

- “I have played, from a very young age, the role of an adult for my brother.”
- “I am a mother to my siblings.”

Family of origin: Students grew up in a variety of family settings. Fifty-four percent (54%) indicated that they grew up in nuclear families, while 46% grew up in extended families (grandparents), reconstructed families, adoptive families, foster care (abandoned) and child-headed families. What is more important than the type of family was their experiences of their families. Their descriptions varied from happy families (53%) with fond memories, to terrible experiences and unhappiness during childhood (40%).

- “At ten years I moved in with my mother who stayed with my stepfather. This was the worst thing that happened to me.”
- “There was verbal abuse and sometimes physical abuse when my father was drunk.”

Many students in particular missed the affection of their fathers (37% fathers are deceased). Students had a common notion of the father figure as the one person who is, or should be, there to support and care for them. Mothers were perceived to be more supportive and willing to make sacrifices on behalf of the children.

- “She has been carrying a box of fruit to sell on the streets since I started school. She is still doing that. She is determined to get the transport fee to university.”

There are also those who did not know their mothers or had a very poor relationship with their mothers.

- “She used to swear at me, even if I tried to concentrate on my studies.”
- “I am angry because she gave me to her sister when I was about two years old until seven years. Her sister abused me 110%.”
- “She doesn’t exist for me. I hate her for dumping me at the age of five.”

Some of the replaced family members were described in a very positive way and, according to some of the students’ statements, grandmothers featured as particular favourites:

- “I sometimes think I love my grandmother more than my mother.”

Some of the replaced family members were not remembered in a positive way:

- “My uncle sexually molested me when I was four and stayed with them.”
- “My aunt never took care of us when we were suffering. She made us eat old stale food which smelled bad.”

These experiences also refer to the **poverty of identity**. In all cultures the family imprints its members with selfhood. Human experience of identity has two elements: a sense of belonging and a sense of being separate. “The laboratory in which these ingredients are mixed and dispensed is the family, the matrix of identity” (Minuchin, cited in Lintvelt, 2008). It can therefore be assumed that the influence of loss and rejection must have impacted on many students’ formation of the self.

Poverty of understanding refers to a lack of access to good education necessary for the person to understand the world in which he or she lives. The students who participated in the research were obviously actively participating in a formal study programme, suggesting at a first glance that they had access to good education. What needs more careful consideration, however, is the performance and throughput of the students and the factors that may influence their education, for example, the low qualifications of the parents and the possible lack of a culture of learning,

the conditions under which they study, and the other responsibilities that limit the time that they spend on their studies (e.g. caring for children, siblings and family).

The following table illustrates the possible impact the context may have on the number of years that it took the students to complete their studies.

TABLE 3
NUMBER OF YEARS TO COMPLETE QUALIFICATION –
2008 4th-LEVEL STUDENTS

Year of registration year	N	%
1991	1	
1992	1	
1993	1	
1994	1	
1995	3	
1996	5	
1997	5	
1998 (10 yrs)	7	1991-1998=16,4% more than 10 years study
1999	5	
2000	5	
2001	10	
2002 (7 yrs)	8	
2003 (6 yrs)	17	
2004 (5 yrs)	37	25%
2005 (4 years) Some may be first-time 4 th level	34	23%
Could not access registration. Blocked – outstanding fees	5	
Blocked – disciplinary hearing	1	
Total	146	

A similar picture emerged from the study of the 2006 group. The results indicate that the average time it takes for a student to complete his or her 4-year degree is 6,5 years, while 30% of the students take more than the average period.

To analyse the slow movement of the students more closely, the academic records of a few students were examined as case studies.

Case study A

This student registered for the first time in 1997. Over this 11-year period the student registered 70 times to pass the 30 modules required in order to enter 4th level. This means that the student registered on average 2,3 times for each module before fulfilling the module requirements.

Case study B

This student registered for the first time in 1993. He/she registered 72 times over a period of 15 years to complete 30 modules, which amounts to an average of 2,6 registrations per module. The student failed 44 times already. If the student had started studying at the age of 20 years,

this student will now be 35 and still not have access to the social work profession. At this rate it may also take another 2-3 years for the student to complete the 4th level.

The results illustrated in these case studies raise serious ethical questions, in particular when it affects the student, as noted one of these “long-term” students:

“I know I want to have my own family, I want to have children, and at my age it tells me that, no, you have failed in many respects. At 40 you are not married. You have no family. Academically you have not achieved anything. I am nowhere. I am a failure”.

Although the students’ perseverance and resilience are admirable, it may be an indication that some students are not equipped to manage their work/studies effectively; they may experience difficulties in dealing with the study material; they may be incapacitated by difficult circumstances and lack of finance may impede their progress. The **poverty of understanding** in these instances becomes inextricably coupled with the **poverty of participation**, because to be excluded from accessing the profession precludes these individuals from participation.

Poverty of participation manifests as an experience of exclusion and isolation.

The nature of open and distance learning in itself contributes to exclusion and isolation: just over 50% of the students who participated in this research indicated that they experience loneliness.

Kader Asmal, the previous Minister of Education, who studied through Unisa while in prison, said:

“...my own experience of correspondence study those many years ago was one of deep loneliness. I refer to it as ‘the loneliness of the long-distance learners’” (quoted in the HEQC document, 2008).

He said he understood the text and concepts, but he could not test his ideas or evolve ideas with co-learners.

Open and distance learning in itself creates wonderful opportunities for the students who could not otherwise access tertiary training, but it has consequences of having to study “with your own strengths and support” (HEQC document, 2008).

Language

It is well known that the ability to read and write English is a challenge to most of the students. Higher Education South Africa (HESA) confirmed this as a dilemma within all the universities. In the 2006 group of students 82% of the students gave English as their second language. Not being able to read, write and express themselves verbally in English excludes the student from participation and understanding. It also creates difficulties in being equipped and ready for Social Work practice, where report writing for court cases, preparing proposals and keeping daily records and reports are essential.

Poverty of creation refers to having work or being able to create. This poverty has been referred to previously. An additional difficulty, which may sound trivial at first, is lack of access to driver licences. A critical aspect of social work practice is to be able to access clients and groups, and to be able to facilitate community projects. A drivers licence is essential in the social work profession. A student who does not have a drivers licence will not be employed by any welfare agency, even if he or she has completed the four-year degree. Acquiring a driver’s licence is an expensive or even an unaffordable venture for many of the students. They must be able to **afford (subsistence)** driving lessons and have access to a car in order to be able to

practise. This requirement prolongs the period of their possibility to access work – therefore the poverty of creation and participation.

CONCLUSION

This paper attempts to illustrate three worlds.

Firstly, the world of Unisa as an open and distance-learning institution. This institution has demonstrated its social conscience and the need to be in the service of humanity by opening its doors and building bridges to ensure accessibility to tertiary education. It has attempted to remove obstacles such as rigid entrance requirements, offers services to students based in outlying geographical areas, makes fees as affordable as it can, gives recognition to prior learning, and allows students flexible learning programmes.

The **second** world is that of the Department of Social Work, which has to deliver a professional person with certain knowledge, skills, a professional value system and a particular work ethos.

The **third** world is the socio-economic realities of the students, who experience poverties in many dimensions of Max-Neef's Fundamental Human Needs. These socio-economic poverties may be some of the factors that inhibit students' growth and development as people and as students.

The results of the research indicate a holistic approach to student development, which can include reconsidering admission requirements or preparation, additional programmes that can help students with their social, life and work-related skills, more focused development of a work ethos, accessing counselling and support services in the dimensions where they experience poverties. This also requires an open and distance-learning institution like Unisa to research and reflect on the effect of such "open" policies regarding their broader student community and the ethical implications this may have. This article, with its limited research scope, hopefully opens the debate and motivates further research in this unique and complex context of open and distance-learning in South Africa as well as in the residential university context.

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