

Problems encountered by BA Cur graduates and recommendations for enhancing learner support

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Abstract

Distance education is becoming ever more important in providing continuing post basic, and especially postgraduate, education to practising professional persons, including nurses. As more and more institutions in the Republic of South Africa offer distance education courses to nurses, it is essential to take note of the positive and negative experiences of successful graduates of these programmes, in order to enhance the learning opportunities, and the success rate of nurses pursuing such distance education courses.

A brief historical overview is provided about the University of South Africa (Unisa) and about the Department of Advanced Nursing Sciences at this distance education university. This background information should assist the reader in contextualising the research findings.

Questionnaires were posted to all Unisa's 1998 BA Cur graduates. The research report focuses on the 1998 BA Cur (nursing) graduates' biographic data, their experiences of pursuing distance education post basic nursing courses, their positive and negative perceptions of these experiences and their recommendations for enhancing other students' success.

Abbreviations used in the report

PHC - Primary Health Care
RSA - Republic of South Africa
SANC - South African Nursing Council
UK - United Kingdom
Unisa - University of South Africa
USA - United States of America

Background information about the University of South Africa

In order to understand the graduates' positive and negative experiences related to their distance education ventures, brief historical background information about the University of South Africa (Unisa) and about Unisa's Department of Advanced Nursing Sciences will be provided. Students following distance education courses at other universities could encounter similar and/or different experiences depending on the type(s) of distance education courses offered.

The University of the Cape of Good Hope was established as an examining university in 1873, changing its name to the University of South Africa (Unisa) in 1916. Since 1946 the major function of Unisa changed from being an examining university to one offering under- and postgraduate courses by means of distance education, using an integrated learner support system including printed study guides and tutorial letters, counselling services, video and teleconferencing, e-mail and Internet access to all the university's services (including library services and on-line registrations) and to individual lecturers. These distance education services are rendered from Unisa's main campus in Pretoria as well as from a number of regional offices in the Republic of South Africa (RSA) and in a number of African countries. Unisa does have the operational infrastructure in place to offer distance education courses

worldwide, because students write their examinations at more than 450 examination centres throughout the world. The 1998 student population (totalling 117 046) comprised:

- 109 997 from the RSA
- 4 717 from the rest of Africa
- 2 332 from the rest of the world (including North America, South America, Europe, Asia, Australia and New Zealand).

During 1998 Unisa conferred 1 489 diplomas, 10 797 Bachelor's degrees, 446 Master's degrees and 87 Doctorates (Unisa 1999d).

The department of advanced nursing sciences, UNISA

The Department of Advanced Nursing Sciences, Unisa (henceforth referred to as the Department) was established during 1975, admitting its first distance education students during 1976 and boasting its first graduates during April 1979. Distance education has been broadly defined as a strategy in which the teacher or institution providing instruction is separated either in time, place, or both, from the learners or students (Moore 1987). This definition applies to the courses offered by the Department because all its courses are offered to students who do not attend full time university lectures. Even attending the group discussion and video conferences are optional.

This Department offers distance education degree and diploma courses to registered nurses, enabling them to acquire additional qualifications with the South African Nursing Council (SANC), depending on their choice of subjects as:

- Nurse Educators and/or
- Community Health Nurses and/or
- Nurse Administrators.

The Department also offers Master's and Doctoral programmes by means of distance education. The number of students who obtained qualifications until 1998, according to Unisa' Bureau for Management Information, (Unisa 1999a) were:

- Diplomas in Advanced Nursing Sciences: 1 118
- BA Cur degrees: 7 391
- Honours BA Cur degrees: 913
- MA Cur: 69
- D Litt et Phil: 25

The Department's study materials consist of study guides explaining the course content and the structure of a specific course, and tutorial letters containing assignments which students need to do in order to gain examination admission. Students need to buy their own prescribed books, but can obtain recommended literature from the Unisa library. Lecturers provide written comments about the essay type assignments to individual students and comments about assignments comprising objective item questions. Group discussions are held in Pretoria and at the regional offices at specific times of the year, supplemented by video conferences. Students can contact the lecturers by telephone, postal correspondence, e-mail, and the Internet. These support systems attempt to provide tutorial support when required by students, an essential element determining the success of distance education programmes (Clark in Price 1997:154).

The need for providing distance education courses to registered nurses in the RSA and in the rest of Africa exists because large numbers of registered nurses cannot leave their jobs and families to attend full time courses in large cities and/or in foreign countries. This situation is not unique to Africa, but has also been reported in the United States of America (USA) by Johnston and Lewis (1995:237): *Registered nurses seeking advanced degrees ... for career advancement frequently encounter difficulty in finding an accessible program ... to fit with family and employment obligations, prevent nurses from growing in their profession.* Reinert and Fryback (1997:42) reported that they identified 135 nursing schools offering off-site courses in the USA.

Distance education courses also become increasingly important to provide opportunities for nurses to enhance their qualifications in the United Kingdom (UK) as a result of organisational and economic reforms in the British health care system (Price 1997:154).

The Research Project

An exploratory descriptive quantitative survey was used in an attempt to identify possible problems encountered by BA Cur graduates and to obtain their suggestions for enhancing learner support systems for future students.

Purpose of the research

In order to enhance the value of distance education courses to

the students, ongoing research should strive to identify strengths and weaknesses of such courses. Such information should not only be obtained from registered students pursuing such courses but also from successful candidates. Obtaining information from the latter group would be more difficult because they might no longer be registered students and their addresses could have changed since they were last registered at Unisa. It was considered essential to conduct research among successful BA Cur graduates to identify ways in which the Department could enhance its learner support to students. This would be in line with the RSA's National Commission on Higher Education's standpoint that: *A key challenge for higher education is to enhance the quality of higher education programmes and to improve success and throughput rates* (Unisa 1999b:5).

The Vice-Chancellor of Unisa proclaimed that ... *one of the most significant distance education challenges facing Africa in general, and Unisa in particular, is providing sustainable and effective student support which is properly integrated into the distance education delivery system* (Unisa 1999c).

This survey attempted to identify ways in which learner support could be enhanced from the students' points of view. This research report focussed only on students who completed the BA Cur degree requirements and graduated during 1998. The purposes of conducting this survey were to:

- gain biographic data about the graduates
- obtain factual data about the duration of their studies
- identify positive and negative experiences which these students encountered
- identify possible ways of enhancing student support.

The research population and sample

The Department of Computer Services, Unisa, provided printed name and address labels of all students who fulfilled the requirements for the BA Cur degree at the end of 1997. This limited the research population only to those 227 students who passed all the subjects required for the BA Cur degree, and who met all the laboratory or practical work requirements by December 1997. Sixty-six completed questionnaires were returned, forming the research sample (n = 66) for this research report.

Research instrument

A structured questionnaire containing mostly closed ended questions but also a number of open ended questions was used because it was the only way in which the 227 BA Cur graduates could be reached who lived throughout the RSA and in a number of African countries.

The items (questions), included in the questionnaire were selected after careful perusal of reports about distance education students' experiences. The compiled questionnaires were submitted to distance education lecturers for their comments. A few items were rephrased, and more questions were included attempting to obtain more biographic data from the respondents.

Pretesting of the questionnaire

Pretesting is a small scale study using a small sample, which will be excluded from the subsequent research sample, to provide a miniature trial run of the research instrument and

process. The purpose of a pretest is to enable the researcher to refine or adjust the research instrument and/or process should that be necessary prior to embarking on the actual data gathering process (Armstrong & Grace 1994:78).

Pretesting the questionnaires on a sample of the 1998 BA Cur graduates proved to be problematic as it could not be ascertained who could be reached at which addresses and how to exclude those participating in the pretests from the subsequent survey. Consequently, ten students pursuing Nursing Education III courses at Unisa during 1997, who could not graduate during 1998 and who were thus excluded from the research population of 1998 BA Cur graduates, were requested to complete questionnaires in an attempt to pretest the instrument. More open-ended questions were added as a result of these ten students' comments. No items were perceived to be ambiguous. The questionnaire could be completed within thirty minutes. Thus the questionnaire could be accepted as a research instrument for this survey.

Reliability and validity of the research instrument

The *reliability* of a research instrument can be regarded as its stability, consistency or dependability as a an instrument measuring certain attributes. "The reliability of an instrument is the degree of consistency with which it measures the attribute it is supposed to be measuring" (Polit & Hungler 1989:242). The items included in the questionnaire were based on an in-depth literature review about distance education programmes and students, as well as on suggestions from distance education lecturers and from students pursuing distance education programmes. Consequently, the instrument was accepted as measuring students perceptions about their experiences while pursuing distance education programmes.

Validity refers to the degree to which an instrument measures what it is supposed to measure (Polit & Hungler 1989:246). *Content validity*, concerning the adequacy of the content being covered by the questions, was assessed by requesting the evaluations of both lecturers involved with distance education courses, and third year Nursing Education students who were pursuing distance education programmes at least for the third successive year.

Ethical considerations

The target population for this study comprised 1998 BA Cur graduates, who were no longer registered BA Cur students, and who could therefore reflect their perceptions about their distance education programmes without fear of intimidation. The questionnaires were completely anonymous and no respondent could be traced as the questionnaires were not numbered. As the questionnaires were completely anonymous, the respondents were assured of confidentiality of their individual responses. The respondents who returned completed questionnaires to the researcher did so freely, without coercion and without remuneration.

The data gathering process

During January 1998, 227 questionnaires were posted to all the BA Cur graduates identified by Unisa's Department of Computer Services. Self-addressed, stamped envelopes were

included for returning the completed questionnaires. Students were requested to return the completed questionnaires before the end of February 1998. Only 66 (29.07%) usable questionnaires were returned by the end of 1998. Approximately 67 (29.52%) questionnaires were returned with "address unknown" stamps on the envelopes. It could be assumed that these graduates might have acquired new professional positions inside the RSA or in foreign countries, making it problematic to trace them. Another 34 (14.98%) questionnaires which were returned, could not be used because they were answered incompletely as the respondents misunderstood the questionnaires to be directed at students registered for the BA Cur degree during 1997 - which excluded them from participating in this survey according to this perception, as they had completed their BA Cur studies and were no longer registered for this course.

No codes were used on the questionnaires, in an effort to ensure absolute anonymity in order to obtain truthful answers, thus the non-respondents could not be identified. The cost of sending reminders and second questionnaires to the 227 graduates would have been prohibitive, and the expected increased number of questionnaires returned appeared to be negligible. Consequently, it was decided to use the available data to identify the possible strengths and weaknesses of the distance education BA Cur degree course, as experienced by the 66 successful 1998 BA Cur graduates (in future referred to as *respondents*) who completed and returned their questionnaires.

The report was compiled to present overviews of the graduates' biographic data, their perceptions about their BA Cur studies, and their perceptions about the nursing courses they followed.

Data Analysis

As this research was conducted as an exploratory, quantitative survey and as no hypotheses were formulated, the responses from the 66 usable questionnaires were tallied, percentages calculated, and frequency displayed as tables where necessary. In this way the raw data from the questionnaires were summarised, organised and systematised and communicated to the readers of the report (Polit & Hungler 1989:260).

Results, conclusions and recommendations

Biographic data

The first section of the report portrayed the respondents' biographic data, as obtained from the 66 completed questionnaires, including their sex, age, marital status, home language, type of school qualification, professional as well as academic qualifications, and current employment status. This background information about the respondents should enable the readers of this report to contextualise the positive and negative perceptions about distance education programmes reflected in the questionnaires.

Sex

The fact that 60 (90,9%) of the respondents were female, coincides with the statistics of the SANC, reflecting that the

majority of registered nurses in the RSA are female. However, if the majority of the female student population should be married and in their childbearing years, the additional load of studying might be placing extreme demands on these women. Should the majority of them be working as well, then they could be regarded as fulfilling three exacting roles simultaneously - those of employee, wife-mother, and student.

Age

Table 1 Age distribution of BA Cur graduates

AGE IN YEARS									
Younger than 30		31-40		41-50		51 and older		TOTAL	
n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
7	10,6	28	42,4	28	42,4	3	4,6	66	100

The actual responses indicated that the three youngest graduates were 27 years old. Most successful pupils complete their schooling when they are 18 or 19 years old in the RSA. The oldest student who graduated during 1998 was 54 years old. The prospects of professional promotions, resulting from graduation might be limited for graduates older than 50 years of age, especially when large numbers of nurses accepted severance or early retirement packages in the RSA since 1995. Cross-checking of the questionnaires indicated that the 54-year old graduate took 15 years to complete the BA Cur degree. She did not provide any reasons for requiring 15 years to complete the BA Cur degree.

Those graduates aged between 31 and 40 years, comprising 42,4% of the respondents, might be trying to fulfill the triple role obligations of being employees, wives and/or mothers, as well as students. The last role might assume the lowest priority, being the only one which is pursued on a voluntary basis, and the only one where achievements can be extended over a number of years. More research might be needed to clarify ways in which students manage to cope with such a role overload, and yet manage to graduate as well.

Marital status

Table 2 Marital status of BA Cur graduates

Married		Never Married		Divorced		Widowed		TOTAL	
n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
43	65,2	16	24,2	4	6,1	3	4,5	66	100

The majority 43 (65,2%) were married while 4 (6,1%) were divorced and 3 (4,5%) were widows. Only 24,2% of the respondents were reportedly never married, and could be assumed to have had more time to spend on their studies. Those 65,2% who were married when obtaining their BA Cur degrees, must have been successful in juggling their time, energy and resources between family, job and study obligations.

Home language

Pursuing distance education in one's second or third language might be a formidable task, especially when time is at a premium because one maintains a full time job and fulfills all the obligations of being a wife and/or mother at the same time. Studying on one's own in a foreign language could demand considerable additional investments of time, compared to studying in one's home (first) language. The RSA has eleven official languages, but the Department of Advanced Nursing Sciences, Unisa, offers study materials only in English and in Afrikaans.

The majority of the prescribed books are available in English only, necessitating even the Afrikaans speaking students to invest additional effort into understand the prescribed materials. The logistics and financial expenditure of enabling students to study in their home languages might be formidable, but lecturers who are aware of their students' potential language

Table 3 Home languages of the respondents (in order of frequency)

Home language	n	%
Sotho	15	22,7
Zulu	14	21,2
Xhosa	11	16,7
Afrikaans	11	16,7
Other (Venda, Tswana, Sepedi, Shona, Ndonga, Tsonga, Shangaan)	9	13,6
English	6	9,1
TOTAL	66	100

problems could assist these students by using the simplest possible language in their study materials, assignments and examination questions, and by explaining difficult concepts in easier terms.

The languages grouped under the "other" category represented only one or two respondents per language listed. Nevertheless even the "other" language groups indicated that at least 13,6% of the graduates did not fall within the five major language groups and would thus not have benefited even if the course materials might have been available in all these five major languages.

Only 9,1% of the 1997 BA Cur graduates were English speaking, implying that 89,9% of these students mastered the (English) learning materials in their second or third language. The skill to read, comprehend and summarise what one has

read, is a basic requirement of all learning, but even more so in the case of distance education programmes where direct contact and/or communication with the lecturer(s) could be minimal or even absent. This places a great responsibility on the lecturers to ensure that the prescribed materials are as accessible to their students as possible. The majority of the graduates, 64 out of 66 as reflected in Table 5, passed English as a Grade 12 school subject. Moreover, all the students with the exception of the eleven Afrikaans speaking graduates, would have completed their basic nursing education courses in English prior to commencing their BA Cur studies at Unisa. This would have enabled them to master the nursing science terms in English prior to commencing their studies at Unisa. The majority of national and international nursing and health care publications are available in English, but very few are available in the other ten languages spoken in the RSA. Consequently, mastering the study materials in English will enable the graduates to pursue postgraduate studies in English.

Matriculation exemption

In the RSA, the term matriculation exemption refers to the fact that the candidates obtained sufficiently high percentages in their final (Standard 10 or Grade 12) school leaving examinations. Furthermore, it is a requirement that a certain number of subjects should be passed at the so-called "higher grade" (more or less equivalent to the UK's Advanced or "A-level"). Pupils who pass all their school subjects at "standard grade" (more or less equivalent to the UK's Ordinary or "O-level") cannot obtain matriculation exemption required for university admissions.

The SANC stipulates that the minimum educational requirement for student nurses is merely Standard 10 or Grade 12, matriculation exemption is NOT required by the SANC but might be required by some nursing colleges and is required by all university departments offering basic and post basic nursing education courses in the RSA.

Table 4 Matriculation exemption acquired by respondents

Yes		No		Total	
n	%	n	%	n	%
49	74	17	26	66	100

Although 74% of the respondents indicated that they did in fact possess matriculation exemption, it cannot be assumed that they had acquired this at the completion of their schooling. An unknown number might have obtained "provisional matriculation exemption" in order to continue with their BA Cur studies. The results portrayed in Table 4 cannot be accepted as necessarily reflecting the real situation, because the question might have been phrased in an ambiguous manner.

Subjects passed for Grade 12 (Standard 10)

Respondents were expected to list all the subjects at higher and at standard grades and symbols appearing on their Grade

Table 5 Subjects passed for Grade 12 (Standard 10) listed alphabetically

Subjects passed	n	%
Accountancy	5	7.6
Afrikaans	56	84.8
Agriculture	6	9.1
Biology	48	72.7
Business Economics	7	10.6
Biblical Studies	10	15.2
Commercial Law	2	3.0
Domestic Science	6	9.1
Criminology	13	19.7
Economics	2	3.0
English	64	97.0
Geography	16	24.2
Geology	4	6.1
German	5	7.6
History	20	30.3
Latin	3	4.6
Mathematics	18	27.3
Music	1	1.5
Needlework	2	3.0
Physical Science	13	19.7
Physiology	12	18.2
Sotho	1	1.5
Tswana	3	4.6
Venda	2	3.0
Xhosa	12	18.2
Zulu	13	19.7

12 (previously Standard 10) certificates. However, the majority merely listed the subjects without indicating either the symbols or the levels at which the subjects were passed. Consequently, Table 5 merely lists subjects passed, in alphabetical order. The percentage indicated for each subject, refers to the total number of 66 respondents. Knowledge about the school subjects passed might provide an indication as to the students' academic capabilities. The reflection that 97% passed English proved puzzling as this is a requirement for obtaining Grade 12 in the RSA. Biology seemed to be favoured because 72,7% passed biology. As only 27,3% of the respondents passed Mathematics, the majority of these graduates could have encountered problems in mastering the nursing research course.

Professional Qualifications

The professional qualifications held by the graduates, as registered with the SANC, might provide an indication as to their fields of interest. One person could be registered in any number of categories, therefore the totals do not add up to

Table 6 Professional qualifications of BA Cur graduates

Professional qualifications (listed according to frequency)	n	%
General nurse	66	100,0
Midwife	58	87,9
Community health nurse	48	72,7
Nurse administrator	37	56,1
Nurse educator	21	31,8
Occupational health nurse	18	27,3
Psychiatric nurse	17	15,8
Intensive care nurse	7	10,6
Geriatric nurse	3	4,5
Operating theatre nurse	3	4,5
Orthopaedic nurse	3	4,5
Trauma care nurse	3	4,5
Paediatric nurse	2	3,0
Ophthalmic nurse	1	1,5

100%.

As the BA Cur degree is only available to registered nurses who have completed their basic training, the reflection that 100% of the respondents were registered general nurses can be assumed to be correct. The other professional qualifications display a wide variety of fields of practice and interest.

Academic qualifications

As the questionnaires were sent only to those students who had met all the requirements for the BA Cur degree, all 66 (100%) would have received this degree during 1998. The BA Cur degree would be the first academic qualification obtained by the majority of graduates, because only two respondents indicated that they had earned other degrees, namely:

- one had a B Soc Sc degree, and
- one had an Honours B Soc Sc degree.

If these indications should be representative of Unisa's BA Cur students, then the Department should investigate why students who obtained their basic degrees at other universities in the RSA did not pursue their post basic studies at Unisa.

Employment positions occupied by the respondents

The graduates were requested to describe the nursing positions in which they were employed at the time of completing the questionnaires.

The majority (33 or 50%) were employed as senior professional nurses, whilst 16 (24,3%) worked as professional nurses. Three of these 16 respondents indicated that they were employed as nurse educators whilst one of the nine chief professional nurses indicated that she was a nursing services manager. Those respondents who held positions as chief professional nurses would have had limited time for their studies as these positions imply great demands. Furthermore, 64

Table 7 Positions occupied by the respondents

Position	n	%
Chief professional nurse	9	13,6
Senior professional nurse	33	50,0
Professional nurse	16	24,3
Junior professional nurse	5	7,6
Occupational health nurse	1	1,5
Private midwife	1	1,5
Not employed	1	1,5
TOTAL	66	100

(90,90%) respondents worked full time, severely limiting their time available for studies.

Institutions where the respondents were working

With the exception of the three nurse educators working at universities, four working at colleges, and the one occupational health nurse, all the other graduates would have been required to work irregular, varying shifts, over weekends and during the night. Working irregular and unpredictable shifts might have made studying more difficult because specific weekly studying times could not be scheduled, as persons could do who worked regular hours.

Table 8 Institutions where the respondents were working

Institutions	n	%
Hospitals	42	63,7
Clinics	12	18,2
Colleges	4	6,1
Universities	3	4,5
Department of Health	2	3,0
Occupational health nurse	1	1,5
Self employed (private midwife)	1	1,5
Not employed	1	1,5
TOTAL	66	100

Conclusion: biographic data

The majority of the respondents were females, married, between 31 and 50 years old, worked as senior professional nurses in hospitals.

Report about the respondents' BA Cur studies at Unisa

This section of the report addresses the factual issues about the respondents' BA Cur studies, such as the number of years required to complete their degrees, the courses selected, planned future studies and whether or not they would encour-

age their children to study at Unisa.

Number of years registered to complete the BA Cur degree

Six (9,1%) students required only four years to complete their BA Cur degrees, but the majority (19 or 28,8%) required six years to do so, whilst 14 (21,2%) needed five years. Thus 39 (59,1%) of the students managed to complete their BA Cur degrees within the first six years of registration. This would seem to be a commendable achievement considering that the majority were working full-time and were married whilst they studied. Even though they could have completed their degrees within shorter periods of time should they have attended full time courses, their family lives might have been disrupted, their services would not have been available to their employers, and more costs would have been involved. However, note should be taken of those students who required more than six years to complete their BA Cur degrees, namely:

- eight who required 7 years
- seven who needed 8 years
- five who needed 9 years
- five who needed 10 years
- one student who needed 15 years.

Twelve courses and laboratory (practical) work needed to be completed to meet the requirements for the BA Cur degree. Thus it could be argued that should students pass two courses per year, they would need six years to complete the degree, or four years should they pass three courses per year. The value to be obtained from a degree, requiring 10 years' investment of time and effort could be doubted. On the other hand, these students did finally obtain their degrees and the employers probably benefited from their increased knowledge acquired during their studies. The number of years required to complete a degree by means of distance education would seem to be less crucial than in the case of full-time studies. However, students who failed a number of examination papers might have benefited from more effective student support systems. Thirty-five respondents indicated that they failed the following number of papers during their studies (these students had to pass one paper per first year, two papers per second and three papers per third year course):

- 10 (16,1%) failed one paper
- 10 (16,1%) failed two papers
- 2 (3,2%) failed three papers
- 5 (8,1%) failed four papers
- 6 (9,7%) failed five papers
- 1 (1,6%) failed eight papers
- 1 (1,6%) failed ten papers.

The respondents did not indicate whether or not they received additional student support having failed one or more papers. However, this would seem to one field in which the Department (and Unisa) could endeavour to enhance its student support. As the majority of students in Southern Africa could be regarded as being relatively poor (Unisa 1999c), the financial burden of repeating ten failed papers could be prohibitive to many students' and their families. The need to enhance student support was addressed by Unisa's Vice-Chancellor when he stated: *The major hurdle in providing quality student support in our distance education context is that of limited resources, both financial and human. However, solu-*

tions for student support in Africa are possible through innovative technological solutions... Foremost amongst these is the establishment of a network of learning centres, equipped with computers that are linked to electronic networks (Unisa 1999c).

Major subjects passed for the BA Cur degree

Students needed to pass any two major (third year) subjects (out of four) to fulfil the requirements of the BA Cur degree. The respondents indicated that:

- the majority, 56 or 84,8%, passed Health Services Management III
- 43 or 65,2% passed Community Health Nursing Science III
- 30 or 45,5% passed Nursing Education III
- only 2 or 3,0% passed Nursing Ethos and Professional Practice III.

Only 3,0% passed Nursing Ethos and Professional Practice III probably because they could not register this major as an additional qualification with the SANC. Consequently, this major would not increase the students' professional qualifications, nor their competitiveness when applying for promotions or other nursing posts.

Health Services Management III was probably the favoured major because it enabled the candidates to become registered with the SANC as "Nurse Administrators" - a qualification required by many nursing posts in the RSA. The reason for not favouring Nursing Education III as a major might be related to the relative scarcity of posts in the nursing colleges and at university departments of nursing in the RSA.

Intention to continue with further studies

Surprisingly 58, or 87,9%, of the respondents indicated that they intended continuing with their studies. Only 8 (12,1%) indicated that they would not pursue any further studies. If almost 90% of the Department's graduates intended pursuing further studies, then a culture of continuing education might have been established among these graduates - to the benefit of the students and of the nursing profession in the RSA.

The majority of the respondents, 34 or 51,5%, intended continuing with their Master's (MA Cur) degrees, but some intended obtaining further diplomas in nursing specialisations, namely:

- Nursing Education (9 or 14,4%)
- Health Services Management (5 or 7,8%)
- Community Health Nursing (1 or 1,5%)
- Primary Health Care (1 or 1,5%)
- Psychiatric Nursing (1 or 1,5%)
- Intensive Care Nursing (1 or 1,5%)
- Paediatric Nursing (1 or 1,5%).

Respondents' intentions to continue with their studies at Unisa

A total of 51 (72,3%) of the respondents indicated that they would continue studying at Unisa, whilst only 14 (21,2%) would not do so. The respondents were requested to provide at least one reason for intending to continue or discontinue their studies at Unisa. The responses to this open-ended question were grouped into similar categories. Out of the 14 (21,2%) respondents who indicated that they did not intend

pursuing further studies at Unisa

- four (6,06%) provided personal reasons for discontinuing their studies
- three (4,5%) indicated that they would prefer to study at other universities, but failed to provide any reasons
- three (4,5) indicated that they would not continue studying at Unisa, because the student fees were too expensive.

The major reasons for continuing with their studies at Unisa, were grouped into the following categories, with the actual numbers in brackets whilst the percentages provided refer to the total number of 51 respondents who indicated that they did in fact consider furthering their education:

- preference for Unisa because of its high educational standards, excellent study materials, commendable student services, good organisation (29 or 56,9%)
- Unisa studies enabled the students to carry on with their family and working lives; enabled students to study at their own time and place (24 or 47,1%)
- affordability, because Unisa's fees were considered to be lower than those of many other universities (4 or 7,8%)
- Unisa (the main campus in Pretoria or one of the regional offices) was within reach of the respondents' homes (5 or 9,8%)
- strict supervision was maintained at all Unisa's examination centres (1 or 1,96%)
- Unisa's study materials were available in Afrikaans (1 or 1,96%).

Thus the main reasons for preferring to study at Unisa revolved around Unisa's perceived high standards of education and the students' abilities to combine their further studies with their family and working lives.

Advice which the graduates would give to potential Unisa students

An open-ended question requested the graduates to indicate what advice they would give to their nursing colleagues who considered studying at Unisa. Only two respondents provided definite negative responses by stating: "Be ready to gain nothing on completion", and "never study through Unisa unless it is your last option" but provided no justifications for this answers.

The other matter-of-fact advice included that prospective Unisa students should:

- register early and start work immediately (14)
- never wait till examination times to start studying, but work consistently throughout the year (19)
- contact their lecturers when they need help (6)
- decide which major subjects should be taken right at the beginning of the course, and start off registering for at least one major subject (4)
- limit the number of courses taken to two per year (3)
- do all the assignments, if at all possible (3)
- attend all the group discussions (3)
- be prepared to make time for studying (3).

All these suggestions are contained in the Department's tutorial letters issued to each student at the beginning of each academic year. These aspects are also stressed during group discussions. Perhaps the Department could emphasise that

these are the suggestions of successful BA Cur graduates - not of the academic staff - in an effort to make undergraduate students pay more attention to these study guidelines.

Respondents' encouragement of their children to become Unisa students

One respondent failed to answer this question. Out of the 65 respondents, 54 (83,1%) indicated that they would encourage their children to become Unisa students whereas 11 (16,9%) said they would discourage their children from studying at Unisa. The reasons for discouraging their children included that:

- Unisa is more suitable for more mature students; their children might lack the required self-discipline to succeed ((7)
- Unisa is too expensive (1)
- distance education is too "strenuous" (1)
- it takes too long to graduate from Unisa (1 respondent who took 5 years to complete her BA Cur degree)
- the children should rather pursue full time studies (1)
- the children would register for courses not offered by Unisa, such as medicine and engineering (1).

Reasons for encouraging their children to study at Unisa concerned mainly:

- Unisa's perceived high standard of education (15)
- the ability to save money on accommodation, transport and tuition fees (7)
- the possibility of combining working and studying (5).

Diplomas/certificates which the respondents would consider doing at Unisa

The questionnaire indicated that a number of diplomas/certificates might not yet be available but requested students to indicate which one(s) would be of interest to them.

Table 10 Diplomas/certificates which graduates would consider doing

Course	n	%
Primary Health Care	31	29,0
Intensive Care Nursing	21	19,6
Health Care Economics	19	17,8
Health Education	13	12,15
Occupational Health Nursing	13	12,15
Advanced Psychiatric Nursing	6	5,6
Geriatric Nursing	4	3,7
Total	107	100

As each respondent could mark more than one response, the total number of responses for this item added up to 107, not 66.

Most graduates would like to pursue a diploma in Primary Health Care (PHC). The contents of such a course were covered in the Community Health Nursing Science courses at that time, but separate PHC certificates were not issued to the Unisa graduates. Two respondents who phoned the researcher

wanted to know where and when they could register for the PHC course because their employers desired them to obtain these certificates as soon as possible. The Department investigated the possibility of offering courses in PHC, and would commence offering these courses in the foreseeable future.

Offering a diploma course in Intensive Care Nursing could be further investigated as this option is available at the Master's (MA Cur) level. No diploma or certificate courses are currently offered in Health Care Economics nor in Health Education. However, both these topics were covered in Health Services Management and Nursing Education courses respectively. Perhaps the possibility of expanding these issues to meet the requirements for certificate courses could be explored. Occupational Health Nursing was indeed offered as an optional course in Community Health Nursing Science. Geriatric Nursing was also currently offered as an optional course in Community Health Nursing Science. Only 4 (3,7%) of the students expressed interest in doing this course.

Perhaps the Department could endeavour to inform its final year students about courses, degrees, diplomas and certificates which could be pursued subsequent to obtaining the BA Cur degree. Distance education students might not have this knowledge, as became apparent from their answers to these questions.

Conclusion: BA Cur graduates' reports about their studies

The majority of the respondents completed their BA Cur degrees within 6 years, followed a major in Health Services Administration, intended continuing their studies at Unisa and encouraging their children to do likewise. A certificate course in PHC would be seriously considered by 29% of the respondents.

BA Cur graduates' perceptions concerning the nursing courses completed for the BA Cur degree at Unisa

This last section of the questionnaire attempted to identify the respondents' perceptions about the nursing courses they completed for the BA Cur degree at Unisa.

Favourite nursing course

Table 11 Nursing courses favoured by the respondents

Course	n	%
Health Services Management	22	36,1
Community Health Nursing	18	29,5
Nursing Education	12	19,7
Nursing Dynamics	3	4,9
Nursing Ethos and Professional Practice	3	4,9
Nursing Research	3	4,9
Total	61	100

With the exception of the three nurse educators working at universities, four working at colleges, and the one occupational health nurse, all the other graduates would have been required to work irregular, varying shifts, over weekends and during the night. Working irregular and unpredictable shifts might have made studying more difficult because specific weekly studying times could not be scheduled, as persons could do who worked regular hours.

Nursing courses disliked by the respondents

An open-ended question requested the graduates to indicate which nursing course they disliked most, and to provide a reason for this perception in the subsequent open-ended question.

Table 12 Nursing courses disliked by the respondents

Course	n	%
Nursing Ethos and Professional Practice	18	52,9
Nursing Research	7	20,7
Health Services Management	3	8,8
Community Health Nursing	3	8,8
Nursing Dynamics	3	8,8
Total	34	100,0

The major reason for disliking Nursing Ethos and Professional Practice was that this subject included too much ancient/irrelevant history (11); respondents who disliked Nursing Education (2) and Health Services Management (3) did so mainly because both these courses contained too much theory irrelevant to practice, whilst the scope of Community Health Nursing Science was too wide (2). Four graduates were dissatisfied with Nursing Research because the course content was extremely difficult and because the statistical calculations were "unclear" (4) - this might be related to the small number of graduates who passed Mathematics for Grade 12 (see Table 5)

The suggestions, obtained from an open-ended question indicating ways in which the least favoured nursing courses could be improved, were grouped according to the courses.

For Nursing Ethos and Professional Practice, the following suggestions were made:

- discontinue the course altogether as it repeats the history covered in the basic courses (2)
- limit the scope, reduce the amount of history, concentrate on fewer theories and philosophies (7)
- make the course more relevant to *current* nursing situations (5).

To improve Health Services Management courses, graduates suggested that:

- the content be limited (1)
- it be made more relevant to current nursing situations (1).

Nursing Education could be improved by

- enhancing the relevance of the course materials (1)

- providing more actual information, in stead of merely long lists of references (1).
- marking the entire assignments, not only selected sections (1).

Nursing Research lecturers would assist students if they were to provide

- more actual workshops where students can practise calculations (3); probably because they might lack the basic mathematical skills - see Table 5
- practical examples to explain theoretical concepts (3)
- more assignments which should be marked by the lecturers (2)
- answers for all the exercises in the Study Guide and for all the assignments (1).

The suggestions came from small numbers of graduates, but the lecturers concerned with teaching the specific subjects might be able to enhance student support by paying attention to these suggestions.

Respondents' perceptions concerning the helpfulness of the lecturers from the Department of Advanced Nursing Sciences

The majority (52 out of 63, or 82,6%) perceived their lecturers to be particularly helpful during their studies, whilst four (6,3%) perceived this to be the case "sometimes" and seven (11,1%) did not perceive their lecturers to be helpful at all.

In response to this open-ended question, graduates indicated that lecturers would be more helpful if they could:

- provide more group discussions at all regional offices (18)
- be more approachable and refrain from providing vague general answers (3)
- replace video conferences with more group discussions (2)
- concentrate on specific issues during group discussions (1)
- provide structure based on the Study Guides during group discussions (1)
- be available at their phones until 13:00 (1) or 15:00 (2); they should also be sympathetic to students trying to call from public telephones (2)
- provide more optional assignments and more comments about assignments (2).

Similar results were reported by Cole et al (in Price 1997:155) who found that students from the Open University, London, expected to ... *have their work treated with respect, to receive an explanation and justification given for the grade awarded and to receive a clear explanation of how the student could improve ... students sought specific comments on the strengths and weaknesses of the work.*

Respondents' perceptions as to whether assignments helped them with their examination preparations

With the exception of one respondent, all answered this question indicating that assignments

- helped them to prepare for examinations (57 or 87,7%)
- sometimes helped them to prepare for examinations (3 or 4,6 %)
- did not help them to prepare for examinations (5 or 7,7%).

Group discussions offered by the Department

Surprisingly 85,9% (55 out of 64) of the respondents indicated that they attended optional group discussions offered by the Department whilst only 14,1% (9) indicated that they did not do so. Only 54 respondents answered the question as to whether or not they perceived attending group discussions to be beneficial, indicating that it was

- beneficial (52 or 96,3%)
- sometimes beneficial (1 or 1,85%)
- not beneficial (1 or 1,85%).

These findings might indicate that the lecturers succeeded in meeting most students' expectations during discussion groups.

Laboratory work

Respondents were requested to indicate whether they experienced any problems concerning the laboratory or practical work required for Nursing Education, Community Health Nursing Science and Health Services Management.

Table 13 Problems experienced with the laboratory work for the courses offered by the Department of Advanced Nursing Sciences, Unisa

Course	Problems - yes	Problems - no
Nursing Education	7	20
Community Health Nursing Science	14	23
Health Services Management	5	36

Responses to this open-ended question, concerning types of problems encountered with laboratory work included that it involved:

- expenditures for travelling, accommodation, materials for preparing lessons, payment for doing occupational health laboratory work at factories
- problems in arranging leave from work to do the laboratory work
- investing time to prepare adequately for laboratory work.

Students need to complete the laboratory work satisfactorily in order to graduate but also in order to obtain registration for additional qualifications with the SANC. The Department's tutorial letters warn students about the expected costs, time and effort to be invested into completing the laboratory work satisfactorily, but the students seemed to be surprised by these demands.

Personal evaluation of the BA Cur degree, Unisa

Out of the 63 responses to this question, nobody regarded the BA Cur obtained from Unisa to be worth less than that obtained from any other university in the RSA, whilst 19

(30,2%) regarded the Unisa BA Cur degree to be of equal worth, and 44 (69,8%) perceived the Unisa BA Cur degree to be worth more than other nursing degrees obtained in the RSA.

Respondents who viewed the BA Cur degree from Unisa to be worth more than nursing degrees obtained from other universities in the RSA, indicated that Unisa

- maintains a high standard of education; Unisa students work much harder and need to master more theory and practice than students at other universities (14)
- offers comprehensive courses; no "fast queue" or "blitz" degrees can be obtained from this university (10)
- produces graduates who are respected as achievers (4)
- helps its students to achieve self-development through their own efforts (4)
- is well known; the graduates need not explain what Unisa is nor where it is (3)
- supplies such excellent study guides that other universities in the RSA teach from the Unisa study guides (2)
- enables its students not only to learn but also to apply their knowledge in the work situation (2)
- awarded degrees to President Nelson Mandela (1).

Reasons for studying at Unisa

An open-ended question requested the respondents to indicate why they chose to study at Unisa. The reasons provided, included that

- Unisa was the only university which enabled family and work life to proceed without disruptions (35)
- Unisa is well known as an established distance education institution, not a "fly-by night" organisation (14)
- other Unisa students recommended its courses (7)
- obtaining a BA Cur degree would help to advance their nursing careers (3)
- they wanted to be proud of the BA Cur degrees obtained from Unisa (2)
- self-study was preferred (1)
- the Unisa main campus in Pretoria was impressive (1).

Conclusion

The majority of the 66 respondents were females, married, working full time, aged between 31 and 50. Only 9,1% of these BA Cur graduates reported English to be their home language, indicating that the majority mastered their study materials in their second or third language. Most students required six years or more to complete the BA Cur course. Only 43,6% of the respondents managed to complete their courses without failing any examination papers, implying that 56,4% of these graduates would have required student support services. The issue of supporting students who have failed examinations would justify further research.

Most graduates were satisfied with the study materials, lecturers, discussion classes and assignments and regarded their BA Cur degrees from Unisa to be valued academic qualifications. However, greater emphasis on providing effective student support to distance education students pursuing BA Cur programmes could enhance these students' learning experiences and decrease the number of years required to complete their courses. This would be in accordance with Unisa's vision as stated by the Vice-Chancellor: ... *Unisa has the*

potential of becoming the major developer of quality teaching and learning material, suited to the African continent ... This it will do by using a variety of traditional and technological delivery and student support systems (Unisa 1999c).

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