

This paper was downloaded from

The Online Educational Research Journal
(OERJ)

www.oerj.org

OERJ is an entirely internet-based educational research journal. It is available to anyone who can access the web and all articles can be read and downloaded online. Anybody can submit articles as well as comment on and rate articles. Submissions are published immediately provided certain rules are followed.

Contact Sessions: Their role in Open Distance Learning and contemporary practice in the College of Human Sciences at the University of South Africa

By Michel Clasquin-Johnson

University of South Africa

Abstract

Since it started providing distance education in the late 1940's the University of South Africa (Unisa) has incorporated an element of face-to-face tuition in its educational strategy, first in the form of vacation schools, later in the form of contact sessions by traveling lecturers. This article explores the academic rationale underlying the practice, the history of face-to-face tuition at the university up to the challenges it faces today, and current practices in this regard at the College of Human Sciences at the university.

Keywords

University of South Africa

College of Human Sciences

Open Distance Learning

Distance Education

Contact Session

Face-to-face Tuition

Vacation School

Contact Sessions: Their role in Open Distance Learning, and contemporary practice in the College of Human Sciences at the University of South Africa

By Michel Clasquin-Johnson

Department of Religious Studies and Arabic, Unisa

Ever since, in the late 1940s, the University of South Africa (Unisa) embarked on its mission of being more than just an examining and accrediting body and acting as an independent university providing tuition by means of the complex of methodologies known variously as correspondence, distance education, and, most recently, open distance learning (ODL), it has been accepted that some form of face-to-face contact between student and lecturer needed to be provided to supplement the published study material. This tutorial model has gone through

two major phases in the history of Unisa, and it is possible that a third phase may be evolving as we speak.

The current practice at Unisa involves lecturers traveling to the various regional centres to provide students with contact sessions, usually once a semester (for the purposes of analysis, we will regard the main campus at Unisa as equivalent to a regional centre - it serves this function for Gauteng). This is not, however, the original kind of contact session practiced at the university. A historical overview of the way face-to-face tuition methods have augmented the traditional "correspondence" model at Unisa will provide some background to the situation the university, and more particularly the College of Human Sciences (CHS), faces today.

Even more fundamental, we must address the question **why** it is necessary to provide such contact. Is it fundamental to the Unisa experience, or is it something that may have been important once, but which has been rendered obsolete by recent developments and

survives as a tutorial fossil? What is the reasoning, if any, behind contact sessions?

WHY DO WE MAKE CONTACT?

Agboola (1993) distinguishes three ways in which distance teaching institutions approach the issue of face-to-face contact tuition:

1. Zero Contact Sessions: "Some Institutions don't provide for contact teaching at all, because they believe that the students want to be left alone ... Their view is that the contact session should remain peripheral as its use is tantamount to 'watering down' of the purity of distance teaching"

2. Supplementary Contact Sessions: "Most other distance teaching institutions believe in the provision of student support services which include the face-to-face contact sessions to help

the student during the period of enrolment as well as in study.

However, due to the complexity of the organisation and management of contact sessions, the philosophy of the independence of the learner, and the experience of poor attendance at the sessions, quite a number of DTIs make attendance voluntary. In this case, contact sessions play a supplementary role by providing only revision, tutorial, practical and seminar sessions. ... No new topics are taught ..."

3. Complementary Contact Sessions: "A number of DTIs share the view that education cannot be given without some face-to-face contact sessions. Hence, at these institutions contact sessions form one of the major delivery strategies.

Students must attend either all or a stipulated proportion of the contact sessions" (Agboola 1993:17-18).

Unisa does not have a single approach among these three. In certain disciplines, such as the natural sciences, education, social work and so on, the complementary approach has always been

used. In the College of Human Sciences, which forms the main focus of this article, the main approach has been one of supplementary contact sessions. The current practice whereby some departments and disciplines are unilaterally moving into a position of zero contact sessions is what prompted the production of this article.

Agboola (p20) goes on to say that "The usefulness of contact sessions as one of the teaching strategies in distance education has never been in doubt." This stands in strange contrast to the already-mentioned fact stated by Agboola that some institutions have chosen to adopt a zero contact session stance as a matter of principle. Even so, it is interesting to note the kind of discussion about contact sessions that the article uncovers. Just as Agboola's division of institutions above is based on the collective "views" and "beliefs" of institutions, so do the debates in educational circles centre on the virtues and methods of face-to-face tuition - its presence is taken as a given. The debate is based on "learning

theories, personality theories, as well as socio-political theories" rather than on hard data gained in carefully controlled quantitative studies.

This is not to say that there are no studies on various teaching strategies: there are studies on the effectiveness of (or rather, student satisfaction with) blended learning strategies (McKenzie et al. 2009), (Vencatachellum & Munusami 2003), and on the costing (Banks et al. 2007) and design (Preceel et al. 2009) of distance tuition curricula that touch upon the issue. However, such studies seem to take the existence of a face-to-face element, be it supplementary or complementary, as an unquestionable given and continue from that point onward.

From the Unisa point of view, and more particularly from the perspective of the College of Human sciences, the hard questions remain to be asked. Do students who attend (supplementary) contact session have a higher pass rate than students who do not?

If so, does that attest to the efficacy of contact sessions, or are the students who attend these sessions just the kind of students who would be more likely to pass anyway? Without answers to these questions, however much theoretical perspectives and our intuition as lecturers may tell us about the importance of contact sessions, it is difficult to make informed decisions about the continued use of this teaching strategy.

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF CONTACT SESSION TUITION AT UNISA

The original way in which Unisa lecturers made personal contact with their students was the Vacation School. This involved the students, rather than the lecturers, traveling to a single venue, where accommodation was provided for a two-to-three week period. The Vacation school was normally held in June of each year, since this practice predated the adoption of a semester system. It was never compulsory for any student.

When did Unisa institute this tuition practice? Almost immediately. There is no mention of the Vacation School in the first typed and mimeographed newsletter sent to "external" students in 1947 (Universiteit van Suid-Afrika 1947). By 1949, however, the newsletter, now named "Die Eksterne Student/The External Student" and printed in regular magazine format, contains letters from students relating their experiences at that year's Vacation School. In particular, one article tells us that " 'n Goeie aantal van die studente wat as pioniers die eerste vakansieskool bygewoon het, het ook hierdie jaar hulle verskyning gemaak ... (*A number of the students who pioneered the first vacation school, again turned up this year ...*)" (Maree 1949). This indicates that the first vacation school took place in 1948.

Needless to say, separate Vacation Schools were organised for "European" and non-European" students (Cilliers 1951). By 1963, the "non-European" school was further sub-divided into "two

groups, i.e. Bantu on the one hand and Coloureds and Indians on the other" (Anonymous 1969).

That the Vacation School system was taken seriously at the time can be seen from the demographic study of the students attending in 1956 (Vorster & Swanepoel 1957). This study concluded with a series of suggestions to improve the Vacation School experience.

Another indication of the high regard in which the school was held can be seen in the fact that in 1957, the opening address was given by the Secretary of Education, Art and Science, who was himself a Unisa alumnus (Op 't Hof 1957).

By 1969, 3000 students were attending the Vacation School (Anonymous 1969). We can imagine the problems organising classes, travel and accommodation arrangements for such numbers of students. Even today, this would be a great effort, but in 1969, not only were there no computers and no online booking services, it even predates the widespread adoption of the fax machine! By

1974, Unisa academics were questioning the efficiency of the system: "Daar word nie gepleit vir die afskaffing van vakansieskole nie maar slegs dat persoonlike kontak deur middel van vakansieskole gesien moet word vir die bysaak wat dit is ... Korrespondensiekontak bied voldoende moontlikhede vir die oplossing van UNISA-onderrig probleme (*We do not advocate the abolition of Vacation Schools, only that personal contact by means of vacation schools be seen as the side issue it really is ... Correspondence contact offers sufficient possibilities for the solution of Unisa's instructional problems*)" (Fourie 1974).

The very next year, Unisa News reported that "Prof. Hendrik Gous, head of the Bureau for University Research and Mr. B. J. Du Plessis of Student Affairs" visited ten centres throughout the country (Kimberley, Cape Town, George, Port Elizabeth, East London, Durban, Pietermaritzburg, Klerksdorp, Welkom and Bloemfontein) to make contact with students and investigate the possibility of sending lecturers to the students, rather than

requiring students to travel to a central point (Anonymous 1975).

The Vacation School idea did not die out immediately: the Faculty of Theology, for example, conducted its own Winter School in Hammanskraal well into the 1990s. In some disciplines (mostly outside the College of Human Sciences as presently constituted) there are compulsory laboratory work or practical work sessions that constitute an equivalent to the Vacation School system even today.

Nevertheless, we can take this date (1975) as the genesis of the present system. Unisa lecturers would conduct contact sessions in the regional centres, flying out to meet their students and staying overnight in the case of multi-day visits. During the system's lifetime, these excursions have gone by different names, such as "group visits" and "discussion classes". In this article we will use the term "contact session" throughout purely as a matter of convenience.

In passing, it should be noted that the demise of the Vacation School in favour of contact sessions had one beneficial effect: with no need to arrange for accommodation, separate sessions for "European" and "non-European" students were quietly dropped.

It seems the system initially envisaged in 1975 was far more ambitious than the one that actually evolved. Even in the author's own student days in the mid 1980s, contact sessions were restricted to Pretoria, Cape Town and Durban, and as we shall see below, the venues that are visited today have reduced in number even further since then. The original vision of lecturers visiting students across the country never came to fruition, and the lack of contact with lecturing staff is a recurring complaint from students in more remote areas.

In the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, Unisa once again finds its tuition model experiencing a crisis, just as it did in the early 1970s. This time, the challenges are more

subtle. Financial constraints have reduced the number of centres that can be visited, the number of lecturers that can be sent, and the number of days they can spend on the road.

In addition to these constraining factors, there are now new, competing forms of non-correspondence tuition have emerged, among them a tutor system instituted by the university (Kilfoil 2008) and the rise of electronic communications. In the 1970s and 1980s, a student who wished to communicate with his or her lecturers would do so by letter and a reply would be expected in a timeframe measured in weeks. Face-to-face contact sessions played a specific role in reducing that distance between lecturer and student at the time. Today, communication between them is largely by e-mail and the student, not unreasonably, expects a reply within days if not hours. Add to this the increased use of the MyUnisa online tuition system to supplement the traditional printed tuition material and it becomes less surprising that informal reports of poor student attendance at contact sessions, and of departments quietly cutting down on the practice, started to circulate.

It is in the light of these events that the Tuition and Student Support Committee of the College of Human Sciences at Unisa appointed a task team to investigate current practice of contact sessions within the college. It was decided to divide this research into two distinct, though partially concurrent, phases:

Phase 1: Researching current practices regarding contact sessions in the college.

Phase 2: Researching the academic justification for contact sessions in the ODL context and the history of the practice at Unisa.

A preliminary report detailing the findings of Phase 1, with an Excel spreadsheet containing the raw data, was submitted to the Committee in Late 2011, and both are available from the present author on application, and abridged version of the Phase 1 findings are also presented below. This article also serves as the task team's final report. Circumstances beyond our control reduced the task team to one person, the present author, by the end of the project.

METHODOLOGY

Initially, it was thought that a questionnaire would need to be compiled and sent out to the various departments. Further investigation revealed that the required data already existed in the form of the Tutorial Letters sent out to students to alert the latter to the contact sessions that will be held during the academic year and/or semester. We therefore sent out a call for the departments in the college to supply us with copies of those letters, either in printed or electronic format.

We received a satisfying number of responses. While we cannot claim to have received returns from every department in the CHS, far less from every discipline, the data we received covered a wide range, from departments with many students all studying a single discipline to departments with a student body divided across many small disciplines. We therefore feel confident that the analysis below presents a valid overall picture of contact session practices in the College of Human Sciences at Unisa. The data harvested from the tutorial letters were entered into a spreadsheet.

Immediately a problem of interpretation appeared: one department may send five people out to see students from five modules over two days, while another department may send out a single lecturer to discuss with students from another five modules in a single day. Shall we count both instances as five contact sessions? Here we needed to apply the most helpful interpretation, and in the end, a student-centric approach was taken. Instead of focusing on the department and the resources it expends, we asked how many times Unisa asks its students to take time off from work or home life to attend contact sessions. We therefore do count both of the two hypothetical examples as five separate contact sessions.

We requested data for 2011 with the proviso that data for 2010 would be accepted if the newer information was not yet available. One department changed its practice during this period. We have included the information for 2010 that it sent us, but take note that that department has suspended contact sessions for undergraduate

students and now uses the contact session budget to organise seminars for postgraduates.

During the research period, the School of Education, at first part of the CHS, was elevated to a separate College. Initially, we requested data from the three Education departments, but all the material we received pertained to contact sessions for diploma and certificate students. Since all our other (non-Education) data referred to classes held for the benefit of degree students, the Education material was not included in the analysis.

FINDINGS

It should be emphasised from the outset that this is not an attempt to “name and shame” any members of the Unisa community. The Task Team accepted that departments and individual lecturers want to do the best for their students and their disciplines, and that they are the best judges of whether contact sessions are

worthwhile in a given context. The following analysis will therefore only present the broad outlines of the findings for public discussion, without naming specific disciplines or departments. More precise data, on a discipline-by-discipline and department-by-department level of analysis, are available on application from the author.

Size matters

It will come as no surprise that departments with large numbers of students and faculty members tend to conduct more contact sessions than smaller departments. However, sheer size is not the only consideration: The departments that reported that they had ceased conducting contact sessions are medium-sized departments whose students are fragmented among a number of disciplines. It appears that the size of a discipline, rather than that of the department, is the determining factor in whether or not contact sessions are arranged. At the same time, there are smaller

disciplines that are resisting this trend. These tend to be disciplines where practical experience is an essential part of the curriculum and assessment may be portfolio-based.

NQF level differentiation

The vast majority of disciplines present contact sessions to students at NQF levels 5 and 6 (First- and second-year students).

There is a sharp decline in the number of classes presented at level 7 and few disciplines present classes for level 8 (Honours) students. Contact Sessions for short course, diploma and certificate students are not included in this report.

The implication of this practice is that Unisa faculty members appear to regard contact sessions as a remedial practice for new students, the need for which disappears as students gain experience and weaker students are winnowed out.

Semester equality

The disciplines that offer semester-based modules and offer contact sessions tend to be scrupulous about offering the same opportunities to students regardless of whether they are registered for the first or the second semester. There are a few instances where a contact session is offered in Cape Town and Durban in one semester, but in only one of the two centres during the other semester. These instances are anomalous and can probably be explained as reflecting the availability of a particular lecturer. They do not affect the overall pattern.

Pretoria students benefit the most

If a discipline is only able to organise one contact session in a given academic period, it will be most likely to take place in Pretoria.

Conducting contact sessions in Pretoria makes a lot of sense. It is fairly central to students in Gauteng, which has the greatest population density in South Africa, and not completely out of reach to students in parts, at least of Limpopo, North-west, Mpumalanga and Free State provinces. It also costs Unisa nothing in terms of travel and accommodation for the lecturers.

Durban and Cape Town students come second and third

Durban appears to be the second most popular regional centre in which to conduct contact sessions , with Cape Town coming in third place. Students within easy reach of these two centres will have about half as good a chance that there will be a contact session organised for them as do students within reach of Pretoria.

Other regional centres are largely ignored

Polokwane is the only other regional centre that attracts a significant number of contact sessions and even so, it trails

Durban and Cape Town significantly. The other regional centres are rarely visited by Unisa lecturers from the College. If face-to-face tuition is provided at these centres, it is more likely to be by means of a video conference (see below).

While no definitive reason for this can be given for this trend without specific research, we would like to make the following observations, in full awareness of their speculative nature.

1. Many of the present Unisa's regional centres were acquired through the merger of the old Unisa, Technikon SA and Vista University that created the new Unisa in 2004. Indeed, they are largely old TSA facilities. CHS lecturers are overwhelmingly from the old Unisa and may simply not be aware of these facilities and what they have to offer.

2. Lecturers may not know where their students are. It is certainly possible to extract student data from either the Student System or

MyUnisa and parse this data to find out where the students registered for a specific module reside. But this would require a large investment in time and effort on the part of each lecturer. If this process could be automated and each module leader received, every semester, an indication of the number of students within 50km of each regional centre, he or she might realise that there are concentrations of students beyond the three traditional Unisa centres and organise contact sessions accordingly.

Video conferencing growing in use

The use of videoconferencing is growing as an alternative to contact sessions. Although the use of videoconferencing was not specifically mentioned in the Task Team's brief, we would be remiss if we did not mention that a number of disciplines have made the switch to electronic delivery of face-to-face communication with the students. It is also notable that the smaller and rural regional centres are increasingly being served this way.

For most disciplines, however, videoconferencing serves as an addition to the traditional contact session, not as its replacement. Only one department seems to have switched to this mode of delivery entirely.

The Task Team did not, however, regard the use of satellite broadcasts as part of its brief. As the term “broadcast” implies, this is mostly a one-way form of communication, with limited possibilities for students to give feedback. It is noted, however, that there are disciplines that use this facility.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While there are three departments (mostly medium-sized departments with a variety of disciplines) that have suspended their use of contact sessions, on the whole this remains a method of instruction that is widely used in the College.

Videoconferencing is an increasingly popular method to extend

the benefits of contact sessions to outlying regions, but Pretoria, Durban, Cape Town and Polokwane (in that order) host the vast majority of classes presented.

It is uncertain what effect the restructuring of the College will have on the practice of contact sessions. We have seen that departments in which the students are divided up into a large number of disciplines are more likely to abandon this form of instruction. But just such departments are the most likely result of the proposed merger of departments and disciplines now proposed in the college and its schools.

Module leaders and other Unisa employees who are tasked with organising contact sessions would benefit from having better access to information about the facilities available to them and the demographics and distribution of the students in a given module.

It is thought that having this information available would lead to a more equitable distribution of contact sessions. However, even if

all regional centres were to receive regular visits by lecturers from all disciplines (a hypothetical state of affairs never likely to be attainable) there would be students who were excluded from the benefits of these classes. If contact between student and university is felt to be a necessity, the extension of the tutor system and electronic communications seem to present a more equitable means of doing so than the contact session method.

There also seems to be a disconnect between the practical arrangement of contact sessions and their financial management. Budgeting for contact sessions has to be done on the departmental level, but our research indicates that the organisation of classes and the communication of their existence to the students always happen on the level of the individual *discipline*. While this need not be fatal to the continued practice of contact sessions in the College, it does create the possibility of over- or under-budgeting, thus raising the level of uncertainty that surrounds the practice. The discipline, not the department, is the central reality in the

contact session, and this should be recognised at every level of the institutional realisation of the practice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author would like to thank the staff at the Archives section of the Unisa library, and especially Ms Marié Coetzee, for their assistance in finding the historical data used for this article.

REFERENCES CITED

Agboola, B.A., 1993. Contact Session in Distance Education : An Asset As Well As a Burden. *Indian Journal of Open Learning*, 2(1), pp.1–17–22.

Anonymous, 1975. Closer Academic Ties. *Unisa News-Nuus*, 2(2), p.1.

Anonymous, 1969. Vacation School ... Vakansieskool. *Unisa Bulletin*, 4(2), pp.10–12.

Banks, F. et al., 2007. *Costing Open and Distance Teacher Education. Case Study Examples from Sub-Saharan Africa*, Washington DC: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank.

Cilliers, D.H., 1951. Vacation Schools. *Die Eksterne Student/The External Student*, 4(5), pp.39–42.

Fourie, L.J., 1974. Korrespondensie-kontak en ander kontak-vorme. *Unisa Bulletin*, 9(3), p.8.

Kilfoil, W.R., 2008. Integrating the elements of open distance learning (ODL) to enhance service to students in a developing country. *WikiEducator*. Available at:

http://wikieducator.org/images/9/99/PID_321.pdf [Accessed April 1, 2012].

Maree, D.H., 1949. Studentebedrywighede Gedurende die Vakansieskool 1949. *Die Eksterne Student/The External Student*, 3, pp.44–45.

McKenzie, J., Pelliccione, N. & Parker, N., 2009. What makes blended learning effective? An interactive session of peer review.

In *Same places, different spaces. Proceedings ascilite Auckland 2009*. Same places, different spaces. Proceedings ascilite

Auckland 2009. pp. 1–4. Available at:

<http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/auckland09/procs/McKenzie-interactive-session.pdf>.

Op 't Hof, J.J.P., 1957. Die Opening van die Vakansieskool.

Unisa, 10(11), pp.12–13.

Precel, K., Eshet-Alkalai, Y. & Alberton, Y., 2009. Pedagogical and Design Aspects of a Blended Learning Course. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 10(2), pp.1–16.

Universiteit van Suid-Afrika, 1947. *Afdeling Eksterne Studie Nuusbrief*, 1(1).

Vencatachellum, I. & Munusami, V., 2003. Effectiveness of blended learning at University of Mauritius: The case of the VCILT. In *International Conference on Open and Online Learning*. International Conference on Open and Online Learning.

Vorster, H.S.C.A. & Swanepoel, J.J., 1957. The Human Background of the Vacation School for European Students 1956. *Unisa*, 10(11), pp.41–44.