing to the lack of expertise in administrative and managerial skills in their schools. One of the most pressing needs in the schools is good organization of a whole range of things like timetables, examinations and schools finances. This diploma is urgently required and is to be made accessible to principals and staff of schools in the whole of the Natal region."

(Annexure 7, 1992)

15. Appendix 7: Dated 12 November 1992

16. Minutes of the Faculty Board meeting, dated 3 August 1992.

17. Appendix 7: Annexure 1, dated 13 August 1992 entitled *Proposed amendments or points for clarification*

18. Ibid.

19. The agreement - Dated 1994

20. Committee of Heads of Education

21. See list of references.

22. Following Rowntree 1992

23. Rowntree, D. *Teaching Through Self-Instruction*, (1992), Kogan Page, London.

24. Appointed to moderate examinations in the various modules

25. The national teacher education audit -synthesis report (1995)

26. Report for the Kwazulu Department of Education and Culture, Academic Planning Section, 1993 prepared by Dr Michael Thurlow of the University of Natal (Durban) Department of Education.

27. Cohen and Manion (1996:289)

28. Appendix 2

29. Appendix 3

30. Appendix 3

31. Appendix 5

32. A copy of the discussion schedule is found in Appendix 4

33. Appendix 1

34. Copies of the questions are included with the discussion guide in Appendix 3.1 and 3.2

35. A credit of four modules towards a B.Ed at UNP has been negotiated and approved.

36. Questionnaire item No. 20

37. Questionnaire item No.22

38. Questionnaire items Nos. 17 and 33

39. Government Notice No. 17300 dated July 1996

40. Questionnaire item No. 11

41. Chapter 1

42. Questionnaire item No. 12

43. Questionnaire item No. 12

44. Questionnaire item No. 18

45. Questionnaire item No. 21

46. Questionnaire items No. 25 and 26

47. Questionnaire item No. 24

48. Questionnaire item No. 23

49. Questionnaire item No. 23(b)

50. Questionnaire item No. 30 and 34

51. This is strongly supported by the SAIDE audit of teacher education.

52. Questionnaire item No.12

53. Questionnaire item No.5

54. Committee on Teacher Education Policy (COTEP) July 1995

55. Questionnaire item No.15

56. Questionnaire item No.18

57. Questionnaire item No.30

58. Questionnaire item No.34

59. Chapter 1.2.5

60. Questionnaire item No.34

61. Questionnaire item No.34

62. Questionnaire item No.34

63. Questionnaire item No.24

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113

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Appendices

Appendix 1   Initial categories of research questions

The following list shows the categories of research questions that were selected by the researcher:

Categories of questions about contact.

A   The Physical parameters

B   Early student perceptions about contact

C   Personal learning background

D   Relationships in contact

E   Learning styles

F   Changes in perceptions about contact

G   Student views about the institution and its demands

H   The content of contact sessions

Appendix 2   General research questions

The following questions were developed from the initial categories. They were identified as basic research questions which would be used to develop a discussion guide for the focus group discussions and items the questionnaire. These questions were never used in this form for gathering data, but indicate the evolution of the actual research tools.

A   **The physical parameters**

1   Would students prefer to have a course which does not put pressure on them to attend contact sessions?

2   Are they aware of this pressure? Are they conscious of the advantages and disadvantages?

3   Is DE a matter of choice as a learning style , or is there no alternative?

4   What would be the chosen alternative, if it were available? Why?

5   Do students prefer face to face communication to the use of telephones of postal communications? Are they forced to attend face to face sessions because of the inaccessibility of their home locations?

6   How frequently should contact take place? What difference is there in relating to the concepts 1) via the interactive guides? 2) via contact sessions?

B   **Early student perceptions**

1   How did students feel about a Distance education course which required contact sessions?

C   **Personal learning background**

1   What is the learner's previous knowledge?

2   What is the learner's previous knowledge of the concepts and principles of the curriculum?

3   Do learners want more or less autonomy in directing their own learning? Is this linked to their own scholarly experience?

D   **Relationships in contact**

1   What effect does a personal relationship with the tutor/course writer have?

2   Do students gain more pleasure from studying alone at home, from working together in small groups in their areas or from attending contact sessions?

3   How important is it for a students to test his own thoughts in the company of his peers? What effect does this have?

4   To what extent does the physical separation of student and lecturer affect psychological separation?

5	How does contact mediate this psychological separation, if at all?
6	Is there a counselling role in contact?

E   Learning styles/Methods of learning

1	When do learners need special assistance? At the beginning? For ongoing motivation?
2	What is the learner's background in terms of learning styles/methods of learning?
3	Would students prefer maximum freedom and far reaching autonomy or a more controlled system?
4	Does the experience of actual conversation enhance their learning?
5	How important is feedback? How does contact facilitate this?
6	Do students engage in text elaboration? When it does happen is it linked to contact sessions or not?
7	Is this affected by studying in a second or third language?

F   Changes in perception

1	As a result of attending contact sessions, have student perceptions about contact changed or been modified?

G   Student views about the institution and its demands

1	How important is the choice Institution for students in choosing a learning style?
2	How important is the criteria of mastery, as set by the course writers and perceived by the students?
3	How important is the integration into the social systems of the institution?
4	What motivates students to attend contact sessions? Is it seen to be semi-compulsory? Is it the way information is disseminated or the content that is more important?

H   The content of contact sessions

1	Which activities are considered most/least useful during contact sessions?
2	What is the students perceptions about the role of the tutors at contact sessions? Do they teach, facilitate, motivate? What do students think the tutors should be doing?
3	Does actual dialogue provide direction through the structure of the course?

Appendix 3   Focus group discussion guide

The question guide used in the focus group discussions is shown below. The questions were developed from the initial set of basic research question in Appendix 2.

Questions for the Focus group discussion

Introduction: Explain the purpose and nature of the discussion and gives reassurances that it is confidential and aimed at finding out what really happens in contact sessions.   The role of the interviewer is not to guide their thinking or to answer their questions. They may ask for clarification about questions but not the opinions of the interviewer. The presence of a familiar figure as a recorder is to see whether the interviewer leads the responses or allows free flow of comments.

Question guide:

1   Look at the two examples on the pieces of paper that I have given you. What observations can you make about them? [**prompt:** Which one would be more useful to you as a student?] *NB. The examples are included in Appendix----*

2   When you first became aware that there were contact sessions planned for the course what was your first reaction? [**prompt:** Did you think that they might be a waste of time or did you feel reassured ?] Why do you think you reacted as you did - what experiences might have guided your thinking?

3   What do you understand *learning* to mean? [**prompt:** how do you learn best?]

4   How did you experience learning when you studied before, for example your teacher's diploma, or your degree?

5   Do you get any pleasure out of this course? [**prompt:** what things are pleasurable and what makes them so?]

6   What is for you the worst part of this course?

7   Does it make any difference that you have met the people who wrote the study guides that you use. What difference might this make to your experience of the course.?

8   How have you been able to find out how you are coping with this course? [**prompt:** are you concerned about how others are performing?]

9   Do you feel more or less confident when you tackle a problem in a group

session at the contact courses?

10   Do your colleagues' ideas make things clearer or more confused when you have differences of opinion at group discussions?

11   What would make you most anxious about this course? [prompt: why would you be anxious - because of what others think or because it is personal to you?

12   When you are at contact sessions do you prefer activities which give you a little bit of content and lots of discussion, or activities where you are provided with a lot of content and little discussion?

13   If there is no salary category recognition for this course will you continue with it. [prompt: surely there is no point in doing it? Why do you really continue? Status? Personal pride? Skills? What are they?

14   Which of the two questions would you prefer to answer? Why would you choose the way you do? [NB one traditional essay type question and one which asks the student to write his own question on a topic and then answer it himself] *NB. copies of the two questions are included in Appendix----*

15   What do you think markers do when they receive exam scripts or assignments? [prompt:Can you describe the process that you think markers follow when they receive the scripts.]

16   If your lecturers were all fluent in Zulu what difference might that make to the way contact sessions are run?

17   What kind of response do you have when you receive information about a contact session?

18   Which other institutions also offer DE courses in Management?

19   Was a management diploma your first choice when you thought about studying further?

20   Are there differences between this institution and others that you are aware of? [NB no names of others should be mentioned here!]

21   Why did you not enrol with another institution for this course: I know of other courses which are cheaper or which would have been easier to attend than this one?

22   What do you understand about standards in education? Who sets and judges standards of quality? How does this affect you as a student?

23   Which activities do you consider most/least useful at contact sessions? [prompt: can you explain why?]

24   What would you consider to be the main disadvantage if you could not attend a contact session? Do the disadvantages outweigh the advantages?

25   What motivates you most to come to contact sessions?

26   How would you describe the relationship that exists between students on this course? And between lecturers and students?

27   Assume that you could have done this course on a part-time basis by attending lectures at an institution that was close enough. What do you think would happen at lectures? What would be different to this DE course?

28   How do you think lecturers prepare for the contact sessions at NCE. Describe the aims and objectives that you think they have?

Appendix 3.1   Examples for question 1 in the FGD

Question 1   Example A

Education and School   Hutchins argued that the perennial role of education was to cultivate human intellect. For him, educational institutions should develop human intellect by examining, reflecting on, and analysing the great ideas of humankind. As a pioneer in American education, Hutchins's efforts were focused on restoring educational premises, which had surfaced in ancient Athens, that he regarded as timeless.

Based on a perennialist philosophical commitment to rational and intellectual education, Hutchins worked directly to reform higher education. Among his educational beliefs were the following:

1.   Education is based on humankind's perennial and constant search for truth; since what is true is always true and is everywhere true, the truth is universal and timeless. Therefore, education should also be universal and timeless.

2.   Since the life of the mind is intellectual and consists of ideas, education should also be about ideas; education's primary function is to cultivate human rationality.

3.   The true purpose of education is to stimulate and encourage students to think carefully about important ideas. Correct and critical thinking is the only defensible method that should be used in education.

Example B

Schools and Education:

Have you ever sat down and thought about what happens in your school? Which of the activities that happen there reflect what you think education is all about? Are there things that happen which you think are *not* part of the role of education?

Pause for a moment and note down your thoughts on this:

1 Activities which I think suit the role of education:-----------------------------
----

--2

Activities which I think are not part of the role of education:-----------------------
----

Hutchins believed that the main function of education was to *cultivate human intellect*. I think that what he meant by this was that schooling should focus on examining, discussing and analysing the great ideas that mankind has developed over the years. His motivation for this was his belief that education was rooted in a rational and intellectual debate. This viewpoint was not his unique belief and was based on an ancient Athenian philosophy!

I wonder if your response has any similarities to Hutchins' ideas?

Here is a more complete summary of Hutchins' beliefs which he used in his efforts to reform Higher Education:

1. *Education is based on humankind's perennial and constant search for truth; since what is true is always true and is everywhere true, the truth is universal and timeless. Therefore, education should also be universal and timeless.*

2. *Since the life of the mind is intellectual and consists of ideas, education should also be about ideas; education's primary function is to cultivate human rationality.*

3. *The true purpose of education is to stimulate and encourage students to think carefully about important ideas. Correct and critical thinking is the only defensible method that should be used in education.*

Appendix 3.2   Example for question 14 of FGD

Examination Questions - Two styles

Question A:

In an essay, outline the major features of an *Appraisal* programme. Comment on the differences between Appraisal and Inspection in the light of your own experience as a teacher. You should also suggest what the major obstacles would be if you tried to implement a full Appraisal programme in your school.

[50]

Question B:

1   Design a question which will help you to explain what you understand about *Appraisal* as an element of School Management.

2   Once you have framed the question, suggest what you think would be put into a good answer. Use some actual examples to demonstrate this.

3   Plan a mark allocation for the two questions above so that the whole exercise can be evaluated out of 50 marks.

Appendix 4   Transcription of Focus Group Discussions

The two focus group discussions are reported simultaneously here. All the participants comments are printed in italics. Numerically labelled responses were recorded from the first focus group discussion and alphabetically labelled responses were made during the second discussion.

The discussions were opened by the researcher thanking the participants for their willingness to participate and explaining the purpose and nature of the exercise. Once the researcher was satisfied that the participants were comfortable with the setting and the procedure the first of the questions on the discussion guide was put to them.

Two examples of types of material: ' Type A - traditional academic text
                                           Type B - interactive text

Question 1 is asking for any observations you may have about the two examples you have been given. What similarities or differences do you note?

1   *example A is just a statement, example B there is participation of the students before any conclusions are made the approach is different.*

a   *I think example B is quite alright because it helps your own thoughts. It whets your appetite as far as the subject is concerned. So in other words it sort of motivates you into thinking in advance and it sort of gives you all the facts as well.*

b   *I don't differ with the opinion but I also see similarities in both papers. They are, in both papers the focus is on his understanding of education, his concept of education. The difference with the second one, the first one is more theoretical giving you the theory of it, with the second one you are first exposed to a practical situation, you give up your own ideas and at the end some sort of a summary or a guide to what you already understand*

As far as the content is concerned have you made any observations about what is contained in the content.

2   *the content is the same*

a   *I think its almost similar because they both really are focusing on education as one way of cultivating the intellect.*

Where would you expect to find an example like example B?

a   *In our study guides. The format is the same as we find in our study guides.*

Where would you expect to find an example like example A?

125

1   From some publication, it could be a manuscript or a textbook.

My second question to you is, which of the two is more useful for students?

1   example B is because of the activities

a   I think example B because the manner in which it is drawn up leaves space for activities and when someone tends to read, then one is tempted to put down his or her ideas and it involves the active participation as opposed to example A which is reading material... uh , in example B it has things like a structured block to give your responses so I'd say that example B is more appropriate in our study.

Do you think that students do these activities when they see them?

1   well they do them depending on whether they know what the intention of the exercises is

2   an example is that in example A you just have the bare theory whereas in example B you have the theory is clarified by the activities and in order to understand the theory you have to do the activities

a   Sometimes you do, sometimes you pass on because you know what it is.

If the activity had nor been there would you have thought about the kind of response that you might have given?

a   If on reading on you find a reference back to the activity, then you attempt perhaps to do it next time.

b   Sometimes I don't do them, sometimes I find it time consuming and when I am trying to read it fast, uh.., I find it takes too much time. Then later on I can go back to the activities, but also sometimes you find that there are some answers, eh.., to the activities, so sometimes there is the tendency to say .. I think there are some answers, let me don't worry myself because at the end you get the answer, so there is the temptation not to do the activity.

c   I think about the activities, there are some ideas in my mind.. I don't jot them down because right below perhaps I will find the answer and what is interesting most of the time, the answer is along the lines or more or less similar to the ones I thought about

d   In some cases, or in may case, I go through this and it depends upon the immediate demands of that section, if that section requires.....(obscured by coughing) then I don't do the activity.

Comment from Alex: Who will benefit more, the one who does the activities or the ones who doesn't?

1   I was going to say that reading something that is commenting on that and putting

down your thoughts in writing, somehow it comes back easier next time when you have to respond rather than just reading because we are more liable just to forget if we only read through and jot anything down.

And you find the activities, for you, would be a positive thing?

1   yes

Any other observation you would like to make about these two examples?

1   yes just to add to that I think that example B is what you could call a learner centred type of situation which builds on the experiences of the students

Question from Alex: what would you say example A is if B is learner centred?

2   well its more of a... well let me take you back to the teaching situation. Example A is more of a note whereby he just has to take what is given without his own perceptions, I mean from his own knowledge and understanding.

Would it be fair to call it content centred?

1   yes

Are your comments related to your actual experience of this course and your study guides?

1   if I reflect on what is found in our study guides, most of the topics, deal with question being asked, you know, give our own ideas on a particular issue before it comes thereafter.

So there is some link between what you have seen in the study guides and what you see here?

1   yes

I would like to move on to the second question: When you first became aware that there were going to be contact sessions for this course, what was your first reaction?

1   Now there are two reaction to that. one is to actively read the materials, and the other is to wait until I get into the group so I can at least get the trend of the course

2   With me I have a contact with some other students and I know that they also go for contact sessions, I also thought it wont apply to us because we are different altogether so I really didn't think we were going to have to come. When I heard that we were going to have to come, knowing I was committed I thought when is the work going to get done if it is a waste of time

a   With me, I thought it would be easier to cooperate or to go along with this course if I go to see some of the people involved in this course and decide that having in mind that if ever there would be times at that meeting for that sort of sharing of ideas or

getting other peoples opinions, as compared to the other courses where there was correspondence and then writing the exams.

b   *Because I had to come for contact I had better read the guides so that I could make a contribution.*

c   *I also felt that it was a better part of the course because when you meet other people and share ideas you learn a lot other than correspondence where you are just looking at the correspondence and you ignore other people and so I thought this is the more beneficial because I know there are some people who have very good ideas so when you share ideas and contribute I get a lot out of these contact sessions. That is why I don't want to miss any of them. I always benefit a lot from them.*

d   *I once felt that it could be a waste of time when I compared that I once remember a certain course when I was registered at UNISA and then I wasted my time travelling all the way from Bulwer to Durban only to find that the lecturer came, and I was meeting the lecturer for the first time, and the last time and then coming in just showing us his face and telling us that he's late and just telling us to concentrate on this and that, now at the beginning of this course I thought that such a thing could happen, meeting people who are going to tell us that they are late and already having their flights booked and all those problems and then decide to leave us. But coming once I realise that this is different.*

e   *In the guide it is stated that in the examination it wont be reproducing the guides, it will be arguing and application to our situation, so that alone made me be there to see the examination so I have to be there to see how they think, how do they apply, to get an idea about a topic.*

Did any of you feel reassured about coming to contact sessions?

1   *We anticipated getting the reassurance and on arrival we really got the assurance because while we were perusing through these guides there were some problems and we also had some ideas in our minds which we thought would be tested in discussion with other people, so we got the assurances.*

Can I ask you what you understand learning to mean? Perhaps I can add to that - how do you learn best?

1   *Learning to me, it means getting involved with what one wants to learn, through activity.*

2   *analyze ideas, or put ideas forward.*

3   *getting involved in a form of discussion about what we want to learn in the hope of getting other ideas and then you wait and hear what others think and in that way be active rather than just sitting and reading.*

a   *It means gaining information and applying skills*

b   *mastering skills*

c   *I thought it was just the betterment of the individual*

You mentioned discussion - who would you like to engage in discussion?

1   *Both fellow students and lecturers.*

2   *No, I can go a step further, and say, learning it means applying the theoretical part that you have gained - in the real situation you find yourself in.*

I want to take that a bit further and ask you how you experienced learning when you studied before?

1   *I think that in the past we didn't get the chance to internalize the particular things we were learning - most of the time we were reading and regurgitating so when I was looking at this, (referring to example B) I wasn't sure I was saying it is good because of the guides or because of internalization that has gone on. Learning only becomes your thing when you can do things when you put into action things you could not do in the past.*

a   *When I was doing my diploma full time, I realised the situation at the College was not realistic, whenever we were conducting some practise teaching they had to bring the kids to the College and the kids who come to the College were well prepared and usually from schools where they come from, they pick up the better ones. Number two, the number of the kids that they bring to the College are almost controllable unlike the overcrowded situation. Number three conditions at the school are not like the conditions at the College.*

b   *I would add that theory and practice were too far apart. Here we get theory and then we practice it. It is …. more efficient.*

Coming back to your school days, what did you have to do to show that you were learning?

a   *Well to me, I can suggest, in everything to reproduce what you have just learned to be able to pass, but looking at the practical side of it was another issue.*

b   *In fact I wanted to compare that with the College learning situation and the school one. At College level it was more learner centred and the school situation was more teacher centred.*

How would you characterise the learning that you are engaged in this particular course?

a   *I think it is somehow student centred, but I am not sure, my colleagues can help.*

b   *I think it is a fifty -fifty. The fact remains that we still have exams and everything is geared towards the exams, that's my personal view of what this course is. Because of the exams we still have to memorise, no matter how much discussion we have, but certain things we have to take in and when we look at the question paper we must apply in the school situation, we still need to know the theory and that involves memorization so I still feel that, for example when I was at varsity we were geared towards the exams for the qualification at the end so I think there's not much difference from when I was at university about fifteen years ago, as compared to the course today.*

c   *I think this course is more of an eye opener compared to the days when I was at university. There it was more of memorising without any application and here we get a lot of application which is a good thing. I feel that this application part of it is very very important because it gets you thinking, you want to get the solution all the time. Of course you cannot get away from it that at the end of the course there has to be some theoretical perspectives.*

Have any of you had experiences in the recent past that you think were very good?

1   *learning has only taken place at a later stage in my education. When learning when I was still younger it wasn't really learning because I wasn't making use of what I got because of the way the whole thing was set up. Making use of what we learned was not given a fair chance.*

Comment from Alex: What is not coming out here is that what we thought, what I thought learning was memorization and the more I memorized the more I thought I knew.

1   *Yes I Agree, learning was seen as memorizing and it was exam oriented.*

Do you get any pleasure out of this course? What sort of things are pleasurable?

a   *Yes there are definitely, especially the part of going back to your school and actually implementing some of the things that you have learned in the course. You actually get to practice the things you have learned and to experiment and see how good that particular situation is now.*

There must also be things that you can't implement?   What sort of feelings does that bring about?

a   *Umm.. frustration, mainly frustration. There is more pleasure than frustration even though the things which you can often not implement, you've got them , you know about them, there will be an opportunity you can use to practice them somehow. Perhaps it is the kind of a school one is in at the moment that makes one unable to practise so its a frustration of the moment because at least you know that knowledge is there. You can practise at another time.*

130

1   there are things which are pleasing here especially when you apply the materials practically at the school in which one is teaching and this is also encouraged buy the courses and assignments whereby you have to state this practically making the organization your focus point.

Don't you think we try to do too much of that?

1   No, personally

Don't you think we present you with situations which you cannot use in you school?

1   There are some of them that are not really applicable in our schools.

Specifically in connection with the contact, in coming to the College are there things you find pleasurable about the contact?

1   There are because as we are sitting in groups chatting to one another, we are getting views from others, hearing solutions of the problems you also have in your school.

What then, is the worst part of this course?

1   Laughter!   ...Personally the worst part of this course is when at times one tries to implement what one has got from here, you find the situation under which you are working is not conducive and you get very much frustrated.

2   What for me was one of the worst moments when we came for that session Learning at a distance because it was not based on our administrative situation so I was a little bit confused at the LDS at the beginning of the course. But it is now that we are on administration it is improved but it was now based on the school administration that was when I noticed it is a bit improved but with the first session it was not good.

Would that be a common perception?

1   Laughter and agreement!

2   I would say perhaps it is a personal issue. My biggest problem has been getting myself organized, really, maybe I don't know with others but with me I really find it hard to make myself organized when I am away - I enjoy it a lot when I am here, I feel as if I could stay with all my comrades for the good of the year, but once I am out there by myself, getting myself organized, haai, it becomes a problem.

3   I am very alone out there and unable to sort out some problems and then you come here and you feel a bit embarrassed that I am not able to contribute anything to the sessions here and the contact session take a bit too long to come around. and be more frequent.

a   Well to me the worst part of this course is when I come with problems, for instance

131

I come out with the situation where I am exposed and perhaps when getting it across to colleagues or the lecturer and perhaps one finds encouragement and advice on how to go about that problem where you are coming from because personally I feel a bit isolated and I've got a problem, now i'm hoping that certain people are going to tell us , to discuss this problem and if I did not find any,.. some sort of idea how to go about it, sometimes I find it a bit discouraging.

b   *The course on its own is OK the way I look at it as we have explained, it is relevant, it is practical, it is related to the present situation, but now what is a problem on the other side is the commitment to us, the personal commitment which also interferes with the time span doing this work which is of use to us and the time we spend doing personal work and school commitment.*

c   *Well I was going to comment about time. I want to say that if the focus should move away from examinations towards assessing what we actually do - at least 75% should come from what we are actually doing from observing what we are actually doing. As far as one can see more or less 70% of the marks come from what we should memorise. There are only a few items where you can put your experience across.*

Does it make any difference to you that you have met the people who wrote the study guides?

1   *From the past experience it is to the students advantage to get the material from the person who wrote it, say for instance if we are doing literature and the person who wrote that book comes and gives you some advice on that book because that person has dealt much on that materials and it becomes easy for him to explain it and you grasp it from the horses mouth, so it is advantageous the approach, so once you take the approach of the person who wrote it you are easily extended.*

a   *Yes I think it makes a big difference in the sense that, number one you get to understand the approach of the person who wrote the study guide. When you are reading the study guide sometimes you may have a misinterpretation of what the writer wants. Meeting him you get more clarity, you get more insight on what he is writing about and number two I think it also helps one to get some guidance as to how approach examination questions,... you get used to his style as well, so in that way I think we benefit a lot by meeting the composers.*

b   *As an example the guide that was written by Mr Comrie, when I read it the first time it was just like talking to him.*

How have you been able to find out how other students are coping with the course and is it important to you? Are you concerned about how other students perform on the same tasks as you are doing?

1   *Yes I personally like to know how other people or members of the group cope with the course, at the same time I know that I cannot actually find it out from them because we don't come from the same place but with the people who come from the same area we make sure that we actually find out how we are going to do something*

132

and we try to assist each other.

a	*There is a way, for instance when we discuss among each other how we fared in an assignment how we approached a question, when sharing the ideas you get to know how the other people fared. you also get,..you also have a chance of in away comparing the work you have done with other people.*

Why do you think it is important for people to compare their work?

a	*To know if you are on the right track, to know that you are not far below the standard because if somebody makes a comment that you feel are good you start looking at yourself, at your work and you say no, I didn't , I was not able to reach that standard. you are challenged to go and improve on how you performed.*

b	*That's the only way you can improve yourself, by comparing what you do with others.*

c	*Competition sort of motivates you, but healthy competition - once you get exposed to other people and how they perform and so on you sort of tell yourself I must pull up my socks because I don't want to be beaten by them.*

What kind of feeling does it give you if you know you are performing at the same level as others?

1	*You feel good about it. another thing I think is we don't condemn each other*

Do you feel more confident or less confident when you have to tackle a problem in a group session?

1	*More confident. Because you have a chance of participating with the other members of the group and you become more confident.*

a	*I think I am more confident in the group than on my own, um... when we are involved in discussion it is where I gain the confidence . In listening to others I find I have more positive points and that gives me confidence and also some of the things..... (indistinct)*

You don't feel afraid of other members of the group scorning some of your ideas?

1	*Fortunately up until now it has not happened. Laughter!*

2	*I like the way it is structured. I like the way you allow a debate which is encouraged. In that way it does encourage a good situation with people listening to others.*

a	*I think we have transcended this thing of laughing at each other.*

b	*In fact I wanted to say that I always feel more confident in a group for in the first case its where we share ideas and that is where I listen to other people whose ideas*

133

or comments on a topic and that is where I get my opinion or my ideas to criticizes so that I can look at that again and then I gain a lot from that.

c   *Sometimes I want to settle a problem alone and later say it to the group, but sometimes I just want to start with the group, it just depends on the problem, but finally I must have the group and hear what they have done.*

When you have differences of opinions in a group, does it make things clearer or does it make them more confused?

1   *It becomes more clearer because you get the views of the other people which may build up on your point of view and then the way up is better.*

You don't feel threatened by other views?

1   *No.No, general murmur. You feel encouraged.*

2   *In fact you feel you actually go out to find things to fortify ones views so you can come up with more conclusive answers.   No I don't know about some of the HOD's. We are principals and HODs and deputy and I think that helps in the input that we are making and the group is mature and therefore there is no criticism just comment so I think that helps a lot.*

What would make you most anxious or worried about doing this particular course?

a   *I think definitely failing the course or modules, the examinations.*
b   *Not being able to complete the assignments in time.*

c   *One other thing that I tend to ask myself is whether it would be beneficial if you sort of give up teaching and engage yourself in the private sector. But you know the wording of the education.. what you call it? Educational administration and Management of secondary schools . those words,.. I mean the two words that's, management and administration, in the private sector maybe it will fit. You can manage the school as an institution, I mean can they consider you in the private sector as a person who's got managerial capacities and managerial skills? I would be worried that you are restricted to schools now.*

d   *If I'm doing this course and I'm not a principal and the principal is nor prepared to accept my ideas or something that I have learned.*

1   *About passing the examination - it is the only worry! (Much laughter!)*

Comment from Alex: You are looking at the end product but you should be responding to what happens during the course. But what about yourself?

1   *What also makes you worried is when you hear ideas in the discussion groups and you compare it with the situation with the situation you come from especially the administration, so when you notice that what is being said or implemented is failed*

to be implemented in our schools, it gives you a worry.

Can I follow up on that? Would it be because of what other people think of you or because of how you react personally to it yourself?

1   *Introspection.*

2   *No, I think the other problem is that such causes in administration, for some of us it has come too late, so now its gonna take years to improve the situation because people are having an attitude towards you and also you have an attitude towards the people.*

So there is an element of how other people think about you as well as the personal element?

1   *...... has put it much clearer than I (1) did previously when I said that you find when you want to implement the things it is not easy to implement because of the attitudes. You see we found ourselves in the negative position without any knowledge or any training towards that. Now after having gone a long way we can now do the right thing.*

2   *I think the other thing that can help is for the next group just to eliminate the Learning at a Distance part and then you replace it with some material that is going to address this particular question because it needs to be addressed.*

When you say this particular question can you explain that?

2   *I mean this question of getting the knowledge now having done a lot of problems.*

3   *Perhaps before we move out of this question, I don't know... I've just had the idea that our course has been, in a way, linked to the adversity problem. I've found it, talking of the point of being a bit disorganised personally, I've found it that sometimes I feel I'm being overloaded on this part-time course. I feel that maybe the information is too much for a part-time course. I even thought that if there has to be so much information on a part-time basis how would it be that when we have this contact sessions maybe we are given a week to be together because to me the material looks bulky, then the question of being accredited by the university comes in and more of it all the issue of having to write two examinations also touches on that as well. I think that maybe if the College could work towards having its own structure rather than us working on a programme dictated by the University.*

Is it your impression that the programme is dictated by the University?

1   *I think so.*

Do others share that impression or is it something that you have not thought about?

2   *I don't share that but I think it is an advantage. I think it gives a very positive image of the relationship, I think it is rather a good thing. What I don't know about is the*

issue of overloading, but I think it is OK.

3   *I'd like to make a comment about the link between this College and the University. If I now pass this course at the end of the year, then if I go to the University, am I going to be accredited and how because that is going to have an impact at the end?*

What I can say is that something new has come from the University and I would like to discuss that with you outside the framework of this interview but I will certainly address that question when we have the opportunity.

Can I pick it up from a slightly different point of view? Just assume that you could have done this course on a part-time basis but by attending lectures. Let's say by attending lectures in the afternoon or evening at an institution that was close enough to you. What do you think would have happened at lectures? And what would be different to this distance education course? What would have happened in a face-to-face course and not a distance education course?

1   *I think it would just be that the lecturer would come in and lecture to us, in fact there would be no discussion except if there were tutorial sessions, but I think that the richness of this course is the contact, the workshops and discussions and the sharing of ideas which is more often than if the lecturer were to lecture to us.*

2   *I would like to disagree, at least on the point that with these study guides I am sure that I should confess myself that there are issues or pages that I don't read in the study guide. in a way I actually work towards, and I must say it is because I am a bit disorganised, I work targeting towards the assignments and towards the exam. Perhaps then in a lecture situation more issues would be dealt with and I would have more information in my mind rather than what happens here. I find myself just passing over some pages without really getting to grips with what is in there. I don't believe it would have been compiled if I were to skip it, but in a lecture I would have heard that covered right through.*

a   *We are used to planning and organizing for contact sessions provided here. If organization and arrangements could be made to resemble what we are used to here there would be no problem.*

Would you say that you would prefer to do a course like this on a full time basis?

2   *Definitely!*

When you are at contact session do you prefer activities where you have a little bit of content and lots of discussion or activities where you are given a lot of content and just a little bit of discussion?

a   *Surely I think at our stage or level, we would gain more in a discussion situation when discuss what's relevant, when we theorise or read or do whatsoever the case may be rather than discuss. I would like to see more discussion and less content.*

b   *As long at the content is forming the background for the discussion.*

c   *I think the balance should be 60/40, 60% content and 40% discussion.*

d   *I think we should focus on the work that will help us to pass the examination.*

a   *Surely the discussion will at the beginning, you know its based on the content, so in fact, I think whatever may be discussed must originate from the content part of it and the practical part of it as well as we are also relating what we are discussing with the situation at our schools.*

1   *I think that there should be a balance of some sort between the content and the discussion because in some cases from last year up to now I sometimes feel that what we are here for really was not worthwhile because there was a lot of discussion over things that were not really up to what I regard as a standard. That's why I really believe that there should be somehow a balance between the content and the discussion.*

When you refer to what has happened in the course you are suggesting that there have been times when there has been too little content and too much discussion? Any other comments on that issue of content and discussion?

If there is no salary category recognition for this course and it may be, because of the new narrow banding of the salary categories that there will be no salary recognition, what is the point of continuing? Surely you should just stop now if you are not going to get any salary benefits?

a   *No I think it is pointless to stop the course, because it would not help us to leave it now because it prepares us to solve the practical situation in our schools. Most of the things we discuss are practical things that happen in our schools, so by attending this course you get information as to how to solve those problems, and also it prepares us for promotion posts.*

b   *I also support this idea that by attending these courses its given me confidence on what I'm doing at school, eh... it has also enabled me to face the challenges of all the problems I encounter at school, though some of them are, I fail in one way or another to implement what I have learned in this course.*

1   *I wont get any salary recognition anyway because I am already category G but as a person who is in a managerial position this benefits me a lot.*

So you claim that you knew that you would not get a salary increase?

1   *Yes*

What about those of you who came looking for a salary category increase?

1   *I think that when that booklet came to us when we applied for the course it was clearly indicated that there was no guarantee that there would be a salary increase.*

so we came here just absolutely knowing that this course would benefit us a personal benefit in the administration of our schools and to improve our performance in our schools although we would wish perhaps that there would be a category benefit.

2   *In fact that's one of the factors that is destroying our teaching, that most of the teachers improve their education only for salary purposes and then you find that in the end whatever a person has done it is not of any use to the children, but with this course I don't think there is any one of us who can say whatever we are getting here has got no use to the institution he or she is working at. It is unfortunate that we are, or most of our teachers improve their education only for salary. To such an extent that some after hearing that some qualifications would have no effect decided to stop their studies which is a bad thing.*

Do you think that there is anybody here who might consider stopping if they know that there is no salary increase?

1   *Not in this group but the fact is that we do have a high drop-out rate in this course because if we look at the attendance at the first contact course we had about sixty something and we have dropped to about half. I don't know whether this category thing has anything to do with this.*

2   *I personally did this course for both reasons, that was for category/salary reasons but also to get information about administration.*

3   *We did consider that salary category but at the same time I wanted to get the qualification.*

I would like you to have a look at two possible examination type questions. Would you tell me which type of question would you prefer to answer if you were faced with them in an examination?

a   *The second one (B), depending on the understanding of the topic, because we have been complaining that when all the marks are concentrated on one aspect, it is appraisal so now its only appraisal that is examined. There is no spreading of questions throughout, so now one who did not understand appraisal has a problem whereas when the questions are split it covers a wider area and can cover so many items. One is able to pick from here and there. I would prefer to see questions that are split into smaller parts and not one large question.*

1   *I would prefer question B. Maybe with the first one I have that problem that if I lose the question I will not do well in Question B maybe I can do one question.*

So you like the division of the question into parts?

2   *To me question B looks too much like an assignment than question A. on the day I might not be able to answer it effectively.*

If it were an assignment, would your choice be different?

2   *If it were an assignment I would take B, its quite alright. But for an exam, whilst I
        am aware that as far as marks are concerned it is better to have a question split, but
        now when you look at B there are many questions and then with a different ...... there
        are a lot of things to think about and the examination time may not allow this.*

But are you suggesting that it calls for a different kind of thinking?

2   *Yes*

By a show of hands how many would prefer question A - 10 question B - 3
                            Group 2   A - 4   question B - 8

What do you think the markers do when they receive your exam scripts and your
assignments? Do you think you can describe what the markers do when they receive these,
an honest reflection of what you think examiners do?

1   *I think that before they get to mark the scripts, they have a marking scheme. when
        they read the script they check if it has any links with the marking scheme.*

2   *No. I think they do not have a marking memo, because if they do have one we ought
        to have received it! Up to now we haven't seen it.*

How long do you think a marker takes with an assignment?

1   *About 30 minutes, one hour, 15 minutes (various) . I think the idea is that as a
        marker you may have, as a marker that marking scheme of yours you want to find out
        if these issues are touched upon,* then you have to get into grips with understanding,
        trying to make an understanding out of that assignment, because actually the person
        is trying to say something, you don't just browse through it.

Do you think there is any evidence on the assignments that you receive back that markers
have taken that sort of time?

1   *Yes, the comments show you are fairly sure there is no cheating in the marking. With
        some lecturers you find he has comments in the first paragraph and the last
        paragraph, but the body of your essay its very clean, so if you find comments page
        by page by page no matter what the mark would be it makes me satisfied because I
        know he's worked through this thing and he's convinced me this is the mark i've
        deserved.*

Is that your impression of the marking that has happened in this course?

1   *general yes,*

If your lecturers were all fluent in Zulu, Xhosa or whatever language the majority spoke,
what difference might this make to the way the contact sessions are run?

1   *No, the course is in English!*

a   *No difference because the medium of instruction at the College is English.*

b   *It would be unfair to use Zulu because not all students have a command of it.*

I'm interested because I did hear in the lectures yesterday and last evening, one or two comments in Zulu. Do you think that served any positive or negative purpose in the context in which it was used?

1   *Referring to yesterdays comments specifically, I think it brings the lecturer closer to make those comments, but I think also one should also guard against making use of the language too much.*

2   *My comment is about the cultural aspect rather than the language aspect, because if you take our background you find that if we define a child it can refer to somebody who is married because she is in std 10 she is a child, so now if I'm talking to a white man and I say this child, who is in std 10 who is having three children, now you start wondering whether its a relevant point or not, so I think this course needs to be a learning experience from both sides pertaining to the cultures.*

Which other institutions offer distance education courses in Education management?

1   *RAU., Pretoria, Umlazi.....*

a   *RAU., Unisa*

So you are aware of other institutions. Tell me, was a management Diploma your first choice when you thought of studying further?

1   *general murmur of yes.*

a   *We could not wait for the College to start offering this course of study.*

b   *For most of us in Management positions of Principal, HOD's, whatever this was an ideal programme.*

It may not have been your first choice?

1   *it was my second choice, a second degree was the first choice.*

2   *I wanted to do B.Ed, specialising in management.*

Is it true to say that the majority wanted to come into a management course?

1   *general agreement*

Are there any differences between this institution and other institutions that run distance education that you are aware of?

1   Yes, there is quite a big difference. My first degree was in.... we are not afforded such opportunities to sit in groups and discuss , it is just a lecture.

2   When I was starting my first degree with...... we were not given the chance of discussion but the lecturer just come for a visit.

3   Yes there are in our institutions although we do part-time studies we are not given such an opportunity to sit down and discuss, share the ideas, sometimes make presentations.

a   The course content relates to practical situations which is not the case with other institutions that tend to be theoretical in approach.

b   Study materials are simplified and user friendly with activities to encourage students.

Is it fair to say that the nature of contact made a difference in some of your choices?

1   The distance is what has been called the sacred land between the students and the lecturer in other institutions there is a no-go area between the learners and the lecturers, unlike here. Even though there is a distance but still there is that closeness that links us with the lecturers.

So you are suggesting that distance between lecturer between lecturer and student is an important issue?

I know of some other distance institutions which have cheaper courses than we have, why didn't you enrol with them?

1   They are not all cheaper.

If there had been cheaper courses at other institutions would you have been tempted to go to those institutions?

1   I had got the prospectus from some other institutions. I first looked through the content of the course - what do I expect from other institutions and I wasn't much impressed with the content.

How important is cost as a factor in choosing a course?

1   The cost is quite reasonable.

2   I examined about two or three other courses which are all linked to particular Universities and this one I also saw was linked to Natal (UNP) which is why I chose it.

What do you understand about standards in education? Who sets and who judges the quality of education? Do you think this affects you as a student? What constitutes a standard in education? Do you think there are different standards in education at the moments? (These

questions were added as prompts when no response was forthcoming.)

1   Yes there are, although one cannot be specific, you see standards in my opinion are easily realised after a person has qualified from whatever institution he has been to. You can judge the standard of an institution by its graduates.

So you think there are ways of measuring the standards by the products that come out of the institution? Do you think that you have been conscious of different standards when you have been making choices in education?

1   Yes from what we have been saying we know that one needs to avoid certain institutions because of their standards.

Comment from Alex: Don't you think that ones perception of standards can be influenced by ethnic issues , such as race?

1   Yes it has something to do also especially if you look at institutions that have been predominantly for blacks, well generally speaking we talk of low standards at those institutions because of different...... but it also becomes a little difficult to measure standards.

Do you think standards is a sensitive issue in education?

1   Well I do there are problems when people talk about standards when they talk about some lecturers which has nothing to do with the actual education standards.

What do you think would be the main disadvantage to you if you could not attend a contact session?

1   I would want to phone the lecturer to get a report and make some arrangement to get the materials and information.

Do you think that the nature of our contact sessions has changed since the first one?

1   Yes we have all learned.

What motivates you most to come to the contact sessions?

1   You come because you get something, the general feeling of other people in discussions.

2   A great motivator is also the returning of assignments.

a   Sharing of ideas with other students and also getting information regarding the course.

b   One gets a clearer understanding of what the lecturer expects from students.

How would you describe the relationship that exists between lecturers and students in this course?

1   *It is super!*

2   *It is frank.*

3   *At the beginning we were very quiet, just wondering how do I approach this thing but now we are relaxed.*

a   *The relationship between lecturers and students is informal and friendly.*

b   *Relationships between students is also friendly, regardless of gender.*

Appendix 5   The Questionnaire and summary of responses.

Contact Sessions - Questionnaire

This questionnaire is part of a study of students' perceptions about contact tuition in a Distance Education FDE. Most of the questions simply require you to make a tick in the appropriate blocks. However, there are some questions that allow you to comment briefly. You are encouraged to do so.

Please respond to the questions as honestly as you can - this research will only be worthwhile if your responses show what you *really* feel.

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

Please read the following before answering any questions:

*   This questionnaire is confidential.

*   You will find different types of questions in the questionnaire. Please follow the instructions carefully for each type of question.

*   Most questions simply require you to place a tick in an appropriate block.

*   A stamped, self-addressed envelope is enclosed for your reply.

1.   What is your sex?   Male   ☑ 21
                                     Female   ☑ 3

2.   What is your age?   20-30   ☑ 1
                                     31-40   ☑ 15
                                     41-50   ☑ 7
                                     51-60   ☑ 1
                                     61 +   ☑ 0

3.   What is your marital status?   single   ☑ 6
                                      married   ☑ 18
                                      divorced/separated ☑
                                      widowed   ☑

4.   How many people do you have living in your home?   Range: 3-15   Ave: 6

144

4.b.   Do you have access to the following?

	Yes	No
a separate room where you can study	☐ 18	☐ 6
a telephone at home	☐ 12	☐ 12
a telephone at work	☐ 8	☐ 16
a computer	☐	☐ 24
a fax machine	☐	☐ 24

5.   What qualifications have you achieved? Tick each of the levels you have completed.

Three year teaching diploma	☐ 13
Four year teaching diploma	☐ 2
Three year teaching diploma plus by a one year higher diploma	☐ 4
A Further diploma in education	☐ 0
Some university course credits	☐ 4
University degree	☐ 10
Postgraduate diploma (eg HDE)	☐ 1
B.Ed degree	☐ 6
Honours or Masters degree	☐ 1
Other (Specify)_____	☐ 3

6.   When you have completed this diploma do you intend to study further for another qualification?

Yes	☐ 20
No	☐ 1
Maybe	☐ 3

7.   If you answered 'Yes' or 'Maybe' to the last question, what type of qualification do you intend to study for? (If you answered 'No' leave this space blank)

B.Ed: 15 Computer course: 1 Degree: 1   M.Ed: 1--------------------

8. If you were to study further, what method of study would you choose, given the fact that you are working full time?

Take Study-leave and study full time. ☐ 2

Part time study with lectures after working hours ☐ 7

Correspondence study (with low frequency contact with the institution) ☐ 0

Distance Study (with regular contact with the institution) ☐ 14

9. At what educational institution did you gain your initial teacher qualification?

----

10. What is your official position at your current school/place of work?

Teacher ☐ 0

Head of Subject ☐ 2

Head of Department ☐ 9

Deputy Principal ☐ 4

Principal ☐ 8

Superintendent of Education ☐ 1

Other (Specify)_____

There are a number of questions which ask you to place ticks in the appropriate boxes.

Here is an example:

How important are the following aims of education?

Place a tick in the *appropriate block for each aim of education (i.e. one tick for each row)*

Aims of education	Of very great importance	Of great importance	Of some importance	Of no importance
Developing lifelong learning skills				
To fill the time before children start to work				

146

11. Below are some statements about reasons for studying further. Please indicate how important each reason is to you by placing a tick in the appropriate box. Please tick a box for *each* of the reasons for studying. (i.e. one tick in each row of blocks)

Reasons for studying further	Of very great importance	Of great importance	Of some importance	Of no importance
For improving your salary category	9	4	8	3
For promotion purposes	9	6	9	
For improving professional skills	21	3		
For increasing your personal status	7	6	7	4

12. When you last studied for a formal qualification (i.e. *before* enroling for this course) what importance was placed on the following ways courses were taught? Place a tick in the appropriate box. Please make a choice for *each* way of teaching.

Ways of teaching	Very great importance	Important	Little importance	No importance
courses which focused on the needs of students	16	4	4	
courses which focused on subject content	14	9	1	
courses which focused on the teacher/lecturer	11	6	3	4
courses that concentrated on students acquiring important skills	14	6	3	
courses that provided opportunities to practise skills	13	7	4	
courses that called for a lot of memorization	2	5	6	11

147

13. This course is only taught in English. How has this affected your learning?

It is a big problem ▢ 0

It is sometimes a problem ▢ 6

There is seldom a problem ▢ 2

It is no problem at all ▢ 16

14. If you had the choice would you choose to study a course like this in:

(If English is your Mother tongue,   English ▢ 21

tick both blocks)   Mother Tongue ▢ 3

Another language ▢ 0

15. What degree of difficulty have you experienced in each of the following activities of this course?

Activities in the course.	Great difficulty	A fair amount of difficulty	A little difficulty	No difficulty
Reading and understanding the study guides		8	7	9
Communicating your ideas in group sessions		3	5	15
Listening to and understanding what the lecturers are saying			7	17
Writing responses to the assignments	2	7	11	4
Responding to the exam questions	4	8	10	2

16. Before enroling for this course what degree of knowledge did you have of distance education as it is practised at NCE?

No idea at all ▢ 12

Very limited knowledge ▢ 6

A reasonable knowledge ▢ 5

A good understanding ▢ 1

17.   a) How much pressure do you feel there is on you to attend contact sessions?

None   ☐ 9
A little   ☐ 11
Quite a lot ☐ 2
A great deal ☐ 2

b) Do you think the level of pressure you feel is good or bad for you?

Good   ☐ 19
Bad   ☐ 5

18.   What is your view of the importance of the following statements about contact sessions?

Statements about contact sessions:	Of very great importance	Important	Of some importance	Of no importance
Contact sessions are necessary at the very beginning of a course	22	2		
Contact sessions are necessary for ongoing motivation	17	7		
Contact sessions help ensure you are prepared for exams	19	3		
Contact sessions provide you with feedback	20	4		
Contact sessions provide an opportunity to meet colleagues	12	7	4	1
Contact sessions provide an opportunity to meet lecturers	17	5	2	

19.   How far do you have to travel to attend a contact session. (i.e. the distance from your home or place of work to NCE and back)

Less than 10km   ☐ 4
Between 10 and 50km   ☐ 4
Between 50 and 100km   ☐ 4
Between 100 and 200km   ☐ 6
More than 200km   ☐ 6

149

20. Does the cost of attending a contact session worry you? Indicate to what extent this is a problem for you by placing a tick in the appropriate block for each cost that is mentioned.

	Worries me a lot	Is of some concern	Worries me a little	Hardly ever worries me	Never worries me at all
Transport costs to and from the College	4	2	6	4	8
Cost of accommodation		1	5	4	14
Cost of meals (At the College or elsewhere)		1	3	5	15
The cost in terms of time that is taken up		2	2	8	12

21. How useful do you find the following ways of studying?

Ways of Studying	Very useful	Useful	Of little use	Not at all
Working from study guides at home on your own	10	10	3	1
Working locally in small groups	13	4	6	1
Working in groups at weekend sessions	15	9		
Listening to the lecturers/tutors at weekend sessions	19	5		

Use this space to add any comments you want to make about ways of studying:
1) Self study in advance of group work is very good. 2) Group work is only worthwhile if self study has been done. 3) Highly impressed with small groups. 4) In self study with guides things are not as clear as at group discussions. 5) Students should have to prepare tasks at home to present to the group. 6) More time is needed for students to ask questions.

150

22. For this course in Educational Administration and Management how frequent should the contact be and how long should it last? Place a tick in the appropriate box for each option order.

Number and length of contact sessions	The best option	A good idea but not practical	A practical option but not a good idea	Not a good idea at all
One contact session per semester (Friday evening and Saturday)	3		11	10
Two contact sessions per semester (Friday evening and Saturday)	20		2	2
More contact sessions but for shorter times (eg.Every second Sat morning)	4	7	1	12
One contact session per semester but for longer (Eg. whole weekend including Sunday)		2	1	21
No contact sessions at all				24
Any other option: Give details:_____				

Please explain why you made the choices shown above:
Support for one session comes from people at furthest distances. Friday time is a problem w.r.t time. Two sessions balances the best-there is time to introduce the materials and time to get information for exams. It works - don't change it! No need for more contact. Students must be made to work independently and not rely on contact.

23. a) How often do your study guides make you aware of the people who wrote them:

Always ▢ 4

Often ▢ 9

Sometimes ▢ 8

Seldom ▢ 1

Never ▢ 2

b) What effect does this level of awareness (your answer in the previous question) have on the way you use your guides?

It makes them easier to follow ☐ 19

It makes no difference at all ☐ 4

It makes them more difficult ☐ 1

24. How important do you think the following styles of learning are for you?

Styles of learning	Very important	Important	Of some importance	Of no importance
Making your own decisions about what/when/how to learn (i.e. not being led by the lecturers)	10	7	5	2
Being provided with a lot of focus on the content of the study guides	7	11	5	1
Being provided with a lot of focus on applying the skills you are exposed to	20	3	1	
Lecturers leading you through the course step by step (i.e. not making your own decisions about what/when/how to learn)	4	5	9	6

25. How often do you do the exercises in the study guides?

Always ☐ 1

Often ☐ 10

Sometimes ☐ 10

Seldom ☐ 3

Never ☐ 0

26. How important do you think it is to do the exercises in the guides?

Very Important ☐ 13

Quite Important ☐ 9

Not very important ☐ 2

Not important at all ☐ 0

152

27.	Why did you choose the answer you gave above (nos. 25 and 26)?
1) They are very useful but time is a problem eg. work pressure; families. 2) We would rather read the whole guide through at once. 3) The exercises are good practice, they help us pass. 4) They discourage rote learning. 5) Success rests heavily on doing them. 6) Sometimes they are a waste of time - the answers are given later in the text. 7) Seldom done because nobody ever assesses them. 8) My response act as a test of what I have learned.

28.	How important do you think the following reasons are for having interactive exercises in the study guides? Place one tick in each row.

Reasons for having interactive exercises in the guides	Very important	Important	Of little importance	Not important at all
To make the guides the right length	6	1	4	13
To make the students think about the content	19	5		
To make the student feel that the lecturer is talking to them	14	7	3	
To link the theoretical issues to practical situations	20	3	1	
To make a link between the guides and the weekend sessions	10	9	3	2

29.	How important is it for you participate personally in the activities at the weekend sessions?

Very important   22
Quite important   2
Not very important   0
Not important at all   0

30. How much satisfaction do you get out of contact sessions for the following reasons? Place one tick in each row. (For each reason given)

Reasons for satisfaction at weekend sessions	A great deal of satisfaction	Some satisfaction	A little satisfaction	No satisfaction
Sharing your thoughts with others	21	3		
Knowing you are not alone in your problems	19	4	1	
Hearing other people's ideas and points of view	21	3		
Comparing your performance with that of colleagues	17	3	3	1
Meeting people and making friends	7	8	7	2
Getting feedback from your lecturers	21	3		
Getting away from school			2	22
Being given lectures	10	7	5	1
Getting extra handouts/notes	5	10	5	4

31. How efficient has the administration of the course been, in your experience?

Excellent   12
Quite good   11
There have been some problems   1
There have been a lot of problems   0
Very poor   0

154

32.   When you receive notification of a weekend session what do you do?

When you receive notification of a course do you:	Always	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
Read the guides so you can contribute	16	7	1	
Not bother to read the guides because the content will be covered		1		23
Think of activities that might be done at the contact sessions	9	12	3	1
Prepare questions you want to ask	2	11	4	2
Find you have no time for any preparation		5	4	13

33.   Do you think the following statements about Contact sessions are true or false?

You attend contact sessions because:

	True	False
They are compulsory	2	22
The lecturers will penalise you if you do not attend	0	24
They are not compulsory but there is pressure on you to attend	20	4
They are not compulsory and there is no pressure to attend	6	18
You go because you don't want to miss important exam information	23	1
You would rather not attend the contact sessions at all	0	24
You feel you need to go but you don't enjoy them	1	23
You enjoy them but don't really learn much	1	23
You enjoy attending and always learn a lot	24	0

155

34.   How do you rate the usefulness of the following things done at weekend sessions:

Usefulness of things done at weekend sessions	Very useful	Useful	Of little use	Of no Use at all
Exercises you do by yourself	13	10	1	
Video tapes	12	10	1	1
Discussing Case studies or scenarios in groups	22	2		
Notes/handouts you receive	19	3	2	
Meet colleagues socially and informally	5	14	4	1
Report back sessions from groups	17	7		

Why do you rate some things as more important than others? You can also use this space to make any other comments you have about the usefulness of things done at weekend sessions:
Case studies/scenarios highly rated because of the relevance of discussion to practical situations. (Some of our school problems are solved) Working on ones own is good, it reflects what the job is like - other activities are enriching. Videos and group discussion help us to master the subject matter. There is reassurance from contact with colleagues. There is no great need to socialize. Activities that encourage participation are good. We receive first class information at contact sessions. Discussions are necessary because the study guides do not offer solutions to specific problems.

35.   What do lecturers/tutors *mostly* do at weekend sessions:

Teach (i.e. talk)   ☐ 9
Facilitate student learning (e.g. guide discussion)   ☐ 22
Motivate students (e.g. encourage participation)   ☐ 18
Sit around doing nothing   ☐
Not sure what they do   ☐
Other (Specify)_____   ☐

156

36. What do you think Tutors/lecturers *should* do at weekend sessions:

Teach   ❑ 9
Facilitate student learning   ❑ 22
Motivate students   ❑ 14
Sit around doing nothing   ❑
Not sure   ❑
Other (Specify)_____ ❑

37. If you have *any* other comment about the weekend sessions that you would like to make, or that you think has not been covered in the questions, please write them down below.

Weekend sessions are good: They are practical

Students should get the scope of the exam at weekend sessions. We need to know the relevant pages for study - to save time.

Work should stop at lunch on Saturday Students are fatigued and have travel commitments

The programme should be sent out in advance to aid preparation

It would be useful to have locally made videos - of local situations Students appreciate getting copies of documents such as the Constitution and Draft Bills because the Department does not supply them. Head Office personnel should attend weekend sessions so that they can see what is being done and also explain their views on the transition and its effect on the management of schools.

Thank you for giving up your time to respond to this questionnaire.

Research Questionnaire

22 August 1996

Dear

As you know, I am completing a Master of Education degree through the University of Natal. You were kind enough to allow me the opportunity of investigating aspects of contact in the FDE: Educational Administration and Management (Secondary School).

The group interviews which I conducted at the College in May provided me with some very interesting material. I have analyzed some of the implications of the interviews and I now need to complete my data gathering by sending you a questionnaire to complete. As you are also conducting a research project you will know how important it is to get reliable data from the respondents. In this sense I am sure that I will be lucky enough to get a 100% response to this letter!

The questionnaire has been trialled with a group of students and I think I have eliminated most problems. It should not take you longer than 30 minutes to complete, so I hope you will be able to respond to it and return it to me within a few days of receiving it. At the moment I am keeping to my time schedule and with your help I should be able to complete my dissertation before the end of third year.

It is **most important** that you respond as honestly as possible. If I am to use the findings of this research to adapt the contact sessions to be more useful and effective for future students, I require accurate perceptions about it in its present form. I value the feedback that you have already given me and I have every confidence that you will continue to do so through this feedback. Remember that all data is entirely confidential!

Please read the instructions on the questionnaire carefully and I hope you find the task of completing it interesting and rewarding! I will be sending you a summary of the research findings once it is completed.

Thank you very much for your assistance in this matter and I hope that you will be able to return the completed questionnaire, in the self addressed envelope I have provided. I would be very pleased if you could return the questionnaire to me by.....

Thank you again for your support.

Kind regards

Neil Avery

Proposed amendments or points for clarification.   13 August 1992

FURTHER DIPLOMA IN EDUCATION
(Educational Administration and Management)

To be offered by the University of Natal, taught by the College of Education, Pietermaritzburg

1.   **MOTIVATION FOR OFFERING THE DIPLOMA**

This diploma has been requested by both the Department of Education and Training and the KwaZulu Department of Education and Culture, owing to the lack of expertise in administrative and managerial skills in their schools. One of the most pressing needs in the schools is good organisation of a whole range of things like timetables, examinations and school finances. This diploma is urgently required and is to be made accessible to principals and staff of schools in the whole of the Natal region.

2.   **THE AIMS OF THE COURSE**

The course is intended to provide students with:

an overall understanding of the nature of principalship;

an understanding of the fields of educational management, educational administration and organisational development;

an understanding of the professional issues confronting principals in South Africa today; and

skills emanating from the above which assist them to run their schools more effectively.

3.   **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE UNIVERSITY AND THE COLLEGE IN OFFERING THE DIPLOMA**

The F D E (Educational Administration and Management) will be issued by the University but taught by the Natal College of Education. The Department of Education in the University will validate the courses and control their evaluation. The University will control student admissions and approve the staff teaching the courses. The University is already engaged in the function of selecting College staff through its representation on the Council and Senate of the College and for several years and Dean in Pietermaritzburg has been on staff selection committees of the College. The University's role in offering this diploma is necessary

because legislation requires the University to control all training at secondary level.

4. FURTHER DETAILS OF THE DIPLOMA

Its title will be the Further Diploma in Education (Educational Administration and Management). It will be offered part-time over two years of study. The maximum number of students to be admitted will be 50. There will be no staffing, space, computing, library or laboratory requirements from the University.

5. ADMISSION REQUIREMENTS

Admission to the diploma shall be by selection.

The following shall be eligible for admission:

(a)   candidates with an approved degree and teaching diploma and three years of approved teaching experience

(b)   candidates with an approved teaching diploma requiring at least three years of training and three years of approved teaching experience

(c)   candidates who hold alternative qualifications which are acceptable to the Senate.

6. SYLLABUS

6.1   FIRST YEAR

6.1.1 Communication Studies in Educational Administration and Management 1

Competence in oral and written communication

Principles of communication:
*   steps in the communication process
*   communication methods and skills: interviews

Reports and report writing

Running meetings and taking minutes

Communication with the management group

Communication within the school as an organisation

6.1.2 Educational Administration and Management 1

Educational Management as a part discipline of management science

Educational administration as a part discipline of public administration
Organisational development in education as a part discipline of the field of organisational development

The role of the HOD, Deputy Principal and Principal in the Light of the above

Task analysis of the work of the principal in management, administration and organisational development.

6.1.3 Professional Studies in Educational Administration and Management 1

Professionalism and education

Professional leadership in the school

The relationship between the school and the community

Policy formation and its implementation at school level

6.2 SECOND YEAR

6.2.1 Educational Administration Management II

Organisation Theory

*   principles of organisations
*   techniques of organisations
*   link to systems theory

Educational Management

*   motivation: pupil, staff, parents
*   assessment and evaluation
*   elements of financial management
*   legal aspects of education management
*   crisis management

Staff Development

*   the management of induction
*   school management; effectiveness; INSET
*   staff development; self-evaluation

6.2.2 Professional Studies in Education Administration and Management II

The Systems of Education: definitions

Three models of educational systems

* democratic
* collectivist
* new nations

A systems approach to educational administration and management

* the systems concept
* common features of systems management
* management by objectives
* application

Vertical communication in a system of education

* the role of the inspector of education
* the role of the education planner

The management of change in education

* educational development and change in the transition to the twenty first century
* the role of the teacher in a changing situation
* the role of the management group in a changing situation
* change and the school

7. **RESEARCH PROJECT AND REPORT**

Basic elements of research

* data gathering; the questionnaire
* statistics; basic techniques
* exercises based on the above

Preparation and submission of written report.