

# THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC REALITIES OF THE SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

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## INTRODUCTION

When a tertiary institution such as the University of South Africa (Unisa) agrees to offer training for a profession such as social work, it accepts the responsibility of educating students according to the minimum standards of the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree as registered at the South African National Qualification Framework (NQF). These requirements include a body of knowledge, required practical skills and the values and ethics of the profession. Social work is a profession which focuses on people and their socio-economic context. It is regulated by its professional Council, the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP), which expects the training institutions to deliver a certain quality of professional who can work together with troubled and marginalised people, facilitate processes with groups and communities in order to meet their basic needs, and improve their livelihoods, based on the principles of respect for people, social justice and equality. The training of social workers in South Africa is also largely determined by the South African context and the policies that guide the type of service delivery, e.g. the South African Constitution, Bill of Rights (Act 108 of 1996) and the developmental approach to welfare, i.e. the White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA, 1997). According to Van Delft (2002), the White Paper for Social Welfare (1997) and the Financing Policy (1999) changed the face of social welfare in South Africa from a residual model to a developmental model. Within the South African context, the focus of service delivery is aimed at the poor and unemployed, those with HIV/Aids, those that have been affected by crime and violence, pregnant teenagers, malnutrition, low levels of literacy and education, abuse and neglect, poor housing and public health, women and children, people with disabilities and the aged.

Unisa's Department of Social Work is one of the training institutions in South Africa that has the task of training social workers for South Africa's complex context within a developmental welfare policy framework that differs from the residual welfare policies of most Western countries.

## UNISA AS CONTEXT

In 2004 Unisa's management formulated the vision of the newly formed Unisa (when Technikon South Africa (TSA) and the "old Unisa" merged) as "Towards *the* African University in service of humanity". Unisa envisages playing a crucial role in South Africa and African affairs. It has a critical social mandate to serve people who would otherwise not have access to education – either because of financial reasons, being employed, living in remote areas, or because they cannot access residential universities owing to disability. Unisa's students also include those who have just come straight from school, because it is the most affordable institution (Kilfoil, 2008).

In its mission statement Unisa states (only the components of the mission statement relevant to this paper will be presented):

- Unisa should provide quality general academic and career-focused learning opportunities underpinned by the principles of lifelong learning, flexibility and "student centredness";

- Unisa should be accessible to all learners, specifically to those on the African continent and the marginalised by the way of a barrier-free environment;
- Unisa should contribute to the creation of a good and responsible society by graduating individuals of sound character and versatile ability.

By implication Unisa, as an open distance-learning institution, is throwing its doors open and making tertiary education possible for anybody with the minimum requirements to enter a tertiary education institution in South Africa without any other entry requirements as practised by other residential universities. At the same time Unisa wants to deliver a product of “sound character and versatile ability” who can contribute to the development of the country and the continent. Unisa also encourages independent and self-paced learning.

Currently as many as a third of public higher education students (250,000 students in 2008) are registered at Unisa (HEQC, 2008:3). This places a huge responsibility on the shoulders of this massive institution to deliver what it promises in its mission statement.

Taking into account the fact that 40-50% of South Africans are regarded as poor, 33% have HIV/Aids, 26% are unemployed, 54,000 women were raped during 2006 (Earle, 2008; Lintveldt, 2008), it implies that an open university such as Unisa should expect, in this context, to accommodate students who live in these circumstances or who have experienced some of these social problems/ills and trauma. These social ills and traumatic incidents may be some of the factors that impact on their own development and studies.

The throughput rate of Unisa as an open and distance-learning institution is disturbingly low. For example, in 2007 Unisa registered 244,000 students, but only 6% graduated (Subotzky, 2008). Unisa is taking a variety of initiatives to make the university as accessible as possible and, at the same time, is taking initiatives to improve integration and support to its students to increase the throughput rate. Emphasis is put on the unpreparedness of the students as a result of a disadvantaged secondary school system. The influence of socio-economic circumstances on this low throughput and high student fall-out figure is acknowledged. There is no evidence that Unisa has taken a close look specifically at the socio-economic circumstances of the students and how these factors should be addressed.

### **The aim of the article**

This article gives a description of some of the socio-economic realities of social work students at Unisa in an attempt to illustrate the importance of the socio-economic factors that need to be taken into consideration when this university plans support programmes for students. The article addresses only the socio-economic realities, as other factors fall beyond the scope of the paper.

### **WHAT MOTIVATED THIS RESEARCH?**

Whilst many of the principles of open and distance learning (ODL) and Unisa’s mission for the people of South Africa are admirable, the Department of Social Work has nevertheless experienced some unfortunate consequences of these noble principles and mission statements.

- The low and slow throughput

The B(SW) programme at Unisa and all other universities is a four-year degree. The following table gives an idea of the throughput of Social Work students at different tertiary institutions.

**TABLE 1**  
**THROUGHPUT OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS AT SOUTH AFRICAN**  
**UNIVERSITIES**

(Earle, 2008)

	<b>Registration 2001</b>	<b>Final 2004</b>	<b>%</b>
University of Johannesburg	75	17	22
University of Stellenbosch	85	19	23
University of Fort Hare Alice	180	47	26
University of Fort Hare East London	33	8	24
University of North West Potchefstroom	25	5	20
University of the Free State	34	13	38
Hugonote College Wellington	86	41	48
University of Cape Town	58	38	66
Walter Sisulu University	92	21	23
University of the Western Cape	112	77	69
University of Pretoria	30	19	63
University of South Africa	999	72	7.2
Unisa overall (2006)	227 539 (head count)		6,1% graduated
University KwaZulu-Natal	127	13	10
University of Limpopo	43	38	88
University of Witwatersrand	42	14	33
University of Venda	100	52	52

The table indicates that Unisa has the highest intake number, but the lowest output/throughput percentage. It also indicates that the throughput of the Department of Social Work is in keeping with the rest of the university. It should be noted, however, that Unisa's first-year Social Work course is an open course and many students from other learning programmes also register for this course.

- Students' social skills and behaviour and socio-economic circumstances

Earle (2008:109), who conducted research in the Departments of Social Work at the Universities of Limpopo and Stellenbosch, explained that the educators from these two universities indicated similar experiences to those experienced by the Unisa educators. Earle (2008:109) quotes one of the educators as saying:

“Sometimes you will be surprised ... it has nothing to do with intelligence ... even those we think are intelligent do fail”.

She emphasised that developing an understanding of educational throughput cannot rely on figures, as these can only be understood within the context of the factors that impact on the institution and those who study there. Students' personal and family circumstances impact

substantially on their ability to complete a degree in Social Work successfully. With the changing demographics of social work students, the majority are now from previously disadvantaged backgrounds and bring the burden of their circumstances with them to the course. According to Earle (2008:109), it seems as if a sizable portion of the students indicated that they have had first-hand experience of the social ills affecting South Africa.

The Social Work educators Earle (2008) interviewed mentioned that it is the social ills and not only the secondary school system of our society that impacted very negatively on the student's preparedness to succeed within the tertiary education system. The educators mentioned experiences such as widespread alcoholism and drug abuse in families, teenage pregnancies, breakdown of family units because, when they were still children, parents left them with their grandparents and moved away in search of work, lack of role models in the community, the lack of early childhood development opportunities, the lack of academic and communication support from uneducated parents or grandparents, lack of access to technology and educational resources, and the lack of access to quality schooling.

The educators also stressed the importance of students symbolising and dealing with their own personal issues before they can adequately accept and deal with the personal and social issues of others.

Concerns were also raised by the educators regarding the "character" of some of the students (Earle, 2008:120). They complained that this attitude manifested in, for example, disrespect for clients, numbness and harshness towards clients, contempt for authority, inappropriate verbal and non-verbal communication, poor and inappropriate physical posture, non-adherence to professional dress codes, lack of preparation, sloppy and incomplete work and a disregard for deadlines (Earle, 2008:120). This indicates that some students need more than knowledge and skills training. It points towards the need for training institutions to include life and social skills, and to instil a value system in students if we want to deliver students of "sound character and versatile ability".

Earle (2008) concluded that some of the students studying Social Work come from the most impoverished communities, where they had experienced hunger and physical danger. They had been exposed to emotional stress along with their lack of access to basic support materials such as textbooks. It was obvious that the students' personal and family contexts impacted on their ability to complete the degree (Earle, 2008:122).

Because of the people-centred and participatory nature of the workshops facilitated in the Department of Social Work at Unisa, during the practical work of the students and in some of the theoretical assignments students often use such opportunities to share their personal experiences. These indicate poverty, unemployment, exposure to crime, abuse, specifically sexual abuse, and other forms of trauma.

These revelations alerted the educators in the Department of Social Work at Unisa to the reality that they are not only training students to work with people living in these circumstances, but they are training people and future social workers who are struggling with these circumstances themselves.

### **Research methodology**

Two master's students, Mrs Rulene Lintvelt and Gwynne Lawlor, and one doctoral student, Mrs Barbara Wade, were commissioned to research different aspects of the concerns about students' socio-economic experiences. They used a combination of qualitative and quantitative

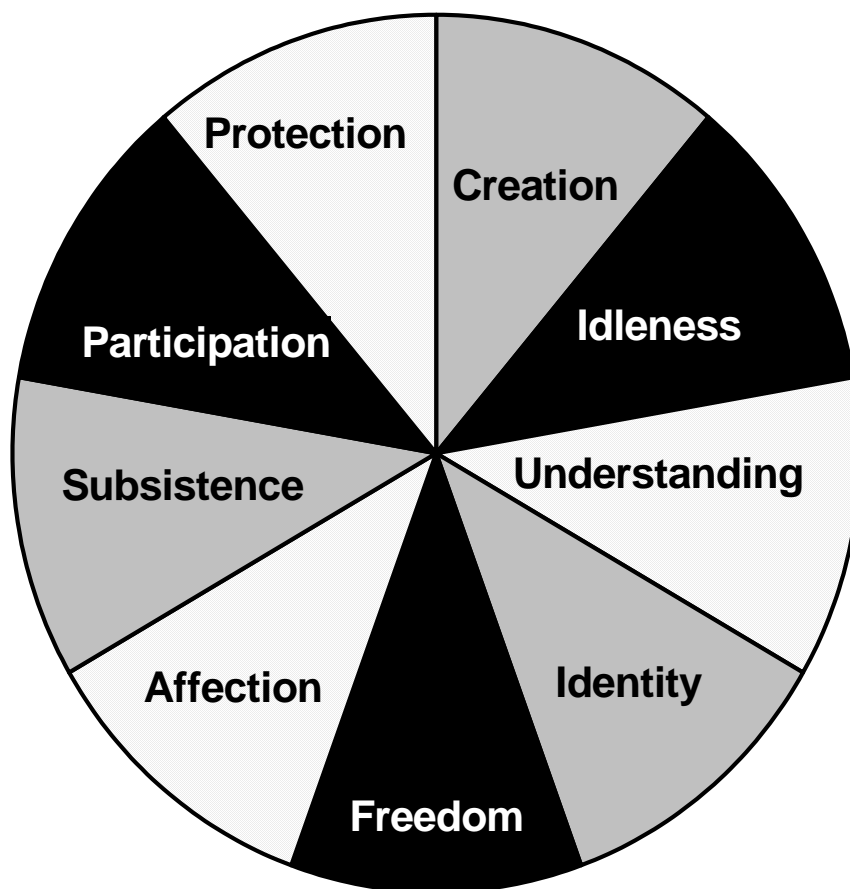
research. All semi-structured questionnaires were completed and focus groups facilitated during workshops at Unisa's regional offices in Pretoria, Cape Town, Johannesburg, Polokwane, Bloemfontein and Durban. The groups of students who were the respondents in this research were two year groups of 4<sup>th</sup>-level Social Work students. Social Work at Unisa is a four-year training programme and it is only after the completion of the 3<sup>rd</sup> level of training that it is determined who will enter into social work practice (this is because the 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> levels also include students from other learning programmes such as Education, Theology and Psychology). The 2006 (n=87) and 2008 (n=146) groups were part of the study.

The written permission of the students was obtained for the completion of the questionnaires and the use of the information.

### **EXPLANATORY FRAMEWORK FOR THE RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH – MANFRED MAX-NEEF'S HUMAN SCALE DEVELOPMENT**

To explain the results of the research, the theory of Human Scale Development as proposed by Manfred Max-Neef, a Chilean economist, and his co workers, was used. Any growth and development, according to Max-Neef, Elizalde and Hopenhayn (1991), depends on the opportunities people have to adequately satisfy their fundamental human needs. Max-Neef *et al.* (1991) identified nine fundamental human needs, which are the needs indicated in the Wheel of Fundamental Human Needs (FHNs):

**FIGURE 1**  
**MAX-NEEF'S WHEEL OF FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN NEEDS (FHNs)**  
(Adapted by Hope & Timmel, 1995)



According to Max-Neef *et al.* (1991) the FHNs are universal to all people of all cultures. What is different are the satisfiers. For example, food and a shelter are satisfiers of the need for subsistence; the type of food and shelter depend on the culture and the context. A good police service, security services, laws or proper enforcement of laws are satisfiers of the need for protection.

Some satisfiers can satisfy a particular need but, at the same time, destroy another need. For example, building a wall around a house to satisfy the need for protection will have a detrimental effect on the need for free movement or freedom. Some satisfiers may also satisfy more than one need simultaneously. For example, a mother who breastfeeds her baby may satisfy the baby's need for subsistence, protection and affection. For a student to be able to study and qualify provides possible satisfiers of the need for understanding, protection, freedom, identity, participation and subsistence. It is through human beings' creative processes in meeting their Fundamental Human Needs that humans fulfil their potential in increasingly novel ways (Louw, 2007).

Max-Neef *et al.* (1991) further states that these FHNs are constant and equal (i.e. not hierarchical, as they are in Maslow). The nine FHNs form an integrated whole as indicated in the illustration. For Max-Neef *et al.* (1991), poverty does not only refer to economic poverty: if any one of the FHNs is not adequately satisfied, this reveals a human poverty. If a person experiences poverty in any dimension, this will to some extent influence the person's growth and development, and will affect the other dimensions or needs. If students experience poverty in any of these dimensions, this may well hamper their performance as students.

Max-Neef *et al.* (1991:21) alluded to a systemic, holistic and comprehensive view of poverty when they stated that poverty is not a single economic condition, but one that refers to all the related predicaments experienced by people below a certain income threshold. Max-Neef *et al.* (1991:21) further suggest that we should speak of "poverties that exist" when any of the fundamental human needs are not adequately met or actualised. This approach recognises the holistic and the systemic nature of needs and poverties.

The data obtained by the three researchers mentioned above will be presented according to Max-Neef *et al.*'s (1991) framework to give a holistic description of the socio-economic profile of Unisa's 4<sup>th</sup>-level Social Work students.

## **SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF THE UNISA SOCIAL WORK 4<sup>TH</sup>-LEVEL STUDENT**

### **Age and gender distribution**

Social work has traditionally been known as a woman's career; this fact is reflected in the groups: 88% students were female and 12% were male.

### **Age**

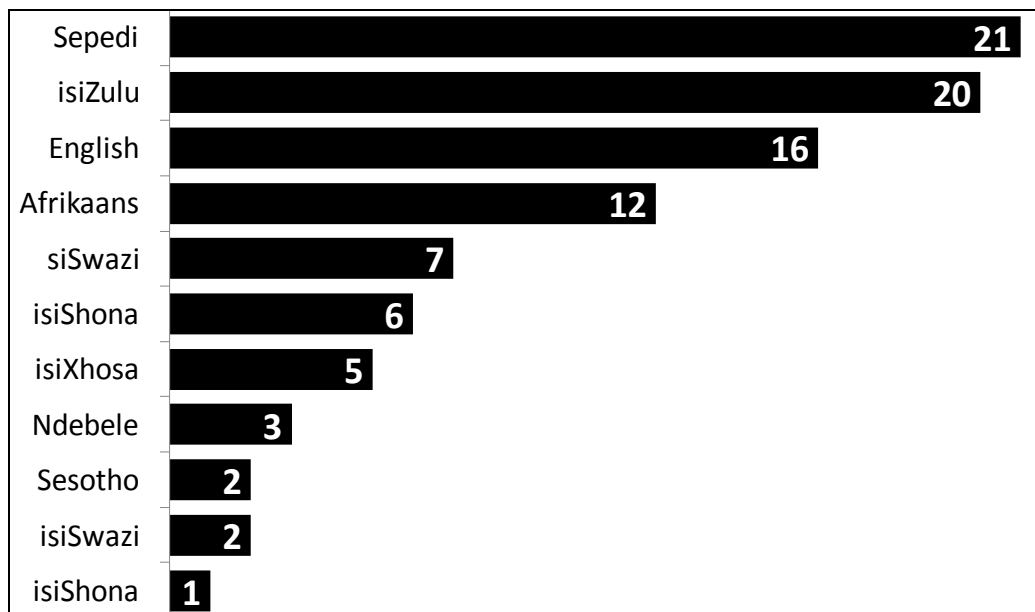
The average age of students of the 2006 group was 32,6, with the oldest respondent being 59 years and the youngest 21 years old. In the 2008 group the ages varied between 21 and 57, the average being 30 years.

According to Kilfoil (2008), Unisa's student population is slowly becoming a younger group of people. More school-leaving students are studying through Unisa, because it is more accessible and more affordable.

## Language distribution

In 2006 the language distribution of the students was as follows:

**FIGURE 2**  
**LANGUAGE DISTRIBUTION OF THE STUDENTS**



The four languages spoken most as indicated by the respondents are Sepedi, isiZulu, Afrikaans and English. The biggest groups of Unisa students are located in the Pretoria region (Sepedi) and the KwaZulu-Natal region (isiZulu).

## Max-Neef's FHNs and the students

Not every form of poverty or FHN will be discussed individually. Some will be combined with others. Only some of the factors will be discussed in this paper.

**Poverty of subsistence** refers, for example, to inadequate income, not enough to eat, and lack of access to decent and affordable housing. In other words, it refers to basic human survival.

In Wade's (2008) research 43% of the students reported that they had experienced extreme poverty. According to Lintveldt (2008), 35% of the students study on the National Financial Student Aid Scheme (NFSAS) study loan, which is an indication of the financial poverty level, while (18%) are supported by their parents, husbands, bursaries and some employers, and 37% pay for themselves.

**TABLE 2**  
**POVERTY OF SUBSISTENCE: EMPLOYMENT STATUS OF THE PARENTS (N=87)**

Status	Fathers	Mothers
Deceased	37%	11%
Unemployed	12%	20%
Retired	3%	24%
Unknown	6%	3%
Non-professional	29%	28%
Professional	13%	14%

Table 2 indicates that as many as 49% of students' fathers and 31% of the mothers are either deceased or unemployed. The high incidence of deceased fathers (37%) is notable. Only 13% of students' fathers and 14% of mothers are employed as professionals and thus may be able to support their children with their studies. The 29% of fathers and 28% of mothers who are doing non-professional work are farm workers, machine operators, truck drivers, dressmakers, domestic workers and messengers.

Another possible indication of **poverty of subsistence** is that 33% of the students do not work at all. This is also an indication of the **poverty of creation** that exists because of either the lack of opportunity or choice to work, as Unisa specifically makes provision for students to work and study.

Comparing the students' experience of **poverty of subsistence** with the poverty level of between 40-50% in South Africa (Earle, 2008), these students represent the poverty situation in South Africa. This might be an indication that Unisa is already succeeding in its mission to reach people and to make education accessible to those who are poor and living in remote areas, and who could not otherwise access further education.

### Students' living conditions

Twenty-nine percent of the students also described the neighbourhoods where they live as poor, low-income areas with high unemployment, where the people are mostly dependent on state grants. Housing is overcrowded and insufficient, with pollution, littering and high volumes of traffic; people are unmotivated and passive. They live in shacks, RDP houses and rented rooms. Some of the students articulated their experiences of poverty as follows:

- “We were sometimes left at home without food. The neighbours gave us food and we slept there.”
- “Our parents died and we had no choice but to live by ourselves. My elder sister was doing matric by then, but she managed to finish school and find a job so that she could take care of us.”
- “We ended up very poor and had to survive on my grandmother's pension. My mother found a job as a domestic worker later and earned about R250 per month.”

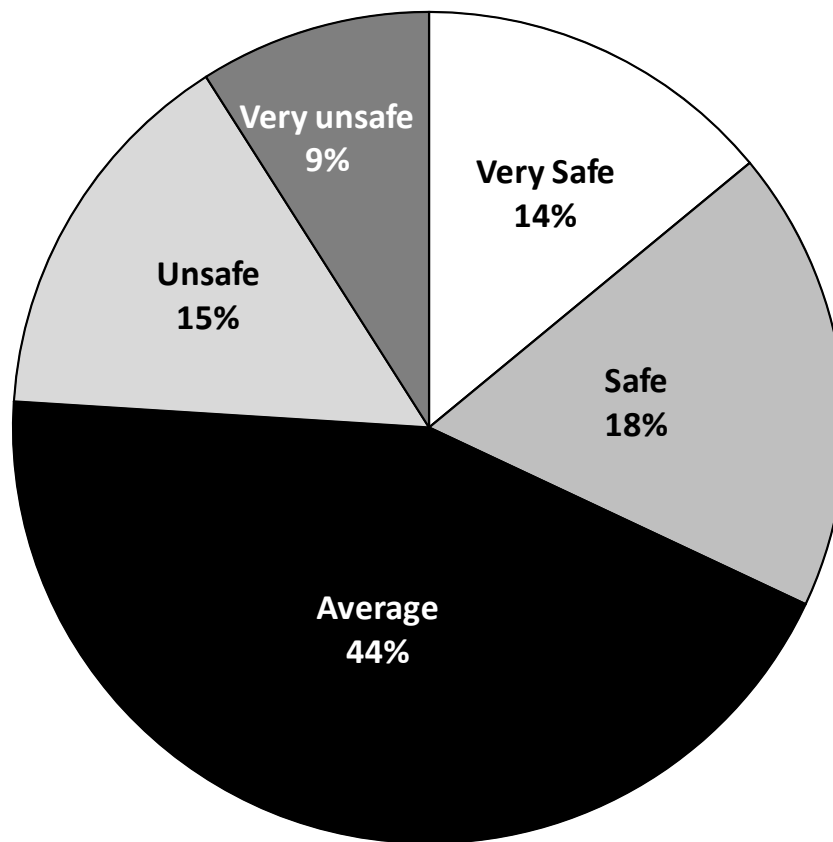
The lack of income not only leads to **poverty of subsistence**, but may also lead to low self-esteem (**poverty of identity**), lack of access to textbooks and other support materials (**poverty of understanding**), but also to lack of **protection** – this refers to the next dimension of poverty.

**Poverty of protection** exists owing to inadequate and unreliable protection systems being in place to safeguard individuals against, for example, crime and unjust labour practices.

The most disturbing finding of the research results indicates how Unisa students are, in fact, affected by crime. Lintvelt (2008) asked the students to describe how safe their neighbourhoods were. The following figure shows the results.



**FIGURE 3**  
**DIAGRAM OF SAFETY OF NEIGHBOURHOODS**



The very safe and safe areas where students live were the remote rural areas and rural towns. All the students (100%) living in the cities indicated that they experience their neighbourhoods as average (44%), unsafe (15%) to very unsafe (9%).

Even of the 44% of the students who were of the opinion that the safety in their area was “average”, at the same time expressed concern about their own safety or about the safety of their property:

- “Hijackings, house breaking, armed robberies. You cannot walk alone freely, especially at night.”
- “Crime is evolving: housebreaking, murder and hijacking.”
- “There is crime and rape.”

South African citizens are truly desensitised to crime. As anticipated, these incidents have an impact on the students’ functioning.

When Wade (2008) asked about students’ own traumatic experiences, it emerged that most of the students had experienced multiple traumatic incidents. These incidents included witnessing murders, hijackings and domestic violence. The highest number of incidents experienced by an individual was 32 and the average traumatic incidents the students experienced were 13. In addition, the students also refer to “cultural trauma” and referred to cultural practices such as circumcision and “cutting off of a finger to prove that you belong to a particular clan/surname”.

A high percentage (88%) of students had been subjected to domestic violence, which included physical and verbal abuse by, for example, caregivers and spouses, while half the class (55%)

reported being exposed to at least one instance of sexual trauma either as victim or as witness. Twenty-one percent reported being sexually abused and 6% had been raped. A striking finding was that 23% of the students had lost loved ones as a result of a murder and 17% had been separated from parents during childhood. Experiences that were specifically mentioned were:

- “Farm attacks – I lost my grandmother.”
- “I was molested when I was 10. When my mother found out, my father denied it and my family looked at me as if I am not a worthy child, but one who wanted to separate the family.”
- “It is very traumatic to see your family members dying (of HIV/Aids) each and every year.”
- “My three daughters were sexually abused by a family member.”
- “My grandmother of about 80 years was raped in the fields by 15 young boys with condoms and thrown in a ditch still alive...”

Wade (2008) also suggests that an African worldview and cultural perceptions of trauma deserve consideration because, for example, the origin of illness and traumas can be seen as punishment by the gods, a curse, witchcraft, a disruption of relationships, angry ancestors, or possession by evil spirits. Trauma can be experienced as something sent by agents and such beliefs can, in themselves, exacerbate the trauma. Even trivial events may be terrifying, if they are construed as evidence of black magic or the action of malign spirits or ancestors.

When asked to describe their perception of trauma, one of the students wrote the following:

“It is an experience that blows you completely out of the depth, gets you seriously disturbed, unbalanced, fearful, paranoid, jittery, jumpy and completely rattled.”

Others referred to experiences of numbness, detachment, alienation, debilitation, hopelessness, powerlessness, changes in personality and feelings of being “broken up inside”.

These results indicate clearly that Unisa students have been subjected to a wide range of traumatic experiences and that most participants had been subjected to multiple traumas.

The **poverty of protection** and the description of the students’ experiences are closely linked to the **poverty of freedom, affection, participation and identity**.

**Poverty of affection**, in this instance, refers to lack of relationships, exploitation and the loss of people who were close to them.

**Poverty of affection** may be inferred for those students who have experienced sexual abuse, domestic violence, rape and the loss of people close to them.

Other experiences included:

*Losses:* Other indications were that many of the participants had lost significant people in their lives. Most (79%) had lost close family members, 28% had lost their life partners and 17% had been removed from home in childhood (17%). Some of these losses (23%) were the result of violence, including taxi violence, political violence and murder. The students who had been removed from home indicated that the reasons behind these removals were poverty, abuse and neglect.

Apart from the losses the students had experienced, some indicated that they were left with more responsibilities as a result of their losses, which then became directly linked to the **poverty of idleness**. Some of the statements made by the students were:

- “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 4<sup>th</sup>-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 <sup>th</sup> 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 4<sup>th</sup> 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 4<sup>th</sup> 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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