

## FULFILLING THE NEEDS OF FIRST YEAR BIBLICAL STUDIES STUDENTS AT UNISA

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### Abstract

*This paper gives a profile of the first year Biblical Studies students at the University of South Africa (Unisa), showing the multi-dimensional composition of the student body and the demands it places on the teaching and learning processes. Different value systems and philosophical viewpoints challenge the academic and teaching skills of this correspondence institution. Maintaining the academic standards implies reconsidering the mission of the university and especially of the Faculty, in the light of its African context and adapting the teaching strategy to be able to contextualize its study material by making use of cultural hermeneutics which include cross-cultural communication. To improve its pass rate, the Faculty will have to improve critical thinking amongst its students.*

### 1. The reasons for and goals of this study

This paper was conceived during my sabbatical in 1988, when I wrote a research report on tuition to Biblical Students 1 at Unisa (Burden 1988). That paper was meant for discussion by the group of Old and New Testament lecturers who are responsible for teaching Biblical Studies 1. It was the result of two questionnaires (BST100=E 106/1986 and 109/1987) which were completed voluntarily by first year students. Discussion on this paper are still taking pace. Our objective is to formulate a teaching strategy which will contextualize and improve our tuition.

I am sure that most knowledgeable people and all our students will agree that Unisa's model is unique, possibly not necessarily because of it being better than others, but because it is so different, so highly flexible, adaptable and effective. Distance teaching has its own unique character and disadvantages, but it also has its challenges and advantages. The main obstacle, of course, is the distance between student and teacher, which demands special qualifications from both. Both teaching and learning skills must be fully developed. A Unisa student must be an independent learner and a Unisa teacher must not only be a skilful scholar and teacher, but a caring one.

In this paper I do not only wish to share some of the findings of my previous paper on Biblical Studies 1 with my colleagues in our Faculty and in the Society for Biblical Studies in Southern Africa, but I would like to take the discussion a step further and include the demands of a genuinely indigenous approach in the light of the challenging educational crisis in our region of Africa.

However, I will, for various reasons, still concentrate on the needs of Biblical Studies 1 students at Unisa. Firstly, they are 'freshmen' - or should I rather say 'fresh people'? - who are burdened with the disadvantages of their particular school system, and who have for this and other reasons still certain adaptations to make. Secondly, all the students at the Theological Faculty of Unisa (and also at some other Theological Faculties), have to take Biblical Studies 1. Thirdly, Biblical Studies 1 students at Unisa outnumber first year students in this field anywhere in the country. Fourthly, since the University of South Africa is the leading provider of higher education to our citizens of all races (Benbo 1976), it is expected that the Biblical Studies 1 student population at Unisa will substantiate this, as shown later. This will also bring the future expectations in this regard into focus.

In summary let me state my goals clearly:

- a) to inform you about some research results regarding the teaching of Biblical Studies 1 at Unisa to a multi-dimensional community;
- b) to stimulate further discussion and research;
- c) to search for a comprehensive and suitable solution for the educational crisis in South Africa;
- d) to be better equipped to teach a relevant and contextual theology in Africa without forfeiting responsible academic standards.

## 2. A profile of Biblical Studies at Unisa

The statistics provided are mainly drawn from the empirical research done in 1986 and 1987, as well as from an investigation in 1983 by F E Deist. Unisa's bureau for management information has also provided additional information.

### 2.1 Some relevant biographical and demographical details

#### 2.1.1 Language medium

##### a) Home language

	1986	1987
	%	%
Afrikaans	14,4	15,7
English	16,0	13,5
Afrikaans & English	2,0	2,1

Venda/Tsonga	16,7	15,4
Zulu	8,6	7,0
Xhosa	3,7	5,5
Northern Sotho	23,6	22,4
Southern Sotho	3,4	4,8
Tswana	7,3	7,0
Swazi	-	2,7
Europeans	0,5	0,3
Other	3,7	3,6
b) Tuition medium		
Afrikaans	16,1	16,0
English	83,9	84,0
2.1.2 Occupation		
Education	71,8	69,1
Housewife	4,8	4,8
Clerical	2,9	3,3
Commerce	2,1	2,4
Industry	1,1	1,7
Medical	1,7	1,6
Agriculture	0,2	0,3
Full-time students	-	6,9
Other	15,5	9,3
2.1.3 Denomination		
None	2,1	1,7
Roman Catholic	10,1	11,0
Anglican	9,5	6,1
Methodist	10,9	9,8
Presbyterian	7,4	6,2
Baptist	3,3	2,8
Pentecostal	5,7	2,2
DRC	13,4	16,2

Reformed	1,3	1,3
Hervormde	2,3	1,5
Lutheran	13,5	12,9
Zionist	5,2	5,7
Apostolic Faith Mission	-	3,6
Assemblies	-	5,3
Other	15,1	13,7

#### 2.1.4 Matriculation exemption

Full	-	40,11
23+	-	52,43
Other	-	7,46

#### 2.1.5 Previous studies in Biblical Studies

School		56,2
College		31,0
University		11,5
Other		1,3

## 2.2 Remarks on student population

### 2.2.1 Age

Since 1983 the average age dropped from 35,21 to 31,47 and 31,67 in 1986 and 1987 respectively. Unisa students are, therefore, mature compared to students at conventional universities, where age ranges between 19 and 21.

### 2.2.2 Sex

Male and female are now nearly equally divided.

### 2.2.3 Language

During 1987 those speaking African languages were by far in their majority: Nguni 15,2; Venda/Tsonga 15,4; Sotho/Tswana 35,2. This meant that in 1987 16% of tuition was done in Afrikaans and 84% in English.

### 2.2.4 Occupation

It is quite remarkable that approximately 70% of students are involved in education, and 6,9% are full-time students.

### 2.2.5 Denomination

There has been a dramatic drop from 35,6% in 1983 to 19% in 1987 in students from a reformed background. The denominations with the highest percentage are DRC's (16,2), Lutherans (12,9) and Roman Catholics (11,0).

### 2.2.6 Matriculation exemption

Since 1983 students with full exemption dropped from 74,8% to 40,11% in 1987. This is most probably due to the increase in Black students from 51,51 in 1984 to 71,18 in 1987. Lower examination results were perhaps the direct result as is clear from the following figures in 1987:

Exemption	Pass	Fail	No response	Total
Full	20,65	17,30	2,16	40,11
23+	20,22	29,41	2,81	52,43
Other	1,19	1,30	4,97	7,46
	41,05	48,00	9,95	100,00

### 2.2.7 Student numbers

The nearly uncontrollable growth in student numbers from 1984 to 1988 is clear from the following table:

Year	Enrolment	% Growth
1984	1 625	-
1985	2 243	38,03
1986	2 738	22,07
1987	3 160	15,41
1988	3 595	13,77

Although the growth steadily declined, the average was still 22,3%, which remains too high compared to the 3% allowed for subsidy purposes. As a result of the policy of the authorities of the university to phase out unsuccessful students, it seems that a growth of only 0,11% for Biblical Studies 1 enrolments (3 543) had registered on March 1989.

## 2.3 Implications of the composition of the student population

From the picture sketched above it is clear that our student body represents a vast multi-dimensional and pluralistic community. It is due solely to a correspondence

teaching being so highly flexible and adaptable that we still are able to teach to a considerable degree of efficiency. The reasons for the success of teletuition are many. In this regard it is worthwhile quoting Crawford-Nutt (1980:12):

Not least among them is the possibility it offers of bringing education to very many more than could otherwise receive it. Correspondence study does not suffer from time or space limitations, and it can satisfy both the interests and the learning needs of a wide variety of learners. And, in so doing, it raises the level of the contribution that those who use it can make to society, and so contributes materially to the wealth and economic power that are necessary to the maintenance of society and to the achievement of its goals.

In the light of the great number of black students (on 18 October 1988 this was 75%) there is, however, one growing concern, namely successful teaching in an African context. Kwapong (1973:4) states:

... African universities should be both truly African and truly international in their curricula, standards and performance.

The question is: is this possible?

### 3. Contemporary educational demands in South Africa

It is expected that the multi-dimensional composition of our Biblical Studies 1 students will also include the conflicting perceptions of education of the communities from which they come. Ken Hartshorne (1988:14) describes our conflicting world as follows:

South Africa is a very peculiar kind of country with a society that is divided into two worlds, but existing within the same borders. You have a situation therefore where the perceptions of people from one world are different from the perceptions of people from the other. I mean here black and white.

Let us now consider the background of some of these conflicting perceptions of the two or even more worlds.

#### 3.1 The different school backgrounds of our students

According to the different departments of education where they have matriculated, the distribution of Biblical Studies students was as follows:

Department	Frequency	Percentage
Transvaal	88	10,1
Cape Province	57	6,5
OFS	11	1,3
Natal	24	2,8
Coloured	36	4,1
Indians	2	0,2

Education and Training	566	64,9
Matriculation Board and National Certificate	55	6,3
Other	33	3,8

Since the riots of 1976 education amongst Coloured and blacks (69%) has been disrupted to such a degree that the standard of first year students was severely negatively influenced, as was proved by a lower pass rate. During the past decade and a half of unrest and the accompanying crisis in education, the conflicting perceptions between blacks and whites grew alarmingly wider. It is especially clear in the perceptions of those marked 'return to school' since 1987. According to Hartshorne (1988:14f) Whites 'take a rather comfortable view of what has happened'. Official statements like 'last year's unrest at black schools was a thing of the past', and the inference 'a return to normality' are proof of this attitude. To the contrary, the 'return to school' was reached amongst blacks by strenuous negotiations between pupils, parental bodies, churches, community leaders, educational and political organisations. There, it must be seen according to Hartshorne (1988:14) 'as part of wider strategies for the achievement of both educational and political objectives in the struggle for liberation'. It is, therefore, not seen amongst the blacks as an acceptance either of the education system or of the government's reform process.

The attitude of the black children is particularly alarming for university training. Hartshorne (1988:15) describes it as follows:

... there is no guarantee in urban schools that learning is taking place. Pupils are restless and disturbed by what is going on around them, regular learning habits are breaking down, they do not bring books to school, are negligent about homework and distrusts tests and examinations, even the external senior certificate/matriculation examination. Since 1976, pupils have experienced the heady feeling of power over their teachers, and ... this sometimes leads to youthful arrogance in speech and education.

Hartshorne (1988:15) sums up the conflicting perceptions between whites and blacks as follows:

In general, in ... statements of improvement and reform in black education, white protagonists show a marked tendency to emphasise finance, numbers and quantity. Black concerns, on the other hand, have to do with issues of quality, relevance, underlying philosophies, black participation, decision-making and control.

It is alarming that this lack of motivation and academic achievement of black pupils make them unsuitable for admission to an university, with the exception of them having a second chance when attending a bridging course. The question in the minds of some academics is: is preparation for university our responsibility? I would think

that in our present situation there is sufficient grounds for a serious consideration of a 'bridging college', which in principle has already been approved by Unisa's Senate.

### 3.2 Different value systems

Pemberton (1963:24, cf Crawford-Nutt 1980:24) found that

... once students have been selected for a necessary minimum of developed ability, achievement from that point depends more and more on motivational factors, and less and less on differences in ability, temperament, and environmental backgrounds.

However, according to Crawford-Nutt (1980:24) '... motivation is related to values. In fact, values motivate'. Crawford-Nutt (1980:80) defines 'value' in such a way that to my mind it is reconcilable with 'world-view', which I would define as 'the perception a person has of his/her environment' with the exception that Crawford-Nutt emphasises the individual functional aspect.

Although Crawford-Nutt's study to determine the relationship between student values and academic achievements was carried out in Unisa's Department of Psychology, the results are also of great importance in general, and especially for a better understanding of conflicting conceptions amongst such a vast variety of students such as we have in Biblical Studies 1. A number of the similarities and differences between the various groupings of successful and unsuccessful students is also of importance to us. I quote in full the summary of his results (Crawford-Nutt 1980:243-245):

Students who succeed academically are those whose system of values mark them out as independent learners, able to participate in the learning practices and procedures of the Department in a manner congruent with the nature.

Students whose system of values makes them more dependent, less self-sufficient, less concerned with understanding the nature of things, less concerned about being critical in their thinking, are also less likely to succeed academically.

Students who not only succeed academically, but who are the top achievers among those who succeed, are those with a strong academic-theoretical orientation to their system of personal values.

Students who drop out are those in whose value systems there is a conflict between altruism and academic commitment that betrays a bias towards helping others which overcomes the intention to complete the academic course.

Students do not change their systems of values towards congruence with those of the Department, but the differences between them and the staff do not prevent the attainment of the common goal of academic success which both are striving to achieve.

Male and female students do not differ fundamentally in their systems of personal values. The differences that do appear between them are probably



the result of their traditional sex role positions, and may disappear as these change.

English- and Afrikaans-speaking students tend to differ somewhat in their systems of values. The value systems of Afrikaans-speaking students reflects more concern with the mastery of what is given than with the critical thinking and spirit of enquiry into the meaning of things that characterise the more academic-theoretical orientation of the value systems of the English-speaking students.

Black and white students differ considerably in their systems of values. While blacks, compared with whites, are more concerned about creativity, they are also less concerned with detail and the values that reflect the academic-theoretical orientation that is associated with top academic achievement. Supporting this view is their emphasis, compared with whites, on the importance of the student adviser, the academic staff, and group visits.

### 3.3 Fundamentally different philosophies of education

Michael Ashley (1986:27) distinguishes three fundamentally different conceptions of education in South Africa, namely Christian National Education, Liberal Education, and 'People's Education'. These now need our attention.

#### 3.3.1 Christian National Education

According to Ashley Christian National Education 'has been extremely successful in its major aim, i e to serve the cause of Afrikaner solidarity, to ensure the survival of language and culture, and to produce the bureaucracy needed to run the country'. He also criticizes it in three aspects:

- a) It failed the Afrikaner since it has not sufficiently encouraged the independent critical mind which is necessary for modern science, technology and business.
- b) It has failed the country through its philosophy of *apartheid*, which produced 'Bantu', 'Coloured', 'Indian' and 'White' education according to population groups. This 'fine ideal' of Afrikanerdom 'became an instrument perceived as oppressive, a denial of basic educational rights'.
- c) According to Ashley, it also failed the country 'in that it isolated children from each other at the period of their lives when they should have been developing greater mutual knowledge, tolerance and understanding'.

#### 3.3.2 Liberal Education

British and European liberal ideals which in education always stood for the development of individuals *qua* individuals to their full potential, were brought in by the English-speaking community. Despite its contribution to the development of the scientific and commercial areas through its high educational standards as well as by creating a reasonable tolerance amongst people who differed from each other, it

failed the country by its very individualistic commitment, since it did not 'generate a sufficiently high level of patriotism and moral commitment'.

### 3.3.3 An indigenous black educational viewpoint

It is only during the last ten years that 'a truly distinctive indigenous and developed black educational viewpoint' - as Ashley (1986:27) calls it - has developed as an alternative to 'black education', on the one hand, and liberal thinking, on the other hand (Hartshorne 1988:16,18).

Of course, conflicting conceptions will exist on this type of alternative education. While whites, on the one hand, will argue that since it is essentially a result of the implications of the Freedom Charter (Ashley 1986:27), it must be Marxist and therefore inspired from Moscow, while blacks, on the other hand, see in it 'a fundamental critique of the existing South African social order'. To them its goals, structures, values and educational objectives would rather be to promote 'democracy, non-racialism, collective work and active participation' (Hartshorne 1988:18). In the eyes of blacks their alternative is 'concerned with "all sectors of our people", white as well as black' (Hartshorne 1988:18) - a viewpoint on which a considerable number of whites will disagree.

The following serious problems are seen by Ashley (1986:27) in some of the implications of 'People's Education':

- a) To maintain the necessary standards of ensuring properly trained and educated medical, engineering, agricultural and financial experts is an extremely difficult and arduous process. Individual talent must not be buried in a sea of mediocrity. Good schools, colleges and universities must, therefore, be protected against flooding by ill-prepared pupils and students.
- b) The second criticism concerns the education of the critical mind, thus avoiding stagnation and challenging any ideology which might lead to one-party or military cliques.
- c) Ethnicity and culture - although they are now very suspect - are factors that cannot be ignored in an education system. To quote Ashley (1986:27) again: 'Groups surely have a right to ensure the protection of their language, religion and culture, provided in so doing they do not gain huge advantage over others, or engender group hatreds and hostility'.

It is an open secret that the multi-dimensional composition of the Biblical Studies 1 population of students at Unisa do harbour all these diverse and conflicting educational viewpoints. The question is: how do we relevantly teach to such a student body? These challenges and demands have now to be met.

## 4. Meeting the demands

Should you be expecting a blue print from me in this regard, I am afraid I must disappoint you. I am only going to touch on a few ideas for further discussion and research.

### 4.1 Maintaining the necessary standards

Both world-wide as well as South African universities are concerned about their academic standards. A report (NASOP 02-129 [87/10]) entitled *Akademie se standaarde by universiteite in die RSA* (cf Harley 1989:1) was submitted by Dr J G Garbers, the chairman of an *ad hoc* committee appointed by the Committee of University Principals.

Harley (1989:2) writes as follows:

Die begrip 'akademie se standaarde' is vaag, moeilik definieerbaar, selfs moeilik om duidelik te omskryf, en beslis nie kwantifiseerbaar nie. Akademie se standaarde aan 'n universiteit kan nie los gesien word van die doelstellings van 'n universiteit nie. (The term 'academic standards' is vague, difficult to define, even difficult to describe and most decidedly not quantifiable. The academic standards of a university cannot be dissociated from the aims of a university.)

To my mind the basic question is: what is a university? In the past great emphasis was placed in the West on the development of the individual according to our basic philosophy - to quote Crawford-Nutt (1980:10): '... the conviction that the development of society depended upon the development of the individual'. In Africa, however, individual is subordinate to society. In Western society a university is defined by its mission, which was very individualistic in the past, whereas in Africa the mission of the university is focused on the development of society. The mission of a university is expressed in its teaching and learning objectives, and for this reason, I would think, our African context should determine and change its basic philosophy from a basic individualistic viewpoint to a society directed viewpoint. Concretely this implies that we must direct our teaching towards all the needs of the multi-dimensional society from which our students come, which in our case, of course, is dominated by an African context.

For this reason we will have to study and apply cultural or ethno-hermeneutics in teaching Biblical Studies. This means that we will have to study the Bible in terms of the social, economic, religious and political needs of the societies of those times, and, after a careful analysis of the needs of our students within our own society, attempt to apply our biblical insights to our own context. A context that will be dominated by blacks - including black theologians - who are often for good reasons driven by an hermeneutic of suspicion, which is *praxis* orientated and based on a materialist analysis of society (cf e g Mosala 1987:26-42). In such a diversity of cultural backgrounds of our students, this, of course, will demand cross-cultural abilities in our communication with them. Cross-cultural communication will therefore imply a temporary suspension, as far as this is possible, of one's own

presuppositions, values, knowledge and explanations in order to understand the ideas and behaviour of those thinking and acting in terms of a different culture to one's own, which means, one must interpret their ideas and behaviour in terms of the meaning they would attach thereto.

Previously this hermeneutical process was known as 'indigenization', but since the momentum of independence in Africa, we now speak of 'contextualisation' (Burden 1982:63-66), which purposely include the social, economic and political issues. Sebothoma (1989) not only speaks of a paradigm-shift in this connection, but also ascribes the editorial work in the biblical texts to contextualization. Nicholls (1979:169) defines contextualization as 'the translation of the unchanging content of the Gospel of the Kingdom into verbal form meaningful to the peoples in their separate cultures and within their existential situations'.

Therefore, I conclude that the maintenance of our standards is not only related to our basic philosophy regarding the essence of a university, but also in so much as how far we are successful in contextualizing the biblical message for South Africa.

## 4.2 Education of the critical mind

We have seen that critical thinking and the enquiring mind into the meaning of things are more important to a student's success than the mastering of what is given. Judging from the pass rate, the majority of our students lack this ability. We therefore have to concentrate on the development of the critical mind. But how? We must attempt to assist our students in metacognition, which simply means 'thinking about thinking' (Bondy 1987:7-10). Bondy (1987:7) describes this process as follows: 'The basic skills of metacognition include predicting the consequences of an action or event, checking the results of one's actions (did it work?), monitoring one's ongoing activity (how am I doing?), reality testing (does this make sense?), and a variety of other behaviours for coordinating and controlling deliberate attempts to learn and solve problems'. She also gives the following practical suggestions for educators:

### 4.2.1 Promote a general awareness of metacognitive activity

- a) Have students keep a daily 'learning log'
- b) Demonstrate and discuss appropriate metacognitive activity

### 4.2.2 Facilitate conscious monitoring of comprehension

- c) Promote opportunities for feedback
- d) Provide instruction in self-questioning techniques
- e) Teach students to summarise material
- f) Teach students to rate their comprehension

#### 4.2.3 Encourage a deliberate and systematic approach to learning and problem-solving

- g) Adapt a studying model
- h) Think about thinking by the following problem-solving guide:
  - (i) Hey, wait! (Recognize that you have a problem and define it);
  - (ii) Think! (Consider your alternatives and select one to try out);
  - (iii) See! (Evaluate the effectiveness of the alternative selected);
  - (iv) Do! (Decide what to do next - stop, recycle, etc).

#### 4.3 Unisa's endeavours

In this regard, I am less informed about the endeavours to contextualize theology at other South African universities than I am about Unisa's position. For this reason I shall rather concentrate on the Faculty of Theology at Unisa. There are several issues in this Faculty that deserve our attention:

##### 4.3.1 Appointment of staff

Since the appointment several years ago of several, but by far not sufficient, black colleagues in our Faculty, they are contributing largely to the issue of contextualization in our Faculty. The general awareness of the problem of cross-cultural communication must be developed fully by intra- and inter-faculty discussions and programs.

##### 4.3.2 Research projects

A research project on 'Interpreting the Bible in African contexts' is registered with the Institute for Theological Research. Although this project has already yielded interesting results, it must be completed before these results can be implemented. This type of project is imperative for the contextualization of theology in our continent.

A second project is registered with the Human Sciences Research Council to investigate the epistemology and methodology of South African biblical scholarship. Interviews are held with most biblical scholars at South African universities. The results of the study will also soon be available for implementation.

##### 4.3.3 Future prospects for Biblical Studies 1

We have considered the appointment of various of our black post-graduate students as tutors in the Northern Transvaal since 40% of our Biblical Studies 1 students live in Lebowa, Venda and Gazankulu. They will be able to assist greatly in the teaching of Biblical Studies in an African context. Since group discussions are very popular amongst our black students, we have, for the past few years, been concentrating on this method of teaching in Pietersburg.

Our new textbooks and study guides will also concentrate more seriously on the African context of most of our students. For this purpose, far more research and staff development is necessary.

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