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# CLOSING GAPS IN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING FOR THEOLOGY STUDENTS

## ABSTRACT

UNISA's policy documents state clearly that the Open Distance Learning (ODL) concept aims to bridge the time, geographical, economic, social, educational and communication distance between student and institution, student and academics, student and courseware as well as student and peers. Blended learning and student-centredness remove barriers to effective learning, provide flexibility, and construct learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed. Student-centredness and blended learning are the main drivers behind the intense evaluation and planned upgrading of the courses taught within the Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology. The student profile showed that our students are indeed a unique group with diverse interests and expectations from the theological courses for which they enrolled. By adjusting the values of the four components of blended learning and using both active and passive learning tools, students can learn course content and develop a core of applicable, transferable skills needed to succeed in the Open Distance Learning environment.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Although the world is constantly changing at a pace which most of us find hard to maintain, a large number of tertiary institutions tend to be comfortable observing, and not making any major efforts to step up their pace or to employ new developments in the fields of teaching and learning

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(Laurillard 2008:3; Ehlers & Schneckenberg 2010:8). Bates (2010:22) notes one Vice Chancellor's words:

Universities are like graveyards. When you want to move them, you don't get a lot of help from the people inside.

This results in increasing dissatisfaction among students and society with the quality of the learning experience (Garrison & Vaughan 2008:10).

One of the reasons for the reluctance to change is because

there is no need for the core mission (creation and preservation of knowledge through scholarship and research, dissemination of knowledge through teaching and publication, and public service) to change (Bates 2010:22).

However, in the past decade, the landscapes of education and training have been transformed as a result of drivers such as dramatic developments in information and communications technology, the move to a 24/7 society, changing patterns of work and leisure, globalisation, increased and changing expectations of stakeholders, and the constant demand to work in a manner that is "smart, lean and agile" (Allan 2007:2). It is, therefore, the means whereby the core mission that is in need of change is accomplished in order to keep abreast of the pace of change in our lives. Universities need to provide flexible learning opportunities that suit the complex lifestyle of students. These institutions must focus on the needs of students and provide opportunities for the development of skills and knowledge that extend beyond the time of formal studies. In a rapidly changing world, universities need to adapt learning and teaching strategies that enhance learning in ways that the students are accustomed to in their daily lives.

On 23 July 2004, the University of South Africa (UNISA), which is the largest mega- (and distance) university in the southern hemisphere (cf. Singh & Liang 2010:36), has embraced change at all levels, the Council approved the vision, mission and value statement for the merged institution (UNISA 2015 - An agenda for transformation). The process was revisited five years later to enhance the strategy to develop and implement a programme for cultural and institutional change (UNISA 2015:25). Change and development are, therefore, a given part of academic life at the university. Blended learning and student-centredness are the methods identified to introduce this change. The challenge is to ensure that the changes made are to the benefit of and with the best interest of the students' academic formation and lifelong learning in mind.

Student-centredness and blended learning are the main drivers behind the intense evaluation and planned upgrading of the courses taught within the Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology. Academic staff is striving to develop adequate and effective courses that will enable students to succeed in the ODL environment and provide them with skills to function efficiently as graduates in an ever-changing environment.

In recent years, e-learning has expanded and shifted its focus with the result that many lecturers are currently involved with blended learning programmes (Allan 2007:2). This creates a vast research field. The main focus of this article will be on the micro level of teaching and learning in distance education (Zawacki-Richter *et al.* 2009). Within the categories for distance educational research (Berge & Mrozowski 2001), it focuses on design issues and, more specifically, on instructional systems design, including needs assessment, content requirement, technical constraints, interactivity, and feedback. The main purpose of evaluation studies is to contribute to decision-making (Parlett & Hamilton 1972:31), in this instance, regarding course design.

## 2. PROBLEM FORMULATION

In order to provide relevant, high-quality education that is useful to students and sought after in the world beyond the university walls, course material must constantly be revised and updated. UNISA adopted blended learning and student-centredness as focus points of its ODL strategy. Therefore, the members of the Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology realised that research needs to be done on both these issues in order to provide guidelines for the proposed redesign of the undergraduate course material. There is a need to know who the students really are and to identify issues that could hamper effective blended learning and student-centredness.

There is also a need to investigate barriers that can have an effect on teaching in an ODL environment, but this could not be included in the current study and needs to be investigated at a later stage. This could include the workload of lecturers, their educational background, and their competencies and talents beyond the content of the subject they teach.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 3.1 Blended learning

Masie (2006:22) mentions that all learning is blended learning. His definition of blended learning as “the use of two or more styles of content or context delivery or discovery” - for example, study guides, assignments, research projects, activities, examinations, and discussion forums - is applicable to the learning methods practised at UNISA. Blended learning designs offer disciplined inquiry through reflective and collaborative activities, while providing unlimited access to information (Garrison & Vaughan 2008:86). Allan (2007:2) notes some of the reasons for developing blended learning programmes as:

- making learning more accessible, engaging and relevant;
- providing more flexible learning opportunities;
- reducing the amount of time spent on face-to-face learning activities by shifting the balance to more blended learning activities;
- integrating practitioner-based experiences with classroom-based learning;
- developing programmes that are relatively cheap to repeat or use with large groups of learners;
- exploiting ICT and training facilities;
- demonstrating the use of leading-edge technologies;
- due to the demand from stakeholders;
- interest at senior management level;
- availability of external funding, and
- exploring new approaches to learning and teaching.

The blend consists of four components. By changing the values of these components, the learning design can be constructed to suit the needs of all stakeholders. Each medium should be used for what it does best (Race 1999:15). The components are:

- The space blend: technology-mediated communication between students and lecturers and between groups of students.
- The time blend: real time (synchronously), but more focused on delayed time (asynchronously).

- The media blend: different types of tools and resources.
- The activity blend: influenced by the tutor's orchestration of a number of different learning activities to create a learning design (Littlejohn & Pegler 2007:75-76).

In *How do people learn*, Reynolds *et al.* (2002:76-78) outline four distinct perspectives on learning. Each of these aspects may require different blends and their overlap must be considered in the design and delivery of blended learning activities and outcomes (Vaughan 2010:178).

### 3.2 Student-centred education

Two ideas, namely community and inquiry, are essential to higher education. Community recognises the social nature of education and focuses on the role that interaction, collaboration, and discourse play in constructing knowledge. It demands the academic and respectful interaction with members of the community. It includes learning to listen, explain and defend positions and ideas (Garrison & Vaughan 2008:16). Inquiry reflects the process of constructing meaning through personal responsibility and choice (Garrison & Vaughan 2008:9). The individual must have the freedom to explore ideas, as well as question and construct meaning. As a process of inquiry, learning must focus on questions, not only on providing answers and information (Garrison & Vaughan 2008:15). It is, therefore, important to get the students into questioning mode (Jarvis 2009:11). Students have to acquire the attitudes and skills to become critical thinkers and to continue their learning beyond the narrow scope and time limit of a formal educational experience (Garrison & Vaughan 2008:17). In order to achieve quality learning, the focus should be on the inquiry process with community and communication as the contextual background (Garrison & Vaughan 2008:30).

A number of scholars link the aspects of blended learning and student centredness with each other and to good practice in the higher education environment (Palloff & Pratt 2011; Garrison & Kanuka 2004).

### 3.3 Research objectives

The study was conducted with the following research objectives in mind:

- to analyse the student profile in order to find out who our students really are, and

- to suggest ways that can be used to close gaps and help the B.Th. students to embrace blended learning to the full through a renewed focus on curriculum design.

### 3.4 Research methodology

Illuminative evaluation recognises the fact that an educational programme cannot be separated from its learning environment which consists of a network of cultural, social, institutional and psychological forces (Parlett & Hamilton 1972:1). Data was collected from observation, interview, questionnaires and documentary sources and its primary concern is with description and interpretation of these (Parlett & Hamilton 1972:10). This research project made use of documentary sources and a student questionnaire to collect data.

### 3.5 Population and sample

In light of the relatively small student number in the B.Th. programme - approximately 700 students (DISA 2008) - it was decided to target first-year students in the introductory course (with approximately 300 registered students), as this popular module can be regarded as representative of the rest of the students in the B.Th. undergraduate courses. A questionnaire, constructed and approved in accordance with the UNISA policy on research ethics, was included with the course material that was sent to all students enrolled for the *Introduction to Theology* module. The completed questionnaires had to be submitted together with the first compulsory assignment, resulting in a 70% response.

### 3.6 Tools and techniques

- The student questionnaire provided first-hand information from the key stakeholders - our students. A questionnaire completed by first-year students was used to compile a student profile. The findings are not 100% representative due to the fact that only 70% of the students returned the questionnaire. Some of the questionnaires were incomplete. In some instances, it could be argued that students regarded some questions as not applicable to them and they, therefore, did not answer them. An example question could be the one on geographical areas. Students who live outside of South Africa probably just ignored the question. This question was included to show potential student access to regional centres for attending discussion

classes and seminars. Students also interpreted some questions differently from what the question intended to determine. For instance, when asked about the Church denomination to which they belong, not all students indicated a specific denomination. Some only mentioned “Christian” or “Protestant”. It is, therefore, possible that the information provided as answers to other questions could also not provide a 100% correct reflection.

- UNISA’s Department of Information and Strategic Analysis compiles and provides statistical information regarding all student enrolments at the university. Information gained from this source was used to supply information regarding B.Th. students’ access to communication technology.
- UNISA’s official ODL policy documentation provides guidelines and parameters for both blended learning and student-centredness.

### 3.7 Procedure

The responses of students to the questionnaires were submitted to the Department as part of the first assignment. With the help of staff from DISA, members of the B.Th. Task Team (who were in charge of streamlining the B.Th. programme) analysed the information, categorised the findings and compiled a comprehensive summary of the information in the form of a report, indicating both information that confirms expectations and some vital, unexpected discoveries. The report was tabled at the B.Th. Task Team meeting and distributed to all Departments within Theology with the intention of being used as a guideline for curriculum development and course revision.

Information regarding the access of students to communication technology was requested from the staff at DISA. The information was analysed and the results, compiled into a report, were circulated to both the B.Th. Task Team members and the Theology Departments.

An evaluation was done regarding the identity and expectations of students, their technical and other constraints to effective blended learning. Ways of improving effective blended learning were devised, taking into account the findings of the investigation.

#### 4. PROFILE OF THEOLOGY STUDENTS AT UNISA

Information gathered from student questionnaires		
Gender	Male	68%
	Female	32%
Race	Black	60%
	White	26%
	Coloured	10%
	Asian	4%
Age	60+	3%
	50+	17%
	40+	28%
	30+	33%
	20+	17%
	-20	2%
Geography	Western Cape	14%
	Northern Cape	1%
	Free State	5.5%
	Eastern Cape	9%
	KwaZulu-Natal	16.5%
	Mpumalanga	3%
	Limpopo	7%
	North-West	5.5%
	Gauteng	35%
Not specified	3.5%	
Church affiliation	Methodist	17.5%
	Dutch Reformed	8.5%
	Presbyterian	8%
	None indicated	8%
	Anglican	7%
	Lutheran	6.5%
	AFM	6%
	RCC	5.5%
Other/unspecified	33%	

<b>Information gathered from student questionnaires</b>		
Position in churches	Pastor	23%
	None	22%
	Church council	1 %
	Youth worker	8%
	Worship	4.5%
	Sunday School	4.5%
	Cell group	4%
	Administration	4%
	Counsellor	3.5%
	Bible study group	3%
	Training and teaching	2.5%
	Women's group	2.5%
	Evangelical work	2%
	Healing	1.5%
	Prayer	1.5%
Treasurer	1%	
Voluntary worker	1%	
Interpreter	0.5%	
Turning point in life to study theology	Unspecified	69%
	Crisis	13%
	Conversion	6%
	Course/camp	6%
	Church experience	2.5%
	Prison	2%
	HIV/AIDS	1%
	Miracle/healing	0.5%
Influences to studying theology	People	48%
	Sermons	17%
	Books	10.5%
	Prophetic words	10%
	Vision/dream	9.5%
	Voice inside	3.5%
	UNISA advertisement	1.5%
What do students want to gain from studying theology	Gain knowledge	20%
	Community service	19%
	Academic qualifications	17.5%
	Understand faith and share knowledge	14%
	Grow in faith	9%
	Skills and empowerment	8.5%
	Self-enrichment, informed Christian	6.5%
	Serve God	5.5%

DISA information regarding internet access and cellular phones	
18%	Students have internet access
29%	Students do not have internet access
53%	Students did not indicate internet access
6%	Students do not have cellular phones

- Church affiliation

Most South African universities that offer B.Th. programmes are linked to specific denominations. For instance, the North-West University caters mainly for members of the Reformed Churches. Students of the Dutch Reformed Church (*Hervormde Kerk*) can study B.Th. courses at the University of Pretoria. UNISA is not affiliated with a specific denomination and offers a generic B.Th. programme. This was confirmed by the large number of denominations indicated by students.

- Position in churches

Although, as could be expected, the majority of students are pastors or pastors-in-training, the second largest group of students indicated that they do not fill any specific position within their church. It can thus be concluded that a large number of our students are laity; this is an important discovery that must be borne in mind when designing course material.

- Turning point

While the majority of students experienced a turning point in their lives that initiated their theological studies, a large portion did not specify the nature of this event. Those who did indicate incidents identified a large array of incidents, most of which can be classified as traumatic or life-changing experiences. Crises include death, accidents, sickness, and divorce. Those students who indicated HIV as a turning point mentioned that they are aware of the crisis and want to help others. Half of the students who indicated the prison as a turning point are wardens and the other half are inmates.

Under “church experience” students noted that they were elected into positions of leadership; recognised a lack of training, and wanted to change the status quo. The *Alpha* course, as well as seminars or crusades attended, also acted as triggers in some students’ lives to study theology courses. Most students listed people that influenced their decision to study Theology. Some have family members who are preachers or pastors. Others were influenced by pastors, friends, family and teachers.

- Why students study Theology

Universities convey knowledge more than they develop competencies (UNISA 2008:1). This statement is confirmed by the responses to the questionnaire. Academic qualifications and knowledge are high on the list, but it is interesting to note that some of the students also want to do community service. A large number of students indicated that they have a calling. Most indicated that this calling was to become pastors or spiritual counsellors, but there were also people called to serve in other professions such as nursing, police work, correctional services, HIV and AIDS workers, and teachers.

A large number of students enrolled for the module because of their general interest in the Christian religion. Their courses did not require a theological module, but they chose Theology to supplement their main courses due to their personal beliefs and eagerness to formally study some theological courses. These students study Psychology, Communications, Social Studies, Health Studies, Human Rights, Human Sciences, and even Ballistic Pathology.

- General

The following noteworthy information was drawn from the questionnaires and, where applicable, compared with the official statistics of the university:

- Although the university's student profile shows that there are more female (60.3%) than male (39.7%) students (Subotzky 2011:30), it is not surprising that two-thirds of the students in Theology are males. Formal theological education is traditionally associated with males and this conservative view, to a large extent, still forms part of the South African perspective (cf. Oliver 2008:213).
- Although students from all four major population groups enrolled for the module, there are considerable differences in numbers with a large number of Black students, a fair amount of White students, not many Coloured students and only a few Asian students.
- The majority of students enrolled for this course are between the ages of 30 and 50, whereas the majority of students enrolled at UNISA are between the ages of 20 and 29 (Singh & Liang 2010:34).
- Nearly all students have cellular phones. This suggests that the "digital divide" can be overcome by mobile learning.

The student profile confirmed that Theology has a unique student corps within UNISA in terms of numbers, gender, age, needs and access to

technology. Their unique circumstances can create barriers to learning and progress if academic staff does not take this into consideration.

## 5. CLOSING THE GAPS

South Africa is a multilingual and multicultural country. It is also a place of great social, economic and geographical contrasts (Singh & Liang 2010:31). The summary provided by Guomundsdottir (2005, in NG 2010:31) regarding divisions contains realities that the majority of (South) Africans are facing:

<b>Type of needs</b>	<b>Type of divide</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Basic needs	The real divide	Include access to clean water, electricity, social justice
Hardware – software	Material divide	Access to costly technology and communication
Mentality – content	Mentality/opportunity divide	How will the internet really help me?
Skills – knowledge – support	Utilization divide	Lack of basic computer skills and user support
Culture – language/ social diversity	Suitability divide	Alien-ness of internet – Western cultural background

Being “The African university in service of humanity”, UNISA has to take these issues into account when striving to develop social awareness and critical citizenry. The University faces the requirement to create a culture and climate that offers respect and support in all aspects of learning for every student, regardless of language, background, nationality, race, gender, or culture (Cleaveland-Innes & Sangra 2010:231).

## 5.1 Student-centredness

### 5.1.1 Recognise the importance of lecturer-student interaction

Small student numbers in Theology enable lecturers to develop a formative relationship with individual students. Consideration for the individual needs of students must be standard procedure, and students must be kept motivated by constant positive input from the lecturers, using all or as much as possible blended learning tools. Students need affective and dialogic teaching to increase their knowledge, confidence and motivation.

Motivation is the heart of successful distance learning programmes. Students who are underprepared for tertiary education often lack confidence. UNISA offers formal modules that teach language and thinking skills, counselling and tutor-support services as well as writing centres to develop sufficient academic literacy skills and build self-confidence.

Teaching to promote learning includes asking the right questions about the students before focusing on the subject material, guiding students through the learning process by providing them with step-by-step instructions on how to learn information, to collect and evaluate information in order to create an integration of the research, and finally lead them to apply the knowledge and skills attained. Students have to take on the role of self-directed, continuous, active learners while lecturers must be more considerate of students and use teaching strategies that foster students' deep learning and increased responsibility (Cleaveland-Innes & Sangra 2010:231).

### 5.1.2 Be aware of the fact that students are not clean slates

Students do not learn from what we tell them, but from their experience of what we tell them or ask them to read (Jarvis 2009:11). It is, therefore, important for lecturers, when designing or upgrading a course, to ensure that they are aware of the non-academic background and circumstances of the students. When faced with course content, students bring with them conceptions of the topic, representational skills and an epistemology, all of which are potential barriers to learning. Therefore:

- lecturers need descriptions of the ways in which students conceptualise a topic in order to be able to challenge their fundamental misconceptions;

- students need explicit practice in the representation of knowledge of the subject, in language, symbols, graphs, diagrams, and in the manipulation and interpretation of those representations, and
- lecturers must enable students to develop their epistemological and ethical beliefs and, in particular, their conceptions of learning (Laurillard 2008:40).

### 5.1.3 Provide clear and understandable goals and projected outcomes

Creating a sense of a learning journey for students with a clear vision of the bigger picture with a clear destination and route maps to guide the way, provide orientation. Students often find it difficult to reconcile different bits of knowledge and course content (Laurillard 2008:34). Examples of mind maps, timelines and summaries as well as tasks to master these skills themselves with full feedback (including examination feedback) could aid in this regard. Learning should be an adventure, fun, interesting and rewarding.

### 5.1.4 Take student background into account

Literacy rates in Africa are among the lowest in the world and poverty levels are among the highest (Brimoh 2009:4). Distance education forces students to become competent and skilful users of a variety of tools, not all focused on or founded in their basic education. Due to the fact that the majority of students at UNISA come from a background of structured classroom education with directed learning and paced delivery and evaluation, first-year students tend to find it difficult to adapt to learning outside this context. They lack the skills, experience, and confidence to learn in a totally different instructional and technologically designed environment of distance education (Anderson 2001:31).

The gap between what students know and what they need to know in order to be successful ODL students often presents an enormous challenge (Louw 2010:46; Singh & Liang 2010:37). The gap between the level of presumed knowledge and existing knowledge could partly be caused by the large gap in time between basic education and higher education (the student survey showed that most of our students are older and did not continue their formal education after leaving school). Basic learning skills are often absent and, therefore, coupled with help, guidance and instruction on how to function as students in the world of distance

education (which normally rest upon the shoulders of the student support and counselling staff), the study material should also focus on effective learning skills (a holistic process that integrates knowing and doing in a critically reflective way – Mayor 2005:24), critical thinking development (evaluate information, creative thinking, learning and problem-solving, and communication), and the five interdependent aspects of the learning process (Laurillard 2008). Students must be made aware of and guided to acquire competencies in order to address all these mathemagenic activities that give birth to learning (Laurillard 2008:60):

- apprehend the structure of the discourse – for example, focus on the narrative line;
- distinguish evidence and argument, organise and structure the content into a coherent whole;
- interpret the forms of representation – for example, practise mapping between the concept, system, event or situation and its representation;
- practise using the forms of representation of an idea, and represent the discourse as a whole as well as its constituent parts;
- act on descriptions of the world – for example, combine descriptions and representations to generate further descriptions of the world, and manipulate the various forms of representation of the world;
- use feedback – for example, use both intrinsic and extrinsic feedback to adjust actions to suit the task goal, and adjust descriptions to suit the topic goal, and
- reflect the goal – action – feedback cycle – for example, relate the feedback to the goal or message of the discourse, and reflect on how the link between action and feedback relates to the structure of the whole.

### 5.1.5 Expose students to lifelong learning opportunities

A major concern both for educational providers and for employers is to ensure that students develop a core of applicable, transferable skills (Race 1999:8). Students are taking their social reality for granted and, more important, the academic staff, by being separated from the students by time and space, may not know who the students really are and what skills they need to develop (Jarvis 2009:11). Rapid changes in the total living environment, in part due to changes in technology and

globalisation, require that students must learn in order to ensure full and continued participation in society or risk exclusion (Braimoh 2009:5). As a comprehensive and visionary concept which includes formal, non-formal and informal learning, which is extended throughout the lifespan of an individual to attain the fullest possible development in personal, social, vocational and professional life (Aitcheson 2003:6), lifelong learning can ensure that the people of Africa (who are our students) can keep abreast of these challenges.

The application and the passing on of knowledge constitute a serious problem for universities that tend to focus on academic knowledge without paying sufficient attention to generating a core of transferable practical skills (Race 1999:8). Knowledge alone does not equip people to do anything (Jarvis 2009:8), or change who they are. The study material should prepare the student for learning, develop the necessary skills and attitudes, and provide knowledge that could be used to transform both the student and his/her community (UNISA 2008:1). Race (1999:4) suggests learning-by-doing opportunities to rectify the situation. If institutions only provide information, the students will store it. Most learning happens when students practise things, and have to learn by experiments. Care needs to be taken to ensure that learning by doing is focused on practising useful, important knowledge and skills.

Lifelong learning, however, also has a negative aspect. It takes time away from other obligations or potential opportunities for social contributions, including family, church, community, or professional service (Anderson 2001:32). Students at ODL institutions need personal time-management and organisational skills to cope within time- and/or place-shifted contexts. Enough flexibility should be built into the curriculum to accommodate these issues. Life skills are, therefore, a crucial issue and must be addressed by both the supporting systems and the formal curriculum.

When planning and designing course content, the students' experiences, living conditions, commitment to lifelong learning and other reasons for enrolment must be taken into account. A level of self-direction is to be allowed and encouraged in all modules.

## 5.2 Blended learning

Two-thirds of the South African population do not have electricity in their homes (Collins 2001). This implies that most South Africans have no or very little access to affordable high-speed internet networks. UNISA uses the best possible mix of media to support students at all levels of learning.

Both active and passive learning tools are used. Printed study material has a particular strength because of its asynchronicity which allows students flexibility and time to interact with the knowledge gained (Macdonald 2008:24). Print media remains the practical choice since it is relatively inexpensive and reliable. It is the easiest medium to design, to produce, to deliver, to handle, and for students to use anywhere and anytime without the need to have access to internet networks or computers. Supplementing printed material with electronic mobile media messages to cellular phones ensures that timely, relevant, and useful information reaches the maximum number of students when needed. This medium is chosen, because most South Africans own cellular phones (90.16 people in every 100 use a cellular phone - Walton 2009), and the student survey proved that most students own cellular phones.

The effective and appropriate use of technologies is increasingly becoming a differentiating and critical factor in determining the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning. "We can no longer afford to produce graduates who are not ready for a world in which the flows and qualities of information and data are fast, contested and fluid" (Prinsloo 2011). The corporate world insists that graduates should be computer-literate. Therefore, blended learning in the UNISA context also includes the use of active and passive electronic media. *myUNISA* (an active blended learning tool) is a generic Web-based tool that supports, among others, assignment uploads, examination administration, graduation information, library information and services, study information and registration, tutorial services, discussion forums, self-assessment tools, and module-specific information. Other active tools include e-mail, telephone, and face-to-face interaction such as discussion classes, workshops and seminars. Satellite broadcasts, audio- and video-conferencing and multi-purpose computer centres provide additional support to students.

Effective tutoring built into the course material and done on the *myUnisa* website, or by using electronic communication to students (on their cellular phones) brings study to the fore amid time-sharing study routines with jobs, family and other commitments.

## 6. CONCLUSION

UNISA's policy states clearly that the Open Distance Learning concept aims to bridge the time, geographical, economic, social, educational and communication distance between student and institution, student and academics, student and courseware as well as student and peers. ODL focuses on removing barriers to access learning, flexibility of learning

provision, student-centredness, supporting students, and constructing learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed (UNISA 2008:2).

Teaching to a diversity of students located throughout Africa and physically separated from the learning institution, their lecturers and fellow students poses unique opportunities and challenges to teaching staff of the Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology. An analysis of the student profile confirmed that Theology has a unique student corps within UNISA in terms of numbers, gender, age, needs and access to technology. The student questionnaires confirmed that student-centredness is a crucial aspect to bear in mind when courses are designed and upgraded to provide an adequate learning and teaching experience. It is also clear that blended learning (focusing on all four aspects of time, space, media and activities) should be used to teach both course content and transferable skills and knowledge needed to succeed in the corporate world.

In order to keep abreast of the rapid changes that the development of technology brought into education, UNISA decided to implement a blended learning approach and to construct all activities around the most important stakeholders – our students. Being the “African University in service of humanity”, UNISA must take into account the diverse living conditions, backgrounds, and the multiple languages and cultures of our students. Student-centred curriculums should also focus on productive interaction between students and academics, and install effective lifelong learning patterns and transferable skills development. Academics should take into account the way in which students interact with course content and should also provide clear directions for students to envision the final goals and their progress on the path of learning and exploring. Blended learning is no longer avoidable in the technological world of the twenty-first century. UNISA still uses printed material as a practical and effective way to provide undergraduate students with course material, but students are also encouraged to make use of technology. UNISA introduces both active and passive means of blended learning to provide students with a choice of media to use.

Implementing the recommendations and bearing these observations made in mind during curriculum design and course reviews could help to remove barriers, close gaps and invent new paths to successful learning by our student corps.

Cross (2010:48) mentions that helping people to be all they can be is not charity; it has to be the ultimate goal of universities. The challenge seems almost impossible to achieve. However, tertiary institutions should

not think in terms of a single technological paradigm shift, but rather adopt a culture of continual change (Ice 2010:157) in order to remove barriers and close gaps one by one, striving to reach this ultimate goal.

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