UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

Faculty of Social Sciences
Department of Social Work Studies

SOCIAL WORK RELATED TRAINING

A COMPARISON FROM THE STUDENT'S VIEWPOINT

OF PURSUING THEIR COURSE EITHER AS A DISTANCE

LEARNER OR A CLASSROOM BASED LEARNER

A RESEARCH STUDY SUBMITTED TO SOUTHAMPTON
UNIVERSITY FOR THE AWARD OF A MASTER OF
PHILOSOPHY DEGREE

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[i]

Chapter Four

ABSTRACT

Large numbers of staff in need of training have been identified within the social work profession. Courses based in colleges and universities are unlikely to be able to respond adequately to this level of demand. Courses using the distance learning approach are now increasingly available and possibly could provide an answer to some of the training needs of social work.

Distance learning has such benefits as reaching many students at a comparatively reasonable cost and avoiding time release of staff from their work, but these advantages are usually identified from the employer's point of view. How do the student consumers of distance education view their educational experience?

This research compared the experiences of 30 past distance learners on the Open University's course 'The Handicapped Person in the Community' with the experiences of 30 classroom based students who had taken social work courses. Why did they choose their particular course? What did they think to its quality? What was the impact of the course on them?

The results, based on 47 returned postal questionnaires and 6 face-to-face interviews, indicated a very favourable response to their respective courses from all respondents. However, many students from both groups identified a lack of interest and support from their employers and work colleagues and it is suggested that this may result in an impoverished educational benefit for the students concerned. Additionally it was noticeable that classroom based students viewed distance learning as having lower status when compared to classroom courses, and a number of these students were reluctant to contemplate taking a distance learning course because of the perceived need for considerable self-discipline in study.

Other aspects of note were the levels of support from tutors and access to resources for further study. Overall the respondents viewed classroom based learning as being more appropriate for social work training than distance learning.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

'Although our society has adapted extremely well to
individual human differences (e.g. most retail businesses
supply products to meet the various tastes and
preferences of customers), education has progressed
rather slowly in this area. Learners are generally
treated in roughly the same manner with flexibility
afforded mainly through the selection of different
courses and programmes. A general concern that students
may require different instructional treatment has not
emerged.'[Daniel, 1982, p92].

This quotation from a paper presented by Coldeway to the
International Council for Correspondence Education's
world conference in Vancouver in 1982, acts as a useful
starting point to this research paper submitted to
Southampton University for the award of a Master of
Philosophy degree.

Although there are many exceptions, the majority of
educational opportunities in Great Britain are offered
in classrooms in a so-called conventional approach. In
the field of social work education and training there is
a similar pattern. Osborne comments in her book 'Distance
Learning in Social Work Education'[Osborne, 1985, p18]
that 'conventional' in this context means teacher led
groups of students learning within the same time and
location boundaries. 'Classes of students are
simultaneously exposed to the educational experience'. As
she goes on to explain, 'classes' can and do cover a
considerable variety of approaches including lectures,
discussion groups, workshops, experiential roleplays,
etc., but the basic building block is the teacher led
group of students.

Returning to the original observations by Coldeway, how
well does this classroom approach square with the great
variety of individual needs of students that can be noted
in any educational field?

This study focuses on the adult student throughout and it
has to be asked whether all adult students prefer
studying in groups; whether, with their domestic and
employment ties, there is necessarily a good, relevant

course near to their home; whether the starting date of any such course is convenient bearing in mind their other commitments? This list of questions can of course be extended and the more one extends the list, the more one is left wondering whether educational opportunities are mainly offered in a relatively rigid framework; a framework based perhaps on the administrative needs of the providing organisation and an unimaginative focus upon the historically major group of educational customers, namely young people.

Keegan [Keegan, 1986, p21] uses the term 'traditional' rather than 'conventional', but his meaning is the same. In describing the North American scene, he comments that: 'Traditional American education of adults has consisted of residential colleges and universities in which carefully selected students between the years of 18 and 24, have enrolled in on-campus courses taught by individual teachers who lectured and led classroom discussion. Education was something to be acquired before one began the business of life. Students were expected to be unmarried and unemployed.' Before my reader comments on the lines of "but things are changing", it is interesting to note Keegan's further observation that: 'The relationship between traditional and non-traditonal education, especially in the United States, has seen a re-establishment of traditional concepts in the 1980's where non-traditional structures had blossumed briefly in the 1970's.'[p21].

Given this picture of education being offered mainly through conventional/traditional approaches, how might a typical adult wishing to up-date his/her skills or perhaps change career direction feel when first enquiring about the range of possible courses available to help fulfil such ambitions? As will be explored further in the next chapter, there is every reasons to suspect that many do not pursue their enquiry having been put off by the lack of flexibility in the educational system.

This research concentrates upon social work education and training. Being a relatively young profession, it can be argued that social work education has not been tied down by any lengthy historical tradition of how to prepare its future generations of workers. Although the pattern of social work training course provision is very much in the melting-pot at the time of writing and some profound changes are on the horizon, the present picture does reflect a relatively flexible range of courses and considerable efforts have been made to break away from a

dominating classroom input. A high proportion of a student's professionally qualifying course will be spent working in a social work team under supervision (on the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work Course-CQSW). Another professionally qualifying course (the Certificate in Social Service-CSS) relies heavily on the input of a study supervisor, a social work qualified individual who tutors the student on a one-to-one basis throughout their two year course. The CSS also is structured to allow the student to remain in part-time employment during the course, offering the strengths of a continued employment record and also constant opportunities to relate theory to practice whilst training.

There are obviously other variations that could be described but space is limited and the interested reader who wishes to have more background information on social work training is referred to an article by Rossetti entitled 'Whither social work education' [Rossetti, 1987, p43] for a brief overview. One note of caution needs to be sounded when reading this article. Rossetti confidently descibes a new qualification (QDSW) to replace the CQSW and the CSS, but this particular development is one of the casualties of the melting-pot referred to earlier. Should further information be required, then contact can be made with the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) in London.

Having briefly described some of the social work training variations and suggested that social work may have avoided some of the rigidity of other professions' training, it must be said that their are still many barriers for the would-be social worker trying to obtain suitable qualifications, or the existing social worker endeavouring to up-date or increase his/her knowledge and skills. My own role in social work education has brought me into contact with numerous people experiencing frustration as they encounter hurdles preventing them obtaining a place on training courses. For the existing social worker there is an additional frustration in that their profession is actively encouraging them to seek further study. As Davenport and Davenport [Davenport and Davenport, 1985, p9] report: 'Continuing education for the professions has been one of the fastest growing areas of adult education. Law, medicine, nursing, social work and many other professions now require or strongly recommend continuing education.'

Meeting such people and hearing of their experiences

over a number of years has led to my interest in looking for other, non-conventional ways of delivering social work education and hence my interest in this particular line of research, namely the place of distance learning in education, and the consumer's view of undertaking a course through distance learning as compared to a classroom based course.

How best then to respond to such people?

Clearly it must be the aim of any educational system to establish a range of provision. We return once again to Coldeway's implied suggestion that there must be various methods for delivering education allowing the prospective student to chose, under guidance, which method best suits his needs at a particular time. The provision of choice has considerable resource implications and so the range will always be limited, but one approach which I feel has been under utelised in social work education is that of distance/open learning. There are indeed distance/open learning courses in subjects related to social work and there is even an example of part of a CSS course being delivered in this way (the Caledonian CSS scheme), but these developments are still in their infancy.

Many voices can still be heard expressing doubts about whether social work can be taught at a distance. One argument runs on the lines of "social work is about interacting with people; how can the necessary skills be learnt through isolated study?" Another comment probably reflects educational prejudice by hinting that distance/open learning qualifications are of lower status than conventional courses. Yet another voice from some training officers and lecturers is critical of the approach probably based on a fear that their own role is threatened by the spread of this new teaching method which, at first sight, requires fewer staff. Still other people are critical of the method as they feel it offers education on the cheap.

From these statements it can be seen that distance/open learning is the subject of considerable debate and interest. However, this debate is most frequently dominated by social work management and educator's voices; very rarely does one hear the voice of the consumer, the student who has completed a course. How do they feel about their educational experience? How satisfying was it for them? A major purpose of this study is to give expression to their opinions so that they may also contribute to the debate.

Defining distance/open learning

By now my reader will be annoyed by my repeated use of
the term 'distance/open learning'. I have purposefully
adopted this term up until now as there are considerable
differences amongst writers in respect of which term to
use. Whilst many writers are of the view that 'open
learning' is the more global term, with distance learning
part of open learning, this is not necessarily
universally accepted. At this point it will be productive
to savour some of debate, leading to my eventual adoption
of the term 'distance learning' for the purpose of this
study.

A promising start would seem to be Keegan's article 'On
defining distance education' [Keegan, 1980 p13]. In his
introduction he states: 'The growing literature on
distance education contains many complaints about the
lack of unanimity on the terminology used in the field.
This is especially true of the English-speaking world
where each of the following terms is used extensively:
correspondence study, home study, independent study,
external studies, distance teaching and distance
education'.

My reader will no doubt be as disappointed as I that
Keegan does not include in his extensive list my intended
term. However, later Keegan [p32] indicates that
distance learning and distance teaching combine to give
the overall term of distance education. It will also be
noted that the term 'open learning' was not given in his
list.

For Keegan, [p33], the main elements of a definition of
distance education are:
a. the separation of teacher and learner which
distinguishes it from face-to-face lecturing.
b. the influence of an educational organisation which
distinguishes it from private study.
c. the use of technical media, usually print, to unite
teacher and learner and carry the educational content.
d. the provision of two-way communication so that the
student may benefit from, or even initiate, dialogue.
e. the possibility of occasional meetings for both
didactic and socialisation purposes.
f. the participation in an industrial form of education
which, if accepted, contains the genus of radical
separation of distance education from other forms.

Keegan's use of the word 'industrial' can be explained by reference to another part of his article [p 20] in which he describes: 'a daily preoccupation with lead times, deadlines, print runs , job schedules, type-faces, warehousing, delivery and dispatch and planning decisions on educational priorities that must take place two, three or more years before teaching is to take place.'

If we now turn to a booklet by Lewis and Spencer entitled 'What is Open Learning?'[Lewis and Spencer, 1986, p9] the term 'Open Learning' can be explored. They write: 'Open Learning is a term used to describe courses flexibly designed to meet individual requirements. It is often applied to provision which tries to remove barriers that prevent attendance at more traditional courses, but it also suggests a learner-centred philosophy. Open learning courses may be offered in a learning centre of some kind or most of the activity may be carried out away from such a centre (e.g.at home). In nearly every case, specially prepared or adapted materials are necessary.

The booklet quoted above was produced by the Council for Educational Technology. In another paper from the same organisation [Davies, 1977,p12] John Coffey writes: 'An Open Learning system is one in which the restrictions placed on students are under constant review and removed wherever possible. It incorporates the widest range of teaching strategies, in particular those using independent and individualised learning.'

For one further definition of Open Learning, the Manpower Services Commission [MSC, 1984, p9] introduces the additional feature of the student working at their own pace: 'Open Learning are those arrangements that enable people to learn at the time, place and pace which satisfies their circumstances and requirements. The emphasis is upon opening up opportunities by overcoming barriers that result from geographical isolation, personal or work commitments or conventional course structures which have prevented people from gaining access to training they need.'

Clearly, from these various definitions there is a good deal of overlap but one can accept the earlier point that open learning is a wider concept than that of distance learning. Perhaps the really helpful distinction is made by Keegan [Keegan, 1980, p28] when he suggests that: 'Open learning, therefore, is a term that is not to be used in an administrative context, rather its context is philosophical.' If this distinction between the two terms

is not acceptable to my reader, the other possible difference is that of geographical distance. Distance learning will always involve a majority of geographical separation of the student from his college, whilst open learning can take place in the educational institution.

In this particular study the term 'distance learning' suits the line of enquiry, as 'open learning' would have taken the scope too wide. However, just a final comment on a theme which will be returned to in the next chapter. Distance learning as I intend using the term (as does Keegan in one of his characteristics mentioned previously) does allow for occasional meetings between the student and tutor and fellow students. Typically such meetings occur in residential blocks or tutorials held for a group of geographically clustered students.

The Aims of the Study

The preceeding paragraphs outlined my personal reasons for pursuing this line of research. These generalised thoughts now need to become more structured.

The study AIMS to:

SEEK FROM THE 'CONSUMERS' OF VARIOUS SOCIAL WORK COURSES THEIR VIEWS ON THE METHOD OF STUDY THEY WERE INVOLVED IN WHILST ON THEIR COURSE; THE TWO METHODS UNDER CONSIDERATION BEING (a) CONVENTIONAL CLASSROOM BASED COURSES AND (b) DISTANCE LEARNING BASED COURSES.

MAKE A COMPARISON OF THE VIEWS EXPRESSED AS ABOVE BETWEEN THE TWO GROUPS OF STUDENTS UNDER THE MAIN THEMES (a) WHY THEY CHOSE THEIR PARTICULAR COURSE, (b) THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THEIR COURSE, (c) THE IMPACT THE COURSE MADE UPON THEM.

In order to achieve these aims it will be necessary:

1. TO ESTABLISH WHAT PAST RESEARCH HAS BEEN CONDUCTED IN THIS PARTICULAR FIELD AND TO INVESTIGATE RELATED LITERATURE.

2. TO OBTAIN ACCESS TO PARTICULAR GROUPS OF STUDENTS WHO HAVE STUDIED ON SOCIAL WORK RELATED COURSES, FOLLOWING EITHER A CLASSROOM BASED COURSE OR A DISTANCE LEARNING BASED COURSE.

3. TO OBTAIN THE VIEWS OF THE STUDENTS AND TO PRESENT

THESE VIEWS IN SUCH A WAY AS TO GIVE THE RESPONDENTS A
'VOICE', EXPRESSING THEIR OPINION OF THE PARTICULAR
COURSE OF SOCIAL WORK TRAINING THEY UNDERTOOK.

4. TO MAKE COMPARISONS BETWEEN THE OPINIONS OF THE
VARIOUS GROUPS OF STUDENTS IN ORDER TO ESTABLISH, FROM
THE CONSUMER'S POINT OF VIEW, WHETHER ONE STYLE OF
LEARNING HOLDS ADVANTAGES OVER THE OTHER WHEN IT COMES TO
THE FIELD OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND TRAINING.

5. TO SHARE THE FINDINGS WITH THE PLANNERS OF SOCIAL WORK
EDUCATION AND TRAINING.

The intention of this particular research, as has been
said a number of times before, is to offer students a
chance to express their views. The research is designed
to be qualitative rather than quantitative in nature.

No hypothesis will be posed. It is hoped that the
research will have sufficient direction and purpose as
already described to be able to stand without a formally
stated hypothesis.

In the following chapter there will be a review of
related literature as regards the application of distance
learning to some areas of professional training and with
especial reference to the field of social work training.
Later chapters will describe the methodology used in this
study followed by the results obtained. Finally the
results will be reviewed in order to see whether the
consumer of social work education, the students who have
pursued their course of study either through distance
learning or classroom based learning, have anything to
say to the planners of the future pattern of social work
training.

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CHAPTER TWO

RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

In the search for related literature to this research, the early discovery of Osborne's book 'Distance Learning in Social Work Education'[Osborne, 1985] was a considerable encouragement. However, this initial boost was short lived with there being no other such directly applicable sources. As described in the Methodology chapter which follows, the literature search rapidly had to widen beyond British shores and beyond the confines of social work education.

The following paragraphs are based on extracts from literature related to the research. It is intended that the reader will gain useful background information against which to set the results of this project. The chapter is set out to cover:
a. a brief history of distance learning.
b. a description of some of the doubts expressed about the role of distance learning in professional training, with especial reference to social work.
c. a review of the potential growth of distance learning when set against the training needs of social workers.
d. a look at the changes in the methods of distance learning aimed at lessening some of its disadvantages.
e. a brief record of some examples of professionally qualifying courses that use distance learning.
f. a resume of some of the recorded student reactions to their distance learning courses.

(a) A brief history of distance learning

It is the considerable growth in distance learning in the last decade that gives it the feel of being a very modern approach to learning. However 'there is nothing new under the sun' and one quickly realises the lengthy history of distance learning, or at least, closely allied educational methods. Holmberg, the author of a number of works on distance education, usefully sums up the early, and very early, days in his book 'Growth and structure of distance education'[Holmberg, 1986, p6] : 'Whereas the term distance education is a fairly recent adoption, the concept it covers is at least 150 years old. Teaching by

correspondence in a non-organised fashion is, of course, much older, as witnessed for instance by the Biblical epistles meant for the instruction of early Christian congregations.'

Holmberg continues with descriptions of other early distance education variations. He mentions [p6] that in 1728 an advert appeared in the Boston Gazette concerning a new method of shorthand and continuing: 'any Persons in the Country desirous to Learn this Art, may by having the several Lessons sent Weekly to them, be as perfectly instructed as those that live in Boston'.

Holmberg raises the doubt that this advert necessarily relates to distance learning, or, more likely, to self-instructional material of which there was a great deal available in the 18th. and 19th. centuries. Some one hundred years later Holmberg records that the University of Lund in Sweden offered 'Ladies and Gentlemen an opportunity to study Composition through the medium of the Post'. In England Isaac Pitman began sending the main principles of his shorthand system to students and they were invited to send back their work to him for correction. This development by Pitman was in 1840, the year in which the penny post was introduced in the United Kingdom [p7].

Looking further through the pages of Holmberg's work for other British developments, he records [p8] that Skerry's college in Edinburgh, founded in 1878, began preparing candidates for Civil Service examinations through correspondence. In 1887 the University Correspondence College in Cambridge was founded, preparing students for University of London external degrees (in 1965 this college was taken over by the National Extension College) and in 1894 the Diploma Correspondence College, now called Wolsey Hall, began offering a wide range of courses.

By now other countries were active in the field with, for example, the Hermods distance teaching organisation founded in Sweden in 1898; considerable developments taking place in Germany; and Australia developing systems for tertiary education from 1911 onwards and subsequently a complete primary and secondary education for children who would never attend school.

For the reader who wishes to learn more of the history of distance education it is suggested that chapter 3 of Holmberg's book will provide excellent material.

Coming more up to date, it was the 1970s that saw a rapid expansion of distance learning. Clearly much of the expansion was facilitated by the revolution in information technology with the progressive spin-offs in so many fields such as communications, printing and access to information. The founding of the Open University in this country in 1971 marked the beginnings of a new era, in which a full degree programme was offered using very high standard teaching material and utelising new media approaches and encorporating rigorous monitoring and evaluation systems. Up until this time private funding had dominated, but now public funds were directed into distance education and this move can be seen as the scepticism, which had frequently dogged distance education, beginning to dissipate.

However the sceptics still abound and this provides the theme for the next section.

(b)Doubts expressed about DL and professional training.

Most of the following doubts about the role of distance learning in professional training are taken from books or articles which, in the main, are enthusiastic descriptions of distance education. The authors are usually to be found expressing the doubts and then quickly providing their answers to these criticisms. Therefore the reader must not view the following authors as anything but supporters of distance learning unless otherwise stated.

A number of writers look at the effectiveness of distance learning as against the expressed views of a number of educational theorists. Baath in his book 'Correspondence Education in the light of a number of teaching models' [Baath, 1979, p109] focused on learning models related to psychological theories of learning , which limited his scope of discussion, but still provides an interesting debate. Baath looks at the theories of Skinner, Rothkopf, Ausubel, Egan, Bruner, Rogers, and Gagne. In his summary chapter (chapter 17), Baath notes that it is Gagne's model which emphasises a particular aspect of learning which I would suggest is interesting in this discussion of social work education. Gagne's model highlights the importance of the type of learning or the domain of learning. Gagne asks the teacher to plan his/her teaching approach to reflect whether verbal information, intellectual skills, cognitive strategies,

attitudes or motor skills are being taught. Depending upon which of these five 'domains of learning' is most central to a particular teaching session, so there will be a corresponding method of instruction which is most suitable.

The method of teaching which Baath describes as pure correspondence education seems:
'to be well adapted to teaching that is directed towards cognitive goals of the verbal information or intellectual skills type. Learning of (certain kinds of) attitudes and motor skills appear however to require a higher degree of face-to-face contacts, in the first place.'

Although Baath does not elaborate on his use of the phrase 'certain kinds of', one question this research must pose is how central to a social work course is the acquisition of motor skills and the opportunity to reflect upon one's own attitudes and possibly modify some of these? The term 'motor skills' is perhaps too narrow, but certainly in social work training the student needs to acquire relevant skills such as techniques for putting an anxious client at their ease or coping with a sudden outburst of violence from an angry client. With the close relationship between correspondence education and distance education (recalling the earlier debate about the confused and overlapping terminology in this field), if one follows Gagne's argument, can distance learning play a central role in offering instruction for social work? The alternative method of classroom based instruction allows constant face-to-face interaction between tutor and student and, probably just as important in this context, interaction between fellow students.

Although this question is important and will be returned to, it is in part answered by the fact that few distance learning courses operate totally 'at a distance'; most have evolved into some degree of a hybrid allowing for some interaction. This evolution will be described later in this chapter.

The doubt about the lack of interaction is also mentioned in Holmberg's book [Holmberg, 1986, p54]. He states :
'human beings, although learning individually, usually develop their thinking in an advantageous way by talking their concepts and ideas over with some partner.'

He answers this point by indicating that distance education material must aim to as closely resemble ordinary conversations as possible. Holmberg also quotes

from Lewis [Lewis, 1975, p.69] as saying that: 'as we mull things over quietly and in solitude, we are actually holding a conversation with ourselves.'

Whilst this may be a fair comment, one is still left to consider whether such 'conversations' are an adequate substitute for classroom conversations.

The title of an article by Rogers, namely 'Changing attitudes through distance learning' [Rogers, 1986], clearly takes us back to an earlier theme. This interesting article will be returned to later when considering the success of distance learning, but here it is useful to quote Rogers' opening paragraph to her article [p12]:

'Most educationists now accept that distance learning techniques can provide a very effective means for the acquisition of knowledge - indeed, well designed materials compete very favourably with face-to-face tuition in this area. However, there is considerably more reticence about their use for other forms of learning, particularly the role they may be able to play in changing attitudes. Yet clearly, many kinds of learning, particularly those related to gaining competence in skills which involve working with other people, place very heavy emphasis on the need to develop appropriate attitudes.'

Rogers later addresses these doubts in her article which relates to the training of staff in the 'caring professions'. A book which also looks at distance learning in the closely related field of training for work in the Youth and Community Service, namely Kitto's 'Holding the Boundaries'[Kitto, 1986, p ix] has in its foreword, 'Even five years after the start of the very successful YMCA National College distance learning course for the professional training of Youth and Community workers, the choice of method needs some justification. After all, the 'received wisdom' suggests that distance learning may be appropriate for the transmission of facts or the exploration of concepts, but surely is no use in a profession where personal relationships are of prime importance.'

This foreword was written by John Coffey who was, at the time, the Open Learning systems consultant for the Centre of Educational Technology (CET). The project described in 'Holding the Boundaries' aimed to explore the feasibility of providing professional training in youth work via distance learning and to test this by running an

experimental course. The Department of Education and Science's funding of the project also reflected an interest in whether distance learning could be used in training for kindred professions e.g. teaching and social work. The evaluation of the project described in the book does, in fact, report very favourably on the experiment.

In the YMCA project considerable attention was given to the frequently identified problem of the high 'drop-out' rate from distance learning courses. Equally, the designers of the course were anxious to try and compensate for another weakness of distance learning which is voiced, that of the students failing to have contact and, therefore, reinforcement from other students who are going through similar experiences.

The need for reinforcement of learning on the part of the student is also mentioned in the Further Education Unit's (FEU) booklet for tutors preparing Open Learning material [Estell, 1986, p22] but in the FEU's discussion the 'reinforcement' referred to comes from the tutor. The writers point out that in Behaviourist Theory, the need for feedback (say from the marking of an assignment by the tutor) is equated with the important part prompt reinforcement plays in the learning process. They continue by saying that since open learning students typically work alone, this reinforcement may sometimes be fragmentary and delayed. This is particularly likely to apply to those students who only see their tutors on rare occasions and who must thus rely on an exchange of work through the post in order to obtain feedback on their performance. Clearly in any training, at a professional level or not, this possible delay in feedback posses a real worry.

The FEU booklet [p22] describes other shortcomings/doubts about distance learning. For example, distance learning students lack the regular interaction with fellow students giving rise to relationships which can be both competitive and supportive. Distance learning students lack contact with teachers qualified to anticipate problems, set clearly defined, manageable goals, and generally stimulate flagging interest and enthusiasm. Distance learning students are unlikely to have a sense of belonging; that intangible, but nevertheless real, feeling that results from being part of a group sharing common interests and enthusiasms.

Finally the FEU report [p24] describes the ability of the classroom teacher to spot the student who does not

understand the material being presented and can adapt his
presentation accordingly. Contrast this with the distance
learning student who struggles with material in:
'concrete, apparently immutable form. If he reaches a
point where his understanding fails, he is in a difficult
position. If he struggles on, difficulties will multiply,
if he stops, valuable studying time will be ticking
away'.

A related problem is also mentioned in the report
and this is the extent to which the student accepts the
material he is studying. Any teacher of adults knows that
such students are usually very willing to question the
information they are given in class and the flexible
teacher recognises the fruitfulness of such open enquiry.
The student who works alone may either tend to accept
unquestioningly the validity of the learning text, or
suffer frustration at his inability to immediately
disagree and argue back.

The FEU report has highlighted a number of doubts about
the distance learning approach and this list is added to
by an ACACE survey (Advisory Council for Adult and
Continuing Education). This survey [ACACE, 1983, p45]
gives nine difficulties identified by students who had
undergone a distance learning course. They are:
* the lack of time to complete assignments to their own
satisfaction.
* a feeling of loneliness and of an institutionally
imposed isolation in their studies.
* a deficiency in the kinds of study skills needed for
the successful completion of a distance learning course.
* problems in integrating study with domestic commitments
and consequent family disruptions.
* a lack of self-discipline and an inability to meet work
completion deadlines.
* problems in obtaining books and the inaccessibility of
public libraries.
* tiredness due to studying at the end of a working day.
* changes of tutors at critical times in the course.
* lack of criteria of success or of information about
their progress.

Although this list is given as difficulties experienced
by distance learners, it would seem fair to comment that
many of these could equally apply to classroom based
students.

The list from the ACACE survey mentioned the difficulty
of finding time when the student is faced by domestic

responsibilities. Other authors (e.g. Kitto, 1986, p124]
identify the clash between work place responsibilities
and the need to find study time. Because the distance
learner studies at home in his /her own time, people
surrounding the student such as family and work
colleagues may fail to see the individual in a student
role and fail to give due regard to the extra time burden
that study entails. Kahan [Kahan et. al.,1988]
emphasises the importance of employers giving adequate
assurances that the student will have the necessary study
time. This aspect illustrates the concern that employers
might well encourage staff to seek qualifications via
distance learning, and may well pay all or part of the
cost, but will they offer adequate time relief to allow
the successful completion of the course?

The above offers a long list of the various doubts
expressed by authors in respect of the role of distance
learning in professional courses. It is worth stating
again that most of the authors are in fact supporters of
distance learning, but they are quite rightly accepting
that not everyone is so convinced and therefore are
noting the criticisms. Certain key people, if convinced
of the effectiveness of the approach, could greatly
expand the impact of distance learning in the field of
social work training. Training officers employed by
statutory and voluntary social work organisations are an
obvious group, but as Hurley notes in her article 'Open
learning for child care' [Hurley, 1987], many social work
trainers still have doubts in their minds as to the
benefits of using the method.

Clearly these doubters may be won over if sound
educational results are increasingly to be found amongst
students who have completed distance learning courses,
and this is the proper way to stem the critics. However,
there is another reason for training officers to review
the potential of distance learning, and that is the sheer
numbers of social work staff who need basic or further
training and this is the subject of the next section.

(c) The potential growth of distance learning.

In the last decade there have been numerous reports
drawing attention to the number of unqualified workers in
social work and social care work. At this point, it may
be helpful to mention that there is a growing tendency to
use the term 'social work' as a description of the work
undertaken in field social work offices or area offices

with clients in a particular locality, whilst the term
'social care' is used as a description for the activities
of staff in residential and day-care establishments. My
own preference is to retain the term 'social work' as
the global term and I will tend not to make any
distinction between the two.

One source of information on the training needs of
social workers is the report commissioned by the
Government in 1980 with Peter Barclay in the Chair
[Barclay, 1980, p26]. This report noted that of
approximately 28,300 care staff employed by social
service departments in residential services, only 15%
held a social work qualification of any kind. The Barclay
report also noted that in day services there were
approximately 7,500 managing or care staff and of these
only 30% had a social work or related (e.g. nursing)
qualification. The picture for field social work staff
was seen to be better, with 70% of such workers employed
by social services departments being qualified and there
is a corresponding figure of 60% for field work staff
employed by voluntary organisations. However, the
disappointing figure for residential workers already
given is mirrored within the voluntary sector, with only
17% holding relevant qualifications.

The above figures were given in the 1980 report. For more
up-to-date figures, it is possible to turn to the Working
Group report in September 1987 entitled 'Workforce
Planning and Training Need in the Personal Social
Services. Copies of this report are available from CCETSW
or the LGTB (Local Government Training Board)[CCETSW,
1987]. Also represented on the working group were members
of the Association of Directors of Social Services and
the Association of County Councils.

Regretably the figures given do not directly correspond
with the figures in the Barclay report, but one table of
figures does give the percentage of qualified Local
Authority staff in England, Scotland and Wales for
certain posts as:

Home Care   7.5% have social work qualifications
Organisers

Social Work   2.5% have social work qualifications
Assistants

Managers of   26% have social work qualifications
Childrens Homes

Managers of   12.5% have social work qualifications
Adult Homes

Instructors in   5%   have social work qualifications
Adult Training
Centres

These figures are based upon the LGTB survey of Manpower
and Qualifications 1986. It needs to be said that some
of these posts are not generally regarded as requiring
social work qualifications, and the report does indicate
that, on average, some 14% of these people have other,
related qualifications, but even so the figures do
represent a large number of individuals needing
training.

In the main report's summary of findings and conclusions,
it states:
'to overcome current training backlogs even over a period
of ten years would require significantly higher annual
intakes (onto existing courses).'

Elsewhere in the report is the comment [CCETSW p22]:
'in the successful development of appropriate training,
major opportunities for open learning will exist and
these should be actively explored as NCVQ (National
Council for Vocational Qualifications) initiatives
develop. There is a need for variety and flexibility in
training methods.'

As can be appreciated from these figures, the situation
has made little improvement over the past ten years or so
and the more recent Wagner report [Wagner, 1988] has
again expressed concern about the low numbers of
qualified staff working in residential settings.

It can be argued that conventional classroom based
courses have failed to make any great inroad into the
training needs of social work staff in the recent past.
The forcast looks no healthier, since restricted finance
is resulting in the contraction of available courses,
rather than any expansion.

It is in this climate that alternative methods of
offering training opportunities need to be considered. As
Osborne says in her book [Osborne, 1985, p16]:
'How can training respond to this demand while creating
cost effective programmes that will be available to
substantially greater numbers of staff?' She continues by

stating that agencies and colleges need to reflect together on numbers and patterns of training and consider new approaches to training.

The pressure for an expansion of training provision for social work can be seen and distance learning is one clear option to be considered. Naturally the situation is not unique to social work. An article in the Nursing Times by Robinson [Robinson, 1986] illustrates similar concerns in the nursing profession and goes on to comment upon why conventional education has failed to cope with the profession's training needs. She writes [p64]: 'Continuing education should be the most accessible education of all - the education that is needed to keep nurse practioners knowledgeable and up-to-date about their work and the society in which they practise. But, of course, in practice we find the opposite is true. Opportunities in continuing education are severely limited. First, there are simply not enough of them in comparison to the size of the workforce. Second, there are practical constraints limiting many nurses' abilities to use what opportunities exist.'

She points out in the article that continuing education is for adults and that adults accumulate ties and responsibilities. Obvious examples of these are family commitments to children or elderly relatives. Another aspect of their responsibilities noted by Robinson are the work ties. They have wards to run, clinics to organise, patients to care for day and night. For many of them, irregular hours and rotating days off are the norm. Therefore the notion of attending a course on a fixed day of the week, at a fixed hour is very impractical. Should an employer be willing to release a nurse from work, will cover necessarily be guaranteed? And even if relief cover is successfully organised, it is likely to be available only for a limited number of staff.

This article clearly describes the problems of access to training for nursing staff. Still in the same training field, Heathcote writing in the magazine Open Learning about Health Education [Heathcote, 1987, p31] comments that, although the Health Education Certificate is offered in a number of colleges through good quality courses, there are many more potential students for the certificate, but they are unable to pursue a course because of 'institutional constraints' such as attending college on a particular day of the week.

Dale in his booklet entitled 'Guides for Training in

Libraries'[Dale, 1986, p 1] makes similar points. He sights the rapid change, not least technological change, which is affecting all our lives and requiring training opportunities if we are to remain competent in our work. On the question of actually attending classroom based courses, he again lists the practical difficulties of personal ties and goes on to describe the present financial climate and the associated staff cuts which make it difficult for employers to release staff to attend training courses. Dale also mentions the difficulty for some rural authorities in organising internal training courses due to cost of lengthy journeys.

These authors clearly make the case for an alternative method of delivering training, additional to classroom based courses. Pure distance learning i.e. courses in which there is no contact between tutor and student or between fellow students, has its limitations as have already been discussed. The next section describes how distance learning has endeavoured to respond to these limitations and, instead, offer a more fruitful mix of educational approaches.

(d) Present day educational approaches within DL.

The evolutionary change process for distance learning is probably slower than that within the classroom environment. As a tutor in a classroom conducts a session he/she can note which approaches are failing to make an impact and modify these immediately or, certainly before the next time the session is repeated. However, for the author of distance learning material such flexiblity is much more difficult. As Kitto [Kitto, 1986, p103] comments: 'As writers, we were never free of the fear that we would make a bad mistake in the material and have to rescue the students. Where a tutor on a face-to-face course can simply abandon one approach and start another next week, we could not'

Here Kitto is describing a pilot course for youth workers with only some 40 or so students each year. The inflexibility of distance learning material is still more apparent when one considers the work of the Open University where courses are designed for thousands of students and to stand, without costly alterations, for years. Naturally course teams plan their courses with infinite care and pilot courses are first tested for student reaction, but once launched a course should

ideally provide the best possible educational package and require no further modification.

Even if the educational evolution of distance learning has been unhurried, some wrong turns can have been taken especially when one philosophical star has been followed too enthusiastically. One of the first fundamental questions that needs to be addressed in the design of a course is to what extent is the course to be conducted totally at a distance?

Returning again to the report of the world conference held in Vancouver, the paper by Smith and Small [Daniel, 1982, p137] describing their work at the University of New England, Australia, highlights their concern that some people have steered towards 'pure' distance learning with little regard for student reaction. They write: 'In our view it is unfortunate that some systems are expending vast amounts of time and money trying to devise learning packages which will allow students to become completely independent of teachers and other students. In these systems the notion of learning as a social experience has not received the consideration we believe it warrants.'

These authors express the fear that this could lead to the dehumanising of the learning process. They describe their efforts directed towards "getting the right mixture" at the University of New England. They comment that course designers have increasingly placed an emphasis upon personal interaction, whether at weekend schools, residential schools, staff visits to students or some other form. Although they recognise that some critics will see this move representing a tacit admission of failure for independent study, they state that the adult student with all his/her personal and educational worries deserves a helping hand. They conclude with the very apt statement of:
'independent study should never be a sentence to solitary confinement'.

How have other writers dealt with this theme?

Holmberg writing in the journal 'Open Learning' in 1987 [Holmberg, 1987, p52] says 'The acceptability and educational value of distance education also depends on the personal investment it leads to.' He describes how he was disturbed to read in a previous copy of Open Learning, an article which commented that personal relationship is of little importance in distance

education. Holmberg continues: 'My own studies and those
of, for example, Kathleen Forsythe show that empathy
between students and the supporting organisation (the
university or school), personal involvement and
conversational approaches can be of decisive importance
for the educational value of distance education.'

Elsewhere [Holmberg, 1986, p53] Holmberg offers another
angle on the need to facilitate contact between student
and tutor: 'Face to face sessions in distance education
...... are useful opportunities to consult subject
specialists and to exchange views with tutors and fellow
students as well as benefit from tutor's expositions and
criticisms of work done.'

Holmberg lists a number of situations in which face to
face interaction can be especially valuable, including
among these times when a tutor is encouraging attitudes
and habits of relevance for the study.

Moving away from these generalised comments about tutor/
student contact, it will be useful to look for similar
observations from educationalists working on courses for
staff from the 'caring professions'.

Gearing's article 'Distance Learning and Gerontological
Education' [Gearing, 1987, p19] describes his work with
the Open University in the Department of Health and
Social Welfare. He writes: 'Distance learning packages
and courses which make carefully planned use of video,
audio cassettes and case studies can enhance knowledge
and sensitivity to the difficult practice situations
which face workers. But the OU's experience strongly
suggests that this is best supplemented by some group
discussions with other workers who are also students.
Most student/workers will also want the opportunity to
relate course issues to their own immediate experience
and that of their colleagues.'

Another past member of the Open University's Department
of Health and Social Welfare is Susan Hurley, who has
written on this theme:
'The evaluation of the Child Abuse Group Work pack
[Hurley and Fothergill, 1978] had demonstrated the value
of a structured learning programme which combined
individual study and group learning over a number of
weeks. The integration of the individual study element
with small group work provided an enrichment greater than
the simple combination of the two methods might suggest.
It is true that the individual study pack is more

flexible to use, but when combined with group activity it can fulfil major additional learning objectives, particularly those related to a change of attitudes and the acquisition of skills.' [Hurley, 1987, p26].

The various writers quoted above demonstrate the need, in their opinion, for there to be a mix of individual and group study within distance learning. However this mix always tends to lean towards individual study otherwise the term 'distance learning' would become somewhat inaccurate. Individual study has been criticised for being lonely and isolated. How has the evolution of distance learning techniques responded to this criticism, bearing in mind that isolation can lead to a worrying loss of motivation and possible withdrawal from a course before its successful completion?

Many writers including Dale [Dale, 1986, p3] note that distance learning courses offer counselling opportunities for their students. Dale comments that 'counselling can alleviate the feeling of isolation'. The use of telephone contact for support is frequently described as one option, but a number of writers note that many people find this means of contact unsatisfactory.
Kitto [Kitto, 1986, p 145] quotes one student as viewing the use of the telephone as a 'very middle class thing'. Certainly the sheer cost seems to keep telephone contact to a minimum.

Another manoeuvre for distance learning course planners to avoid feelings of loneliness in their students as they study, is to try and encourage students not to study for too long. Courses are frequently planned to offer the student plenty of breaks and it is often suggested that a student finds a work colleague or a friend to talk over particular ideas encountered in the study pack.

Heathcote [Heathcote, 1987, p32] having described the five major themes of the Open Learning Health Education course adds: 'These themes are examined in blocks of material which are divided into units which take 1+-2 hours to study. This length was chosen on the assumption that the staying power and concentration spans of students studying at home or at work will be relatively short, isolated as they are from fellow-students and possibly subject to more distractions.'

Even a time-scale of 1+-2 hours can seem a long time to hold the attention of someone working on their own. Writing in 'Distance no object', a report from the

Scottish Education Department in 1982 [Duncan, 1982, p90] Manwaring says: 'material written for distance learning must be interactive. It must contain questions or exercises for the student to perform and it must contain answers, comments and feedback.The student will only really learn when he applies his knowledge and he should be asked to do this in the unit. Feedback on his performance can be given by a tutor, but immediate feedback can also be provided within the unit.'

Obtaining the interaction/participation of the student via a written text is quite an art and great strides have been made in distance learning packages in capturing the correct 'conversational style'. If the right style can be achieved, then there is much to be gained. Childs [Childs, 1979, p86] notes that: 'a correspondence student cannot come to his lesson without working; he has to answer the questions.'

My reader can reflect that there is always room for cheating, but so can a classroom based student. Likewise, a classroom student can be physically present, but their mind may be 'miles away'.

Childs also lists some other advantages of distance learning as:
'* distance learning is never unprepared, as classroom teaching sometimes is
 * a correspondence course always waits for the sick, the slow or the absent student.'

This last point raises another design aspect of distance learning which has exercised the minds of course planners, and this is should deadlines be set for the submission of written assignments? Childs' point would seem to suggest that deadlines can be put back if a student is ill, etc. However, other writers feel that distance learning needs to be very structured to help student's self-discipline, and set dates for submissions are important in this.

Returning to the report 'Distance no object', [Duncan, 1987, p34] Kirkland discusses the degree of flexiblity there can be in work deadlines. He says: 'While extensions to deadlines are normally granted if asked for in advance, the tendency for students to let work pile up shows itself in the more loosely timetabled second year of the course.'

Generally the adherence to immoveable deadlines is seen

as a useful prompt to possible flagging self-discipline on the part of the student. Obviously, a seriously ill student will receive sympathetic treatment, but in general, missing deadlines is viewed as a worrying indicator.

Earlier in this chapter the concern about the student's employer not giving the student sufficient support and time-off was raised. How have distance learning courses responded to this difficulty?

Clearly this is an aspect that course design can do little about, although frequently authors of distance learning packs build in case-studies etc. and instructions to the student to discuss these exercises with their line-manager. The intention here, amongst other things, is to give the student an opportunity to remind his/her manager that a course of work-related study is still going on and thus aim to keep the manager's interest alive (if it ever existed!).

The approach most frequently adopted by course designers in this regard is to outline the dangers resulting from the lack of employer support in the introductory literature sent to prospective students. An even more effective, but regretably seldom available, method is to interview prospective students and discuss the value of employer support at this early stage. As Kitto comments [Kitto, 1986, p195]: 'The (distance learning) institution can have no control over where the student works and hence what experience they gain. This problem can be solved to some extent at selection by admitting only students who look like having the appropriate kind of experience.'

Kitto adds that another approach was to arrange 'alternative field placements', i.e. arranging for the student to experience another work setting as part of the course. However, Kitto reports that this manoeuvre does not work particularly well in the experience of the youth worker training course.

Distance learning course designers have also tried to respond to the possible confusion of role for their students. As has already been mentioned, full-time classroom based students should have little difficulty in seeing themselves as 'students', but the distance learning student is likely to be in full-time employment and/or have a demanding domestic role. Although it may seem only to be playing with words, a number of writers

including Kitto, note the importance of addressing the students at every opportunity as 'student', rather than using blurring terms such as 'course member' or 'participant' [p196].

In this section it is important to address how distance learning courses have tried to design their material to not only advance the knowledge of their students, but also to provide new skills or reinforce existing ones and to help students examine their work practice attitudes.

The discussion about the place of group meetings and other face-to-face contact mentioned the benefits of such interaction in shaping appropriate attitudes and skills. The following example given by Rogers in her article 'Changing attitudes through distance learning' [Rogers, 1986, p15] illustrates the potential impact in this area of well devised material using more classic distance learning methods.

Rogers was at the time researching how Open University material was being used in other teaching settings. In the article she recalls interviewing a woman who had been the head of a home for elderly people for some twelve years. This head of home described how she had listened to an audio cassette recording which was part of the OU's 'Caring for Older People' course(P650). On the tape a woman describes her life caring for her mother who was suffering from senile dementia. She listened to the tape at home and it made her initially sad; she said she wept to hear the harrowing details of trying to cope with the mother's bizarre and distressing behaviour, the sheer grind of no let up night and day. But soon the sadness turned to anger at the thought that anybody should have to face that kind of task alone. In a caring society there should be help available. The student felt strongly that we should be doing something to help, but then she suddenly realised that we do - we take such people into residential homes. She realised that she, and others like her, take over completely. Her home had many residents suffering from senile dementia. Then she began to think about what tends to happen when these confused people are first brought to the home by their relatives. "All along I had always assumed they were being hard and uncaring, they seemed, all of them, just to dump their Mum or Dad and couldn't get away fast enough. We resented them, because we couldn't see how they could be so callous. Of course, listening to the tape, I now realise that it wasn't like that at all. They'd had enough - they had had

too much. They were worn down and needed to get away. With us, well we are on duty and then we go off, and somebody else takes over. We don't have the constant demand that they do - so we cannot understand the effects of often years and years of constant care with no release."

Rogers goes on to describe the dramatic impact this tape recording made upon the student. It changed her attitudes considerably and her subsequent work practice, making her seek out new skills in order to handle relative's stress more sympathetically. Rogers then suggests why the distance learning approach may have contributed particularly to the student's experience.

She firstly suggests that it was valuable for the student to listen and react to the material in private. 'Emotional stimuli have a particular capacity to influence attitudes, but it can be very difficult to become engaged in affect-provoking experiences in the classroom.'

Secondly the material was presented at 'first-hand' in effect via the audio tape. 'this is not a teacher telling a class how difficult it is to take on the 24-hour care of a demented old lady, but a person who is actually facing the problem, talking from raw experience.' Distance learning producers have the resources to seek out first-hand accounts and present them through high quality media; the classroom teacher is unlikely to be so well placed.

Thirdly, distance learning material, as already mentioned, is designed to promote the active involvement of the student and the tape sequence was followed by a number of activities which ensured that the students focused on various key issues.

Finally, the tape was designed to be part of the total experience of taking the particular course. The student was already in a 'set' because she had undertaken previous exercises and, as a result, was willing to ask herself "how would I feel if this happened to me?"

This lengthy example does illustrate how distance learning can have a major impact on a student's attitudes, given the right degree of sensitive design of the learning material.

Finally in this section I wish to briefly address the
question of how the distance learning approach tries to
encourage its student and to boost their confidence when
there is no direct contact between student and tutor. The
marking of an assignment/essay is always a fraught time,
even in the classroom, with the tutor aiming to guide a
student's learning without seeming to be over critical.
Adult students, especially, require 'kid-glove' handling
and in the classroom a tutor has an opportunity to explain
his/her written comments when returning work and to build
upon the student's reaction. How does the distance learning
tutor cope with the lack of contact at the time of
returning the marked assignment? Unless by some happy
coincidence the tutor is also moonlighting as a postman,
there is the potential for some long lasting
misunderstandings.

The Further Education Unit's booklet [Estell, 1986, p72]
discusses this issue and also mentions the contribution
by Lewis in his book 'How to tutor in an Open Learning
Scheme' [Lewis, 1981]. Both sources emphasise how
vulnerable the written word is to failing to communicate
accurately. The two parties in the exchange have no
recourse to non-verbal clues which can give clearer
meaning in face-to-face communications. There is also no
immediate feed-back which can indicate that understanding
has occurred. As the FEU report puts it: 'Communication
in such circumstances (face-to-face) is dynamic,
information flowing backwards and forwards, both parties
modifying their messages in accordance with the other's
reaction.'

The authors comment that it is difficult to convey in
writing a 'tone of voice' that is warm and friendly but
which at the same time does not hint at patronage or
condescension. Various tips are offered to tutors marking
distance learning work and naturally many of these are just
as applicable to a classroom based tutor who wishes to
maintain high standards, but it is the former who must be
especially vigilant since he/she cannot qualify a comment
nearly so easily. The authors also describe how the
distance learner can well be much more 'on edge' awaiting
the return of the marked work. They have had no opportunity
to discuss the assignment with a fellow student who has
also struggled with the same material. Mature students
frequently set themselves very high standards and the
distance learner is less likely to check with the tutor
to what depth a topic needs to be explored. The time gap
between sending off an assignment for marking and its

return may be extented by the mysterious internal workings of the Post Office, and this can lead to extra anxiety - " was my assignment so poor that my tutor has had to send it on for a second opinion?"

These two books encourage tutors to mark and return work speedily. They should always look for something to praise and convey that reading the work was enjoyable. Ideally the student should feel from the tutor's remarks that they are exploring the subject together, rather than the tutor seemingly sitting in judgement. In the early stages of a course a tutor should only focus on one or two weaknesses at a time and give plenty of examples of how something could have been better expressed, developed, etc.

This section has described a number of responses that have evolved over time aimed at improving the effectiveness of distance learning. Have these efforts paid off? Has there been a growth in distance learning courses and which professions in the 'caring services' now offer such courses?

(e)Existing Distance Learning courses in Great Britain

Just briefly, before the picture in Great Britain is reviewed, Osborne [Osborne, 1985, p58] notes that distance education has been a feature of social work education in the United States, Canada and Australia since the early 1970's. She describes a number of pre-qualifying and qualifying courses, with some being at degree level. Falling enrolment figures onto conventional courses caused some universities to first look into the distance learning alternatives, but once established and with teething difficulties ironed out, the courses have proved, in the main, successful.

Developments in Britain are at a slower pace when compared to the three countries listed above. One likely explanation reflects another pressure on some educators to consider distance education, namely the vast geographical distances to be found in the three countries identified.

Britain, being more compact geographically, has had less of a need to devise distance learning courses. At a professionally qualifying level it is quite difficult to identify courses. As Kitto [Kitto, 1986, p58] writes when commenting upon the lack of guidance she and her

colleagues experienced during the early days of
preparatory work on their youth work course: 'One problem
was that there were very few professional training
courses using distance learning methods. At the start of
the project (1979), the only one we knew about was the
Doncaster Assisted Private Study Course in Quarrying,
which was too different in subject matter to be really
useful as a model. We also obtained materials and advice
from Dundee College about their diploma course in
Educational Technology. Later on, we learned about a
course in Zoo Animal Management produced by the National
Extension College. This seemed much closer, in certain
respects, to a course for training youth and community
workers.'

Kitto does not elaborate upon this tantalising last
comment!

Clearly Kitto's own course needs to be mentioned as a
relevant professionally qualifying course and her book,
containing as it does a full evaluation of the course,
has been and will be referred to a number of times in
this study.

In the field of training for careers in medicine,
Heathcote's article [Heathcote, 1987, p31] describes the
development of a distance learning course leading to the
Certificate in Health Education. Stephenson writing in
the Journal of the Society of Occupational Medicine
[Stephenson, 1986, p139] describes the development
between 1979 and 1985 of the distance learning course in
Occupational Medicine. He comments that: 'the distance
learning course appears to be satisfying a training need
not previously available to many occupational physicians
and initial demand has lived up to the expectations of
the organisers.'

Within the scope of social work training, Osborne
[Osborne, 1985, p65] identifies the extensive use of Open
University material on the Caledonian Certificate in
Social Service Scheme and this is the most extensive
example of distance learning contributing to a
professionally qualifying social work course.

A report by the University of Bristol's School of
Applied Social Studies and their Dartington Social
Research Unit [Berridge, 1985] evaluates extensively the
pilot phase of the Open University's P653 'Caring for
Children and Young People', and mention has already been
made of the Open University's course 'Caring for Older

People' P650. Remembering that none of these are
professionally qualifying courses, the Open University
also has run, or still does, 'The Handicapped Person in
the Community' P251, (now ceased, but likely to be
replaced by a new course entitled 'The Disabling
Society); 'Children and Young People'P254, presently
being developed; 'Mental Handicap: Patterns for
Living'P555; and 'Mental Health Problems in Old Age'P577.
These courses are all run by the University's Department
of Health and Social Welfare and naturally there are
other OU courses from other departments which would also
be of value to someone in social work.

The above represent the major, identifiable, contribution
of distance learning to training of social work staff and
related professions.

The final section in this chapter picks up the central
theme of this research, i.e. seeking the views of
students who have undertaken a distance learning course.
Although this angle seems to be a relatively neglected
one in the literature, the following section records some
of the few descriptions of student's reactions.

(f)Student reaction to their distance learning course.

Reference has already been made to the difficulties
experienced by distance learning students as reported in
the ACACE survey [ACACE, 1983, p45] and now to balance
this negative view the same survey can be quoted from,
using its list of benefits as described by interviewed
students. These were:
*   the flexibility allowed by self-pacing.
*   distance learning in professional and in-service
training courses permits students to make direct
connections with their own work experience.
*   studying-at-a-distance learning helps the development
of transferable study skills - faster reading habits,
critical faculties, logical analysis and selective
notetaking - quite apart from subject specific skills.
*   the accessibility of distance learning for different
and educationally inexperienced adults who might be
intimidated by participation in classes.

These reported comments from students relate to distance
learning in general and are not specific to a particular
subject area. Osborne, when presenting a paper to a
CCETSW workshop looking at the inclusion of Open
University material on the Caledonian CSS scheme

[Osborne, 1982], gave a summary of student reaction to the distance learning approach within their course. She described a number of reactions which included a feeling that they had not had sufficient preparation in how to use the tapes (audio-cassettes) or the booklets. Students expressed the opinion that they should have been given time to experiment with the tapes. Some students found the tapes difficult to listen to in terms of vocabulary and note taking. Students felt that time was too limited for adequate coverage of the material and several spoke of the isolation from other students. Others mentioned the need for disciplined application to the task because of home and work distractions.

However, Osborne reported to the workshop that the student's comments were: 'generally positive about distance learning as an educational process and the material is on the whole considered to be of a high and acceptable standard.'

Her general feeling was that students had applied themselves more easily than might have been anticipated to this isolated form of study. This report by Osborne is of particular interest as the students were taking much of their CSS course in a conventional, classroom based way and therefore their reactions were based on a direct comparison of the two methods of learning.

The Dartington Social Research Unit's report [Berridge, 1985, p31] in its evaluation of the pilot phase of the Open University's course 'Caring for Children and Young People' looked at student reaction as part of the enquiry. In summary, they found: 'In general, the response to the pilot course was complimentary. 'Caring for Children and Young People' was perceived to be particularly useful to the more inexperienced students, although many of those who were more experienced claimed to have derived benefit from it, especially the group work sessions. In addition to acquiring general or 'theoretical' knowledge, the majority of students also revealed that they had learnt from the course certain practical skills in working with children and young people. There was some indication that the attitudes of a proportion of students had altered as a result of taking the pilot course, but more significant was the perception that students' behaviour in their work had been modified.'

The Dartington researchers also noted that many students became interested in further study as a result of the

course.

Naturally the above comments can be seen as a reaction to the content of the course and not necessarily to the style of delivery, but of course the two are closely related. Just before leaving this particular report, one reply from a student included in the report is worth including for its 'human angle'!
"It's now 2 o'clock in the morning and I've filled in my questionnaire after having worked all day and sat studying all evening. The reading bit I enjoyed but if I'd had to listen to that jingle and that man's funny voice much more I'd have thrown that tape recorder out the window!" [p17].

The above is a rare example of a direct quote from a student to be found in the literature on distance learning. One other publication that gives expression to the 'consumer voice' is the HMSO book called 'Distance no object' [Duncan,1982]. In its last section the student's view are sought and the following [p154, quoted with permission] are a selection from these, mainly from students who had completed the Diploma in Educational Technology run by Jordanhill and Dundee Colleges of Education.

In response to the question from Manwaring of 'why did you take a course by distance learning?'

John: "Well in my case living in Kenya it was obviously rather impr009al to do it by any other method. As it happens it rather fits in with my personal inclinations because I have always found assimilation of printed materials rather easier than listening to people, so it suits me doubly well."

Marion: "The courses available in educational technology are nearly always full-time courses and my job is such that I cannot leave it for any time without it getting completely out of hand. Also with having a family it was quite impossible for me to go regularly on long journeys so really I had little choice."

In response to the question 'what are the particular problems of adjusting to home-based study?'

John M.: "Both our parents live a long distance away and therefore we do get overnight visitors. Now we find all my work has to be cleared away, put into boxes, put into the loft and when they leave it has to come down again."

-33-

Derek: "I would say self-discipline is more important than anything."

In response to the question 'what did you think to the study units we sent out?' Firstly in terms of timescales and rate of work:

Alan: "Generally very good. What I do like are the scales on the units - when you say this unit should take 30 minutes. Even if I do not do it in 30 minutes I can at least judge how well I have coped with that particular topic."

David: "I think the times ought to be left off."

Andrzej: "Some people read faster or know something about the subject or want to put more into that unit. I don't think it makes much difference how long it takes."

Secondly in terms of including questions in the text:

Alan: "I do not like to find two pages without any questions. I don't like a lot of reading without activity. I like units with plenty of activity."

Brian: "I actually find the reverse. It irritates me no end to find a large proportion of the unit is questions."

Thirdly in terms of the presentation of the material:

Andrzej: "My only criticism is the writing has a certain flatness in a lot of the material. Sometimes I wish that you would write things that you don't really believe just to wake us up. It is all pre-digested. I think there is a danger in distance learning of processing everything for the student."
"If you are asked to compare different controversial views, it raises the whole level up."

Fourthly in terms of the use of cassettes and filmstrips:

Marion: "I didn't find them very useful. It was annoying having to find equipment."

John B.: "I think there is a clear distinction between having both tapes and filmstips which specifically require that particular medium and those for which the only justificstion is to provide a change in medium."

David: "They were a nuisance. Having to clear a wall or darken a room, then get yourself back into reading the materials, I found it a lot of hassle to be quite honest".

Fifthly in terms of college blocks:

Brian: "They are important because of the tutor contact as well as meeting colleagues on the course. I would feel unhappy about doing the whole course entirely at a distance without any face-to-face contact at all."

John B: "This is the first time I have been (on a block) and we are only half way through but so far it is my impression - as with tapes - I simply find the opportunity of personal identification probably more useful than any specific knowledge that I am likely to pick up."

In response to 'how possible is it to tutor at a distance?'

John B.: "I would like to say that I have much appreciated the correspondence I have had with with my tutors and I think that I can quite truthfully say that I have had more interaction, albeit by post, on this course than I have ever had on any previous traditional course, which only reflects on those courses."

Brian: "I would like more telephone contact...... I would welcome a call to say - it is a while since we heard from you - are there any problems?"

Marion: "I find telephone calls useful but I also found that if you write a letter you often solve your own problems in writing the letter."

Derek: "I know that I am reluctant to phone - I will try and get any assistance anywhere else, rather than contact you - especially at night."

In response to the question 'are there any other general points?'

Marion: "Despite minor problems, the kind of opportunities to study things that you could not normally do far outweighs the disadvantages of things like that and there would have been no other way that I could have done it. I would have regretted not having done it very much."

I have quoted, with permission, at length from this
section in 'Distance no Object' as the material is very
relevant to this study and there are so few other sources
of student reaction to their distance learning course.
The next chapter now focuses on the methodology used in
my research aimed, as it is, at adding to the literature
on the consumer's view of distance learning.

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CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The aims of this particular study were given in the final
section of the first chapter, but they can be summarised
by way of introduction to this chapter on the methodology
as:-

'As regards to training for the personal social services,
to compare the students'experience of following a
distance learning course with the experience of students
who have undertaken a classroom based course.'

The word 'student' is deliberately underlined to
emphasise the intention of giving the consumers of the
courses a chance to express their views. As discussed in
the introductory chapter, the relative value of distance
learning is frequently described in terms of its
economics, its use of new educational technology, etc.,
whereas this study aims to give the consumer a voice.

How then to achieve this goal? What data is required to
meet this intention?

Related literature

Clearly the first step was to seek out any related
literature and build upon this, rather than repeat work
already conducted. Therefore, early on in the study, it
was necessary to identify any key books/articles with a
bearing on the topic. Through contacts with CCETSW, the
path quickly led to the CCETSW study paper by Osborne
entitled 'Distance Learning in Social Work Education'
[Osborne 1985], a book which was discussed in Chapter 2.
Having quickly identified this particular source it was
tempting to expect to find similar, equally relevant
publications, but it was soon discovered that Osborne's
work represented a rare find.

Literature searches were conducted through the Dorset
Institute of Higher Education using Dialog's ERIC
database and through Southampton University using the
DHSS database. Since few leads resulted from these two
approaches, information was also sought from CCETSW's own

information office and from the United Nations University - International Centre for Distance Learning; the latter organisation being based at the Open University's Walton Hall in Milton Keynes. There was also correspondence with the editors of the journal 'Open Learning'; staff at the Council for Educational Technology; staff at the Cranfield Institute of Technology and staff at the Dartington Social Research Unit. Finally, a manual search was made of the Social Services Citation Index (SSCI).

Throughout these searches the key words used covered:-

> DISTANCE LEARNING; OPEN LEARNING; SOCIAL WORK
> TRAINING; SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION; SOCIAL SERVICE
> TRAINING; SOCIAL SERVICE EDUCATION; STUDENT
> ATTITUDE; STUDENT SATISFACTION; PARTICIPANT
> ATTITUDE; PARTICIPANT SATISFACTION.

When it was discovered that there were few entries in this particular field, additional search key words were added:-

> MEDICAL TRAINING; MEDICAL EDUCATION; PROFESSIONAL
> TRAINING; PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION.

Relevant publications were obtained through inter-library loan following on from the leads obtained from the above literature searches.

Direct contact with the Dartington Social Research Unit of Bristol University led to the obtaining of their evaluation report of the pilot phase of the Open University's P.653 'Caring for Children and Young People' [Berridge et. al. 1985]. The unit also supplied a copy of their actual questionnaires used in their research work.

Despite numerous enquiries, mainly through the Open University's Northern region office, no other related current research work was discovered.

The choice of courses to investigate.

The infancy of the application of distance learning to social work training has already been mentioned. This fact helped to some extent when it came to the question of deciding which distance learning course to use in this study. The Open University's Department of Health and Social Welfare was quickly identified as the most

prolific of the providers of distance learning in the field. The Open University has made vast strides in its short history in establishing high professional standards in the courses it offers. Equally, it has always endeavoured to actively explore areas of training need at national level. Social work training is one of these areas, and the Open University has made a significant response by offering a number of courses.

No professionally qualifying courses are offered by the Open University, but a range of shorter courses are offered of which one entitled 'The Handicapped Person in the Community' (OU course number P251) was a well established course at the time this research was being conducted. The course, with a recommended study time of 180 hours, was available both in the Open University undergraduate programme (where it counted as a half credit towards the six credits required for a degree) and the associate student programme where the award was a Certificate of Satisfactory Completion. The course was first presented in 1975, remade in 1982 and finally withdrawn in 1988 having been studied by more than 7,000 students over the 13 years. A replacement course is under discussion, possibly to be called 'The Disabling Society'.

'The Handicapped Person in the Community' represented, for my research purposes, a relatively in-depth coverage of a social work related topic, extending over some 8 months and had been taken by a considerable number of students from which to select my sample.

The question then arose as to which classroom based course to chose for the comparison group of students. Lengthy thought and investigation led to no obvious candidate. Which ever choice of course one homed in upon, it still left numerous variables unmatched. Early on in the process of choosing, the possibility of using the Central Council in Education and Training in Social Work's (CCETSW) course called the 'In-service course in Social Care' arose. This course is a non-qualifying basic social work one, aimed more as a starting point for those seeking qualifications. However, for many students it is seen as a course in its own right and they have no intention of progressing further. The choice of this course had some attraction as the academic level was seen as broadly comparable (although probably lower) and the ability range of the students at enrolment had some similarity with the Handicapped Person in the Community, anything from no qualifications through to first degree

level. Upon further consideration the dissimilarities
became apparent. Two major differences were that the
'In-service Course in Social Care' runs over a full
academic year, considerably longer than P251. The other
problem was the generic nature of the course compared to
the very client specific focus of the chosen OU course.
These factors were viewed as posing matching problems
that could not be overcome.

As other classroom based social work courses were
considered, the same kinds of problems surfaced. After a
great deal of discussion the decision was made,
especially in view of the qualitaive nature of the
research, that the perfect match for statistical
analysis purposes was not going to be forthcoming.

The deliberations regarding the choice of the research
samples had by now taken some while and rapid decisions
had to be made to avoid time pressures becoming still
more pressing. Relatively easy access to the students
became an important consideration and so the choice of
classroom based student groups was mainly made upon
geograhical nearness (to help facilitate the later
face-to-face interviews).

In the event three different classroom based courses
were chosen so as to minimise the danger of any one
variable distorting the results. The courses chosen
were:
a. The Post-qualifying course in Ageing, Health and
Social Care. This is a CCETSW recognised course aimed
at professionally qualified workers in the personal
social services and the health services who work with
elderly people. The course requires part-time
attendance at Southampton University, the only
University in the country that runs it. It runs over
one year but this includes a six month period for the
preparation and submission of a project.

b. The Diploma in Applied Social Studies which is a
post-graduate course qualifying students to
professionally practice social work. The course,
validated by CCETSW, runs at Southampton University, but
is also available in many other centres throughout the
country. It involves full-time attendance for a year, but
much of this period is spent in social work practice
under supervision. Successful completion of the course
leads to the award of the Certificate of Qualification in
Social Work (CQSW).

c. The Certificate in Social Service which is a professionally qualifying course, requiring half-time attendance over a period of two years whilst the student remains in employment. The course is available nationally and the research group was drawn from the Wessex CSS scheme. The CSS uses, as part of its tuition approach, study supervisors who support and guide students on an individual basis.

These then were the three classroom based courses chosen for the research.

Data collection method

When deciding upon the method of data collection for the study, constraints of time and finance weighed heavily. Clearly, with the study aiming to give the consumer a voice as to their experience of the different styles of training for social work, then 'face to face' interviews would have been of real value. The problem then arose of the practicalities of meeting an adequate number of ex-students for such interviews. Distance learning students by their very nature are scattered. As for the classroom based students, they had finished their courses and many had 'got on their bike' and obtained employment. One individual must have had a very damp ride - all the way to Canada!

The time and money required for meeting a large number of individuals for an interview was simply unavailable. Instead, the alternative approach of using a postal questionnaire was considered and adopted. It was decided that a postal questionnaire would allow access to a reasonable number of ex-students in an acceptable manner for this research paper.

Decisions on the size of the samples were to some extent determined by the numbers of students actually available. The numbers of students finishing the PQ course on Ageing was limited to 12 or so, as was the number finishing the Wessex CSS course. It must be remembered that another feature of the selection of the samples was that individuals should have finished their relevant course within the last 6-12 months, and this again was a limiting factor. In the event a sample of 30 distance learning students and 30 classroom based students was decided upon, with the latter group further divided into three equal groups of 10 depending upon which actual

course they took.

Handling the data from 60 respondents seemed a realistic workload and still allowed the pursuit of the previously held intention, namely conducting some face to face interviews. In this latter regard it was decided to conduct such interviews with 6 respondents. The selection of this group of six from the overall 60 postal questionnaire respondents was based on (a) whether they had expressed a willingness to be further interviewed and (b) their geographical nearness to Dorset (the home county of the author).

Having decided upon the research populations, access to these individuals then had to be agreed by the personnel responsible for running the various courses. Fortunately much of the early discussion about the choice of topic for the research had involved the same people that now needed to give permission for access to the students. In respect of all the courses it was agreed that it would be necessary for the relevant tutor to write a covering letter to the students enclosed with the questionnaire and an example of such a letter is given in the appendix(A).

In the event it was relatively easy to obtain the permission of staff at the Dorset Institute of Higher Education for access to CSS students, and staff at Southampton University for the PQ and DASS students. As regards the Open University's student group, matters were much more complicated, but fortunately crucial support was obtained from the OU's Northern Region Director and she was willing and able to steer my request through the University's research projects co-ordinating panel and obtain the agreement of colleagues in the Southern Region (the region that it had been decided to concentrate upon for the main mailing of the questionnaire).

For all the agencies involved undertakings had to be entered into in respect of the Data Protection Act.

Design of the data collection method

As has already been mentioned, a postal questionnaire was to be the main data collection method. Somewhat fortuitously British Gas selected me, out of thousands no doubt, to obtain my views on their services through a postal questionnaire and their booklet format with the covering letter forming the outside first page seemed

eminently practical. The questionnaire that I wished to use had to be relatively rugged and had to run to some eight pages and yet not exceed the standard second class post rate when included with a sizeable stamped, addressed envelope. The British Gas offering seemed to fit these various requirements and so one 'warmed' to the idea of a booklet form questionnaire and this approach was subsequently developed.

Numerous enquiries were made as to how best to print the questionnaire and it was decided to simply use a word processor and print from a photocopier. The finished product was perfectly clear to read and the weight of paper used was right as regards the postal cost considerations.

Clearly, before all these practical decisions could be made, considerable thought had to be put into what and how many questions were to be included in the questionnaire. Possible themes/issues for questions were brain-stormed with numerous people and an early list is included in the appendix(B) by way of example. From these themes evolved possible questions which were assembled into a draft questionnaire and this first attempt was given to four friends or relatives for completion and comment. Of these four people, two individuals had undertaken the CSS and two had undertaken the OU's 'The Handicapped Person in the Community'. All four were returned in the fullness of time and the reactions enabled the questionnaire to be refined into the final version for the pilot stage.

With the questionnaire now ready for the pilot study it became necessary to identify the target group of students. Close links had by now been established with the Northern region of the Open University and it was a natural development to ask them to help in the pilot phase. Such a move would also leave the Southern region of the OU available for the main study and make any follow-up face to face interviews more practical as regards travelling distances. Equally, the classroom based groups proposed also lived in the Southern area and therefore some attempt could be made for matching for any geographical variations.

Discussions with Northern region revealed that there had been ten successful finishers of the 'Handicapped Person in the Community' course finishing in October 1986 (the most recent group available). It was decided not to contact 'failures' as apparently a sizable number of

people register on OU courses with no real intention of
completing the course, but instead wishing to obtain the
course material for whatever purpose. Clearly contact
with such individuals would not have served a very useful
purpose for this particular research.

Ten blank questionnaires were sent off to the Northern
regional office in July of 1987 for distribution by OU
staff direct to the ten ex-students. The respondents were
supplied with stamped addressed envelopes with my home
address on them. Each questionnaire was identified by a
number only (01-10), with the OU's regional office
retaining the only record of which individual respondent
corresponded to which number.

By the 31st. August all ten questionnaires had been
received; a 100% return.

Revisions to the questionnaire following the pilot

The response to the pilot questionnaire was remarkably
positive and no fundamental changes to its content and
structure were required. However, there were some 31
changes made and these, briefly, are now described. The
final version of the questionnaire is given in
appendix(C).

The use of the phrase 'social work training' had been
made a number of times in the pilot questionnaire and
this wording had, in fact, caused some anxiety in early
drafts. Reactions by 3 of the respondents confirmed that
this phrase was too specific. These 3 respondents did not
regard themselves as being involved in social work and
use of the phrase clearly put them off. For example,
respondent 04 described herself as a secretary and,
although she struggled on and completed the questionnaire,
it was obvious that she felt almost a fraud in
responding. Open University courses by their very 'open'
nature are pursued by a variety of people for a variety
of reasons. The OU's record keeping system was unable
to distinguish between students with a social work and a
non-social work background and so it was known that other
non-social work respondents would be likely to be
included in the main study. It therefore became necessary
to find a phrase which would not put off such respondents
as their views would still be of interest. As a result

the phrase 'training for the personal social services' was used, or better still, the phrase 'social work training' was cut out altogether and 'training' was used instead. These particular changes were especially important for the introductory letter, as this was the part of the questionnaire that set the scene and would either encourage the respondent to continue reading or not.

The only other change to affect the introductory letter was to improve an ungainly use of the English language and thus 'the questionnaire should take no longer than approximately half an hour to complete', became 'the questionnaire should take approximately half an hour to complete'.

Pages 1,2 and 3 of the questionnaire survived unscathed except for the deletion of my personal reference code, which the word processor had over enthusiastically included at the bottom of each page, rather than just at the end.

On page 4 the instructions to Question 9 were modified, as the original version had caused confusion for at least one respondent. Also on page 4, the response 'others' in question 9 was dropped down by a couple of lines to make it stand out more clearly, as only two respondents had used this option and a greater response had been expected.

The only change on page 5 related to underlining the word 'you' in question 10. The aim of question 10 had been to obtain the personal opinion of the respondent on whether they considered distance/open learning to have higher or lower status when compared to classroom based learning. Respondent 01 for instance queried 'higher/lower status to whom? - employer or self? Therefore Question 10 became 'When considering comparable Distance Learning/Open Learning courses, do you think classroom courses have.. higher/lower/the same status/don't know'.

The questions on page 6 were all open in nature and designed to encourage as full a response as possible, describing the respondent's views on the strengths and weaknesses of their course. In an attempt to make the questions as 'encouraging' as possible, two minor changes were made resulting in the questions reading:-
     'Still with the statements of question 11 in mind, please elaborate on any of them if you wish'
rather than:-

'Please elaborate below on any of the
afore-mentioned statements if you wish'

                        and
        'Are there any other aspects you would like to add
to my list of statements which you consider I have
missed?'
rather than:-
        'Are there any aspects you would like to add to the
aforementioned list which you consider I have missed?'

On page 7 only one change was made, namely the addition
of the word 'fees', so that Question 12 now read:-
        'Did you incur personal expenditure whilst on the
course (fees, travel, books, postage, etc), not covered
by a grant or your employer?'

Alterations for page 8 amounted to the inclusion of one
further dimension for the respondents to consider, namely
'did they consider that they were more or less aware of
their client's circumstances after the completion of
their course.' This change was made as it had been noted
that three of the respondents (01, 03, and 10) had all
made related comments as part of their answers to
earlier, open questions.

Finally, the spacing on page 9 was increased by running
onto the blank page 10, as some respondents had run out
of space when answering Questions 16 and 17 in a very
full and helpful way.

The total of 31 alterations previously mentioned was
reached due to the fact that a number of the changes
described above occurred more than once.

Both Questions 11 and 14 had two of their responses
deliberately reversed in order to keep the respondents
'on their toes' during a rather long, repetitive
question. The results from the pilot seemed to confirm
that this purpose had been fulfilled.

Having made these alterations to the questionnaire
following the pilot, all the data was discarded.

Collection of the raw data

With the modifications to the questionnaire now complete,
the 60 copies needed were printed using the same method
as with the pilot:- word processor and photocopier. In

the production of the questionnaire for the various sub-groups, the only point to watch was to ensure that where reference was made to the respondent's actual course (mainly in the introductory letter), the correct course was referred to by name. Similarly, the wording for Question 10 had to be reversed depending upon to whom the questionnaire was being sent.

In the third week of November 1987 the 60 questionnaires were sent off to the various distribution points:-

a) 10 copies (301-310) were sent to the Department of Social Work Studies at Southampton for posting to 10 ex-students of the Post Qualifying course in Ageing, Health and Social Care. These individuals had finished their course in the proceeding July, although a final paper could be submitted a few months later. Selecting the 10 was relatively simple as only 12 had completed the course and , of these, two had moved too far away to offer any chance of subsequent interview.

b)10 copies (201-210) were also sent to the same department at Southampton University for posting to ex-students of the Diploma in Applied Social Studies. They had finished in the preceeding August. Some forty individuals had finished the course and their selection was based upon whether the University had a reliable forwarding address. Apparently ex-DASS students have a reputation for leaving no trail behind them as they emerge from Southampton's chrysalis!

c)10 copies (101-110) were sent to the Department of Nursing and Social Services at the Dorset Institute of Higher Education for distribution to ex-students of the Certificate in Social Service. As the course covers Hampshire, Wiltshire and Dorset, it was decided to select individuals with a home address in Dorset or as near to Dorset as possible.

d)30 copies (401-430) were sent to the Open University's Northern Region office for distribution to ex-students of the The Handicapped Person in the Community (P251). The pilot study having covered the Northern region, it had been agreed that the main study would draw on students from the OU's Southern region. Permission was given by Southern region staff for their students to be contacted and Northern region office staff offered to do the actual mailing. Once again, selection of respondents was made on the proximity of their home address to Dorset.

For all the above sub-groups, the posting out office retained the only record of which questionnaire was sent to which individual; the actual questionnaires being identified by a number only. Each respondent received a covering letter from his or her past tutor introducing them to the research project and indicating the agencies support for the work (appendix A). They also received a copy of the questionnaire (appendix C) and a stamped addressed envelope for return to my home address.

Response to the main study questionnaire

Although the bulk of replies were received by early January, the last questionnaire arrived in April having been caught up in someone's house move.

The response rates were as follows:-

Table 3.1.   **RESPONSE RATE TO POSTAL QUESTIONNAIRE**

Course	Number sent out	Number returned	% return
PQ course in Ageing	10	9	90
Dip. in App. Soc. Studies.	10	6	60
Cert. in Social Service	10	8	80
Handicap. Person in Community	30	24	80
Totals	60	47	78.3

This level of return for a postal questionnaire was most encouraging. The only sub-group that can be described as disappointing is the Diploma in Applied Social Studies.

-48-

As has already been stated, the University of Southampton was somewhat sceptical about the accuracy of their address records and this could offer a possible explanation. It can also be noted that the average age of the DASS respondents was the youngest of all the sub-groups, and perhaps this topic of research has greater interest to a more mature type of student and one who has returned back to study after a break of some years.

The final question on the questionnaire asked whether the respondent was willing to be contacted at a later date to allow a face to face interview in order to discuss some of the issues in greater depth. Only two of the 47 returned questionnaires declined to be contacted and so this proved a promising start to the final phase of the data collection part of the research.

It had been decided to conduct 'face to face' interviews with six respondents in order to explore the views expressed in their questionnaire in greater depth. Given the 47 returned questionnaires, it was decided to aim for three interviews from the OU sub-group, and one from each of the CSS, DASS and PQ course sub-groups. The selection of these six people was done on the basis of writing to the agency holding the records and asking them to identify the 3 or 1 respondent(s) living closest to my home. The agencies were given the identifying numbers of those respondents who had expressed a willingness to be contacted later, and obviously the selection was only made from such people.

Written or telephone contact was made with the six and arrangements were made to meet them.

The interviews were focused in nature, with my having a list of questions I wished to cover by the end of the contact. However, the atmosphere was relatively relaxed with discussion frequenlty requiring little 'steering' on my part. This list is given in the appendix(D). All the interviews were tape recorded to allow better recall, the subject having given permission for the recording in the knowledge that the tape would be wiped clean once written notes had been taken from it.

All the interviews were conducted in the respondent's work place at lunch times or at the end of the working day. All the people concerned were very cooperative and the interviews were unrushed. The audio cassettes were 45 minutes long and this time period proved very adequate

for the issues that were covered. Each respondent was given their original questionnaire to remind them of their previous answers, although it was stressed that no test of memory was involved. This particular point needed to be made since two of the interviews were conducted approximately 12 months after they had completed the postal questionnaire. In the main, however, the interviews took place approximately 9 months after the completion of the questionnaire. By way of introduction to the face to face interview, the people concerned were told that I wished to 'add flesh to the bones' provided by their written answers. The purpose of our meeting was to add still further to the consumer's voice and that their recollections would greatly enhance my research. They were aware that they were one of six respondents of the original questionnaire to be interviewed.

Of the six respondents interviewed, five were female and all of these people were engaged in social work. The one male interviewed was the Head Teacher in a special education unit attached to a junior school.

Therefore the <u>data base</u> for this research project is as follows:-

    There were 47 respondents to the questionnaire
    of which:

    24 were Open University students on the Handicapped
    Person in the Community.

    6 were students on the Applied Social Studies
    Diploma at Southampton University.

    9 were students on the Post Qualifying course in
    Ageing, Health and Social Care also at Southampton.

    8 were students on the Certificate in Social
    Service at the Dorset Institute of Higher
    Education.

    From this group of 47 respondents, a further 6 were
    interviewed of which
    3 were Open University students
    1 was a DASS student
    1 was a PQ in Ageing student
    1 was a CSS student.

Adequacy of the data in meeting the Aims

On reading the aims and the processes required to
meet these aims given in the first chapter, those
relating to the obtaining of data fit well with the data
obtained following the receipt of the completed
questionnaires and the completion of the face to face
interviews.

The response rate of 78.3% to the postal questionnaire
was most encouraging and respondent's lengthy answers
to open questions were also very helpful. Considerable
data was therefore available for later analysis and,
equally encouraging was the fact that of the 47
respondents, 44 expressed a willingness to be contacted
at a later date for a follow-up interview if required.

Bearing in mind the research's intention of expressing
the voice of the consumer of various methods of
delivery of social work education, this level of
response promised well in achieving such an intention.
To this can be added the totally positive response of
the six respondents selected for further interview. The
mix of the written responses from 47 questionnaires and
the further verbal responses from the 6 individuals
interviewed, offered a great deal of fruitful material
for analysis.

The analysis of the data

As stated earlier, a statistical computer programme was
required to aid the process of analysing the data from
the questionnaires. There are a number of possible
programmes, but personal circumstances restricted the
choice somewhat. Having considered such possibilities
as Oracle, Minitab, SPSSX and Statgraphics, it was
decided that SNAP would provide the right balance
between being capable of the job and also being
available for use at home on a PC computer. SNAP was
also readily available and so analysis work was able to
proceed without delay.

In order to facilitate the transfer of the data to
computer the first step was to create a coding book,
identifying by column:-
the Questionnaire's question number; the topic of the
particular question; the number of computer column
entries required; and the code for the information to be

entered.

Two copies of the coding book were made and stored in separate locations in order to safeguard the information.

The data from the questionnaires was then entered directly onto the computer and a manual check was then made to ensure its accuracy. In four places in the questionnaire the 'pattern' of responses was intentionally reversed in order to keep the respondents 'on their toes', and care had to be taken when entering the data from these four responses to ensure that this reversal was recognised.

The SNAP programme was then used to give a print-out of frequencies relating to all aspects of the data collected from the 47 questionnaires in order to give an overview of the data.

For clarity of presentation, it was decided to devote separate chapters to each of the two sources of questionnaire data, i.e. one chapter for the data from the questionnaires returned from respondents who had studied on a distance learning course, and one chapter for the data from questionnaires returned from respondents who had followed a classroom based course. A further chapter was then devoted to a description of the findings from the six face to face interviews and responses to the open questions in the questionnaire (Chapter 6).

The data from the questionnaires was mainly presented in the form of tables, without any comment. Following the three chapters of results, Chapter 7 was devoted to a comparison of the data from the three chapters, but again without comment.

The next chapter, Chapter 8, offers a full discussion and analysis of the results in three sections. The first section comments upon the results from the distance learners, the next comments upon the results from the classroom based learners and the final section makes a comparison between the two sets of results. In all the sections reference is made to the face-to-face interviews and open questions where relevant.

The final chapter, Chapter 9, offers the main conclusions of the research and suggests some future lines of investigation.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS — DISTANCE LEARNING

Introduction

As stated in the preceeding chapter, the results from the research will be presented in separate chapters depending upon whether the data was obtained from (a)distance learners (b)classroom based learners, or (c)face to face interviews.

In this first results chapter, data obtained from the 24 returned questionnaires from respondents who had taken the Open University's 'The Handicapped Person in the Community' course will be presented. Some open questions were included and these results will appear in Chapter 6. As previously indicated, 30 questionnaires were sent out to this group and 24 were returned, representing an 80% return rate. All questionnaire forms were fully and clearly completed and so no responses were wasted.

The Data   Section A - GENERAL BACKGROUND

Table 4.1   AGE

Of the 24 respondents there were:

Under 21 years	1
21 - 24 years	4
25 - 34 years	15
35 - 44 years	4

N =	24

SEX

Of the 24 respondents there were 4 males and 20 females in the group.

Table 4.2   **PREVIOUS SOCIAL SERVICE TRAINING COURSES**
Actual number of social service related courses identified by the respondents.

No previous such course taken	8
One previous such course taken	8
Two previous such courses taken	8

N =	24

Of the 8 respondents who had taken one previous social service related course and the 8 who had taken two previous courses, how many of the total of 24 courses had been taken by distance learning and how many had been taken by classroom based learning?

Table 4.3   **PREVIOUS COURSE - DL OR CLASSROOM**

One course taken via distance learning	10
Two courses taken via distance learning	4
One course taken via classroom learning	2
Two courses taken via classroom learning	2

No respondent had taken a mix of previous distance and classroom based courses.

Table 4.4   **GENERAL EDUCATION**

Respondents were asked to indicate the general education they had had in the past. The results showed that 5 respondents had reached 'O' level standard, 5 had reached 'A' level standard and 14 had obtained a first degree.

No formal educational qualification	0
Educated to CSE level	0
Educated to GCE 'O' level	5
Educated to GCE 'A' level	5
Educated to ONC/OND; BTEC Nat. Dip.	0
Educated to HNC/HND; BTEC Higher Nat.	0
Educated to First Degree	14
Educated to Post Graduate	0

N =	24

Of the 14 with a First Degree, it was possible to identify that 13 of these were obtained with the OU.

Table 4.5　　TYPE OF PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATION

From the information given on respondent's education,
their professional qualifications were recorded. Eleven
respondents had no professional qualification, 7 were
teachers, 4 had medical qualification, one had social
work qualifications and one was a qualified careers
worker.

Social work qualification	1
Nursing/Medical qualification	4
Youth and Community	0
Teaching	7
Management	0
Careers Guidance	1
None	11

	N = 24

EMPLOYMENT STATUS

In the group there were 5 unemployed people, 14 working
full time and 5 working on a part time basis.

Table 4.6　　NATURE OF EMPLOYMENT

If they were employed in social care work, respondents
were asked what organisation employed them. The largest
group, numbering 7, were employed by Local Education
Authorities, 4 were employed within the Health Service, 3
with the Social Services and one by the Careers Service.

Local Authority Social Services Dept.	3
Probation Department	0
Local Education Authority	7
Voluntary Agency	0
Private Agency	0
Health Service	4
Careers Service	1
Other	3
None of these	1

	N = 19

'Other' included Lecturers in Polytechnics, and

'none of these' related to respondents not employed in social care work.

Table 4.7   SOCIAL CLASS

Based on information given in their answers, respondents were categorised by social class. Of those that could be classified, 13 came from social class III N, 7 from social class III M, and 1 from social class IV.

Social Class	I	0
Social Class	II	0
Social Class	III N	13
Social Class	III M	7
Social Class	IV	1
Social Class	V	0
Not classified (lack of information)		3

	N =	24

Classification of social class based on 'Classification of occupations' [Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, 1980].

Section B - MOTIVATION FOR STUDY

The reader is referred to the layout of the questionnaire as given in the appendix. As can be seen, section B is almost entirely based upon one question in which the respondent is asked to consider some 18 possible reasons for undertaking an educational course and to indicate whether the given reasons featured in their thinking prior to taking the course. Respondents were also invited to add any additional reasons for study which influenced them and which were not listed in the questionnaire.

Respondents were asked to identify the three most important reasons by giving a rank order between 1 - 3. Respondents were able to identify further reasons from the list, but these were classified as unranked. Where respondents made no response against a possible reason, this was recorded as not given.

The following table (4.8) gives the responses to each possible reason for study. Five entries (marked with an '*') relate to additional reasons given by the respondents themselves in response to the invitation to list aspects which the questionnaire had not covered. The results are listed in an approximate descending order of positive responses.

When reading this table, the reader should prefix each response by:
'I undertook the course because'

Table 4.8

	Given rank 1	Given rank 2	Given rank 3	Unrank -ed	Not Given
IT WOULD HELP MY SELF DEVELOPMENT	3	3	4	4	10
COURSE CONTENT LOOKED INTERESTING	1	3	5	5	10
LEARNING APPROACH FITTED MY WAY OF LIFE	3	1	3	7	10
IT WOULD ENHANCE MY CAREER PROSPECTS	2	3	1	4	14
IT WOULD GIVE ME NEW SKILLS	0	4	2	6	12
I NEEDED THE STIMULUS OF NEW IDEAS	2	1	3	4	14
IT WOULD HELP ME TO DO MY PRESENT JOB BETTER	2	1	2	5	14
PREFER STUDYING ON MY OWN	0	2	0	6	16
PREPARATION FOR A RETURN TO WORK	0	1	1	1	21
COURSE WAS THE MOST RELEVANT AVAILABLE	0	0	1	8	15
HELP JOB CHANGE TO A NEW ROLE eg MANAGEMENT	0	0	1	3	20

	Given rank 1	Given rank 2	Given rank 3	Unrank -ed	Not Given
HELP JOB CHANGE TO A NEW CLIENT GROUP	1	0	0	2	21
CHANCE TO OBTAIN AN OU HALF CREDIT *	1	0	0	1	22
STEP TOWARDS HIGHER DEGREE *	0	1	0	0	23
ABLE TO GET FINANCE FROM EMPLOYER	0	0	0	4	20
I HAD SPARE TIME ON MY HANDS	0	0	0	2	22
MY LINE-MANAGER SUGGESTED IT	0	0	0	0	24
A COLLEAGUE RECOMMENDED IT	0	0	0	0	24
REASONABLY INEXPENSIVE WAY OF STUDYING	0	0	0	0	24
PREFER STUDYING IN A CLASSROOM GROUP	0	0	0	0	24
USEFUL QUALIFICATION FOR SOCIAL WORK *	0	0	0	0	24
REFRESH MYSELF FOR PRACTICE *	0	0	0	0	24
CHANCE TO LOOK AT OTHER PRACTICE *	0	0	0	0	24

N = 24

From this lengthy table it can be seen that some of the reasons for studying on the course attracted greater support than others.

The reason that 'it would help my self development' was given 3 rank 1's, 3 rank 2's, 4 rank 3's and 4 unranked

responses.

The reason that 'the content of the course looked interesting' was given 1 rank 1, 3 rank 2's, 5 rank 3's, and 5 unranked responses.

The reason that 'the particular approach to learning fitted my way of life' was given 3 rank 1's, 1 rank 2's, 3 rank 3's and 7 unranked responses.

Although not so positively supported, the reasons 'it would enhance my career prospects'; 'it would give me new skills' and 'I needed the stimulus of new ideas' can be identified as the next cluster.

When looking at the results for the least favoured reasons for studying, there were seven reasons which received no support at all, neither ranked or unranked. The seven reasons were :-
    'My line-manager suggested it.'
    'A colleague recommended it.'
    'It was a reasonably inexpensive way of studying.'
    'I prefer studying in a classroom group.'
    'It would be a useful qualification for social work.'
    'It would refresh myself for practice.'
    'A chance to look at other practice.'

Table 4.9   STATUS OF DISTANCE LEARNING COMPARED
            WITH CLASSROOM BASED LEARNING

Results obtained indicated that, when considering comparable distance/open learning courses, 5 respondents felt that classroom based courses have a higher status, 7 felt that they have lower status, 8 thought the relative status to be the same and 3 did not know.

Higher status	5
Lower status	7
The same	8
Don't know	3
No response	1

	N = 24

Section C - AN EVALUATION OF THE COURSE

In this section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to evaluate the quality of their course by responding to questions that identified a number of possible strengths and weaknesses of an educational course. They were also asked whether they felt they had had enough support whilst studying and also what financial outlay they had had to make.

This part of the questionnaire also had more 'open' questions and any comments expressed as a result of these open questions will be described in Chapter 6.

Table 4.10 relates to Question 11 on the questionnaire which read as follows:

'Realistically most courses have strengths and weaknesses. Listed below are a number of statements about your course. After each statement are the words 'Agree', 'Disagree', and 'No View'. Please circle one of these responses for each statement.'

The results are listed in a descending order of 'Agree' responses.

Table 4.10	Agree	Dis agree	No View
THE PRESENTATION OF THE MATERIAL USED ON YOUR COURSE WAS GOOD	22	1	1
THE COURSE REQUIRED CONSIDERABLE SELF-DISCIPLINE	22	2	0
THE MATERIAL USED ON THE COURSE HELD YOUR INTEREST IN THE MAIN	22	2	0
THE MATERIAL USED ON THE COURSE WAS PITCHED AT THE RIGHT LEVEL	21	2	1
THE NATURE OF THE COURSE ALLOWED YOU TO CHOOSE WHEN TO STUDY	21	3	0
YOU WERE ABLE TO SET YOUR OWN PACE FOR STUDY	21	3	0

	Agree	Disagree	No view
THE MARKING ON YOUR COURSE WAS FAIR	20	3	1
MATERIAL USED ON YOUR COURSE WAS UNBIASED	16	6	2
THERE WAS EASY ACCESS TO YOUR TUTOR	15	4	5
MATERIAL USED ON YOUR COURSE WAS UP-TO-DATE	15	7	2
THERE WAS A CHANCE TO CHALLENGE THE MATERIAL USED ON YOUR COURSE	12	9	3
THERE WAS CONVENIENT ACCESS TO YOUR CENTRE FOR STUDY	10	10	4
YOU HAD GOOD ACCESS TO RESOURCES FOR STUDY	9	13	2
THERE WAS A CHANCE TO DISCUSS IDEAS FROM THE COURSE WITH OTHERS	4	15	5
THERE WAS A GOOD SOCIAL LIFE WITH FELLOW STUDENTS	0	18	6

N = 24

On looking through the results contained in table 4.10, the aspects which draw the most agreement are:

Twenty-two respondents agreed, 1 respondent disagreed and one expressed no view following the statement 'the presentation of the material used on your course was good.'

Twenty-two respondents agreed and 2 respondents disagreed with the statement that 'studying on the course required considerable self-discipline.'

Twenty-two respondents agreed and 2 respondents disagreed with the statement that 'the material used on the course

held your interest in the main.'

Twenty-one respondents agreed, 2 disagreed and one expressed no view in response to the statement 'the material used on the course was pitched at the right level.'

Twenty-one respondents agreed and 3 respondents disagreed with the statement that 'you were able to set your own pace for study', and there was the same response for the statement that 'the nature of the course allowed you to choose when to study.'

As the table shows, there is a noticeable cluster of agreed responses of 20 or more and then it is possible to identify another grouping between 16 - 15. The results then tail off until one reaches the totally unsupported response of 'there was a good social life with fellow students'.

Aspects which seem to have found more divided opinion were whether or not there was good access to the centre for study; whether there was a chance to challenge the material used on the course; and whether there was good access to resources for study, eg library.

Section C finished with two questions seeking to discover the amount of support from various sources respondents felt they received, and the cost of their course.

Table 4.11   DID YOU FEEL YOU HAD ENOUGH SUPPORT FROM:

N = 24	Yes	No	N/A
YOUR FAMILY	19	2	3
YOUR EMPLOYER	9	8	7
YOUR COLLEAGUES AT WORK	8	8	8
YOUR FELLOW STUDENTS	4	13	7
YOUR TUTOR	15	7	2

Table 4.12   HOW MUCH PERSONAL EXPENDITURE DID YOU
                   INCUR WHILST ON THE COURSE?

None	2
£1 - £50	9
£51 - £100	3
£101 - £150	4
£151 - £200	2
£201 - £300	2
£301 - £400	0
£401 - £500	0
Don't know	2

                                              N = 24

From results recorded in table 4.11, respondents
generally felt that they had received enough support from
their family (19 agreeing, 2 disagreeing). A similar
result related to their view of the amount of tutor
support (15 agreeing, 7 disagreeing). As regards the
amount of support from their employer, 9 felt they had
received sufficient support, with 8 indicating that they
had not had enough. In terms of sufficient support from
work colleagues, of the 16 to which this question
applied, 8 agreed and 8 disagreed. Finally, as regards
support from fellow students, 4 felt that they had had
adequate support and 13 felt this not to be the case.

As regards the cost of the course (table 4.12), the
highest number of respondents had incurred personal
expenditure in the range £1 - £50 (9 respondents). For
all the respondent who answered the cost was less than
£300 whilst on their course.

Section D - THE IMPACT THE COURSE MADE ON THE
                        RESPONDENT

In this section of the questionnaire, respondents were
asked to consider the kind of impact their course had
made upon them. The main question (question 14) listed
ten possible outcomes from studying on a course on
their professional role, and asked respondents to assess

on a scale rating the level of impact the course made on them. The following table (table 4.13), gives the results for the ten different elements of the question. The results are ranked according to a descending order of positive responses arrived at by summing the responses to the '1s' and '2s'.

The question was prefixed by the statement 'please indicate on each of the following scales how you feel following your course in respect of your professional role'.

Table 4.13

	Scale	1	2	3	4	5	Scale	N/R
		-+---+---+---+---+-						
INFORMED	Better	13	9	2	0	0	Less well	0
THE COURSE WAS	Worth doing	14	6	4	0	0	Not worth doing	0
AWARE OF CLIENT'S CIRCUMSTANCES	More	7	11	5	0	0	Less	1
EQUIPPED FOR FURTHER TRAINING	Better	6	12	5	0	0	Less well	1
EXISTING SKILLS	Reinforced	5	12	4	2	0	Undermined	1
CONFIDENT	More	3	14	2	1	3	Less	1
NEW SKILLS ACQUIRED	Many	6	8	6	1	1	No	2
IN CONTROL AT WORK	More	8	5	9	1	0	Less	1
CAREER PROSPECTS	Improved	1	12	10	0	0	Reduced	1
RELAXED	More	5	7	11	0	0	Less	1

From the results in table 4.13, the kind of impact resulting from the course most frequently identified by respondents was the feeling of 'being better informed.' The second most frequently supported statement was 'the course was worth doing'.

Overall, the respondents felt able to respond
relatively positively to most of the statements save for
the small number of negative responses in relation to
'more or less confident'.

Respondents seemed most uncertain as to how to respond
in the last three aspects, namely 'more or less in
control at work'; 'improved or reduced career prospects'
and 'more or less relaxed'.

The final question relating to the impact of the course
asked respondents about the number of times, since
completing their course, they had referred to their own
notes/handouts/course booklets. These results are set out
in the final table.

Table 4.14   SINCE FINISHING THE COURSE, HOW MANY
                    TIMES HAVE YOU REFERRED TO YOUR MATERIAL?

Not at all	2
Occasionally	13
Frequently	8
Don't know	1

	N = 24

The results given in table 4.14 indicate that of the 24
respondents, 2 indicated that they had never referred to
their course material since finishing their course, 13
had occasionally referred to their material, 8 had
referred to their material frequently, leaving 1 who had
responded 'don't know'.

Tables 4.1 - 4.14 have given the results from the
precoded questions put to the group of respondents who
took the distance learning course 'The Handicapped Person
in the Community' (the Open University's P 251 course).
The questionnaire sent to them also posed open questions
and these results will appear in Chapter 6.

The next chapter gives the corresponding results for the
classroom based learners.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESULTS – CLASSROOM LEARNING

Introduction

As stated in Chapter Three, the results from the research will be presented in separate chapters depending upon whether the data was obtained from (a)distance learners (b)classroom based learners, or (c)face to face interviews.

In this second results chapter, data obtained from the 23 returned questionnaires from respondents who had taken one of the three classroom based courses (DASS; CSS; and the PQ course in Ageing) will be presented. Some open questions were included and these results will appear in Chapter 6. As previously indicated, 30 questionnaires were sent out to this group and 23 were returned, representing a 76.6% return rate. All questionnaire forms were fully and clearly completed and so no responses were wasted.

The Data   Section A – GENERAL BACKGROUND

Table 5.1   AGE

Of the 23 respondents there were:

Under 21 years	0
21 – 24 years	0
25 – 34 years	8
35 – 44 years	9
45 – 54 years	6

N =	23

SEX

Of the 23 respondents there were 9 males and 14 females in the group.

Table 5.2   PREVIOUS SOCIAL SERVICE TRAINING COURSES
             Actual number of social service related courses
             identified by the respondents.

        No previous such course taken   6
        One previous such course taken   10
        Two previous such courses taken   6
        Three previous such courses taken   1

                                     N =   23

Of the 8 respondents who had taken one previous social
service related course and the 8 who had taken two
previous courses, how many of the total of 24 courses had
been taken by distance learning and how many had been
taken by classroom based learning?

Table 5.3   PREVIOUS COURSE - DL OR CLASSROOM

        One course taken via distance learning   4
        Two courses taken via distance learning   0
        One course taken via classroom learning   13
        Two courses taken via classroom learning   4

Four respondents had taken a mix of previous distance
and classroom based courses.

Table 5.4   GENERAL EDUCATION

Respondents were asked to indicate the general education
they had had in the past. The results showed that 3 had
no formal educational qualifications, 5 had been
educated to 'O' level standard, 8 had reached 'A' level
standard, 4 respondents had first degrees and 3 were post
graduates.

        No formal educational qualification   3
        Educated to CSE level   0
        Educated to GCE 'O' level   5
        Educated to GCE 'A' level   8
        Educated to ONC/OND; BTEC Nat. Dip.   0
        Educated to HNC/HND; BTEC Higher Nat.   0
        Educated to First Degree   4
        Educated to Post Graduate   3

                                        N =   23

Table 5.5   TYPE OF PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATION

From the information given on respondent's education,
their professional qualifications were recorded. Seven
respondents had no professional qualification, 4 were
teachers, 4 had medical qualifications, seven had social
work qualifications and with one it was not possible
to identify their professional qualification.

Not known	1
Social work qualification	7
Nursing/Medical qualification	4
Youth and Community	0
Teaching	4
Management	0
Careers Guidance	0
None	7

N = 23

EMPLOYMENT STATUS

In the group there were no unemployed people, 23 working
full time and no one working on a part time basis.

Table 5.6   NATURE OF EMPLOYMENT

If they were employed in social care work, respondents
were asked what organisation employed them. The largest
group, numbering 19, were employed by Local Authority
Social Services Departments, 1 was employed within the
Health Service, 2 were employed by private agencies and 1
by the Probation Service.

Local Authority Social Services Dept.	19
Probation Department	1
Local Education Authority	0
Voluntary Agency	0
Private Agency	2
Health Service	1

N = 23

Table 5.7   SOCIAL CLASS

Based on information given in their answers, respondents
were categorised by social class. Results indicated that
16 came from social class III N, and 7 from social class
III M.

Social Class	I	0
Social Class	II	0
Social Class	III N	16
Social Class	III M	7
Social Class	IV	0
Social Class	V	0

N = 23

Classification of social class based on
'Classification of occupations' [Office of Population
Censuses and Surveys, 1980].

Section B - MOTIVATION FOR STUDY

The reader is referred to the layout of the questionnaire
as given in the appendix. As can be seen, section B is
almost entirely based upon one question in which the
respondent is asked to consider some 18 possible reasons
for undertaking an educational course and to indicate
whether the given reasons featured in their thinking
prior to taking the course. Respondents were also invited
to add any additional reasons for study which influenced
them and which were not listed in the questionnaire.

Respondents were asked to identify the three most
important reasons by giving a rank order between 1 - 3.
Respondents were able to identify further reasons from
the list, but these were classified as unranked. Where
respondents made no response against a possible reason,
this was recorded as not given.

The following table (5.8) gives the responses to each
possible reason for study. Five entries (marked
with an '*') relate to additional reasons given by the
respondents themselves in response to the invitation to

list aspects which the questionnaire had not covered. The results are listed in an approximate descending order of positive responses.

When reading this table, the reader should prefix each response by:
'I undertook the course because'

Table 5.8

	Given rank 1	Given rank 2	Given rank 3	Unrank -ed	Not Given
IT WOULD HELP ME TO DO MY PRESENT JOB BETTER	6	2	2	5	8
IT WOULD ENHANCE MY CAREER PROSPECTS	5	2	1	7	8
IT WOULD HELP MY SELF DEVELOPMENT	1	1	5	5	11
I NEEDED THE STIMULUS OF NEW IDEAS	3	0	3	5	12
IT WOULD GIVE ME NEW SKILLS	0	3	2	11	7
COURSE CONTENT LOOKED INTERESTING	1	3	1	8	10
COURSE WAS THE MOST RELEVANT AVAILABLE	2	0	2	6	13
ABLE TO GET FINANCE FROM EMPLOYER	0	3	0	4	16
I PREFER STUDYING IN A CLASSROOM GROUP	1	1	0	7	14
MY LINE-MANAGER SUGGESTED IT	1	0	1	2	19
HELP JOB CHANGE TO A NEW CLIENT GROUP	0	1	1	2	19
LEARNING APPROACH FITTED MY WAY OF LIFE	0	0	1	5	17

	Given rank 1	Given rank 2	Given rank 3	Unrank -ed	Not Given
REASONABLY INEXPENSIVE WAY OF STUDYING	0	0	1	2	20
PREPARATION FOR A RETURN TO WORK	0	1	0	1	21
USEFUL QUALIFICATION FOR SOCIAL WORK *	1	0	0	0	22
I HAD SPARE TIME ON MY HANDS	0	1	0	0	22
CHANCE TO LOOK AT OTHER PRACTICE *	0	1	0	0	22
STEP TOWARDS HIGHER DEGREE *	0	1	0	0	22
HELP JOB CHANGE TO A NEW ROLE eg MANAGEMENT	0	0	0	7	16
A COLLEAGUE RECOMMENDED IT	0	0	0	2	21
REFRESH MYSELF FOR PRACTICE *	0	0	0	1	22
I PREFER STUDYING ON MY OWN	0	0	0	0	23
CHANCE TO OBTAIN AN OU HALF CREDIT *	0	0	0	0	23

N = 23

It must be remembered whilst reading this chapter's results that they relate to three different courses, whereas the previous chapter's results relate to the one OU course.

From this lengthy table it can be seen that some of the reasons for studying on the course attracted greater support than others.

The reason that 'it would help me do my present job better' was given 6 rank 1's, 2 rank 2's, 2 rank 3's and 5 unranked responses.

The reason that 'it would enhance my career prospects' was given 5 rank 1's, 2 rank 2's, 1 rank 3 and 7 unranked responses.

The reason that 'it would help my self-development' was given 1 rank 1, 1 rank 2, 5 rank 3's and 5 unranked responses.

The reason that 'I needed the stimulus of new ideas' was given 3 rank 1s, no rank 2's, 3 rank 3's and 5 unranked responses.

The above were the four most supported statements. When looking at the results for the least favoured reasons for studying, the following can be identified.
'chance to obtain an OU half credit' - no responses.
'I prefer studying on my own' - no responses.
'refresh myself for return to practice' - 1 unranked response.
'I had spare time on my hands' - 1 rank 2 response.
'a colleague recommended it' - 2 unranked responses.
'useful qualification for social work' - 1 rank 1 response.
'a step towards a higher degree' - 1 rank 2 response.

Table 5.9   STATUS OF DISTANCE LEARNING COMPARED
                 WITH CLASSROOM BASED LEARNING

Results obtained indicated that, when considering comparable distance/open learning courses, 13 respondents felt that classroom based courses have a higher status, no respondent felt that they have lower status, 9 thought the relative status to be the same and 1 did not know.

Higher status	13
Lower status	0
The same	9
Don't know	1

	N = 23

Section C - AN EVALUATION OF THE COURSE

In this section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to evaluate the quality of their course by responding to questions that identified a number of possible strengths and weaknesses of an educational course. They were also asked whether they felt they had had enough support whilst studying and also what financial outlay they had had to make.

This part of the questionnaire also had more 'open' questions and any comments expressed as a result of these open questions will be described in Chapter 6.

Table 5.10 relates to Question 11 on the questionnaire which read as follows:

'Realistically most courses have strengths and weaknesses. Listed below are a number of statements about your course. After each statement are the words 'Agree', 'Disagree', and 'No View'. Please circle one of these responses for each statement.'

The results are listed in a descending order of 'Agree' responses.

Table 5.10	Agree	Dis agree	No View
THERE WAS EASY ACCESS TO YOUR TUTOR	21	2	0
THE MATERIAL USED ON THE COURSE HELD YOUR INTEREST IN THE MAIN	20	2	1
THERE WAS A CHANCE TO CHALLENGE THE MATERIAL USED ON YOUR COURSE	20	3	0
YOU HAD GOOD ACCESS TO RESOURCES FOR STUDY	19	4	0
THE COURSE REQUIRED CONSIDERABLE SELF-DISCIPLINE	18	3	2
MATERIAL USED ON YOUR COURSE WAS UP-TO-DATE	18	4	1

	Agree	Dis agree	No view
THERE WAS CONVENIENT ACCESS TO YOUR CENTRE FOR STUDY	18	4	1
YOU WERE ABLE TO SET YOUR OWN PACE FOR STUDY	17	4	2
THE MATERIAL USED ON THE COURSE WAS PITCHED AT THE RIGHT LEVEL	17	5	1
THE NATURE OF THE COURSE ALLOWED YOU TO CHOOSE WHEN TO STUDY	16	6	1
MATERIAL USED ON YOUR COURSE WAS UNBIASED	15	5	3
THERE WAS A CHANCE TO DISCUSS IDEAS FROM THE COURSE WITH OTHERS	15	8	0
THE PRESENTATION OF THE MATERIAL USED ON YOUR COURSE WAS GOOD	14	9	0
THE MARKING ON YOUR COURSE WAS FAIR	13	0	10
THERE WAS A GOOD SOCIAL LIFE WITH FELLOW STUDENTS	12	4	7

N = 23

On looking through the results contained in table 5.10, the aspects which draw the most agreement are:

Twenty-one respondents agreed and 2 respondents disagreed with the statement that 'there was easy access to your tutor'.

Twenty respondents agreed, 2 respondents disagreed and one expressed no view with the statement that 'the material used on the course held your interest in the main.'

Twenty respondents agreed and 3 respondents disagreed with the statement 'there was a chance to challenge the material used on your course'.

Nineteen respondents agreed and 4 respondents disagreed with the statement that 'there was good access to resources for study'.

When looking over the results in table 5.10 for aspects which drew less agreement, the following can be identified.

Twelve respondents agreed, 4 disagreed and 7 expressed no view following the statement that 'there was a good social life with your fellow students.'

Thirteen respondents agreed, nobody disagreed and 10 expressed no view following the statement that 'the marking on your course was fair'.

Fourteen respondents agreed and 9 disagreed with the statement that 'the presentation of the material used on your course was good'.

Taking an overview of the results, no particular clusters of results can be identified as the results seem to descend in a very steady progression.

Section C finished with two questions seeking to discover the amount of support from various sources respondents felt they received, and the cost of their course.

Table 5.11   DID YOU FEEL YOU HAD ENOUGH SUPPORT FROM:

	Yes	No	N/A	No resp.
YOUR FAMILY	21	0	1	1
YOUR EMPLOYER	11	5	7	
YOUR COLLEAGUES AT WORK	13	2	7	1
YOUR FELLOW STUDENTS	22	1	0	
YOUR TUTOR	21	2	0	

N = 23

Table 5.12   HOW MUCH PERSONAL EXPENDITURE DID YOU
                        INCUR WHILST ON THE COURSE?

            None   7
            £1 - £50   6
            £51 - £100   2
            £101 - £150   1
            £151 - £200   0
            £201 - £300   0
            £301 - £400   0
            £401 - £500   0
            £501 - £1000   3
            £1001 - £2000   2
            Don't know   2

                                            N = 23

From results recorded in table 5.11, respondents
mainly felt that they had received enough support from
their family (21 agreeing, 1 no response). A similar
result related to their view of the amount of tutor
support (21 agreeing, 2 disagreeing). As regards the
amount of support from their employer, 11 felt they had
received sufficient support, with 5 indicating that they
had not had enough. For 7 respondents this question was
not applicable. In terms of sufficient support from work
colleagues, of the 15 to which this question applied, 13
agreed and 2 disagreed. Finally, as regards support from
fellow students, 22 felt that they had had adequate
support and 1 felt this not to be the case.

As regards the cost of the course (table 5.12), the
highest number of respondents had incurred no personal
expenditure (7). Six had incurred expenditure in the
range £1 - £50 and two in the range £101 - £150. At the
higher expenditure bands, 3 respondents had made outlays
between £501 - £1000 and 2 between £1001 - £2000.

Section D - THE IMPACT THE COURSE MADE ON THE
                        RESPONDENT

In this section of the questionnaire, respondents were
asked to consider the kind of impact their course had

made upon them. The main question (question 14) listed ten possible outcomes from studying on a course on their professional role, and asked respondents to assess on a scale rating the level of impact the course made on them. The following table (table 5.13), gives the results for the ten different elements of the question. The results are ranked according to a descending order of positive responses arrived at by summing the responses to the '1s' and '2s'.

The question was prefixed by the statement 'please indicate on each of the following scales how you feel following your course in respect of your professional role'.

Table 5.13

	Scale	1	2	3	4	5	Scale
THE COURSE WAS	Worth doing	19	4	0	0	0	Not worth doing
EXISTING SKILLS	Reinforced	15	8	0	0	0	Undermined
INFORMED	Better	11	11	1	0	0	Less well
CONFIDENT	More	12	7	4	0	0	Less
IN CONTROL AT WORK	More	9	10	3	1	0	Less
CAREER PROSPECTS	Improved	7	12	4	0	0	Reduced
EQUIPPED FOR FURTHER TRAINING	Better	7	12	4	0	0	Less well
NEW SKILLS ACQUIRED	Many	10	5	7	1	0	No
RELAXED	More	6	9	5	3	0	Less
AWARE OF CLIENT'S CIRCUMSTANCES	More	5	9	7	1	1	Less

From the results in table 5.13, the kind of impact resulting from the course most frequently identified by respondents was the feeling that 'the course was worth doing'. This was ranked '1' nineteen times and ranked '2' four times. The second most frequently supported statement was that 'existing skills were reinforced'. This statement was ranked '1' fifteen times and ranked '2' eight times.

Amongst the least supported statements were 'more aware of client's circumstances'. This statement was ranked '1' five times, ranked '2' nine times and ranked '3' seven times. Another statement in this category was 'feel more relaxed at work'. This statement was ranked '1' six times, ranked '2' nine times, ranked '3' five times and ranked '4' three times.

The statement which drew the most negative responses was 'more or less relaxed', although even this statement only received three rank '3' responses.

The final question relating to the impact of the course asked respondents about the number of times, since completing their course, they had referred to their own notes/handouts/course booklets. These results are set out in the final table.

Table 5.14   SINCE FINISHING THE COURSE, HOW MANY
             TIMES HAVE YOU REFERRED TO YOUR MATERIAL?

Not at all	4
Occasionally	9
Frequently	10
Don't know	0

	N = 23

The results given in table 5.14 indicate that of the 23 respondents, 4 indicated that they had never referred to their course material since finishing their course, 9 had occasionally referred to their material and 10 had referred to their material frequently.

Tables 5.1 - 5.14 have given the results from the
precoded questions put to the group of respondents who
took the three classroom based courses (Certificate in
Social Service, The Diploma in Applied Social Studies
and the Post Qualifying Course in Ageing).

The questionnaire sent to them also posed open questions
and these results will appear in Chapter 6 along with the
results from the face to face interviews with six
randomly selected respondents to the postal
questionnaires.

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CHAPTER SIX

RESULTS – INTERVIEWS
AND OPEN QUESTIONS

Introduction

This chapter will set out the results obtained from the open ended questions and the six face to face interviews conducted with a small sample from the main group of 47 postal questionnaire respondents. As previously described, 3 respondents from the 24 distance learners and 3 from the 23 classroom based learners (1 from the CSS group; 1 from the DASS group and 1 from the PQ course group) were randomly selected, the only criteria being their geographical nearness to the home of the author. The six individuals were all seen in their place of work for some 45 minutes and were interviewed to add further detail to their responses to the questionnaires they had previously completed.

In order to enable the reader to put the six respondents into some kind of context, brief details of their background are given below. All the names used are fictional.

Gwen: Aged between 35 - 44, working as an Instructor in a day centre for physically handicapped people run by a local authority. Gwen was interviewed as a respondent from the distance learning group, but interestingly she had also successfully completed the CSS.

Jean: Aged between 35 - 44, working as a house parent in a children's home (Community Home) run by a local authority. She had had previous experience as a teacher. Jean was drawn from the distance learning group.

Martin: Aged between 35 -44, working as the Head Teacher in a special needs unit attached to a junior school. Martin was the third distance learner to be interviewed.

Sandra: Aged between 25 - 34, working as a field social worker in a child care team although, at the time of her course, she worked as a social worker in a team working with elderly clients. Sandra was the respondent from the post - qualifying course in Ageing, Health and Social Care.

Betty: Aged between 45 - 54, working as a social worker in a child guidance clinic. Betty was the respondent from the Diploma in Applied Social Studies (DASS) course.

Mary: Aged between 25 - 34, working as the manager of a small day centre for handicapped people run by a local authority. Mary was the respondent selected from the Certificate in Social Services (CSS) course.

It is accepted that there is a sex imbalance in the sample (5F / 1M), but this does approximate to the biase in the full sample.

The following pages convey, mainly through quotations, the views expressed by the six people interviewed. The order of their responses will roughly follow the order in which the topics appeared in the original questionnaire, although additional topics were covered and therefore will be added. Interspersed with the quotations from the six face to face interviews will be extracts from the open question responses from all 47 returned postal questionnaires.

Before each quotation will appear either the abbreviation (C) or (D) to indicate to the reader whether the remarks are from a classroom based learner (C), or a distance learning student (D).

REASON FOR CHOOSING TYPE OF COURSE

Clearly the number of reasons for studying on a particular course can be as many as the number of people one asks, however some themes could be identified as illustrated by the following.

Gwen(D): "One reason why I took the distance learning course was that my own manager was presently studying on the CSS and I knew that the authority would not release two members of staff onto a day release course at the same time from the same unit. I took the OU course to keep my mind working - to avoid atrophy, which at my age is easy! Distance learning was available and timely, whereas CSS possibly 2 years away; a long queue. The OU course kept my ideas fresh and my brain turning over. The In-service course had stirred my brain and I did not want to loose the momentum."

Martin(D): "I'm a bit of a loner anyway and so lone learning suited me and did not present a problem. In fact

I consciously sought out such a course."

Betty(C): "I had thought about distance learning courses, but I was worried about the sheer demand of time. This job (in social work) makes great demands of your energy - you are supporting people going through great difficulties - and the thought of studying in the evening on top of a job worries me; so I looked out for a classroom based course. We owe it to our clients to keep something in reserve for them and evening study would push against the limits."

Sandra(C): "I would only take a distance learning course if I had the clear agreement of my employer to take time off work for study. In that they refused, I held out for a classroom based course so that time off would have to be given to me."

Two distance learning respondents offered the following comments in the open question section.

(D)"I prefer distance learning because of the chance of studying when convenient for me. There is no regular commitment."

(D)"Correspondence learning is good because you can work at your own pace and do not feel you have to compete with and keep up with others. Concentration is better too - no distractions."

THE RELATIVE STATUS OF DISTANCE AND CLASSROOM LEARNING

The questionnaire had asked respondents to rate the relative status of the two styles of learning, either higher or lower or the same. In the face to face interviews it was interesting to discover how they had been using the word 'status'.

Gwen(D): "Distance learning does not have the same crediblity, certainly with management and County Hall. I used the word in terms of credibility."

Martin(D): "I would say that, sadly, the course in class would carry more weight than a distance learning one. This is to do with history and attitudes and suspicion, if you like. People think it is all learning from tapes, and this must be easy compared with attending lectures."

Sandra(C): "I had in mind the word 'kudos' when I

answered that. I think there is slightly more kudos in being on a classroom based course. Certainly, I suspect my work colleagues are likely to ask me about the (classroom) course more, if only because I've been away for a day from the office."

Mary(C): "Being the Open University and not having any entrance qualification requirements, makes some people think it must be only easy courses on offer (which they are not) and therefore standards must be low."

Betty(C): "Traditionally people would see learning as going to University and having lectures and so I used the word 'status' with tradition, with a track record and how society views this new thing 'distance learning'."

WAS THERE A CONSISTENT CHANCE TO DISCUSS IDEAS FROM THE COURSE WITH OTHERS?

Gwen (who had taken both the OU course and the CSS):
  "What was missing in distance learning was the chance to immediately discuss ideas with other students. Exchange of ideas in lectures/tutorials and at coffee breaks is good and very valuable. The support of other students."

Betty(C): "Some lectures triggered memories, ideas you are reminded about. We could discuss these, relate them to what was being said. Learn from our own experiences as well as the comments in the lecture. This was important to me."

Comments from the questionnaires included:
 (C)"The opportunity (on the CSS) to exchange experiences, ideas and observe skills of others in the student group was a strength of the course."

 (C)"I valued the opportunity for the immediate sharing of ideas and information (on the DASS)."

 (C)"I wonder if the level of discrimination can be the same on a distance learning course without the stimulus and challenge of group situations which are much more readily available in a classroom."

 (D)"On my distance learning course I had limited contact with either tutor or students. Full-time classroom based students are engaged in relevant discussion/conversation out of the classroom as well as in it."

HONEST FEEDBACK FROM FELLOW STUDENTS

The opportunity was taken during the face to face
interviews to ask the six respondents whether, in
addition to marks and comments from course tutors, their
fellow students offered a helpful source of feedback on
how they were progressing on the course. If this was the
case, did fellow student feedback provide more 'honest'
commentary compared with the possibly more tactful
reactions of course tutors?

Jean(D): "I did not miss comparing my progress with other
students. It only mattered to me; I gained a lot from
taking the course and the tutor's comments sufficed."

Martin(D): "Not a problem for me - I don't need to
compare myself with others."

Sandra(C): "The others students said my work and plans
sounded interesting and this gave me support - they made
me feel good. They made me feel that the work I was doing
was really worthwhile. Their comments were more important
to me than the tutor's."

Betty(C): "Fellow students helped you to be more honest
with yourself. They challenged and questionned you very
directly. We had some very lively discussions and I had
to review some things about myself. A number of people
with quite set views on how things should be done were
challenged by fellow students."

THE LEVEL OF SELF-DISCIPLINE NEEDED FOR STUDY

Both postal questionnaire and face to face respondents
were asked whether studying on their particular course
had posed any problems as regards the self-discipline
needed for study. This aspect did not seem to pose any
problems to many people but these were the comments that
were made.

Martin(D): "I aimed to work on the little and often basis
as I was scared about falling behind. Also people told me
that such an approach would be the best. So I made myself
stick to this and it worked quite well. There was a bit
of a culture shock when I started on the OU course and
perhaps I needed some preparation. All this material just
arrived through the post. But how much would you tell a
student before he starts? You need to work out your own

approach; you learn from your own mistakes."

Betty(C): "The self-discipline needed for distance learning I would find very difficult. People on distance learning need a whole course on how to study; how to structure their time; time management; how to cope with the guilt of studying and not being with their family."

In the open question responses in the questionnaire, the following comments were made.

(D)"Much more self-discipline is needed when undertaking distance learning. You have to control your learning in conjunction with environmental factors. It is easier to go to a given classroom, at a given time, to be taught."

(D)"A strength of my course was the self-discipline needed to study without supervision."

(D)"When I received a poor mark for my first piece of work (which I felt I had worked hard at), I felt like packing it all in. I kept going because (a) I had paid for the course out of my own pocket, and (b) pride."

(C)"I've never undertaken a distance learning course but I'm sure for me it would not be the same. I just know I would be lacking in the self-discipline needed for formal study at home."

WERE THERE OPPORTUNITIES TO CHALLENGE THE MATERIAL?

Respondents were asked whether they had felt there had been enough opportunity to challenge the material used on their course. In the responses to the interviews and the open questions, only distance learners expressed any opinion.

Martin(D): "I did disagree with some of the things that were said on the course, but I wrote these down and saved them up until the next contact with the tutor. In fact I rang up the tutor on one occasion as I couldn't wait".

Jean(D): "One other OU course had some things that I thought was put in a simplistic way and my hackles went up, but I was able to express this in my next assignment, so my annoyance was expressed."

Open question responses from the questionnaires:

(D)"I found the behavioural approach of the material

hard to accept. I sometimes/freqently felt frustrated at
not being allowed by the material/tutor to question the
ideas."

(D)"it is very difficult to get replies to your letters
from the OU actually answering the questions you have
asked them."

(D)"Opportunities to meet with tutor in Reading or
Southampton on a Saturday were not convenient and so many
of the things I would have liked to have raised were left
unsaid."

WHAT WAS THE QUALITY OF THE MATERIAL USED ON THE COURSE LIKE?

Three of the face to face interviews dwelt on this issue.
What was meant by 'quality' was not defined. The
respondents made their own interpretation.

Jean(D): "I was very impressed by the quality of the
material and I was very sad to think that the course was
shortly to stop running."

Martin(D): "I thought the material was very good. When
they first plopped on the mat I was amazed by the amount
there was and I was quite daunted by it, but I got over
the first 6 week period and I tried to use all the
material that was available. I thought the quality was
good, but some of the Social Services people queried some
of the content."

Mary(C): "One tutor (on the CSS) repeated the same
information over and over again for every situation. And
some of the tutors had become disillusioned with their
jobs and left during or soon after the course. This
affected their presentation of, what was often, very good
material."
"I felt and still feel strongly that the quality of
presentation of lectures (on the CSS) was extremely poor.
Material was often out of date and there was little
intellectual challenge. Without wishing to be radical, I
would not have employed the majority of the lecturers. In
terms of pure quality , the one year OU course (P251) I
took was much better in terms of quality of material and
course content. I often refer back to the material.
However, the 2nd. year of the CSS was better in terms of
personal development."

Open question responses from the questionnaires:

(C)"On the PQ course I especially appreciated the flexibility in the choice of speakers and the up to date material was good."

(D)"Much of the material (on the OU course) was dated from the 60s/70s. More up to date material would have been appreciated."

(D)"I also think the course content is much superior (on OU courses) to oral lectures, probably because it is made PUBLIC."

(D)"The OU courses I have done have always been of extremely high standard and one advantage is that usually all the material that is needed is included with the course. It can be difficult for someone with a job/children/whatever to get out, alone, to a library."

INTEREST SHOWN BY WORK COLLEAGUES

The next few sections explored the amount of support and interest from the various people around them the respondents felt they had had.

Gwen(D): "I did not talk to work colleagues about my distance learning course, so they were not aware of what I was doing. The distance learning method did not give me increased confidence to voice my views or challenge other people. A later classroom course (the CSS) really helped me with this confidence aspect as we had to speak up in class, and so colleagues talked about the course because I was willing to talk to them."

Sandra(C): "In terms of colleague interest, if anything there was resentment from my colleagues and perhaps this would not have happened had I been taking a distance learning course. Colleagues resented me being a part-timer; being away from the office to attend in Southampton."

THE VALUE OF CONTACT WITH FELLOW STUDENTS

Rather naturally it was only the classroom based respondents who expanded on this point.

Mary(C): "I appreciated the richness of experience and

support of the other students. Real companionship was
experienced and expressed as a result of the closeness. I
felt the benefit of measuring my work against them and
sharing my ideas with them whenever I needed on an
informal basis. I became so close to some people that I
could ask them things about the way I present to others
and be sure of getting an honest answer. Interaction with
other students was one of the best things about the
course and this would have been almost totally lost had I
attempted CSS by distance learning. Support from my peers
and the opportunity to moan to them was vital."

Betty(C): "You get to know one another very well,
particularly when you are in groups together. We were
able to nurture one another and be supportive which is
a very important point to make. In this job - in social
work generally - you are required to work on your own,
but you need to recognise your own limitations and ask
other people for help and you can begin to do this on a
course. There is a neutrality about getting such comments
from fellow students, which has some advantage compared
with tutor's comments.
    Finding my way round the library - I got tremendous
support from other students. They showed me round and
shared books they had found. That sharing was very
important to me on the course - there was a lovely sense
of cooperation which I greatly valued and would have
really missed on solitary study. For example, another
student gave me a book order address in Rugby which
proved invaluable and I might not have discovered this
for myself."

SUPPORT FROM TUTORS

Martin(D): " I thought my tutor was very good and she
made herself available on an informal basis. We had her
home phone number and when we rang we were made welcome
and I did not feel awkward. I felt I had more support
from my OU tutor than I have had on some past classroom
and in- service courses."

Mary(C): "There was close monitoring of personal
development (on the CSS). The contact helped a lot to
help me learn about me - my skills, aptitudes, strengths,
weaknesses, shortcomings. I cannot emphasise this enough."

Open question responses from the questionnaire:

 (D)"In distance learning comments from tutors are

-88-

extremely important and I think tutors need to recognise student's abilities and backgrounds and not be rigid."

(D)"The (OU) tutor was always available to talk about course difficulties."

(D)"A weakness of my OU course was the lack of tutorials. Being a half credit and the tutor living some distance away, only 4 tutorials of 2 hours duration were timetabled. Not sufficient, although tutor was always available by phone, but costly!"

(D)"I have always found OU tutors approachable and helpful when contacted. I have always had my assignments marked promptly and fairly."

KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND ATTITUDE CHANGES FROM THE COURSE

In the face to face interviews especially, every attempt was made to explore what knowledge, skills and attitude changes had resulted from the courses. These aspects proved difficult for the respondents to answer, but below are given some of the responses.

(a) Knowledge acquired from the course

Only one of the face to face interviews commented upon the above.

Sandra(C) "There were two students from other countries - one from Canada and one from New Zealand. It was very interesting hearing from them about the approach to the elderly in those countries and I got a lot of information and ideas from them."

(b) Skills acquired from the course

Jean(D): "Maybe I learnt interviewing skills and essay writing skills. We had to interview a handicapped person and I learnt quite a bit when preparing and conducting the interview."

Betty(C): "Achieving empathy, good listening, communication skills - are all learnt most easily in a group in class. I suppose you can read a good book such as Egan's, but it's not the same."

Open question responses from the questionnaire:

(C)"The opportunity to exchange experiences, ideas and observe the skills of other students was very good (on the CSS). Watching people in role play drove home the message and I gained many useful techniques as a result."

(C)"I feel more able to state my case with confidence as a result of the course experience (on the CSS). Speaking up in front of the group was very beneficial."

(c) Attitude change as a result of the course

Gwen(D): "Distance learning is strongest in knowledge acquisition. I picked up programming skills from distance learning. As for attitudes, I was in tune with the course writers. But I don't think distance learning would change attitudes. There is no one to challenge you face to face verbally. In a classroom, if you say anything sexist or racist, people jump on you. You meet with people from different backgrounds and these people challenge you; they make you check your thoughts. In a classroom you can have 7 or 8 people ganging up against you and this really makes you think."

Martin(D): "Yes, I think I began to change my attitude on the OU course. I think I used to have blinkers on. It came from the course, this notion of handicapped people only being handicapped by the community itself. A person who has lots of facilities is not handicapped. This thought came from the course and changed my view."

Jean(D): "I now see disablement much more in a social context - disablement being as a result of society's attitudes, and this is a change of attitude in me. The course made us look at the way we viewed disability."

Open question responses from the questionnaire:

(D)"The (OU) course made me much more aware of the potential problems handicapped people have to face and the attitude of the able-bodied towards them. I have become much more sensitive."

THE IMPACT OF THE MATERIAL

With especial reference to the respondents who had studied on distance learning courses, people were asked

about the kind of emotional impact the course material made upon them. Does the classroom atmosphere 'engage' the student more than reading books/watching videos, etc?

Martin(D): "The videos made me aware of how some people have to struggle in life. The material was not clinical - it made an emotional impression upon me, yes. An audio cassette of some kids in wheelchairs made an impact on me. They clearly expressed the feeling that being in a wheelchair made people think of the kids as thick. People look down on us, they said. The kids expressed this very well on tape."

Gwen(D): "Mabel made an impression on me. A pretty terrible existence. This was written material in a book and it really affected me. More than the cassettes or the videos. The videos were very low key for me, I wasn't impressed. The written material was easy to relate across to my own clients and so it was alive."

Open question responses from the questionnaire:

(D)"The many case studies in the course book gave a clear picture of people's difficulties and their problems - their perspectives were illustrated only too well. Most importantly, how labelling shapes people's lives."

SUBSEQUENT USE OF THE COURSE MATERIAL

In the interviews, respondents were asked how often they had referred to the course material after having finished the course.

Gwen(D): "The written material from the OU stays in good condition unlike handouts from college courses. I have been able to loan the material to people."

Jean(D): "I use many of the ideas from the course often, although I have not read the material very frequently. However, I would know where to go in order to read my notes. There are lots of goodies in the OU material. Disorganised people would gain by the OU course material, as it is all clearly presented and bound - unlike the random handouts classroom courses sometimes have. It is easier to lend the material to friends etc. when it is not in your scribbled handwriting."

FLEXIBILITY TO COPE WITH UP's AND DOWN's

Using examples such as a move of house or an extended period of illness of a family member, respondents were asked whether they felt either a distance learner or a classroom based learner would have an advantage when trying to cope with such a disruption to study.

Gwen(D): "I did in fact move house during my OU course and I feel it was easier to manage as a distance learning student as the approach is more flexible. I was able to get ahead of the planned schedule by doing a burst of work and then I allowed myself three weeks off to cope with the move."

Martin(D): "I know several people who dropped out of the OU course because of family problems. I guess distance learning can be more exposed to up's and down's at home than classroom learning. Maybe distance learning is more vulnerable with people being hit harder by those sort of things. A classroom group can give support and encouragement and maybe you feel a commitment to the other students in your group to stick it out."

Open question responses from the questionnaire:

(C)"I found the pace of study (on the CSS) somewhat erratic which made life very difficult. This was especially bad on the occasions when I also was having problems at work."

THE FEELING OF ISOLATION WHILST STUDYING

With especial reference to distance learning study, the theme of whether students felt a sense of isolation whilst studying was explored.

Gwen(D): "I was working at the time, so I could put the (OU) ideas gained into practice almost the next day if I wanted, and I didn't feel isolated. In my position I had the best of both worlds."

Jean(D): "There was a feeling of isolation but one of the major tasks we were asked to do was to find and interview a disabled person and 'get inside them'. That exercise was very good at overcoming the isolation. I also made arrangements to watch the T.V. programmes with another student and so we had a natter after the programme."

Sandra(C): "Course participation is missing in distance learning. I need to be with a group of people to toss around ideas."

Mary(C): "How can you be trained effectively as a practioner in the humanities business in isolation - you need other people. I know that one has one's colleagues but they are not sharing the same experiences, comparing it, doing it. If it is not shared one cannot hope to learn as much - about yourself, about others, about the people who matter - the clients. Also others teach you the most about yourself."

Open question responses from the questionnaire:

"The lack of social life didn't really matter for myself, but it can be a very isolated way of studying with limited chances for discussion with other, perhaps better informed, students."

WHICH STYLE OF LEARNING IS BETTER FOR SOCIAL CARE TRAINING?

Although some of the preceeding answers have already referred to this aspect, further comments can be added here. The following statements mainly were prompted by question 17 on the questionnaire which ran:
'Is there anything that you would like to add which you feel has not been covered in this questionnaire but you consider is relevant to how you reacted to your course? Remember this study is aimed at assessing the comparative value of distance learning with classroom based learning in the field of social work education and training.'

Gwen(D): "Having been on both types of courses, I would prefer to do social care training on a classroom course. There is more chance to do practical exercises immediately after a discussion. There is also the moral support of the other students; they cared for you. Gathering ideas from so many other people from all different backgrounds. The mix was helpful. On a distance learning course you don't get to know anybody in the group tutorials except for Bob with whom I used to drive to the group meetings."

Sandra(C): "I don't think you can learn about social work at a distance. I think you have to get your hands dirty; it has to be based on practice and talking to other people, other students. I think you can learn the theory, but unless you have a fair amount of experience under

your belt, I don't think you can learn about social work through distance learning."

Betty(C): "It is important for future social workers to learn to listen to other people. We learned a lot from other people on the course. Their previous experience was very varied - they had been in residential work, community work etc. and we were able to learn from that varied experience."

Open question responses from the questionnaire:

(C)"Distance learning is often associated with an individual approach to specific learning, but social work is about people; therefore it is about exploring ideas and concepts in groups. I believe that social work has to be learning in classrooms or groups."

(C)"The support, information and exchange of ideas between students and between students and tutors is missed on a distance learning course. Use of role play, video, group discussion is also very helpful and only really practical on a classroom based course. There is a sense of identity which helps build confidence which then improves social work practice with clients."

(C)"Classroom learning is preferable to distance learning in my estimation, particularly for adults who can benifit from other student's ideas and opinions. Debate and discussion are most stimulating and a vital part of the learning process."

(D)"I feel in the field of social work education and training, open learning could be used for theory work - maybe open learning for two years and one at college to do the practical for the CQSW."

(D)"The lack of contact with other students inhibits confidence in self when dealing with others - which is part of my social science profession. Also this lack of contact leads to an inability to know oneself as others see you/react to you. There is no role play and activities undertaken in groups which is a necessary part of social work training and education."

(C)"I prefer classroom based courses (having done a number of OU courses), because you have to be there. It is more readily built into my life. Staff in residential work accept this, but with distance learning courses they

would expect me to do evening and weekend shifts."

GENERAL REACTIONS TO THE DISTANCE LEARNING APPROACH

When reading the questionnaires from the group of respondents who had completed the Open University's course a number of general comments could be identified commenting upon the approach entailed in distance learning. This final section records these comments.

(D)"The libraries I went to did not have the books, or if they did there was a wait whilst they were obtained. This held up study."

(D)"It is an advantage of distance learning that the student can decide, according to his/her own needs and interests, what weight to give each topic in terms of time and effort. Although this is constrianed by deadlines, it is good that one can organise times and place to fit in with the demands of family and work."

(D)"Distance learning has clear and easy to follow and understand units - the structure is very good."

(D)"The value of distance learning is that it can be done at a time to suit the individual e.g. late at night/ early in the morning and not at a specified time which I personally would find difficult e.g. to attend regular classes at a set time each week."

(D)"Finding somewhere to study undisturbed by T.V. and children without them feeling shut off was very difficult - the best time I found was between 5 - 7 am."

(D)"I cannot see how one can set one's own pace for study when deadlines for assignment submission were predermined. I feel that the OU's contention that one can set one's own pace is misleading."

(D)"It was certainly a new experience to learn this way. I would do another course with the OU, but I would make sure that I worked harder to involve myself in a support group."

(D)"On all my OU courses, the course material and study aids have been of a much higher, consistent standard than classroom courses. The only thing that could be missing is the practical experience."

(D)"Distance learning affords limited opportunities to put theory into practice."

(D)"A strength of distance learning for me is that there is no pecking order to compare with and no need to conform to group norms. Once you develop the habit of studying, then the OU approach is easy to cope with."

The above represents a full and unaltered account of the comments obtained from the six face to face interviews and the responses to the open questions in the questionnaires. This chapter concludes the data section of the research.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

A COMPARISON OF THE RESULTS

Introduction

It is now intended to compare the material given in the previous three chapters in a systematic way. In order to save space, only a resume of the results will be included. Should my reader require specific detail, then please refer to chapters 4, 5 and 6. This overview will aim to determine whether the data in the various chapters is observably different or similar. The following chapter (chapter 8) will be used to analyse the data and comment upon the results. Because of the small size of the sample, this comparison will be presented in a descriptive way; there will be no statistical analysis.

Throughout this chapter my reader should keep in mind the marginal difference in the size of the two samples; namely 23 in the classroom based group and 24 in the distance learning group.

AGE OF RESPONDENTS

The distance learners ages ranged over a wider span and included one person under 21 years and four people aged between 21 and 24. No one was aged over 44.
As regards the classroom based learners, there was no one aged under 25 and the age range clearly extended higher, including as it did, six people in the age bracket 45 to 54.

SEX

The classroom based courses had noticeably more male students and correspondingly fewer female students.

PREVIOUS COURSES - DISTANCE OR CLASSROOM COURSES?

When comparing the figures from table 4.3 and table 5.3, it is apparent that classroom based learners have taken

the majority of any previous courses via classroom based
courses and distance learners have likewise taken the
majority of their courses via distance learning.

Amongst the classroom learners thirteen had taken one
previous classroom course and four had taken two previous
classroom courses. Four had taken one distance learning
social service related course and no one had taken two
such courses.

This contrasts with the distance learners. This
group contained ten who had taken one previous social
service related course at a distance and four who had
taken two such courses. Only two had taken a classroom
course and the same number had taken two classroom
courses.

GENERAL EDUCATION

Overall it would appear that the group of distance
learners had a generally higher level of education than
the group of classroom based learners.

Three of the classroom based learners indicated that they
had no formal educational qualifications whilst none of
the distance learners made a similar claim. Both groups
recorded five individuals reaching 'O' level standard,
whilst eight classroom based learners and five distance
learners had reached 'A' level standard.

The largest difference is noticeable when one looks at
the number of graduates, with fourteen distance learners
having a first degree but only four classroom based
learners being similarly qualified. This imbalance is
slightly redressed at post-graduate level in that three
classroom based people had pursued post-graduate courses,
but no distance learners were similarly placed.

TYPE OF PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATION

When comparing the results from the two student groups in
respect to their professional qualifications the
following can be noted.

Of the classroom based group seven indicated that they
had no professional qualification whilst eleven of the

distance learners responded in the same vein.

Only one respondent identified herself as being qualified in career's guidance, and she was from the distance learning group.

Of the remainder, seven classroom learners and one distance learner identified themselves as being social work qualified. Four classroom learners and four distance learners identified themselves as medically qualified and finally four classroom based and seven distance learners identified themselves as being qualified teachers.

EMPLOYMENT STATUS

When identifying whether respondents were fully employed, working part-time or unemployed, it is noticeable that there were no unemployed people in the classroom based group as compared with the five unemployed people in the distance learners group.

All 23 respondents in the classroom based group were in full-time employment as compared to the distance learners who numbered 14 working full-time and 5 working on a part time basis.

NATURE OF EMPLOYMENT

When comparing which organisations employed the respondents there was a noticeably high number of classroom based learners employed by Local Authority Social Services Departments (19) whereas only 3 distance learners were so employed.

There is a reverse picture for those employed by Local Education Authorities, with seven distance learners so employed, but no classroom based learners working as teachers.

Within the employment of the Health Service there were four on distance learning courses and one on a classroom course.

Other than the one distance learner working in the Career's Service, the only other category to compare were the two private agency staff on classroom courses compared to the none so employed in the distance learning group.

SOCIAL CLASS

When taking an overview of the social class
categorisations for the respondents, the picture is
all but the same for both groups as below:

	CB	DL
Social Class 111 N	16	13
Social Class 111 M	7	7
Social Class 1V	0	1
Not classified (lack of information)	0	3

These results conclude the section of the questionnaire
which dealt with the background information on the
respondents. The next section of results focused on
the:-

MOTIVATION FOR STUDYING ON THEIR PARTICULAR COURSE
recorded by the respondents.

The actual results are given in tables 4.8 and 5.8. These
lengthy tables cover 18 possible reasons for studying on
a course. There are also further results covering aspects
added by respondents but which were not included in the
questionnaire. In this comparison of results chapter,
all similarities and dissimilarities will be noted even
if small.

The statement that 'It would help my self development'
drew a good deal of support from both groups of
respondents (14 distance learners and 12 classroom based
learners giving a ranked response).

The reason that 'It would help me do my present job
better' drew slightly more support from the classroom
based group than the distance learners, although both
groups responded quite strongly to this statement (10
distance learners and 15 classroom based learners giving
a ranked response).

The reason that 'It would enhance my career prospects'
was supported more by the classroom based group than by

the distance learners, although the difference was again only marginal (10 distance learners and 15 classroom based learners giving a ranked response).

Both groups responded favourably to the statement 'It would give me new skills' (12 distance learners and 16 classroom based learners giving a ranked response).

There was strong agreement between the two groups that the reason 'I had spare time on my hands' did not apply.

The statement 'I needed the stimulus of new ideas' gained a good deal of support from both groups (10 distance learners and 11 classroom based learners).

It would appear that neither group had received encouragement from their line-manager to undertake their particular course since the statement 'My line-manager suggested it' received little support save for one classroom based learner who ranked this statement as rank 1 (the highest possible), and two others from the classroom group who also ranked the statement.

The two groups were in strong agreement in response to the statement that 'A colleague recommended it.' Both groups indicated that this was not the case except for two classroom based respondents who gave the statement the lowest possible ranking.

Neither group offered much support for the statement that 'It would be a preparation for a return to work'.

There was marginally more support for the statement that 'It was a reasonably inexpensive way of studying' from the classroom based group, but the difference was very small and in effect neither group supported the statement (no distance learners and 3 classroom based learners giving the statement a ranking).

Neither group offered much support for the statement that 'It would help in a job change to a new client group'

Although the difference was small, there was slightly more support from the classroom based group for the statement that 'It would help a job change to a new role e.g. management', (4 distance learners and 7 classroom based learners giving this a ranking, but all were low rankings).

The two groups expressed a similar amount of support for

the statement that 'The course content looked interesting' with, in both groups, over half of the respondents ranking this response to some degree' (14 distance learners and 13 classroom based learners giving the statement a rank).

There was quite a lot of support for the statement 'The course was the most relevant available' from both groups (9 distance learners and 10 classroom based learners).

There was a marked difference in the responses from the two groups to the statement that 'I prefer studying on my own'. None of the classroom based respondents ranked the statement, whilst in contrast, eight of the distance learners gave some level of ranked response.

The next statement reversed the previous one by giving 'I prefer studying in a classroom group'. Here the results were also reversed, with no distance learners ranking the statement but nine of the classroom based respondents giving the statement a ranked response.

These last two statements i.e.studying/not studying on one's own were explored in the face to face interviews. Martin (a distance learner) for instance, stated "I'm a bit of a loner anyway and so lone learning suited me and did not present a problem. In fact I consciously sought out such a course."

The statement 'I was able to obtain some help from my employer as regards the cost' drew some support from the classroom based learners (7 giving it a ranking), whilst the distance learners were slightly less responsive (4 giving it a ranking).

The last statement in this section on student motivation for studying on their course was 'The particular approach to learning fitted my way of life.' In respect of this statement there was noticeably more support from the distance learners group (14 ranking the statement but only 6 of the classroom group giving it a ranking.

The results chapters give other reasons for studying on the courses but, as these were offered by the respondents themselves rather than in the printed questionnaire, there is a tendency for the statement to be ranked only by its author. There was one exception to this when two respondents (one from the distance learners and one from the classroom based learners) both gave rank 2 to the

statement 'The course was a step to a higher degree'.

As regards the face to face interviews, there were some other comments that relate to this section on motivation. For instance Gwen(D) said that she had undertaken her distance learning course to avoid "atrophy of the brain" whilst awaiting her turn on a classroom based course. **Betty**(C) indicated that she had chosen to study via a classroom type course because she felt she already had a demanding day time job (in social work) and therefore "evening study would push against the limits". For **Sandra**(C) she had chosen a classroom course because her employer had refused to give her time off for study whilst on a distance learning course.

This concludes the comparison of the results from tables 4.8 and 5.8 which dealt with respondent's motivation for studying on the type of course they chose.

STATUS OF DISTANCE LEARNING COMPARED WITH CLASSROOM BASED LEARNING

The results from question 10 of the questionnaire were given in tables 4.9 and 5.9. Although a considerable number of respondents indicated that they felt that distance learning and classroom based learning both had the same status (8 distance learners and 9 classroom based learners), looking at the results overall there is a noticeable difference.

Amongst the distance learners 5 felt that distance learning had a higher status than classroom learning and 7 felt it had a lower status.

In contrast, amongst the classroom based learners no one felt distance learning had a higher status than classroom learning and 13 felt it had a lower status.

Clearly these results indicate a tendency to see classroom based courses as having higher status. This view is very marked amongst the classroom learners, but it also applies to a small degree amongst the distance learners.

The face to face interviews spent some time exploring to see how respondents had interpreted the word 'status'. For **Gwen**(D) she had the word 'credibility' in mind,

credibility in the view of her superior managers. For **Martin**(D) he had thought in terms of 'history' and of people's suspicion that distance learning must be 'easier' than attending lectures. **Sandra**(C) had in mind the word 'kudos', **Betty**(C) the word 'tradition' and **Mary**(C) again mentioned 'easier' as in the Open University being 'open' and without entrance qualifications.

The next section was directed at an:

EVALUATION OF THE COURSE

and the results are fully covered in tables 4.10 and 5.10. These results give the answers to the sixteen statements that gave possible strengths and weaknesses of any course when they were asked to indicate whether they agreed, disagreed or had no view.

As regards the statement that **'The marking on your course was fair'** there was more agreement for this amongst the distance learners than the classroom based learners (20 distance learners agreed compared with 13 classroom based learners).

The next statement respondents were asked to consider was **'You were able to set your own pace for study'**. Again there was more support for this amongst the distance learners but the difference was not so marked (21 distance learners agreed compared with 17 classroom learners).

In response to the statement **'The material used on your course was unbiased'** the results from the two groups were relatively matched (16 distance learners and 15 classroom learners agreeing)

When looking at the results from the statement **'The material used on your course was up-to-date'** there was a discernible difference between the two groups, especially when 'disagreements' are taken into account. The statement was supported by more of the classroom based learners (18 agreeing and 4 disagreeing) compared with the distance learners (15 agreeing and 7 disagreeing).

The face to face interviews asked respondents for their opinion of the quality of the material used on their course and some of their remarks will be included later.

The next statement 'You had good access to resources for study' was clearly supported more by the classroom based learners than the distance learners (18 classroom learners agreeing but only 9 distance learners agreeing).

Similarly, the statement 'There was easy access to your tutor' received more support from the classroom learners than the distance learners, but the difference was not so marked as in the previous result (21 classroom based learners compared to 15 distance learners).

No distance learner supported the statement that 'There was a good social life with your fellow students', whereas 12 classroom based respondents felt able to support this statement.

Marginally more distance learners agreed with the statement that 'The course required considerable self-discipline' than classroom based learners (22 compared with 18).

The face to face interviews explored this particular issue of self-discipline. Martin(D) indicated that other people had advised him to adopt the 'little and often' approach so as to avoid falling behind; a possibility which worried him. Betty(C) commented that the degree of self-discipline needed she felt for distance learning worried her. She could see big problems as regards time-management and family tensions caused by study at home. There were also two very pertinent comments from the open questions in the questionnaires. One distance learner wrote 'much more self-discipline is needed when undertaking distance learning. You have to control your learning in conjunction with environmental factors. It is easier to go to a given classroom, at a given time, to be taught.' Another respondent, this time a classroom based one, wrote 'I've never undertaken a distance learning course but I'm sure for me it would not be the same. I just know I would be lacking in the self-discipline needed for formal study at home.'

The next statement was 'There was a consistent chance to discuss ideas from the course with others'. Here there was a clear difference between the two groups with 15 classroom based learners agreeing whilst only 4 distance learners agreed.

The face to face interviews and the open question responses offered further comments. Gwen (who had taken both the OU course and the CSS) said "What was missing in

distance learning was the chance to immediately discuss ideas with other students. Exchange of ideas in lectures/ tutorials and at coffee breaks is good and very valuable. The support of other students." **Betty(C)** said "Some lectures triggered memories, ideas you are reminded about. We could discuss these, relate them to what was being said. Learn from our own experiences as well as the comments in the lecture. This was important to me."

A number of open question responses also have a bearing on this aspect. One distance learner wrote 'On my distance learning course I had limited contact with either tutor or students. Full-time classroom based students are engaged in relevant discussion/conversation out of the classroom as well as in it.' A classroom based respondent wrote 'I wonder if the level of discrimination can be the same on a distance learning course without the stimulus and challenge of group situations which are more readily available in a classroom.'

The next statement was **'The material used on the course was pitched at the right level'**. Slightly more of the distance learners expressed agreement with this statement than the classroom based learners (21 compared with 17).

Still focusing on the course material, the next statement was **'The material used on your course held your interest in the main'**. Both groups were able to express all but unaminous support for this statement.

The face to face interviews covered the topic of 'what was the quality of the material used on your course like?' **Jean(D)** responded "I was very impressed by the quality of the material and I was very sad to think that the course was shortly to stop running." **Martin(D)** said "I thought the quality was good, but some of the Social Services people queried some of the content." **Mary**(who had also taken both courses) was quite critical of the quality of some parts of her CSS course: "I felt that the quality of the presentation of lectures was extremely poor. Material was often out of date and there was little intellectual challenge."

Open question responses from the questionnaire also add to the above. Two distance learners had somewhat differing views. One wrote 'Much of the material on the OU course was from the 60s/70s. More up to date material would have been appreciated.' Another wrote 'I also think the course content is <u>much</u> superior (on OU courses) to oral lectures, probably because it is made PUBLIC.'

The statement that 'There was a chance to challenge the material used on your course' drew more support from the classroom based respondents than the distance learners (20 classroom based learners supporting the statement compared with 12 distance learners).

This issue was also explored in the face to face interviews and some of the open question responses were relevant here. All the following comments came from distance learners, there being no responses from classroom based learners. **Martin** said "I did disagree with some of the things that were said on the course, but I wrote these down and saved them up until the next contact with the tutor. In fact I rang up the tutor on one occasion as it couldn't wait." **Jean** said "One other OU course had some things that I thought were put in a simplistic way and my hackles went up, but I was able to express this in my next assignment, so my annoyance was expressed." Two open question responses were as follows. One person wrote 'It is very difficult to get replies to your letters from the OU actually answering the questions you have asked them. ' Another person wrote 'Opportunities to meet with the tutor in Reading or Southampton on a Saturday were not convenient and so many of the things I would have liked to have raised were left unsaid.'

Turning to the next statement on the questionnaire which was **'There was convenient access to your centre of study'**, 18 of the classroom based learners agreed whilst 10 of the distance learners agreed.

The questionnaire asked respondents to consider the statement ''**The nature of the course allowed you to choose when to study'**. In response to this distance learners felt able to support the statement more than the classroom based learners (21 compared with 16).

The final statement in this section on the evaluation of the course was **'The presentation of the material used on the course was good'**. In this respect distance learners again were clearly more able to support this (22 distance learners supported the statement compared with 14 classroom based respondents).

The questionnaire then sought to determine **WHETHER RESPONDENTS FELT THAT THEY HAD HAD ENOUGH SUPPORT FROM VARIOUS PEOPLE WHILST ON THEIR COURSE.** The full results

are given in tables 4.11 and 5.11.

As regards 'enough support from their family', both
groups expressed all but unanimous support in this
respect although a very small number of distance learners
(2) disagreed.

When it came to 'enough support from your employer',
both groups registered lower levels of support for the
statement, but the distance learners were more inclined
to disagree with the statement. The figures were 11
classroom based learners indicated that they had had
enough support and 5 indicated inadequate support,
compared with 9 distance learners agreeing and 8
disagreeing.

In response to the question 'Did you feel that you had
enough support from colleagues at work?' 13 classroom
based learners agreed and 2 disagreed whilst 8 distance
learners agreed and 8 disagreed.

This issue of support from colleagues was explored in
the face to face interviews. Gwen(D) said "I did not
talk to work colleagues about my distance learning
course , so they were not aware of what I was doing.
The distance learning method did not give me increased
confidence to voice my views or challenge other people.
A later classroom course (CSS) really helped me with
this confidence aspect as we had to speak up in class,
and so colleagues talked about the course because I was
willing to talk to them." Sandra(C) said "In terms of
colleague interest, if anything there was resentment from
my colleagues and perhaps this would not have happened
had I been taking a distance learning course. Colleagues
resented me being a part-timer; being away from the
office to attend in Southampton."

In response to the question 'Did you feel you had enough
support from your fellow students?', there was a very
marked difference in the two group's responses. Of the
classroom based students 22 agreed with the question. In
contrast only 4 distance learners agreed and 13
disagreed.

In the face to face interviews the question was posed
slightly differently, but the replies are relevant here.
The respondents were asked about the value of contact
with fellow students during their course. Rather
naturally it was only the classroom based respondents who
expanded on this point. Mary replied "I appreciated the

richness of experience and support of the other students.
.... Interaction with other students was one of the
best things about the course and this would have been
almost totally lost had I attempted CSS by distance
learning. Support from my peers and the opportunity to
moan to them was vital." **Betty** "......We were able to
nuture one another and be supportive which is a very
important point to make. In this job - in social work
generally - you are required to work on your own, but you
need to recognise your own limitations and ask other
people for help and you can begin to do this on a course.
There is a neutrality about getting such comments from
fellow students, which has some advantage compared with
tutor's comments. ...."

The final question posed in this section was 'Did you
feel you had enough support from your tutor?'. The
classroom based learners offered greater agreement in
respect of this question than the distance learners (21
classroom learners agreeing compared with 15 distance
learners).

The face to face interviews and open question responses
offered the following comments. Martin(D) said "I
thought my tutor was very good and she made herself
available on an informal basis. We had her home phone
number and when we rang we were made welcome and I did
not feel awkward. I felt I had more support from my OU
tutor than I have had on past classroom and in-service
courses." Mary(C) said "There was close monitoring of
personal development (on the CSS). The contact helped a
lot to help me learn about me - my skills, aptitudes,
strengths, weaknesses, shortcomings. I cannot emphasise
this enough."

Open question responses from the questionnaire included
one respondent who wrote 'The OU tutor was always
available to talk about course difficulties'. Another
respondent wrote 'A weakness of my OU course was the lack
of tutorials. Being a half credit and the tutor living
some distance away, only four tutorials of two hours
duration were timetabled. Not sufficient, although tutor
was always available by phone, but costly.'

Question 13 in the questionnaire explored the **LEVEL OF
PERSONAL EXPENDITURE INCURRED WHILST ON THE COURSE.**
Tables 4.12 and 5.12 give the full results. Taking a
comparative overview of the results the largest number of
classroom based learners (7) indicated that they had

incurred no expenditure, whilst the largest number of
distance learners (9) indicated that they had spent out
in the range £1 - £50. The next largest group of
classroom based learners (6) indicated expenditure in the
range £1 - £50 compared with the next largest group of
distance learners (4) who spent out in the range £101 -
£150. The classroom based learners group, unlike the
distance learners, recorded some individuals (2) who had
spent in the range £1001 - £2000. In both cases this
expenditure related to the purchase of a car in order to
travel to their college.

The final section of the questionnaire looked at the

IMPACT THE COURSE MADE ON THE RESPONDENT

and tables 4.13 and 5.13 are the main results tables for
this section. The questions in this section were all
prefixed by the statement 'please indicate on each of the
following scales how you feel following your course in
respect of your professional role'. The scale was set
out as below:

```
     1      2      3      4      5
   -+-----+-----+-----+-----+-
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The first statement given was **Career prospects** and
point 1 on the scale related to 'improved' whilst point 5
related to 'reduced'.

Amongst the distance learners, 1 gave point 1, 12 gave
point 2, 10 gave point 3 and there was 1 'no
response'. This contrasts somewhat with the classroom
based learners who felt their career prospects to be
slightly more improved since 7 gave point 1, 12 gave
point 2 and 4 gave point 3.

In viewing these results it must be remembered that two
of the classroom based courses are professionally
qualifying courses for social work and therefore can be
regarded as more beneficial as far as this particular
question is concerned.

The next statement given was **Equipped for further
training** and point 1 on the scale related to 'better'
whilst point 5 related to 'less well'.

The responses to this question from the two groups were

all but identical. Of the distance learners 6 gave point 1, 12 gave point 2 and 5 gave point 3. For the classroom based learners 7 gave point 1, 12 gave point 2 and 4 gave point 3.

The next statement given was **In control at work** and point 1 on the scale related to 'more' whilst point 5 related to 'less'.
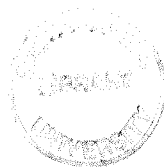
The classroom based learners showed a slightly more positive response to this statement as shown by the following figures. Amongst the distance learners 8 gave point 1, 5 gave point 2, 9 gave point 3, 1 gave point 4 and there was 1 'no response'. In contrast, amongst the classroom based respondents, 9 gave point 1, 10 gave point 2, 3 gave point 3 and 1 gave point 4.

The next question asked how **Confident** they felt in their professional role following the course. Point 1 on the scale related to 'more' whilst point 5 related to 'less'. Again the classroom based learners were able to express a more positive reaction to this question. Amongst the distance learners 3 gave point 1, 14 gave point 2, 2 gave point 3, 1 gave point 4, 3 gave point 5 and there was 1 'no response'. This contrasts with the classroom learners with 12 giving point 1, 7 giving point 2 and 4 giving point 3.

The next question asked how **Relaxed** they felt in their professional role following their course. Point 1 on the scale related to 'more' and point 5 related to 'less'. There was a marginally more positive response from the classroom based learners, viz amongst the distance learners 5 gave point 1, 7 gave point 2, 11 gave point 3 and there was 1 'no response'. In contrast 6 classroom based learners gave point 1, 9 gave point 2, 5 gave point 3 and 3 gave point 4.

The next statement was **Aware of client's circumstances** with point 1 relating to 'more' and point 5 relating to 'less'. On this occasion it was the distance learners who responded slightly more positively. Amongst the distance learners 7 gave point 1, 11 gave point 2, 5 gave point 3 and there was 1 'no response'. In contrast amongst the classroom based learners 5 gave point 1, 9 gave point 2, 7 gave point 3, 1 gave point 4 and 1 gave point 5.

The next statement was **Existing skills** and point 1 related to 'reinforced' and point 5 related to 'undermined'. In this respect the classroom based

learners felt able to express more positive feelings. Amongst the distance learners 5 gave point 1, 12 gave point 2, 4 gave point 3, 2 gave point 4 and 1 made 'no response'. In contrast 15 classroom based learners gave point 1 and 8 gave point 2.

The next statement was **New skills acquired** and point 1 related to 'many', whilst point 5 related to 'no'. When the contrasting figures are reviewed it is difficult to detect any clear difference between the two groups. Amongst the distance learners 6 gave point 1, 8 gave point 2, 6 gave point 3, 1 gave point 4, 1 gave point 5 and 2 gave 'no response'. These figures compare with the classroom learners with 10 giving point 1, 5 giving point 2, 7 giving point 3 and 1 giving point 4.

It was in this area of the acquisition of skills that the face to face interviews and responses to open questions have some bearing. **Jean(D)** said "Maybe I learnt interviewing skills and essay writing skills. We had to interview an handicapped person and I learnt quite a bit when preparing and conducting the interview." **Betty(C)** commented "Achieving empathy, good listening, communication skills - are all learnt most easily in a group in class. I suppose you can read a good book such as Egan's, but it's not the same." One classroom based learner wrote in response to an open question 'The opportunity to exchange experiences, ideas and observe the skills of other students was very good (on the CSS). Watching people in role play drove home the message and I gained many useful techniques as a result.'

The penultimate question in this section asked whether respondents felt better or less well **Informed** in their professioal role following their course. As with the previous pattern point 1 related to 'better' and point 5 related to 'less well'. In response to this question the results were similar. Amongst the distance learners 13 gave point 1, 9 gave point 2 and 2 gave point 3. The figures for the classroom learners were 11 gave point 1, 11 gave point 2 and 1 gave point 3.

Finally, respondents were asked to respond to the statement that **The course was worth doing or not worth doing**. Point 1 on the scale related to 'worth doing' and point 5 related to 'not worth doing'. There was a marginally more positive response from the classroom based learners as follows. Amongst the distance learners 14 gave point 1, 6 gave point 2 and 4 gave point 3. In contrast 19 classroom learners gave point 1 and 4 gave

point 2.

This concludes the comparison of the results from the two groups of respondents as collected via the questionnaire, save for the final results as given in tables 4.14 and 5.14. Question 15 of the questionnaire asked respondents: **'SINCE FINISHING THE COURSE, HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU REFERRED TO YOUR MATERIAL?'** Respondents were given the examples of 'course booklets', 'handouts and own notes'. The results from this question are relatively similar as given below.

	DL	CB
Not at all	2	4
Occasionally	13	9
Frequently	8	10
Don't know	1	0

Two of the face to face interviews add to this issue. **Gwen**(D) said "The written material from the OU stays in good condition unlike handouts from college courses. I have been able to loan the material to people." **Jean**(D) said "........I would know where to go in order to read my notes. There are lots of goodies in the OU material. Disorganised people would gain by the OU course material, as it is all clearly presented and bound - unlike the random handouts classroom courses sometimes have. It is easier to lend the material to friends etc. when it is not written in your scribbled handwriting."

So far in this chapter a comparison of the data obtained from the questionnaire has been given, with the occasional inclusion of comments made by respondents in the face to face interviews and the responses to open questions. If the results given in chapter six are considered, there is additional material that has not been included so far because the headings in the data results chapters (4 and 5) do not necessarily coincide with the headings used in chapter 6. The following represents a brief overview of the rest of the results in chapter 6 where any comparative observations can be made.

One heading used in the face to face interviews was **'Honest feedback from fellow students'**. Respondents

were asked whether, in addition to marks and comments from course tutors, their fellow students offered a helpful source of feedback on how they were progressing on the course. Two distance learners and two classroom based learners made the following comments.

Jean(D): "I did not miss comparing my progress with other students. It only mattered to me; I gained a lot from taking the course and the tutor's comments sufficed."

Martin(D): "Not a problem for me - I don't need to compare myself with others."

These remarks from distance learners compare with the following from classroom based learners.

Sandra(C): "The other students said my work and plans sounded interesting and this gave me support - they made me feel good. ...... Their comments were more important to me than the tutor's."

Betty(C): "Fellow students helped you to be more honest with yourself. They challenged and questionned you very directly. We had some very lively discussions and I had to review some things about myself."

Another theme explored in the face to face and open questions was **The flexibility of the course to cope with up's and down's.** Examples such as a move of house or an extended period of illness were given. The three respondents who replied all tended to pick out different aspects in their replies.

Gwen(D): "I did in fact move house during my OU course and I feel it was easier to manage as a distance learning student as the approach is more flexible. I was able to get ahead of the planned schedule by doing a burst of work and then I allowed myself three weeks off to cope with the move."

Martin, although also a distance learner, saw the answer in a different light: "I know several people who dropped out of the OU course because of family problems. I guess distance learning can be more exposed to up's and down's at home than classroom learning. Maybe distance learning is more vulnerable with people being hit harder by those sorts of things. A classroom group can give support and encouragement and maybe you feel a commitment to the other students in your group to stick it out."

The only classroom based respondent to comment on this issue was someone replying to an open question: ' I found the pace of study (on the CSS) somewhat erratic which made life very difficult. This was especially bad on the occasions when I also was having problems at work.'

A further question posed in the face to face and open questions was 'Which style of learning is better for social care training?' A number of people replied (9), but no matter whether they were distance learners or classroom based learners their replies all tended to support the view that classroom based learning was more suitable for social care training. The following quotations give a flavour of their replies.

Gwen(D): "Having been on both types of courses, I would prefer to do social care training on a classroom course. There is more chance to do practical exercises immediately after a discussion. There is also the moral support of the other students........"

An open question response from a classroom based respondent ran as follows: 'The support, information and exchange of ideas between students and between students and tutors is missed on a distance learning course. Use of role play, video, group discussion is also very helpful and only really practical on a classroom based course. There is a sense of identity which helps build up confidence which then improves social work practice with clients.'

On a similar theme, a distance learner wrote: 'The lack of contact with other students inhibits confidence in self when dealing with others - which is part of my social science profession.'

Finally, another distance learner wrote: 'I feel in the field of social work education and training, open learning could be used for theory work - maybe open learning for two years and one at college to do the practical for the CQSW.'

Two other themes were explored in the face to face and open questions, namely 'The emotional impact of the material' and 'General reactions to the distance learning approach'. In both of these the only responses were from distance learners and so no comparison can be made of the results. The full responses to these two questions are recorded in chapter six.

This concludes the comparison of the results from the two groups of respondents (distance learners and classroom based learners).

The next chapter (chapter 8) will comment upon these comparisons and the rest of the results in the areas where it is felt that there is a significance for this research.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

DISCUSSION AND COMMENT

Introduction

Until now the results of the research and their comparison have been presented with little or no comment. In this chapter there will be a full discussion and comment and the findings will also be related to any relevant literature.

It is intended to focus on the results of each of the chapters 4 and 5 separately, but draw upon the open question and interview responses of chapter 6 where these relate. Then an overview of the comparison of results in chapter 7 will follow with, once again, there being a discussion of the findings.

At this point in the research my own views will be expressed based upon my social work practice career spanning 11 years and direct involvement in planning and running social work classroom based courses in my capacity as senior lecturer in social care for a further 8 years at a college of further education. Additionally I have been involved in tutoring an open learning child care course.

DISTANCE LEARNERS RESULTS

Throughout this section should full details be required, then please refer to chapter 4.

When commenting upon the distance learning sample results, considerable comparison will be made where appropriate to the work done for the Open University by the Dartington Social Research Unit of Bristol University. Their report (Berridge, 1985) stemmed from a request by the OU's Department of Health and Social Welfare to help in the evaluation of the pilot stage of a, then, new OU course called 'Caring for Children and Young People' (P653). The report's detailed findings came from questionnaires sent to a random sample of 100 students on the course (86 returned), although additional information came from a pre-coded questionnaire sent to all 287 students at the end of their work packs. Much of the report's findings

focused on the consumer's view of the course and
therefore has a comparative value for this research.

Background details of the DL respondents.

The predominant **age** group amongst the 24 distance
learners was the range of 25 - 34 years, and the upper
limit was 44. This can be viewed as a relatively young
sample for social work related courses as frequently
social work is a second career for many practioners and
therefore such courses tend to have a somewhat older age
range.

Berridge (Berridge, 1985, p52) also found that the vast
majority of his 86 respondents were aged under 44, with
the largest group being aged between 25 - 34 years. The
course he and his colleagues were investigating was aimed
specifically during the pilot stage at child care workers
employed in residential child care establishments. From
my experience there is a tendency for such staff to be
relatively young. Certainly Berridge's results are in
line with mine but it is difficult to conclude whether
it is the subject matter of the course or the method of
delivery (distance learning) which attracts the younger
student.

The **sex** of the distance learners was heavily biased
towards female students (20 F./4 M.). Bearing in mind the
occupational groups that proved interested in this course
(see later), this ratio is in line with approximate sex
ratios of the workforces, certainly at non-management
levels.

The figures for **previous social services training
courses** taken by respondents indicate that a third had
taken no previous such course, a third had taken one such
course and a third had taken two previous courses. When
looking at whether these courses had been taken via a
classroom based course or via distance learning, the
figures show a clear preference for these distance
learners to take their courses through the distance
learning approach. These figures certainly suggest a
willingness on the part of distance learners to 'come
back for more', and at least one of the face-to-face
interviews with a distance learner gave voice to the
tendency amongst distance learners to become 'hooked'
on the style of learning and seek out further courses.

As   regards   the   distance   learners **previous general**

education, a high number of respondents (14) recorded that they had achieved first degree level. The vast majority (13) had taken their degrees through the Open University. It needs to be remembered that the distance learning course which was researched, namely 'The Handicapped Person in the Community', counts as a half credit for the six credits required for a first degree and so the sample may have involved some people more intent on obtaining a degree than pursuing a social work related course.

The lowest educational achievement recorded by respondents was 'O' levels (5) and 'A' levels (5).

Berridge (ibid. p53) found a wider range of educational qualification amongst his 86 respondents. Thirty-one respondents recorded that they had 'none of the above' qualification (they had been given a list of options from a degree down to CSE's). Only 1 person indicated that they were a graduate, 12 that they had 'A' levels and 32 that they had 'O' levels.

Clearly the main differences between the two research groups are firstly the high number of graduates taking 'The Handicapped Person in the Community', and secondly the high number of respondents not holding any of the listed educational qualifications taking 'Caring for Children and Young People'.

As already stated, the difference in the number of graduates can be seen as a clear indication that many of my research sample were taking 'The Handicapped Person in the Community' in order to obtain a half credit for, possibly, an Honours degree. This can be borne out by some of the additional remarks offered on the questionnaires by respondents. This is a reflection of the 'openess' of the Open University. Students on the undergraduate programme can choose which courses they wish to take in the pursuit of their overall goal of obtaining a degree. The course 'Caring for Children and Young People' however is not regarded by the OU as warranting $\frac{1}{2}$ credit status and therefore is not included in the undegraduate programme.

With 'The Handicapped Person in the Community' course having the higher academic status, this may explain why respondent's overall educational achievement was somewhat higher than amongst the students on 'Caring for Children and Young People'. The prospect of tackling the former course without paper qualifications is probably daunting

for many. Certainly in my experience in social work education when encourging people to consider an OU course, many are put off by the word 'University' in the title. The philosophy of 'openess' can be hard to sell to someone who has never seen themselves 'as doing well at school'.

Results from the next section on **type of professional qualifications** show that most of the respondents (11) had no professional qualification. Teachers (7) were the next largest group, followed by individuals in the medical profession (4), whilst there was only one person already social work qualified. The figure for social work is perhaps surprisingly low but the high number of teachers probably reflects the desire amongst teachers in special needs units to increase or up-date their knowledge and also the number of serving teachers who endeavour to obtain a degree to add to their teaching certificate. The number of people without professional qualifications can be seen to reflect the Open University's open philosophy in that a number of people had taken the course through personal interest rather than professional. A good example was the civil servant who took the course because his brother is profoundly handicapped and he wished to learn more at a theoretical level.

Results from Berridge's work (ibid. p54) are not directly comparable, but in his sample there was only one person with a social work qualification (the CSS), but there were 4 with teaching qualifications and 4 with nursing qualifications.

When looking at **employment status** there were 14 people working full-time, but there were also substantial groups either unemployed (5) or working part-time (5). Distance learning has long been recognised as a flexible means of obtaining qualifications and so people not engaged in full time employment may well have taken the opportunity to follow courses possibly aiding a return to work eventually.Results identifying student's employing agencies were given under the heading of **nature of employment**. As relected in figures already given, Local Education Authorities proved to be the largest employer group, with the Health Service next and then Local Authority Social Services Departments.

The final section in the information on respondent's background related to their **social class**. The figures show a heavy grouping in social classes 111N and 111M.

Motivation for study.

The full results for this section are given in table 4.8.

Amongst the distance learners the most frequently supported reason following on from the statement that 'I undertook the course because' was **it would help my self development.** This reason coupled with the second most frequently given reason **the course content looked interesting** suggests a high self-generated interest in taking the course. Certainly, when one looks at the figures for **my line-manager suggested it** (taking the course) and **a colleague recommended it,** these reasons received a very low response rate and it is clear that respondents were largely self-motivated as regards taking the course and had taken the initiative in seeking it out.

By its ranking of third in the list, the reason that **the learning approach fitted my way of life** suggests that the majority of the group of respondents actively sought out a distance learning course to fit in with their domestic/work commitments. A third of the respondents also recorded a degree of preference for **studying on my own,** a reason confirmed by two out of the three face-to-face interviews with distance learners. One interviewee described himself as 'a bit of a loner' who had no wish to compare himself with others.

Many of the respondents had confidence that the course would **give me new skills** and **help me do my present job better.** Since, as previously described, colleagues and line-managers had not particularly recommended the course, it would appear that the course commands quite a high degree of respect through other means, perhaps based on a general view of the Open University's reputation, although this was not explored in the research. The literature chapter raised the issue of whether distance learning is suitable for the acquisition of skills and so it is interesting to note the reasonably high level of confidence amongst the intending students that the course would give them new skills. This issue will be discussed further later.

Looking at the reasons for studying which received minimal support, very few people indicated that they were **able to get finance from their employer,** which again highlights the lack of support from employer/line-manager. Still

with finance in mind, none of the respondents responded
to the reason for study that **it was a reasonably
inexpensive way of studying** leaving one to speculate
that possibly money was not a worry or that they viewed
the course as costly. The latter point can be answered to
some extent by turning to the results given in table 4.12
which indicate that the highest number of respondents had
incurred personal expenditure in the range 1 - 50, and
that none of them had had to spend more than 300. None
of the open question responses or the face-to-face
interviews mentioned the cost saving of not having to
have time release from work to attend a classroom course.

Possibly linked with motivation to take a particular
course is the status intending students give that course.
For example, why should someone spend time and money
taking a 'low status' course? The final question in this
section sought to establish **the status of distance
learning compared with classroom based learning.** The
wording of this question took a more general view of
distance/classroom learning rather than focusing upon the
specific courses being researched. The distance learners
tended to rate distance learning courses as having the
same status as classroom based courses, although the
figures also give 7 respondents expressing the opinion
that distance learning has a higher status. These
figures do not reveal any great anxiety about the
relative status of distance learning to classroom based
learning amongst the respondents.

Earlier it was suggested that taking a distance learning
course whilst not in full time employment might **aid a
later return to work.** This particular question was posed
in the questionnaire as another possible reason for
taking the course but few respondents supported the
statement and it was ranked 9th. out of the 18 reasons
given in the list. The reason that **I had spare time on
my hands** was also offered but this received even less
support.

An evaluation of the course.

In this section of the questionnaire, respondents were
asked to evaluate the quality of their course by
responding to questions that identified a number of
possible strengths and weaknesses of an educational
course. Berridge's work (Berridge, 1985) coincides in
places in this section and will therefore be referred
to.

Amongst the distance learners most of the responses were
very positive about their course. Especially positive
were the responses relating to **the presentation of the
material used on your course was good**, and **the material
used on your course held your interest in the main.**
Other, later, comments also indicate strong support for
the statement that **the material used on your course was
pitched at the right level.** Certainly the distance
learners had few complaints about the course material,
although fewer respondents felt able to support the
statement that **the material used on your course was
up-to-date.** A number of the open question responses were
also complimentary about the quality of the Open
University course material and one respondent wrote that
these high standards are probably due to the fact that
the material is made public. Keeping printed teaching
material up-to-date is of course a considerable problem
for open learning organisations, but as indicated in
the introductory chapter, major course revisions are
undertaken and the 'Handicapped Person in the
Community' has in fact been withdrawn and a replacement
is currently being devised with an intended title of
'The Disabling Society'. None of the open question
responses or the face-to-face interviews mentioned the
aspect of material being out of date so it does not
appear to be a major concern. This is especially
encouraging when one considers that the course was
researched towards the end of its life.

As regards whether 'the material used on the course
held your interest in the main' and whether 'the
material was pitched at the right level', Berridge
(ibid. p17) can offer some related comments although
his questions were not worded in quite the same way.

His respondents were asked whether they found the
written material used on 'Caring for Children and Young
People' stimulating. Replies tended to be positive with a
third indicating that they found the topics 'very
interesting' and a further half replying 'quite
interesting'. In contrast, only 2 respondents stated that
the topics were 'quite dull' or 'very dull'. Respondents
were also asked whether they found difficulty in
understanding the topics (cf. material pitched at right
level). Few students indicated that they found the
material too complex, a quarter replied that the material
was 'very easy' to understand and a further two-thirds
stated it was 'quite easy'.

From these two sets of results it would seem that these OU courses are able to 'pitch' the material at the right level in the main and also hold the interest of the students well. Clearly both these aspects are crucially important when designing a distance learning course as the student is denied to a considerable extent the opportunity to react to the teacher face-to-face and express dissatisfaction if felt.

An aspect of distance learning that worries a number of people is the need for considerable self-discipline when studying at home with the various distractions. One of the classroom based learners who was interviewed commented, for example, that she could never contemplate taking a distance learning course because of the difficulties of working at home with all the demands of family life. The distance learners certainly strongly supported the statement that **the course required considerable self- discipline.** However this reaction can be placed alongside the almost equally strong support given to the statement that **the nature of the course allowed you to choose when to study.** Presumeably this 'choice' which was appreciated, also carries with it additional burdens of self-discipline. In the face-to-face interviews distance learners talked about the systems they had had to devise in order to structure their work. Some also mentioned the feeling of anxiety upon the arrival, through the post, of the vast package containing the course material. The Open University provides some excellent material giving advice on how to study, especially in the context of distance learning. However one respondent admitted to 'wanting to get on with it' and therefore not reading the advice and regreting it later.

The approach of studying at home carries with it the possibility of a feeling of being isolated. In this respect, respondents in the main felt unable to support the statement that **there was a chance to discuss ideas from the course with others** and no one supported the statement that **there was a good social life with fellow students.** As has been noted before, many of the respondents commented in their open question responses or interviews that this feature of isolation is not a concern to them and in fact some of them positively seek out such solitude.

The Further Education Unit's booklet (Estell,1986, p.24) notes the danger of distance learning students working alone and suffering from the frustration of not being

able to immediately disagree with a teacher's comment or ask for clarification. Half of the distance learner respondents supported the statement that **there was a chance to challenge the material used on your course,** leaving 9 to disagree and 3 expressing no view. In the face-to-face interviews, distance learners did not identify this aspect as a problem with them indicating that their contact with tutors offered adequate opportunities for discussion and query. Telephone contact was used and questions stored up for such occasions. **Tutor access** was indeed viewed as easy by well over half the group.

It would be wrong to pass over too quickly the positive response respondents felt able to give to the question on tutor access. In chapter 2, Holmberg's emphasis upon the importance of student access to his/her tutor was mentioned (Holmberg, 1986, p53). Here Holmberg focuses upon face-to-face meetings allowing for an exchange of views. In my interviews with the three distance learning respondents, the method of contact with tutors was discussed. It would seem that all three were reasonably content to use the telephone in order to put questions to their tutor and therefore were able to respond positively to the question of tutor access . However I suspect this view on the part of the students would not be echoed by Holmberg or many distance learning tutors. The value of actually watching a student's reaction during a discussion is considerable. In terms of aiding understanding and clarity, the telephone has many draw-backs and therefore the chance to meet takes on real value. The fact that a number of respondents expressed reluctance to travel the distances involved for some group tutorials and described the inconvenience, is rather disturbing in this context.

At another worrying level, one notes that in response to the statement **you had good access to resources for study,** 'considerably less than half felt able to express agreement. Although the Open University packages come all but complete in themselves, these respondents were clearly indicating that they were seeking other resources and seemingly being unable to obtain certain items. This particular difficulty was also identified by the ACACE survey (ACACE, 1983, p45) when its authors listed difficulties identified by students who had undergone a distance learning course. The Open University's packs are very well put together and usually provide adequate resources for the course. Presumeably the problem can begin when a student's interest in a particular topic is

fired and they wish to explore further for personal interest. In my experience, this 'personal exploration' is very much a characteristic of the adult student once they have been pointed in the right direction. If the advantage of studying at home begins to be out-weighed by the difficulties of seeking out adequate resources for study (e.g. libraries), then one of the strengths of distance learning might not hold water for some prospective students.

This section finished with a question seeking to establish whether the respondents felt they had adequate support from various people whilst they were on their course. The danger of a distance learner not being supported in his/her student role because few people realise that they are indeed on a course (there being little outward show) was noted by Kitto in her work with the training of youth workers (Kitto, 1986, p196). The results from my work indicate good support from **family** and **tutor**. However only approximately a third of respondents felt that they had sufficient support from their **employer** and their **colleagues at work**. Naturally enough few distance learners indicated that they had had enough support from **fellow students**. On this last point it can be noted from the face-to-face interviews that distance learners are adept at seeking out others on the same course and arranging occasional/ regular meetings if these are viewed as mutually beneficial. That only a minority seem to sustain such meetings might point again to the personal preference for individual study voiced by some respondents. The Open University have long since organised opportunities for group tutorials, but these are relatively infrequent and these results seem to indicate that students found such meetings as still wanting. Berridge (ibid. p19) mentions the part played by 'group meetings' but more in the context of skills acquisition than in terms of student support. This point about skills will be returned to later in the next section and in the part of this chapter looking at the comparison of results between the distance learners and the classroom based learners.

The impact the course made on the respondent.

In this section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to consider the kind of impact their course had made upon them in respect of their professional role.

Most strongly supported was the feeling of **being better**

informed and this seems to relate to Baath's contention that correspondence education is well adapted to the acquisition of information (Baath, 1979, p109). The report by Berridge (ibid. p17) describes respondent's answers when asked how much they had learnt from the written topics in 'Caring for Children and Young People'. Five respondents (N = 86) felt they had learnt 'a vast amount', almost a third replied 'a lot' and a further half 'something'. Only 8 respondents said they had learnt 'very little' or 'nothing at all'. Here again is strong evidence that distance learners have found the learning approach sound in terms of the acquisition of knowledge.

There was again strong support for the view that **the course was worth doing** and this result can be tied in with the earlier positive comments about the quality of the course material. Respondents seem to have most frequently come away with the feeling that they are **more aware of their client's circumstances** as a result of taking the course.

On the question of learning new skills respondents were more inclined to suggest that **existing skills have been reinforced** rather than indicating that they had **acquired new skills**, although the difference in the level of responses was not great. To have one's existing skills reinforced may not seem a particularly valuable educational achievement, but this is not necessarily the case as students often comment that it is very reassuring to realise that their experience is supported by theory. Such reinforcement can act as a considerable confidence boost and certainly the results indicate that there was a positive response to the **feeling more confident** statement.

Berridge (ibid. p19) also explored the question of acquisition of skills. As he comments, 'Caring for Children and Young People' is not intended essentially to be a 'skills development' course but the group work sessions dealt with some skills issues. He found that 3 respondents felt they had learnt 'many skills', 9 replied 'quite a lot' and 47 'some skills'. However this leaves 26 students replying that they had learnt 'no skills'. There is some danger in comparing Berridge's findings with those of this research since the child care course placed a heavy emphasis upon students' attendance at group sessions when skills were focused on. The Handicapped Person in the Community did not place such an emphasis on group tutorials.

Although quite well supported, the lowest response rate
followed **feeling more relaxed.** It is possible that
respondents have interpreted the rather vague term
'relaxed' in different ways and this might explain the
low response. Another explanation is that students
frequently feel confused/shaky shortly after a course as
they first try and apply new learning which feels
unfamiliar and makes them self-conscious. This reaction
tends to dissipate in the months after the completion of
a course but could still be affecting some respondents.

Whatever the feeling of being less relaxed amongst some
of the respondents, a high proportion felt **equipped for
further training,** reflecting again a positive evaluation
of the course and a sense of confidence to seek further
training opportunities. Berridge asked the same question
and found that 33 respondents 'definently' wanted to
continue with further training, 30 'probably' and 9
indicating they were 'unsure', while only 12 replied
'probably not' and 1 'definently not' (N = 86).

The last question in this section aimed to establish **how
frequently respondents had turned to their course notes/
handouts/booklets since finishing their course.** Many a
conscientious course tutor has an uncomfortable hunch
that once students finish their course the ideas, facts
and debate soon become lost in the mists of time. How did
this group of ex-students marry up to such a hunch? The
figures from table 4.14 indicate that the majority of
respondents had looked at their notes 'occasionally' and
a third had looked at their notes 'frequently'. In the
interviews and open questions a number of respondents had
commented that the high quality, printed course booklets
produced by the Open University offer an attractive and
well organised reference source and are thus more likely
to be used. One respondent also said that the OU
material, being so well presented, was easy to lend to
a friend.

This concludes the overview of the results from chapter 4
relating to distance learners. The next sections deal
with chapter 5 and the classroom based learners.

CLASSROOM BASED LEARNERS RESULTS

Throughout this section the full results can be seen by
referring to chapter 5.

Background details of the classroom based learners.

The predominant **age** group amongst the classroom based learners was the range 35 - 44. There were no respondents in the sample under the age of 25 and the age ranges 25 - 34 and 45 - 54 were well represented with 8 and 6 respondents respectively. As will be mentioned a number of times in this section on classroom based learners, two of the courses are professionally qualifying courses and one was a post-qualifying course. The latter clearly will tend to recruit a more mature in years student since they must be already qualified and usually will have a number of years experience in social work practice before wanting to go on such a specialist course.

As regards the two qualifying courses, the CSS (Certificate in Social Service) is an 'employment route' course recruiting individuals already employed in social work and training them during their half-time release from work. For an employer to be willing to make such an investment, the prospective student will most likely have been required to work for his/her employer for some years in order to establish loyalty and experience. The other qualification, the DASS (Diploma in Applied Social Studies), is offered to individuals who have obtained a first degree and therefore are already 21 years old. However competition for places is usually stiff and consequently it is beneficial for competing applicants to show that they have acquired some 'life experience' before trying for a DASS place. As a result, this group too tend to be in their mid-twenties and upwards.

The **sex** of the respondents was heavily weighted towards female and this can be viewed as a reflection of the social work profession's workforce composition.

The figures for **previous social services training** courses taken by respondents indicate that the largest number (10) had taken one such course and that 6 had taken two courses and 1 had taken three. It must be recalled that for the Post-qualifying course in Ageing, students must have already taken a professionally qualifying course, and equally the CSS student tends increasingly to have taken some kind of preliminary course such as the In-service course in Social Care in order to successfully obtain a CSS place.

When looking at whether these previous courses had been

taken via classroom based courses or distance learning, the figures show a clear preference for this group of respondents to have taken their courses as classroom based ones.

As regards the classroom based learner's **previous general education** there was quite a wide range of results. A number of respondents (3) indicated that they had no formal educational qualification. These respondents were all from the CSS sub-group. The highest number of respondents (8) recorded 'A' levels as their level of education. At a higher level a total of 7 respondents gave a response to either graduate or post-graduate. This range of previous education is in line with the entry requirements of the three courses.

When looking at the results relating to **type of professional qualification**, 7 respondents recorded that they had none and an equal number indicated that they were social work qualified. Teaching and medical were also equally represented, this time with 4 apiece.

The results for **employment status** revealed that all 23 were working full-time. As already stated the CSS is an employment training route so one would expect these respondent to be in full-time employment. Having qualified from the full-time DASS course one would expect respondents to have obtained employment since there is a shortage of qualified social workers. The post-qualifying course in Ageing can be viewed as a career progression and likely to attract full-timers. Another comment relating to all three courses is that they are all quite expensive courses and therefore employer sponsorship or full-time earning status would play its part.

The respondent's employing agencies were given under the heading of **nature of employment** and these results show a heavy biase towards Local Authority Social Services Departments (19). Again, the nature of the courses with their focus on social work, can explain this figure.

The final section in the information on respondent's background related to their **social class**. The figures show a heavy grouping in social classes 111N and 111M.

Motivation for study.

The full results for this section are given in table 5.8.

Amongst the classroom based learners the most frequently
supported reason following on from the statement that 'I
undertook the course because' was **it would help me to do
my present job better.** When one recalls that two of the
courses involve students being trained whilst in
employment, it is understandable that this motive should
be high on their list. The second most supported
statement of **it would enhance my career prospects** turns
the motivating focus onto the student's own needs and
probably quite accurately reflects the fact, as described
by the Barclay report (Barclay, 1980, p26), that social
work has a great many unqualified workers and so a
corollary could well be that to be qualifified is to be
better placed for promotion.

Prospective student's self interest was again expressed
in their third rated reason for study, namely **it would
help my self development** and also in the fourth rated
reason of **I needed the stimulus of new ideas.**

The acquisition of new skills was rated quite highly
(5th) amongst the classroom based learners. Although the
post-qualifying course in Ageing is only one day per week
over two terms (and then the submission of a project),
the other two courses are equivalent to full time study
over one year. With such lengthy courses it can be seen
as natural for prospective students to anticipate
acquiring new skills.

The **ability to get finance from employer** counted as
quite important and a reasonable number of respondents
indicated that **my line-manager suggested it.** Although
this aspect was not covered in the research, these
results do suggest that employers view the three courses
as having a credibility leading to a willingness to help
prospective students attend the courses.

This interest on the part of employers was even more
emphasised by the students themselves. Their responses to
the course content looked interesting and **the course
was the most relevant available** were quite positive
(rated 6th and 7th respectively). Obviously the
respondent's confidence will have been helped by the
knowledge that all three courses are validated by the
national body the Central Council for Education and
Training in Social Work. Additionally, bearing in mind
the fact that all the respondents gave themselves as
being in full time employment, another factor in this
level of support could be the fact that their employment

and family commitments held them in one area of the country and so there was in fact no choice of course available. Another illustration of this lack of choice is the fact that for the CSS the employing agencies actually form part of the management committees and have a commitment to send their staff onto the local course.

There was a high level of support for the statement that **I prefer studying in a classroom group** whereas no one supported the statement **I prefer studying on my own**.

Perhaps surprisingly, bearing in mind previous comments about the three courses being locally available ones, the statement that **a colleague recommended it** received very little support. One might have thought that work colleagues who had previously attended a particular course would have acted as enthusiastic 'ambassadors' and encouraged others to attend.

Finally in this section on motivation was the question of **relative status of distance learning compared with classroom based learning**. The results from these classroom based respondents clearly indicated their opinion that classroom courses have a higher status although a substantial number (9) indicated that the two approaches have the same status. This strong support might suggest a real reluctance for this group of respondents to contemplate a distance learning course in the future.

An evaluation of the course.

In this section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to evaluate the quality of their course by responding to questions that identified a number of possible strengths and weaknesses of an educational course.

Amongst the classroom based learners most of the respondents were very positive about their experience of their course. The only statement that found just half the individuals expressing agreement for was **there was a good social life with fellow students**. This then was the statement which received the lowest level of support. Despite the classroom based nature of the courses, only one course (the DASS) was a full time course leading to the likelihood of participants meeting in the evenings

and at weekends. The other two courses involved some variation on day-release with students often travelling substantial distances between home and college/ university. Such a geographical spread obviously negates any great degree of socialising.

Another statement which drew low support was **the marking on your course was fair**. This low response to such a fundamental question is quite striking but the issue was not explored any further in this research. None of the face-to-face interviews developed this theme.

Coupled to some extent with the comments about the social life with other students was the relatively low support rate for the statement **there was a chance to discuss ideas from the course with others**. One might have expected that with classroom based courses the chances for such exchanges would be good and yet 8 respondents disagreed leaving 15 in agreement. Why a third of the respondents were unable to discuss ideas from the course is difficult to guess. As the questionnaire did not define 'others', it might well be that the respondents had work colleagues in mind as they read the question. Certainly, in the face-to-face interviews, some of the respondents mentioned the lack of interest amongst work colleagues as regards hearing about their course. Regarding discussion with fellow students, two of the interviewees expressed great appreciation concerning the debates they had had informally over coffee etc.

Turning to the more strongly supported statements, the one that was rated most highly was **there was easy access to your tutor**. The second and third most supported statements were respectively **The material used on the course held your interest in the main** and **there was a chance to challenge the material used on your course**. These three most highly rated statements combine together to give a picture of a fruitful interaction between teaching staff and students as the course progressed. That 5 respondents disagreed with the statement **material used on your course was unbiased** is perhaps mitigated by this ability to interact and challenge.

The statement **good access to resouces for study** rated fourth highest and therefore can be seen as an indication that the students were widening their educational experience well beyond the confines of the classroom.

With the necessity for travel to and from their place of study, the fact that 18 respondents felt able to agree

with the statement **there was convenient access to your centre for study** is reassuring. However, it must be recalled that the three courses are run in the relatively densely populated south of England; someone living in rural Wales for example might see things in a different light.

Other well supported statements were **you were able to set your own pace for study** and **the nature of the course allowed you to choose when to study.** In the context of a classroom group of students all being taught together, it is interesting to note that so many respondents felt that they had these kinds of freedoms.

The statements that **the material used on your course was up-to-date** and **the material used on the course was pitched at the right level** were both quite well supported reflecting the generally positive reaction to their courses from the classroom based learners.

This section then included a question seeking to establish whether the respondents felt they had adequate support from various people whilst they were on their course. The results indicated a good level of support from **family, fellow students** and **tutor.** At a much weaker level came **colleagues at work** and an even lower rating for **employer.** Considering the number of students who had financial and time release support from their employer, the lack of interest in the progress of the course is in marked contrast. A comment made by a classroom learner in her face-to-face interview can be included here. She quite angrily described how a number of work colleagues had been resentful towards her attendance on a college course, with various barbed comments about her part-time membership of her work team.

This section finished with a question designed to establish **the level of personal expenditure incurred whilst on the course.** The highest number (7) indicated expenditure in the range £1 - £50 and the next highest response (6) was for the range £51 - £100. A number of respondents recorded much higher sums with 2 people recording sums in the range £1001 - £2000. The questionnaire asked respondents to identify broadly how this money had been spent. From their answers it was possible to establish that the purchase of a car had been the main item for 3 of the respondents spending over £500. The outlay of such considerable sums of money at the start of a course may well present quite a problem for would-be students.

The impact the course made on the respondent.

In this section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to consider the kind of impact their course had made upon them in respect of their professional role.

Most strongly supported was the feeling that **the course was worth doing** and this general comment fits well alongside the positive reactions expressed in the previous section.

The next most frequently supported statement was that **existing skills had been reinforced** but the related statement that **new skills had been acquired** was quite noticeably less frequently supported. As indicated in the previous discussion on the distance learner results, the reinforcement/confirmation of previously held skills is beneficial in its self, but the noticeably lower response for the acquisition of new skills is perhaps disappointing, especially when one recalls the high rating by this group of respondents of their wish to acquire new skills as a reason for taking the course.

The third most highly rated impact of the course was the feeling of **being better informed.** From this result one can conclude that new knowledge had been learnt as a result of attending the course and this links with the well supported statement of feeling **more confident.** Of course with two of the courses affording professional standing to the student upon successful completion, considerable confidence can flow from holding that 'hallowed' piece of paper issued by CCETSW. However, there were good response rates to feeling **more in control at work** and **having better career prospects** and so the overall positive response is maintained.

Where there is a distinctly cooler response is where the questionnaire asks whether, as a result of the course, the respondent is **more aware of their client's circumstances.** The results here suggest that the courses are less successful in this specific area, although the figures from the sub-group which took the post-qualifying course in Ageing are more encouraging. This particular result still merits further reflection however since the CSS is often seen as providing students with client related knowledge and skills and yet these responses do not at first sight support this particularly strongly.

In response to the statement that they felt **better**

equipped for further training, respondents were relatively positive but this aspect was only ranked 7th out of the ten included. One reasonable explanation is that two-thirds of the respondents were just emerging as professionally qualified social workers and therefore, at this point, were not seeking further training.

The last question in this section aimed to establish **how frequently respondents had turned to their course notes/ handouts/booklets since finishing their course.** Encouragingly for course tutors, a large number of respondents (10) responded 'frequently' and 9 indicated that they looked at their notes 'occasionally'. No doubt some of the credit for this high response rate must rest with the students themselves as their filing system is clearly efficient. Notes collected over one or two years can pose quite an 'information retrieval' challenge!

This concludes the overview of results from chapter 5. The next part of this chapter will be devoted to a discussion of the comparison of the results which were given in chapter 7.

A COMPARISON OF THE RESULTS OBTAINED FROM THE DISTANCE LEARNERS WITH THOSE FROM THE CLASSROOM BASED LEARNERS

Throughout this discussion my reader is asked to keep in mind the marginal difference in the size of the two sub-groups; namely 23 in the classroom based group and 24 in the distance learners group.

AGE OF RESPONDENTS

It can be noted that the classroom based group of respondents are overall observably older than the distance learners. Likely reasons were given in the preceeding section which related the ages to the entry qualifications required by the courses and the stage in life/career that people would most probably seek out the

kind of courses that have been researched.

When one re-considers the views expressed by Robinson [Robinson, 1986] in her article on the continuing training of nurses during their career, the picture that comes to mind is of a group of nurses in the middle stage of their career. Robinson describes their

-136-

family commitments to children or elderly relatives and also their work ties as barriers to their pursuing traditional classroom courses. The advantages of distance learning with its ability of not requiring attendance in a classroom at a fixed date and time is then argued by Robinson. Logically then, a distance learning group would have a tendency towards older students compared with a classroom group.

This research and that of Berridge [Berridge, 1985] does not bear out such a picture. There are numerous possible explanations and some of these have already been aired. For example, college/university courses are usually seeking a maturity from their prospective students as this will be an essential characteristic for a successful social worker, acting as they do, with considerable professional independence. Such a recruiting policy will push up the age range for the classroom based groups. Also the post-qualifying course in Ageing will be recruiting an experienced and therefore older type of student.

These, then, may be explanations for the tendency towards older classroom students in the sample. Why the younger range for the distance learners? One explanation could be the above policy of the classroom based courses. One of the face-to-face interviews with a distance learner identified her wish to avoid 'brain atrophy' whilst <u>waiting</u> for a CSS place. If a number of prospective students are waiting for their college place, a natural reaction might well be to fill this time profitably by taking a distance learning course which makes no demands about their age. With the prospect of the distance learning course being cheaper (lower course fees and less travelling) the individual has more chance of being able to pay for him/herself. Equally, there is no need to ask for time off from work and therefore the employer's permission does not have to be sought.

Such an explanation might well cover the lower age range for the distance learners although, of course, there could well be numerous other factors.

PREVIOUS COURSES - DISTANCE OR CLASSROOM COURSES?

The comparison of results in this section certainly suggests an 'habitual' style of learning. Both groups seem to have developed a 'brand loyalty' to either distance learning or classroom based learning. The

face-to-face interviews suggested a greater flexibility on the part of the three distance learners since they all, whilst valuing the distance learning approach, were willing to take a classroom based course. For the three classroom based learners, they voiced real doubts about their ability to cope with the alternative of distance learning, sighting lonliness and isolation and and inability to be sufficiently self-disciplined.

The three interviews conveyed almost an unwillingness to try distance learning. This unwillingness was not seemingly an expression of a lack of confidence in the distance learning course content and structure, rather a lack of confidence in their own ability and the need to have fellow students around them.

GENERAL EDUCATION

Overall it would appear that the group of distance learners had a higher level of education than the classroom based learners. This was most apparent in the number of graduates. It would probably be wrong to draw any conclusion from this comparison since, as has already been stated, the 'Handicapped Person in the Community' is offered as part of the Open University's undergraduate programme and therefore the sample may well have included some people using the course as an half credit towards a degree and an honours degree.

As regards the individuals who disclosed that they had no formal educational qualifications, there is an argument given by Berridge [Berridge, 1985, p10] that distance learning offers the most 'attractive' return to learning. The argument runs that if someone feels a 'school failure' then they are reluctant to tackle a traditional course, particularly those perceived as having a high theoretical component. The ACACE survey also covered this point, commenting that distance learning may offer 'an accessibiity for educationally inexperienced adults who might be intimidated by participation in classes' [ACACE, 1983, p45]. In this research the results reverse the argument in that it is the classroom group which numbers 3 respondents without formal qualifications whilst the minimum qualification for the distance learners is 'O'levels.

EMPLOYMENT STATUS

The comparison of results reveals that the classroom based sample were all in full time employment whilst there were 10 distance learners either unemployed or employed on a part time basis, the rest being in full time employment. There is a difficulty in interpreting these results since respondents may have been answering the question as of the period they were on the course or as of the time when they received and completed the questionnaire. An illustration of this point is when one considers the DASS sub-group of the classroom based sample. Being a full time course, DASS students at the time of their course would have been either unemployed or employer sponsored. However, on leaving their course they would be well qualified to obtain a post and therefore at the time of receiving the questionnaire they would be very likely to be in full time work. Therefore their response to the question of employment status will be fundamentally different depending upon the period they had in mind when answering.

The question of whether a student was unemployed or not at the time of taking the course would have been an interesting one to have explored. To give up one's job in order to take up a place on a full time course is a brave step and ideally one obviously waits and seeks employer sponsorship. Such sponsorship is not always forthcoming and so some people are forced to make considerable financial adjustments when, even with family commitments, they pursue a course on a student grant or on savings. There is an obvious attraction in taking a course on a distance learning basis as one's employment can continue without interruption.

The face-to-face interviews were an opportunity to check to see how respondents had answered the question in terms of the point in time they had in mind and it became clear that there had been varied interpretations.

Therefore, upon further exploration of this issue, only one of the three classroom based respondents interviewed had been 'unemployed' at the time of her course. She did indeed express concern about the financial disruption taking the course had caused her and her family and accepted the advantage that a distance learning course would have afforded in this context. However, she was one of the people who expressed grave concern as to her ability to exercise the self-discipline for such an approach and so, even had a suitable course been available via distance learning, she would not have

considered taking it.

MOTIVATION FOR STUDYING ON THEIR PARTICULAR COURSE.

When looking through the comparison of results for this
section in chapter 7, many of the results from the two
groups are quite similar. As a starting point for this
section the dissimilarities will be discussed.

The statement that **I prefer studying on my own** drew the
most apparent disparity. A third of the distance learners
group felt able to respond to this statement whereas no
one in the classroom group replied. The question was
reversed a little later in the questionnaire (I prefer
studying in a classroom group) and the results were also
reversed.

Quite clearly a sizeable number of respondents actively
preferred studying in a particular way and had managed to
seek out a course that fitted their preference. This
personal preference in the approach to learning has
caused me concern over some years. I have managed to
elicit from a number of possible students for one of my
classroom courses that they do not wish to join the
course because of its large group (18 students) element.
I have also lost one or two students over the years after
the first day of a course with, again, their reason being
on the lines of 'I didn't realise that the group would be
so large'.

Agreed the numbers concerned have been very small, but to
deny even a few students a place on a course because they
cannot cope in some way with a large group of people, is
to realise that we ask people to learn in settings which
some   find   uncomfortable,   embarrassing   or   perhaps
distressing. One is left wondering whether these people
who have voiced these feelings are just the 'tip of the
iceberg' and that there are others who ideally should
join courses but who feel unable to do so. To be able
to offer the same course but in two different
approaches (classroom and distance learning) would seem
an appropriate, if expensive, step.

Another statement which drew different responses from
the two groups was **The particular approach fitted my
way of life.** The distance learners were much more
likely to support this view. Only one face-to-face
interview built on this aspect with one of the distance

learners stating that the approach (distance learning) was much more flexible and she was able to do bursts of work to allow her to 'get ahead'. Two comments from distance learning students quoted in 'Distance no object' [Duncan, 1982, p154] add to this discussion. One student, living in Kenya, pointed out that distance learning was the only practical approach in view of his geographical isolation. Another student, this time resident in G.B., said her job was such that she could not leave it for any length of time without it getting completely out of hand and therefore attendance on a classroom course was out of the question.

Mention has already been made of the mature student's various domestic and work ties and the results from this research support the view that students appreciate the apparent flexibility of distance learning and its avoidance of too much disruption to their normal life. One face-to-face interview with a distance learner did reveal that her husband and young family found her frequent disappearance to 'the study' was indeed disruptive to their way of life, but such is the sacrifice for learning!

The reason that **It would enhance my career prospects** was supported by appreciably more classroom based learners than distance learners. This could well link to the whole question of **relative status of the two methods of learning.** It will be recalled that classroom based learners overall rated classroom courses as having higher status than distance learning courses. The distance learners, for their part, were more inclined to the view that there was little difference in relative status. This differing perception amongst the two groups of students is an important issue and was explored further in the face-to-face interviews.

Five of the six interviewed respondents had definite views on this topic and all tended to support the notion that classroom based courses had a higher status than distance learning ones. In terms of what they meant by 'status', terms such as 'credibility with management'; 'kudos in the eyes of colleagues'; ' historical view based on attitudes and suspicion' and 'tradition' were all used.

For any student embarking upon a course he/she wants to feel that the course is worthwhile. Each student's definition of 'worthwhile' will of course differ, taking in such dimensions as the gaining of knowledge, personal

growth and the extension of horizons. But clearly another notion centres on the concept of status. As we have seen, status is difficult to define, but if the students feel that a course is not particularly valued by their employer or by work colleagues, and if one of their motives for taking the course is progression at work, then this can be very undermining for existing and past students and may put off potential students. A number of writers [e.g.Berridge, 1985, p 42; Hurley, 1987, p26] have noted the 'luke warm' response of training officers within L.A. Departments of Social Services to the introduction of distance learning courses for their staff, and if scepticism exists amongst such key members of staff, then the status issue could well prove a 'long running story'. In chapter 2 the large number of untrained staff in the personal social services was explored with a view to distance learning helping in the process of training these people. If the view of distance learning having low status is as widespread as the research suggests, then there is a real brake on any such development.

Whether students gained skills following their course will be dealt with later, but at this point it needs to be noted that marginally more classroom based learners supported the statement that **It would give me new skills.** Therefore more classroom based students anticipated learning skills on their course, but as has been stated earlier, two of the classroom courses researched spanned the equivalent of one year's full time study. This compares with the distance learning course requirement of 180 hours study over 8 months and so the difference in expectations can be ascribed to the prospective student's view of the length and intensity of the course. However it might hint at the respondent's opinion as to whether skills can be learnt at a distance or not. Much, no doubt, depends upon whether particular respondents are steeped in the learning theories of Gagne etc. which we will look at later!

The question of finance does not seem to have featured too extensively in the minds of respondents as they considered which type of course to aim for. There was marginally more support for the statement **It was a reasonably inexpensive way of studying** from the classroom based group and this was later borne out by the actual expenditure figures given in tables 4.12 and 5.12. Classroom based learners were also more confident about **obtaining financial help from their employers** than the distance learners.

Matters of finance must generally feature as people contemplate embarking on a training course. Both the above comments indicate that classroom courses have a slight edge over distance learning courses in this respect. Part of the expansion of distance learning has come about because of its financial attractiveness from the point of view of the employer, there being less likelihood of costly time release compared to attendance at college for classroom courses. This research has put the emphasis on exploring the student's viewpoint, and it does seem that distance learning is more expensive to the student especially when one considers the relative length of the various courses. Employer sponsorship does seem more forthcoming for classroom courses (contrary to the above comments about employers and probably reflects the status question again) and the student with such sponsorship immediately has a great deal of the financial burden lifted from them.

The one financial hiccup that does surface for classroom based learners is that of the purchase of a car in order to get to college. All three of the respondents who had spent out in excess of £500 came from the classroom courses' group and all three indicated that the sum had been spent on the purchase of a vehicle. Just a flippant thought - perhaps the college/university bookshop should double up with a car showroom?

There were equally strong levels of support from both groups for the statements **It would help my self development** and **It would help me do my present job better** and the notion that **I needed the stimulus of new ideas** was also well supported.

In contrast, there was little support from either group for the statements that **My line-manager suggested it** and **A colleague recommended it**. Both of these results will be looked at again when considering the amount of support students received from those around them.

EVALUATION OF THE COURSE

The full results for this section are given in tables 4.10 and 5.10. These results relate to answers given to the sixteen statements describing possible strengths and weaknesses of an educational course in terms of whether the respondents agreed or disagreed with them.

When comparing the results from this section there are a number of clear differences to be noted.

The statement **There was easy access to your tutor** received more support from the classroom based learners than the distance learners. A later question asked whether respondents felt that they had **enough support from their tutor** and these results were identical (21 classroom learners agreeing and 15 distance learners agreeing).

As Lewis comments [Lewis, 1981] the role of the tutor is frequently central to the success or otherwise of any educational course. We are already building a picture of distance learning students lacking any great interest from their work colleagues in what they are doing and being largely cut off from fellow students, and now it appears their tutor contact is lacking as well. Actually the picture may not be quite so bleak as at first sight. It has been noted that many distance learning students actively seek the isolation distance learning can afford and decline to make full use of the tutorial support offered to them. Another angle is to consider the quality of the contact rather than the quantity.

In 'Distance no object' [Duncan, 1982, p66] one student response it worth quoting in full here.
John B. "I would like to say that I have much appreciated the correspondence I have had with my tutors and I think I can quite truthfully say that I have had more interaction, albeit by post, on this course than I have had on any previous traditional course, which only reflects on those courses."

This quotation makes the point that distance learning courses can offer very high quality tutorial support even when there is no opportunity for face-to-face contact. Guides such as the booklet entitled 'Staff Development for Open Learning Tutors' [Estell, 1986] emphasise the sensitivity distance learning tutors must employ when corresponding with students. They must choose their words carefully since there is no quick remedy available to them for sorting out a misunderstanding following on from an ill chosen word. This care on the part of the tutor extends to the marking of assignments etc. and tutors are encouraged to adopt an 'exploring the subject together' style when marking.

It is worth noting at this point the results from another

of the statements given in the questionnaire. Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement **The marking on your course was fair.** Here the distance learners were much more inclined to express agreement than the classroom based learners. Could this be an indication of the high standards distance learning tutors adopt in their written contact with their students?

Having made these points, it still remains that many distance learners did not feel they had had adequate contact with their tutor.

Turning to the statement **There was a consistent chance to discuss ideas from the course with others,** there was considerably more agreement amongst classroom based learners than distance learners (15 cf. 4). From the various comments made in the face-to-face interviews, it was apparent that respondents had talked to fellow students (if available), work colleagues, tutors, etc. This discussion of ideas from the course takes us, I consider, into the realm of attitude change/modification/ reinforcement.

In earlier chapters the distinction has been made between knowledge, skills and attitudes in the learning process. It has already been argued that distance learning can be as good as classroom learning as regards acquiring knowledge. Baath then takes his reader into the discussion about how effective correspondence education is in the learning of certain kinds of attitudes and motor skills [Baath, 1979, chap.17]. I am reluctant to write about adult students 'learning attitudes', as it carries the implied suggestion that the course designer always has the 'right' attitudes, but I do see social work courses aiming to provide opportunities for students to reflect on their attitudes and possibly modify them. When does such reflection and modification take place?

In my opinion the process extends over quite a long time. The initial idea may be sown in a classroom discussion or whilst reading a book, but the opportunity for later, further consideration in conversation with others is, I would contend, an important part of the process for many adult learners. If my reader accepts my views, then we are still left wondering whether the distance learners in this sample have had adequate opportunity for the reflective process and therefore whether the course had any impact on their attitudes.

Responses amongst the interviewed distance learners are,

in the main, unsupportive of my view.

One respondent spoke of his acceptance of the attitude that handicapped people are handicapped by the community itself rather than by their particular disability. He indicated that this change of attitude on his part stemmed from the course material. Another interviewee also described how the course had made her look again at the way she viewed disability. One of the open question responses from a distance learner mentioned how the OU course had made her much more aware of the potential problems of handicapped people and how she had become much more sensitive.

The only interviewee to question the effectiveness of distance learning was someone who had taken the OU course and, later, the CSS. She said: "I don't think distance learning would change attitudes. There is no one to challenge you face-to-face verbally..... In a classroom you can have 7 or 8 people ganging up against you and this really makes you think."

So, overall, the distance learners felt their course had been fruitful in the area of attitude change and therefore the difference in response rates to the question about opportunities for discussion with others is not as worrying as I might suggest. Increasingly, distance learning courses involved in training in which attitudes are of crucial importance, ensure that there are opportunities for group seminars as part of the course. Course designers are thus seeking the 'best of both worlds'. However, if such meetings of minds cannot be built into distance learning courses, there are still writers such as Rogers willing to argue that well devised material can be provided through tape recordings etc. which have a real potency in shaping attitudes [Rogers, 1986, p15].

Having aired some of the debate about shaping attitudes through distance learning, the question of skills acquisition will follow later in the next section.

The statement that **There was a chance to challenge the material used on your course** drew more support from the classroom based respondents than the distance learners. Estell describes the frustration for the adult learner working at a distance of not being able to immediately disagree with teaching material being used and argue back [Estell, 1986, p24]. These frustrations could well build up to such a degree that the student might

-146-

contemplate giving up the course. At a lesser, but still important level, the argument and exchange of views is all part of the learning process. How then did the respondents cope with this feature?

Various comments made in the interviews and open question responses, all from distance learners, offer some indications.

One respondent described how he 'saved up' his disagreements by writing them down and then putting them to his tutor when they next had contact. In fact on one occasion he could not wait and had to telephone his tutor there and then. Another respondent described how her hackles went up when something had been written in 'a simplistic way' but she had expressed her annoyance in the next assignment and so dealt with the feelings in a constructive way. These two satisfactory resolutions of the problem are countered by two open question responses. One speaks of the difficulty of getting the OU to actually reply to a question you have raised in a letter, and the other makes the point again of the difficulty of travelling long distances to meet with a tutor and therefore not raising issues with the tutor which should, ideally, have been.

For a classroom based student to be able to question/ disagree with their teacher there and then in the classroom would seem far better. However that does assume that the classroom teacher has created the kind of atmosphere in which debate and challenge are acceptable. Equally, not all students feel confident enough to speak up in front of a group or they do not wish to 'waste the time of others' by arguing with the teacher. Therefore it would be wrong to assume that all is necessarily perfect in the classroom, but the figures from this investigation do indicate that the classroom courses had achieved an atmosphere which encouraged students to speak out.

The desire to challenge course material will naturally be greater if students feel that the material is lacking in some way. Some of the statements raised the issue of how good the material indeed was and these will be looked at next.

One source of irritation for the informed student could well be finding that the course material is out of date. For a classroom course revisions can be made relatively easily, but the distance learning course, once printed, is very vulnerable to change. How did the courses stand

up to the statement **The material used on your course was up-to-date?** The classroom group respondents were able to express significantly more support for this than the distance learners and so it would seem that the distance learning course was indeed beginning to show its age. It needs to be recalled that the course was indeed withdrawn by the OU shortly after this research was finished. There was one dissenting voice amongst the classroom based students who were interviewed. This respondent was quite angry about the standard of some of the lectures she attended from 'lecturers merely waiting for retirement' who re-ran lectures without modification year after year. Clearly what goes on in the relative privacy of a lecture room is vulnerable to the influence of second rate staff.

As regards the statement that **The presentation of the material used on your course was good,** distance learners were clearly more able to support this than were the classroom based students. The distance learning student's remark about OU material being good because it is published material has already been made. Rogers [Rogers, 1986, p15] writes about distance learning producers having the resouces to seek out good teaching material and present this through high quality media. Childs, in his list of the advantages of distance learning, gives 'distance learning is never unprepared, as classroom teaching sometimes is'[Childs, 1979, p86]. In my experience, distance learning material frequently has a professionalism and polish well beyond classroom material. The results of this research illustrate the students' appreciation of this.

In response to the statement **The material used on your course held your interest in the main** both groups were able to express all but unaminous support for this. As regards the related statement of **The material used on the course was pitched at the right level** slightly more of the distance learners agreed with the statement than the classroom learners. These responses can be viewed as a compliment to all course staff, but perhaps especially to the distance learning course team because they have no further opportunities for fine tuning once the pilot stage of the course has passed.

This question of the quality and level of the material does raise another point worthy of reflection. For the classroom teacher running a session there is constant feedback as to the success of the presentation from the assembled students. Their non-verbal behaviour can speak

volumes and if interest seems to be waning, then a few provocative statements should capture the attention of at least a few of the students. For the distance learning course writer however he/she may well be avoiding any wild statements for fear of triggering the very same frustrations of non reply which we were exploring a few paragraphs before. The reverse of the coin though is the production of a rather bland teaching concoction. This point is admirably captured by one of the students who had studied on the distance learning diploma in educational technology [Duncan, 1982, p160]:
 "My only criticism is the writing has a certain flatness in a lot of the material. Sometimes I wish that you would write things that you don't really believe just to wake us up. It is all pre-digested. I think there is a danger in distance learning of processing everything for the student."

Ideally learning allows space for personal exploration on the part of the student. Teaching material should stimulate interest in further learning beyond just the confines of the course syllabus. If that interest is indeed stimulated then the course writers can point the way suggesting, for example, other books to read in order to pursue a topic to greater depth. Many students may not wish to extend their learning beyond the course, but the invitation is there.

None of the interviews or open question responses revealed any complaints in the vein of the teaching material being too bland or, equally, too provocative and so the writers seem to have achieved the right balance. Given such satisfied customers, it is likely that many would have wished to explore topics further. Were they able to do so?

Another statement was **You had good access to resources for study** and ideally for any self directed learning to be successful, the student concerned would need to reply reasonably positively to this statement. In the event 18 classroom based students agreed whilst only 9 distance learners agreed. This result does raise some question about the chances for the distance learning students of pursuing their own lines of enquiry. Of course, given strong motivation, the determined student will succeed, but one wonders if others give up on the way and therefore have a restricted educational experience. One of the open question responses from a distance learner can be usefully quoted here: 'The libraries I went to did not have the book, or if they did there was a

wait whilst they were obtained. This held up study.'
In answer to a related statement **There was convenient
access to your centre of study** the classroom based
learners again felt able to support this considerably
more than the distance learners (18 cf. 10).

Another aspect of this comparison between the student's
view of distance learning compared to classroom learning
is the already mentioned need for self-discipline. All
study requires self-discipline, but is this need greater
for the distance learner?

Leading us to this question are two of the statements
included in the questionnaire. The first gave **You were
able to set your own pace for study** and the second was
**The nature of the course allowed you to choose when to
study**. The first statement drew a strong positive
response from both groups but there was slightly more
from the distance learners. The results for the second
statement were all but the same (21 cf.16). From these
results all the courses seem to offer a high degree of
freedom for the student but this is somewhat more for the
distance learner.

Does this freedom make greater demands on the distance
learner? The questionnaire gave the statement **The
course required considerable self-discipline.** In
response 22 distance learners agreed compared to 18
distance learners. Therefore most respondents from all
courses felt self-discipline was required but the
response rate was marginally higher for the distance
learners. Adult students in the main are able and want
to exercise more self-discipline than younger ones and so
course tutors tend not to structure the work so much.
However some boundaries have to be offered, but a crucial
question is 'where to set the limits?'

In classroom based learning perhaps there is more room to
negotiate the limits. Students and staff do meet
frequently and therefore can discuss problems and react
accordingly. A 'hardy perennial' is the question of
whether to put back completion dates for assignments.
In distance learning the tutor may appear to be more
rigid in setting dates and is less accessible for appeals
for extra time.

With an eye to the drop out rates on distance learning
courses, there has been quite a debate amongst course
designers on how much student's self-discipline should be
'helped' by clearly set completion dates. Childs has

described correspondence courses always waiting for the sick, the slow or the absent student [Childs, 1979, p86]. Other writers express concern about work piling up if extensions to deadlines are granted and advocate a general adherence to immoveable deadlines [Duncan, 1987, p34]. The face-to-face interviews revealed a great deal of anxiety on the part of two classroom based respondents about taking a distance learning course, because of their doubts about having sufficient self-discipline to succeed. It would seem that the respondents in this research did indeed regard distance learning as involving somewhat more self-discipline and some expressed doubt about whether they could cope. The Open University has some excellent material aimed at helping students confidently return back to learning; perhaps this needs to be marketed more forcefully.

The evaluation section finished with questions aimed at determining **whether respondents felt that they had had enough support from various people whilst on their course.**

The question of **tutor support** has already been dealt with in a previous section of this chapter.

As regards 'enough support from their family' both groups expressed all but unaminous support for this statement. Whether families of distance learners found themselves having to give greater support than families of classroom based students, or vice versa, was not explored.

In response to the question '**Did you feel you had enough support from your fellow student?**, there was a marked difference in the response rate (22 classroom based students agreeing compared with 4 distance learners). The opportunity to talk ideas from the course through with fellow students has already been discussed in the section on attitude modification. How else can fellow students help?

All three of the face-to-face interviews with classroom based learners found them talking warmly about the experience of close interaction with their fellow students. Examples of helping one another through emotional up's and down's were mentioned. There had clearly been many times in which students shared information with one another or had given useful advice. The opportunity of grumbling about aspects of the course with one another had been fully taken.

How did the distance learners fill this gap? From the
results it would appear that many did not fill the gap.
Yet there were others that were unconcerned. One response
in the face-to-face interview was "I don't need to
compare myself with others." Another respondent had made
contact with one other nearby fellow student and this one
contact was "quite enough". Perhaps distance learners are
more inclined to cope on their own and are less in need
of company.

Writers such as Estell [Estell, 1986, p22] suggest that
distance learners lose out on such aspects as:
* 'The intangible (but nevertheless real) sense of
'belonging' that arises from the sharing of common
interests and goals.'
* 'Regular interaction with fellow students giving rise
to relationships which can be both competitive and
supportive.'

No doubt distance learners do lose out on such aspects,
but perhaps as a 'breed' they can cope better than some.
It must also be remembered that distance learning course
designers do make every attempt to fill any gap through
tutorials/seminars for those who want to attend.

The other dimension of the support offered was from the
work place. The questionnaire asked **Did you feel you had
enough support from colleagues at work?** and **Did you
feel you had enough support from your employer?** Only
approximately half of the respondents in both groups felt
able to agree with the questions, which was quite a low
level of response for this section. For both questions
the 'agree' responses from the distance learners were
slightly lower than the classroom based learners.

What impact might this low level of interest have on the
students and the learning process and why was there this
disinterest?

Taking the issue of colleague support first, two of the
face-to-face interviews give us two possible angles. One
distance learner mentioned her own lack of confidence in
speaking out in a group and telling people about what she
was learning. She added that the distance learning
approach did not help this lack of confidence because she
was not asked to speak out in front of a group as part of
the course. The same respondent later took the CSS which
involved a good many presentations to fellow students and
she claimed that this led to an increase in confidence

and a resultant willingness to contribute in work meetings etc. and tell colleagues about what she was learning. Once she started sharing, then colleagues became interested and supportive. This illustration is perhaps a relatively personal one, but it does show how the students themselves need to make the effort to involve work colleagues.

The other angle came from a classroom based learner. She described how her colleagues at work were resentful of her University attendance and made various asides such as 'part-timer' and 'not pulling your weight'. In such a climate there was no room for sharing information from the course. She was, in fact, very enthusiastic about what she was learning and wanted to share with colleagues, but their resentment quickly caused her to feel angry and so a rift developed. In my experience of running classroom based courses this recollection strikes a familiar chord. I have come across similar stories of colleague resentment and it is clear that sharing of ideas from the course does not always take place. One wonders how well the team was prepared for the time when a colleague was due to go onto a course. Ideally colleagues should be interested and supportive and looking forward to feed-back. However, a hard pressed team is less likely to be positive about a colleague's absence and the only solution here would seem to be the allocation of temporary manpower during the period. This seldom happens for short courses on a one day per week basis. There are of course other likely sources of resentment amongst colleagues such as 'why has she had the opportunity of a course and not us?' and 'no doubt she will come back from the course full of ideas and want to change things here'. This research did not reveal these particular forces at work, but I offer them as further possible sources of difficulty for the student.

Employer support is the other aspect presently being considered. Two of the interviewees (one classroom based and the other a distance learner) both mentioned the total lack of interest on the part of their training section as to the outcome of their course. Both had been willing to feed back information, but save for a request to fill out a brief course appraisal form, no contact was made. No indication was forthcoming from this research that distance learning met with greater or less disinterest from training sections, but it will be recalled that some writers [Berridge, 1985 and Hurley, 1987] have identified coolness on the part of training officers towards distance learning.

Although the questionnaire did not specifically identify this theme, the three interviews with the distance learners did ask whether their employers had given them time off for study. All of them indicated that they had received no time off and yet the course was quite a demanding one and relevant to the work of all three respondents. Kahan takes up this theme [Kahan, 1988, p23] describing how in the pilot stage of the new Open University course 'Children and Young People'considerable attention was given to protecting the student's study time. Specific agency assurances on this point were obtained before a student embarked upon the course. The youth workers on Kitto's distance learning course did not seem to fare so well [Kitto, 1986, p125]. Although some of them had the support of their employer, others had to struggle:

"Getting the (study) time was hard. Employers do not want the Centre shut."

"I had to fit the course in with my normal work. There was no reduction in duties .... my line-manager never comes to see me and doesn't know what I am doing .... but expects me to do more innovative things as a result of this course."

The last quote especially has a very bleak ring to it. In terms of maximising learning and presumeably benefiting clients, how much better it would have sounded had there been employer interest and support. Support through paying course fees is indeed helpful but is it enough? I suggest that most students, be they classroom based or distance learning, would value some interest being shown in their progress. The very process of relating what took place at college the day before to a work colleague can be   viewed   as   part   of   learning   with   the   necessary searching through the memory or notes. Many of my respondents seem to have lacked such an opportunity. I would suggest that the distance learner is more vulnerable in this respect since, although both groups seem to have lacked work colleague interest, at least classroom based students are guaranteed time off for study and they also have the support of fellow students.

The last questions in the evaluation of the course related to the personal expenditure incurred by respondents whilst on their course. The discussion of the results has already been included in the motivation for

study section.

IMPACT THE COURSE MADE UPON THE RESPONDENT

Tables 4.13 and 5.13 contain the full results for this
section. The questions in this section were all prefixed
by the statement 'please indicate on each of the
following scales how you feel following your course in
respect of your professional role'.

Overall the answers in this section show a very positive
response from all the students, be they distance learners
or classroom based learners, to their courses. The
results from the statement **The course was worth doing or
not worth doing** illustrate the general enthusiasm, with
the majority of the respondents giving the highest
rating. If one compares the results very closely, then
the classroom learners are marginally more positive, but
the figures are indeed very close.

When comparing the responses from the two groups in
answer to the statement **Equipped for further training**,
all the courses have succeeded in enabling their students
to respond positively to this. The comparison of the
results reveals no real difference between the distance
learners and the classroom based learners.

The statement aimed at seeking to establish whether
respondents felt they had acquired new knowledge and
understanding from taking their course was **Do you feel
better or less well informed**. The results here were
again very similar and no real discernible difference can
be identified. This result is in line with the views of
many writers and Rogers is able to write [Rogers, 1986,
p12] 'Most educationists now accept that distance
learning techniques can provide a very effective means
for the acquisition of knowledge - indeed, well designed
materials compete very favourably with face-to-face
tuition in this area.' Osborne writes in similar terms
[Osborne, 1985, p44], 'Studies have shown that cognitive
objectives and psychomotor skills involving written
achievement are attained at least as well by distance
study. I know of no studies of achievement which show
that correspondence students do less well than classroom
students.'

Another related statement was **More / less aware of**

client's circumstances. In this case it was the distance
learners who felt able to respond slightly more
positively than the classroom based learners. It must be
accepted that the 'Handicapped Person in the Community'
is a very client specific course, but so also is the
post-qualifying course in Ageing, Health and Social Care,
and the Certificate in Social Service provides some
lengthy units aimed at particular client groups. Having
made these provisos, it is still noteworthy that the
distance learning course performed well in this area
especially as there is a tendency in post-qualifying
social work training towards training courses for
specific client groups, e.g. Approved Social Worker (ASW)
for Mental Health. There is a large potential student
market in this area and possibly distance learning could
take a more active part in responding.

Before drawing too many conclusions from the previous
result, it must be now mentioned that the classroom based
students responded slightly more positively to the two
following statements. They were **More / less in control
at work** and **More / less relaxed at work.** Again the
differences between the two groups are small, but the
figures do suggest that the classroom courses prepared
their students slightly better in these ares.

The difference was more marked, and again in favour of
the classroom courses, when it came to the statement
More / less confident in your professional role. What
factors lead a person to feel more confident at work are
hard to confidently define. Having a greater depth of
knowledge, knowing if others tend to support your
viewpoint, realising that your experience is backed up by
theory and having wider horizons as regards your work
will all clearly help. The face-to-face interviews did
not explore these factors any further, but the matter of
skills acquisition is another and the questionnaire posed
two questions specific to this.

The questions related to the statements **Existing skills
added to / undermined** and **Many new skills / no new
skills acquired.** Of the two statements the only really
noticeable difference between the two groups concerned
the first one, i.e. existing skills. The classroom based
learners were able to indicate more positively that they
had had their existing skills reinforced than the
distance learners. As regards the acquisition of new
skills the two groups recorded very similar responses,
but with a slightly more favourable response from the
classroom based learners.

-156-

Earlier in this chapter knowledge acquisition and attitude modification have both been discussed in relation to the two methods of learning under investigation. Now the debate turns to skills acquisition and the results as above lead one to conclude that classroom learning has a slight edge over distance learning in this respect. All of the relevant face-to-face interview comments, be they from distance learners or classroom based learners, tended to question whether distance learning was suitable for skills acquisition. Interviewed respondents made the following kinds of comments:

"Achieving empathy, good listening, communication skills - are all learnt most easily in a group in class. I suppose you can read a good book .... but it's not the same." (CB student)

"The opportunity to exchange experiences, ideas and observe the skills of other students was very good. Watching people in role play drove home the message and I gained many useful techniques as a result." (CB student)

One distance learning student did describe how she had picked up skills on her course but these were more related to coping with the course than social work. For example she mentioned essay writing skills. There was however one useful spin-off, namely interviewing skills gained from planning and conducting an interview with an handicapped person.

When discussing this skills issue, the question of what is the 'mix' of the course quickly comes up. Very few distance learning courses now teach solely at a distance. The provision of face-to-face tutorials, group seminars and even 'summer school' variants are all part of the mix, alongside the material that is worked on at home. At home, the picture is not necessarily one of the student working at their books, since television, radio and audio/video cassettes are all part of the repertoire that distance learning can call upon. Through these various teaching approaches students can be given the element of involvement and participation so often seen as necessary in the learning of skills. However, for distance learning to be able to retain its descriptive label, the amount of student interaction must be limited and therefore the doubts expressed in the interviews do still remain to an extent. What do some writers say on this issue?

In his article entitled 'Distance Learning and
Gerontological Education', Gearing [Gearing, 1987,p19]
writes 'Though distance learning materials can provide a
practice-related knowledge and value-base, what is less
clearly demonstrable is that distance teaching can
improve the professional skills required for working with
people.' He goes on to describe the limited research,
mainly in North America, designed to compare distance
learning and classroom based learning in this respect and
comments that the findings do not, actually, report a
significant difference between the two methods. But he
concludes by commenting that research in this field is
notoriously complex.

Holmberg specifies the kinds of skills that lend
themselves to distance learning and those which do not.
He gives skills such as surgery or the capacity to handle
dangerous chemicals as inappropriate, but offers drawing
and type-writing skills as suitable [Holmberg, 1987, p51].

Social work skills do not fit alongside any of Holmberg's
examples. Osborne [Osborne, 1985, p122] describes skills
appropriate   to   the   field   of   social   work,   namely
inter-active, inter-personal, human relations or 'people'
skills. These she describes as 'high level skills' and
asks whether such skills can be taught at a distance. In
a lengthy development of ideas, she does indeed show how
such skills can be incorporated in the distance learning
approach. Osborne identifies three stages in which
students acquire skills. Firstly the student must
comprehend the skill he seeks to master and in distance
learning this will involve offering examples of good
practice through, for example, audio or video cassettes.
The second stage requires opportunities to imitate and
practice the skill. Here, she suggests, the student is
supplied with detailed instructions on how to set up role
plays and simulations. The student will then seek out
'volunteers' from amongst colleagues, supervisors or
perhaps clients for recorded simulations. The final stage
follows the experiencing of the skill and involves
'publishing' i.e. exploring, discussing and evaluating.
The last two stages clearly place a heavy reliance on
other people cooperating, but Osborne quite rightly
points out that any student on a traditional course has
'practice placements' which also involve clients and
supervisors.

Osborne has offered us a timely reminder that classroom
courses in social work do not necessarily take place just
in the classroom. They have a heavy emphasis on

placements in which students are given the chance to practice, under supervision, various skills. Likewise, then, to suggest distance learners should have similar opportunities and have equal support from practice supervisors seems reasonable. At the heart of what is being said is that it is asking too much to expect 'high level' skills to be mastered without some degree of interaction with others. This proposition applies just as much to distance learners as to classroom based learners.

If this idea is accepted, then an earlier finding of this research surfaces again. It has already been shown that work colleagues and employers seem to show less interest in the distance learner than the classroom based learner. If this is indeed the case, the ability of the distance learner to practice and evaluate skills is considerably lessened. A key learning opportunity is being lost.

This concludes the section on the impact of the course save for the last statement which was **Career prospects improved or reduced**. In response to this, classroom based learners felt able to be more positive than distance learners. It needs to be remembered that two of the classroom courses were professionally qualifying courses and so the results may reflect this fact. However many of the distance learners also responded positively and so they had a general feeling of career enhancement. In my experience, employers respect the member of staff who has tackled a distance learning course, recognising the personal effort that has most probably been necessary. Recalling previous paragraphs, perhaps this recognition is somewhat overdue.

This concludes the comparison of the results from the two groups of respondents except for the final results as given in tables 4.14 and 5.14. The question asked respondents **'since finishing the course, how many times have you referred to your course material?'**

The figures overall offer a very similar picture, but slightly more classroom based students indicated 'frequently' than distance learners. The impression gained from the face-to-face interviews was a little different with distance learners being very complimentary about the polished course booklets etc., and expressing a willingness to turn to these notes because of their ease of reference. Instead of finding one's way through pages of lose notes, everything from the OU was orderly and

indexed. This was greatly appreciated.

In this comparison of the results the discussion so far has been based on data obtained from the questionnaire, but with interview and open question responses interwoven where appropriate. There are some other interesting comments included towards the end of chapter six covering interview and open question responses and a resume of these will be given now.

The main line of enquiry fitted under the general heading of **Which style of learning is better suited for social care training?** Nine people made comments in response to this question, but no matter whether they were distance learners or classroom based learners, their replies all tended towards the view that classroom based learning was better suited.

The common thread through all the replies was the importance of contact with other students. This contact allows, so they variously listed 'chances for practical exercises; moral support; exchange of ideas; a sense of identity leading to self confidence and group discussions'. Contact with tutors was also mentioned, but the major preoccupation was the contact with other students. Two direct quotes will give the flavour:

"Distance learning is often associated with an individual approach to specific learning, but social work is about people; therefore it is about exploring ideas and concepts in groups. I believe that social work has to be learning in classrooms or groups."
(CB student)

"The lack of contact with other students inhibits confidence in self when dealing with others - which is part of my social science profession. Also this lack of contact leads to an inability to know oneself as others see you."
(DL student)

One is tempted to query whether distance learner's lives really are as isolated as these comments seem to suggest. Surely there are some opportunities for interaction with others. However one again recalls the results from the section on 'support from other people' and concludes that many distance learning students do indeed seem to be on their own as regards professional colleagues. And even if one is a little sceptical about

the real level of isolation for these people, if this is
their impression it will obviously colour their attitude
towards taking a distance learning course.

The discussion of the results from the research concludes
here. The next chapter, chapter 9, will identify key
themes from the research and suggest lines for future
enquiry.

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CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSIONS TO THE STUDY

Introduction

The main purpose of this chapter is to highlight the major findings of this research and to suggest possible lines of future enquiry. Inevitably, with the benefit of hind-sight, one can now see elements which were either missed or under-played in the present research and these will also be mentioned.

As a starting point, it will be helpful to recall the original aims of the study given in the first chapter.

Aims of the study.

The two aims given in chapter one were:-

To seek from the 'consumers' of various social work courses their views on the method of study they were involved in whilst on their course; the two methods under consideration being (a) conventional classroom based courses and (b) distance learning based courses.

To make a comparison of the views expressed as above between the two groups of students under the main themes (a) why they chose their particular course, (b) the strengths and weaknesses of their course, (c) the impact the course made upon them.

Having given the two aims of the study, if my reader feels I have failed to meet them fully it is no fault of the 47 respondents who have given of their time to help in this research. The response they gave was overwhelming in its positive and thoughtful nature, be it from the questionnaires or the face-to-face interviews.

The data collected and the subsequent discussion has tended to be weighted towards the distance learning group but this has been based upon the feeling that it is this group which has had less opportunity to voice their reaction to their courses. It is to be hoped that this weighting has not frustrated my reader nor weakened the findings of this research, but instead has added to the knowledge about how people react to distance learning. Distance learning is after all still in the shadow of

classroom based learning when one considers the size of
the relative students groups which have pursued courses
in the two different styles of delivery over the years.
This research may redress the balance a little.

It is proposed to share the main findings of the research
with the staff of the courses involved, and the Central
Council for Education and Training in Social Work
(CCETSW) and the Open University.

Noteworthy findings

Support from employer and work colleagues

A major theme of this research has been the level of
support experienced by the students whilst on their
course. Both groups mainly reported excellent support
from sources such as family and tutor, but when it came
to **support from employer and work colleagues**, the
picture was very different. Distance learners seem
especially vulnerable in this respect since they have few
links with fellow students, and they have no guaranteed
time off from work such as the classroom based learner's
time for attending day-time courses.

The significance of this lack of support becomes more
apparent when one considers the argument given in Chapter 8
about the learning process for developing social work
skills. It will be recalled that Osborne [Osborne, 1985]
describes the student's interaction with others (practice
supervisor, colleagues and clients) as a crucial factor in
learning skills. Naturally much of this interaction can
also take place in the classroom for classroom based
students, but even they are provided with other
opportunities as part of their course. For example, the
Diploma in Applied Social Studies (DASS) involves a high
proportion of the student's time being spent working, under
supervision, with clients. Appropriate skills, once
identified in the classroom or in other discussion, can be
practised under guidance. Clearly the same process can be
followed by distance learners, but they must also be
offered the same level of support if the learning process
is to function adequately.

This research raises a question mark about whether
employers and work colleagues will indeed respond to such
a demand. At present, distance learning course designers

have made few formal requests to employers for this type of support and so this aspect has not been put to the test fully, but this research does offer an impression of many distance learners (and indeed classroom based learners) feeling left to make their own way through their course after, perhaps, the initial help of course fees being paid. One face-to-face interview identified the need for the distance learners themselves to involve colleagues more by a positive sharing of information and ideas from their course, but course tutors must take a central role in working for improvement as well.

An obvious focal point for course tutors to relate to in order to improve matters is the training officer for the employing organisation. Although not addressed by this research, other writers [Berridge, 1985 and Hurley, 1987] have commented upon the somewhat luke-warm interest on the part of some Social Service training officers to the distance learning approach and so one could, perhaps justifiably, wonder whether such crucial people would be willing to develop support systems for distance learners wanting to develop skills under supervision. Long established and respected classroom based courses frequently experience problems in securing enough field practice placements for their students. How much more difficult might be the task for distance learning courses making the same request?

Although this present discussion has focused upon skills acquisition, similar arguments are valid for personal attitude modification and the acquisition of new knowledge. No doubt the well motivated adult learner will cope and do a great deal for themselves to gain from their course, but this research leads to the tentative conclusion that support could be more forthcoming from employers leading to an eventual improved service to clients due to well trained staff.

This aspect does seem to be of real importance and a **future research investigation** of Social Service training officer's attitudes towards distance learning courses could offer a valuable indicator as to the extent of this problem and how to tackle it.

Relative status

One likely result of any such investigation could well centre on the **relative status of distance learning to classroom based learning.** This research has clearly

identified a feeling amongst classroom based students that distance learning holds a lower status than classroom based learning. No matter how one seeks to define the word 'status', one is still left with the impression that for many people (and this could well include training officers) this impression of lower status acts as a brake upon their interest in this particular approach to learning. Distance/Open Learning has made great strides over recent years in becoming an accepted part of the education scene, but one recalls Keegan's comment quoted in Chapter 1 [Keegan, 1986, p21] that after blossoming briefly in the 1970's, non-traditional education (open learning) is now receding in the face of traditional (classroom based) education in North America.

It would seem that the promoters of distance learning still have a major public relations task on their hands, despite the very energetic and professional work already done in this respect by such organisations as the Open University.

Self-discipline for study

If any extra public relations initiative were to be undertaken, then an anxiety about distance learning which would need to be addressed would be **the degree of self-discipline needed for distance learning.** This research has identified, especially in the face-to-face interviews, a real concern about the amount of self-discipline needed to succeed as a distance learner. Admittedly the number is small, but one or two of the classroom based learners seemed to be expressing a 'mental block' as regards their ever contemplating a distance learning course. This research did in fact reveal that both groups of learners felt that their course required considerable self-discipline, but it was only the classroom based respondents who mentioned it as a block to contemplating a change to the other style of learning. Although most distance learning organisations offer considerable advice and support on this aspect, it would seem from this research that a number of people still need to be reassured further about this feature. Equally, it may have to be accepted that some people need the apparent structure resulting from frequent contact with fellow students and course tutor and so will never become distance learners.

Tutor support

Earlier in this chapter it has been stated that most classroom based learners and some distance learners felt that they had had good **support from their tutors**. This particular statement needs to be qualified to some extent as regards the distance learners. It is correct to say that many felt their tutor support was good, but one or two of the open question responses commented upon the difficulties of availing themselves of the offer of face-to-face meetings with their tutor. It is clear that 'good support' included, for them, contact on the telephone and by letter. One does not need to turn to writers on distance learning before finding criticism of the telephone and the written word as a means of communicating. Both clearly have shortcomings when compared to a meeting between two people. How crucial such a meeting is in the learning process is discussed by Holmberg [Holmberg, 1986, p53]. Designers of distance learning courses have long accepted the need to bring students into contact with fellow students and tutors especially in subject areas such as social work, and have built into their courses such opportunities. This research has identified a few students who did not avail themselves of this contact mainly because of geographical distance. Another direction for **future research** could be to explore this issue further. It would be helpful to closely identify what proportion of tutor support for distance learners is offered respectively by, telephone, written communication, group tutorial and individual tutorial. Having established this, it would then be to explore whether the learning process is detrimentally affected by low levels of face-to-face contact.

Access to resources for further study

Still with the theme of the success or otherwise of the learning process, this research has identified difficulties for distance learners in obtaining **access to resources for further study**. A high number of distance learning respondents indicated, for example, that they experienced problems when trying to obtain books etc. from libraries. As previously stated, many adult learners wish to explore topics beyond the limits required by their course and this research has highlighted a possible source of frustration in this respect.

Employment status

In Chapter 8 it was mentioned that there was a possible area of confusion as to how respondents had answered the question in the questionnaire concerning their employment status. It was suggested that some respondents may have answered the question from the point in time when they received the questionnaire, rather than the intended time when they were about to embark upon their course. In any similar **future research** it would be beneficial to avoid this confusion since it would be interesting to investigate whether any students became distance learners because they could not obtain time release from work and they could not afford to become full time students. Equally, it could be established how many classroom based students had made the sacrifice of giving up work and living on savings or a grant, rather than becoming distance learners. One of the face to face interviewees had mentioned how she had given up work in order to take a college course. When asked whether she had considered retaining her job and becoming a distance learner, she had replied that she did not feel confident about her ability to cope with distance learning. How many other people have similar views and make similar sacrifices based on personal doubts about their ability to cope with distance learning? This line of enquiry has been missed in this present research.

Unfair marking of course work

Although not particularly a central issue for this research, the view expressed by many classroom based learners that the marking of their work was not fair is a worrying finding. Students frequently react to the marking of their assignments, but the results from the distance learners suggests that the Open University staff manage to handle this matter more constructively. This contrast merits further consideration by the classroom based staff concerned.

Distance learning and social work training

Some comments have already been made in this respect in the section in this chapter on employer support, but it is now necessary to extend the debate further. In Chapter 2 mention was made about the doubts some authors have

expressed concerning the ability of distance learning to cope sucessfully with the various 'domains of learning'. The term 'domains of learning' comes from Gagne's writings which were described in Baath's book [Baath, 1979, chap. 17]. In this research Gagne's model has not been used, with instead the very loose translation to the terms 'knowledge', 'skills' and 'attitudes' being broadly substituted. A very generalised summary of these authors' main arguments suggests that whilst distance learning may well deal adequately with the acquisition of knowledge, the approach has greater difficulties with skills acquistion and even more problems with attitude change.

This research offers further support for the case that distance learning is able to hold its own alongside classroom based learning as regards **acquisition of knowledge.**

Turning to the other two areas of learning, various authors have argued the case for distance learning's ability to indeed make valuable contributions towards skills acquisition and attitude change [Osborne, 1985, and Rogers, 1986], but what has this research to say on these issues?

On the question of skills acquisition, both groups (distance learners and classroom based learners) offered a high level of positive responses to the question asking them whether they took their course in order to acquire new skills. The classroom based learners were, in fact, more supportive of this reason, but the difference was marginal. From these results it can be said that potential distance learning students had considerable confidence in the style of learning for gaining new skills. Was their confidence justified?

Both groups of respondents were asked whether they had acquired new skills and also whether they had had their existing skills reinforced. The majority of respondents from both groups felt able to indicate that they had indeed gained in both respects, but it was the classroom based learners who indicated a slightly more positive response to **existing skills reinforced** whilst the results from the two groups in response to **new skills acquired** were all but the same. From these results it is safe to state that distance learning has compared very favourably with classroom based learning as regards the acquisition of skills as far as the students were concerned.

The research explored to see whether the respondents felt **more in control at work** and whether they felt **more confident in their work role.** Although the link must be made with some caution, it is proposed that both these dimensions have a bearing upon the question of skills acquisition and attitude modification. If my reader accepts this link, then it has to be said that in these two respects (more in control and more confident) the classroom based learners recorded a more positive response.

It must be stated that throughout all the results in this section, in the areas where the classroom based respondents recorded more positive results, the distance learners came a very close second and, in fact, both groups were very pleased with their respective courses in the main. There were very few negative replies in this section. These results bode well for the Open University's plans to further expand into client specific training in the future. Having made this comment, it is perhaps a little disturbing that all the responses in the open questions and interviews to the general question of **which style of learning (DL or CB) is best suited to social work training** indicated a firm preference towards classroom based learning.

Many of these replies are quoted at the end of Chapter 6, and as can be seen, both distance learners and classroom based learners were all of the opinion that social care training is best undertaken in the classroom. Only one voice slightly qualified this by suggesting that the theory work could be done at a distance, but the rest of the course should take place within a college setting. These views all tended to come back to the central theme that social work is about relating to people and therefore a training course should allow for a high level of interaction.

Such a firm statement on the part of all the respondents who expressed an opinion on this fundamental question cannot lightly be ignored. Despite the previously described strong showing of the students evaluation of their distance learning course, the clear preference from the respondents was for social work related training via classroom based learning.

General conclusions

Much was made in Chapter 2 of the large number of
unqualified staff in the personal social services,
especially in residential and day care work [Barclay,
1980, p26]. The joint report from the Central Council
for Training and Education in Social Work and the Local
Government Training Board [CCETSW, 1987] and Osborne
[Osborne, 1985], both suggest that distance learning has
a part to play in responding to this training need. The
report, for example, states [CCETSW, 1987, p22] 'There is
a need for variety and flexibility in training methods'.
This research has been based on a relatively small sample
and so the findings need to be treated circumspectly, but
the findings do lead to two general comments as regards
the place of distance learning in responding to the
training need as described above.

Firstly, past students of an Open University social work
related course have expressed considerable confidence in
their course. Their impression of its ability to
'deliver' knowledge, skills and help them reflect on
their professional attitudes ranks very favourably
alongside the views of broadly comparable classroom based
learners. So on this finding, distance learning, in the
eyes of the student consumer, is a valid alternative to
consider when planning the provision of social work
training.

Secondly, when it comes to an overall assessment of
whether the same group of students sees distance
learning as appropriate for social work training, there
is an apparent contradiction. In this respect
respondents have turned their back on their own view of
its success and opted for classroom based learning as
the better mode of delivery.

It would seem that despite the appreciated high quality
of the distance learning material, there is still
something missing. Whether this 'something' harks back to
the discussion on status and all that the word hints at,
or whether it is the dimension of isolated learning
clashing in some way with the perception of social work
being about human interaction, there still remains a lack
of confidence in the minds of potential students about
distance learning. If this lack of confidence is also
mirrored by training officers within the personal social
services, then distance learning has an up hill struggle
to establish its credibility in this field of learning.

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APPENDIX A

Typical letter sent by course tutor accompanying the
questionnaire.

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

Department of Social Work Studies
Southampton,
SO9 5NH

Dear,

Research Project - Social Work Training

For several months I have been in discussion with Mike
Bunning, a personal research fellow at this University,
about a research project he is conducting. His interest
in comparing student's experience of distance learning
and classroom based study is of considerable interest to
us and to others in the Open University.

I would be most grateful if you could afford the time to
complete the questionnaire enclosed. The latter is sent
to you via this office in order to guarantee your
anonymity. However the general data which is collected
will be made available to the University and to the Open
University and will help in the future planning of
courses.

With many thanks for your time and co-operation.

Yours sincerely,

Director
Diploma in Applied Social Studies.

enc.

APPENDIX B

Question themes based on early discussions

This list of possible questions resulted from discussions with various colleagues and subsequently was developed into the first draft of the pilot questionnaire.

1. Did you feel there was a different status (educational, career prospects) in studying for a distance learning qualification/course compared with a classroom based course?

2. On completion of the distance learning course/ classroom based course, did you feel more/less motivated to progress to further training than at the beginning of your study?

3. Do you feel you missed out on the stimulation of a classroom group?

4. Did you feel a need for someone else (lecturer) to pace the learning rather than you setting the pace?

5. Did you find the marking of the assignments satisfactory?

6. Did you feel there was greater objectivity in the marking with the tutor not knowing you personally?

7. Did your motivation for study experience peaks and troughs? If so, can you identify circumstances leading to these?

8. How would you rate the standard of the material used on the course in terms of its presentation, modernity, clarity, etc.?

9. How easy did you find fitting your learning into the working week?

10. Do you feel more competent in your work compared with before the start of the course?

11. Did you find your professional attitudes and values

needing to be adjusted during and after the course?

12. Can you give examples of such changes (Q 11), if any?

13. What factors influenced your choice of either a distance learning course or classroom based course?

14. Was it difficult to discipline yourself for study?

15. Were you given time off for study by your employer?

16. Was there an adequate range of courses to choose from available to you?

17. Were you adequately prepared for the type of study involved on the course?

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK STUDIES

Head of Department — Bryan Glastonbury
Professor of Social Work Studies — Colin Pritchard MA, AAPSW

If telephoning please ask for
Mr M Bunning – 0202-747600 Extension 5905

Dear   Ex D.A.S.S. Student

RE: Diploma in Applied Social Studies

I am writing to you in the hope that you will be willing to help me with some research I am conducting into training for the personal social services.

In recent years there has been a considerable growth in courses available through distance learning/open learning/correspondence courses. Meanwhile, clearly most training continues to be conducted mainly in classrooms within colleges, eg In-Service Course in Social Care (ICSC); Certificate in Social Service (CSS); and the Qualifying Certificate in Social Work (CQSW).

My research is designed to compare the students' experience of following a distance learning course with the experience of students who have undertaken a classroom based course.   It is a consumer study, ie a study trying to establish how you felt about your course, why you decided to take it, what you gained from it, etc.   The courses I am researching are varied, but include the Southampton's Diploma in Applied Social Studies – hence this letter to you as you have been involved with this course. By contacting people who have studied on the various courses, I will be able to compare your reactions with those of people who have undertaken training in a different way – distance learning compared with classroom based learning, and therefore begin to identify the strengths and weaknesses of these two approaches to training for the personal Social Services.

The Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) and the Open University have been involved in the preparation of this research project and will be supplied with the findings.   CCETSW in particular regards the findings as "potentially of considerable use" as the Council plans its training programmes into the 1990s.

Enclosed is a questionnaire and a stamped addressed envelope.   The questionnaire should take approximately half an hour to complete. My work telephone number is given above should you have any queries. The results of the questionnaire will be treated in confidence. As you can see, the questionnaire is identified by a number only and even this will be discarded once the information gathering part of the research is complete.

I hope you will be able to find time to respond to the questionnaire and thank you in advance for your help.

Yours sincerely

MIKE BUNNING (Personal Research Fellow – Southampton University)
    JLWAAJ

INTRODUCTION

The questionnaire is divided into four broad sections, namely:
'A' - some background information about yourself;
'B' - your motivation for study;
'C' - an evaluation of your recent course;
'D' - its impact upon you.
After most questions there is a space for your comments. Please add any additional information you may want. Remember, the questionnaire is designed to establish your feelings/views about the course you undertook in order to provide people designing future courses with more information from the student's viewpoint.

THE MORE INFORMATION YOU CAN GIVE - THE BETTER!

SECTION 'A'

In order to put your responses into some kind of context, I need some basic background information about you. Please complete the following questions.

Question 1   To which of the following age-group do you belong?
               Please tick in the appropriate box.

               Under 21 .... [   ]
               21 - 24 .... [   ]
               25 - 34 .... [   ]
               35 - 44 .... [   ]
               45 - 54 .... [   ]
               55 and above .... [   ]

Question 2   And are you.....?

               Male .... [   ]
               Female .... [   ]

I need to establish your previous experience of education and training.
Can we first look at your social service related training (Question 3) and then at your general education (Question 4).

Question 3   Please list any substantial social service related training
               courses you have ever been involved in, indicating under
               the headings whether they were successfully completed
               ('yes' or 'no') and the year (approximate if necessary) in
               which you took the course. Please include the course
               presently being researched, ie The Diploma in Applied Social
               Studies. Short courses need not be included, but if in doubt,
               please enter it.

Course Title   Successfully Completed?   Year?

Question 4   Now we look at your general education.   With regard to the actual courses, you need only tick in the relevant boxes - specific details are not required. As in Question 3, can you please indicate whether the course was successfully completed and the year.

Course Title	Successfully Completed?	Year?
No formal educational qualifications		
CSE(s)		
'O' levels GCE/CSE(s) Grade 1		
'A' levels GCE		
ONC/OND BTEC National Dip ...		
HNC/HND BTEC Higher National		
First degree		
Post graduate qualification .		
Other (please specify below)		

including professional
qualifications such as
nursing and teaching:

In respect of both Question 3 and Question 4 could you please indicate if a particular course was taken as an open learning/ distance learning/correspondence course by writing its title again below, eg one of your 'O' levels might have been undertaken as a correspondence course.

Question 6   By ticking in the appropriate box(es), are you presently....?

Unemployed .... ☐
Working - full time .... ☐
Working - part-time .... ☐
Working - shift work .... ☐

Question 7   If you are employed in social care work, is your employer....?
(Please tick in the relevant box)

Local Authority Social Services Department ... ☐
Probation Department .... ☐
Local Education Authority .... ☐
Voluntary Agency .... ☐
Private Agency .... ☐
Health Service .... ☐
Other (please give details below) .... ☐

Question 8   Please describe your job, its level of seniority and its
responsibilities as fully as possible below:

SECTION B

Having obtained some background information - and please remember that all your replies will be dealt with in strictest confidence - can we now turn to your reasons for studying on the Diploma in Applied Social Studies. From now on all the questions relate to this course.

Question 9   *This question seeks to find out why you took this particular course. Thinking back to before you actually started the course, please tick, using Column 'A', the statements which apply to your circumstances. You may wish to tick against quite a number of the statements.*

I readily accept that my list of reasons is unlikely to be complete, so please feel free to add others at the bottom.

Please use Column B to write 1, 2 or 3 alongside the three most important reasons for you; '1' being the most important and '3' being the least. In other words, please rank order the three most important reasons.

I undertook the course because: 'A'   'B'

It would help my self development .... ☐   ☐
It would help me to do my present job better .... ☐   ☐
It would enhance my career prospects .... ☐   ☐
It would give me new skills .... ☐   ☐
I had spare time on my hands .... ☐   ☐
I needed the stimulus of new ideas .... ☐   ☐
My line-manager suggested it .... ☐   ☐
A colleague recommended it .... ☐   ☐
It would offer preparation for a return to work .... ☐   ☐
It seemed a reasonably inexpensive way of studying .... ☐   ☐
It would help a job change to a new client group .... ☐   ☐
It would help a job change to a new role, eg management ... ☐   ☐
The course content looked interesting .... ☐   ☐
The course was the most relevant available .... ☐   ☐
I prefer studying on my own .... ☐   ☐
I prefer studying in a classroom group .... ☐   ☐
I was able to obtain some help from my employer as
  regards the cost .... ☐   ☐
The particular approach to learning fitted my way of life   ☐   ☐

Others (please add)   ☐   ☐
                                                             ☐   ☐
                                                             ☐   ☐
                                                             ☐   ☐
                                                             ☐   ☐

Question 10   When considering comparable Distance Learning/Open Learing
               courses, do *you* think classroom-based courses have ....?
               (Please tick relevant box)

               Higher status .... ☐
               Lower status .... ☐
               The same .... ☐
               Don't know .... ☐

SECTION C

Now can we turn to your experience of the Diploma in Applied Social
Studies.

Question 11   Realistically most courses have strengths and weaknesses.
               Listed below are a number of statements about your course.
               After each statement are the words 'Agree', 'Disagree',
               'No View'.   Please circle one of these three responses
               for each statement.

The marking on your course was fair	Agree	Disagree	No View
You were able to set your own pace for study	Agree	Disagree	No View
The material used on the course was fair and unbiased	Agree	Disagree	No View
The material used on the course was topical and up-to-date	Agree	Disagree	No View
There was good access to resources for study, eg library books	Agree	Disagree	No View
There was easy access to your tutor	Agree	Disagree	No View
There was a good social life with your fellow students	Agree	Disagree	No View
Studying on the course required considerable self-discipline	Agree	Disagree	No View
There was little consistent chance to discuss ideas from the course with others	Agree	Disagree	No View
The material used on the course was pitched at the right level	Agree	Disagree	No View
The material on the course held your interest in the main	Agree	Disagree	No View
There was no chance to challenge the material used on your course	Agree	Disagree	No View
You had convenient access to your centre for study	Agree	Disagree	No View
The nature of the course allowed you to choose when to study	Agree	Disagree	No View
The presentation of the material used on your course was good	Agree	Disagree	No View

Still with the statements of question 11 in mind, please elaborate
any of them if you wish:

What would you especially identify as a strength of your
course?

What would you especially identify as a weakness of your
course?

Are there any other aspects you would like to add to my list of
statements which you consider I have missed?

Question 12   Did you feel you had enough support whilst on the course
               from (please circle either 'Yes', 'No' or 'Not Applicable')....?

               Your family   Yes   No   Not Applicable
               Your employer   Yes   No   Not Applicable
               Your colleagues at work Yes   No   Not Applicable
               Your fellow students   Yes   No   Not Applicable
               Your tutor   Yes   No   Not Applicable

               Please elaborate on any of your answers below:

Question 13   Did you incur any personal expenditure whilst on the course
               (fees, travel, books, postage, etc), not covered by a grant or
               your employer?

               If so, please estimate how much.   £_____

               Please indicate the kind of expenditure - what items?

SECTION D

Finally, can we turn to the kind of impact the course had upon you.

Question 14 *Please indicate on each of the following scales how you feel following your course in respect of your professional role.*

Each scale ranges from 1 to 5, with 3 being the mid-point. For example, if you feel that your career prospects have improved somewhat following the course, you might respond as below:

Improved career prospects 1 2 3 4 5 *Reduced career prospects*

Or if you feel your career prospects have been reduced following the course, you might respond as below:

Improved career prospects 1 2 3 4 5 *Reduced career prospects*

So, please respond to the following in respect of your professional role following your course:

Improved career prospects	1 2 3 4 5	*Reduced career prospects*
Feel better equipped for further training	1 2 3 4 5	*Feel less well equipped for further training*
Less in control	1 2 3 4 5	*More in control*
More confident	1 2 3 4 5	*Less confident*
Less relaxed	1 2 3 4 5	*More relaxed*
More aware of clients circumstances	1 2 3 4 5	*Less aware of clients circumstances*
Existing skills reinforced	1 2 3 4 5	*Existing skills undermin*
Many new skills acquired	1 2 3 4 5	*No new skills acquired*
Better informed	1 2 3 4 5	*Less well informed*
The course was worth doing	1 2 3 4 5	*The course was not wort doing*

Are there any other areas in which you feel you have changed which have not been listed?

Question 15   As part of the course you have undertaken, you have received various course booklets/handouts/taken your own notes, etc. Since finishing the course how many times have you turned to this material for reference or further reading....? Please tick in relevant box.

Not at all .... ☐
Occasionally .... ☐
Frequently .... ☐
Don't know .... ☐

Question 16   Some people's motivation for study experiences peaks and troughs during their course. If this happened to you, can you describe the circumstances around such feelings? These may have been linked with your personal life or the progress of the course.

Question 17   Is there anything that you would like to add which you feel has not been covered in this questionnaire but you consider is relevant to how you reacted to your course? Remember this study is aimed at assessing the comparative value of distance learning with classroom based learning in the field of social work education and training.

Many thanks to you for responding to these questions.

I hope to follow up some of the respondents in order to discuss some of the issues in a little more depth. Please tick in the box below if you do not want me to contact you.

☐

As I mentioned, only a few people will actually be contacted.

JLWAAK/MRB/KEW

APPENDIX D

Guide line questions used in the face to face interviews

1. In social care training, is there a benefit in being able to 'immediately' discuss with fellow students ideas sparked off by an input that has just finished?

2. A number of people expressed the view that social work is about people, and how can you learn about working with people through 'isolated' study? What do you think they were trying to convey? Do you agree?

3. Do you think that fellow students offer you a more honest/accurate feedback as to your progress on a course than that given by tutors?
    Was there adequate opportunity for this?

4. Did you value the opportunity of measuring your own progress against fellow students, rather than just from remarks/ marks given by the tutor?

5. The questionnaire asked about the relative status of distance learning courses compared to classroom based courses. How were you defining the word 'status' in your own mind as you answered that question?

6. Taking the course in the way you did (either distance learning or classroom based), was your role as 'student' sufficiently established so that people around you adjusted if necessary? (e.g. family, employer, work colleagues).

7. Do you think personal 'ups and downs' (e.g. moving house) would be more likely to disrupt study if studying on a distance learning course or classroom course?

8. All things being equal, would you prefer to study on a social care course on a distance learning basis or a classroom basis?

9. What did you think about the quality of the material used on your course?

10. Do you think the other type of course would have given you more chance to develop new skills?

11. Would it have been / was it helpful to observe the skills of fellow students?

12. The questionnaire mainly raised questions about the aquisition of skills through the courses, but do you think your attitudes changed much?
    What features of the course most probably influenced your attitudes?

13. Was there sufficient opportunity on your course to draw on your/other's work experience? Would this have been / was this helpful?

14. Which type of course requires the most self-discipline on the part of the student?

15. Was having a good social life with fellow students important to you?

16. Can you identify any particular strengths or weaknesses of the type of course you undertook?

N.B. The questions were not asked in any particular order and, in fact, not all questions were necessarily put to all six of the face to face interviewees.