

# **TITLE: EFFECTIVENESS OF SMS COMMUNICATION BETWEEN UNIVERSITY AND STUDENTS**

**Authors: Ms Evelyn Nonyongo, Ms Khomotso Mabusela, Mr Vincent Monene (Institute for Continuing Education, University of South Africa)**

## **Abstract**

In distance learning, universities can only communicate with the students mainly by post, which at times gets lost or take too long to reach them. In view of unreliability of the post method, this article seeks to explore the probabilities, reliability and cost effectiveness of using another communication method via SMS. Given the fact that majority of Unisa students own cellphones, this article seeks to explore the possibility of using SMS as an alternative means of communicating. This can assist in narrowing the gap of contact between the University and students as the message goes directly to the intended receiver. It will as well present the opinions of students regarding the kind of information they deem necessary to be communicated to them via Short Message (SMS).

## **1. Introduction**

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is an important method of increasing access to education and training. The University of South Africa (UNISA) is a pioneer provider of ODL in Africa and with enrolment figures of over 100 000 students annually, it is one of the world's mega-universities. UNISA's student population is scattered in all continents globally, though the majority of students are in South Africa (190 061 in 2004) and the rest of the African continent (11 102 in 2004). Communication with and providing support to ODL students, especially those in remote and rural areas and informal settlements with limited infrastructure is however, one of the major problems facing ODL institutions. The postal system, telephones and recently computers are some of the main means of communication in ODL in South Africa. However problems of delay and reliability of the postal system, access and costs of telephone and computers continue to present major challenges for ODL providers and students. The increasing use of mobile/cell-phone short message service (SMS) among South African youth and adults presents opportunities for using this technology in communicating and providing support to ODL students.

This paper reports on the preliminary findings of a collaborative research project between UNISA, Institute for Continuing Education (ICE) and the Commonwealth of Learning (COL).

The aim of this research is to investigate whether and how SMS can be used to improve communication with and/or provide support to students enrolled for the Diploma in Youth Development at UNISA.

## **2. Literature review**

The All-Africa Ministers' Conference on Open Learning and Distance Education held in Cape Town from 1-4 February 2004 acknowledged the contribution of ODL to meeting Africa's particular educational needs and the potential of ODL in providing education at all levels.

Among the recommendations of this meeting on areas that need to be addressed was "collaboration at regional and Pan-African level, including sharing information, experiences and research in Africa and other countries". Presentation of the preliminary findings of UNISA-ICE/COL research to M Learn conference is one way of sharing information at regional, Pan-African and internationally.

Communication between ODL institutions and students presents major challenges. Some of these challenges relate to costs, unsatisfactory services and access to information and communication technologies (ICT) like postage, telephone and computers. In a forthcoming DEASA (the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa) and UNISA Press publication (Dodds 2005) some of the problems mentioned include the fact that:

- Students from remote and rural areas constitute a sizable number in some countries. At the University of Namibia, Centre for External Studies for example, rural students constituted 88,7% of the 1998 student population and these students mentioned isolation from the institution as a major problem (Beukes 2005). In another study from UNAM-CES, 61% of respondents complained that mail from the institution takes too long to reach them and post offices return mail back to sender too soon. (Mowes 2005). In comparison to these two examples, students from the VUDEC study who were mainly teachers reported no problems with the postal system.
- Remote and rural students reside more than 100 kilometers from the nearest learning centre. In 2000, some of the students registered for Institute for Continuing Education's Diploma in Youth Development had to travel more than 800 km to the nearest learning centre in Kimberley (Nonyongo 2004).

It is worth noting that none of the research studies in this important publication produced by a sub-regional ODL association, the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA), mentions the usage of SMS as a mechanism for addressing some of the above problems. The late 1990s - 2000 timeframe of the research studies might be the reason for this as at that time SMS usage in some Southern African countries were not as popular as now. Neither was cell-phone coverage as widespread as now. Hence these studies tend to concentrate on the usage of landline telephones, computers and television and some of the difficulties experienced with these ICTs. For example, Hay and Beneke (2005) note in 1998, 81% of VUDEC students who were teachers had no access to audio cassette recorders at school, 89% had no access to television and only 8% has access to a computer.

Research on SMS communication which confirms that SMS communication is quick, efficient, cheap and convenient and it has been used around the world for different purposes.

According to Power (2004) deaf people have taken readily to this technology as they now have the same access to phone communication involving SMS communication as do hearing people.

According to Michael Howie (2004), Trevor Bryant has devised a system that allows pupils to do homework using their phones. They text a number and download the information on the subject. A lot of youngsters have cellphone and use them frequently therefore this present alternatives for ODL that takes SMS communication to include teaching possibilities,

Famborough College use SMS tool to communicate with students and parents about day to day college information such as timetable details, assignment due dates, parents' evenings and college events (Terrettini: 2004).

The above shows that SMSs continue to be used, at schools socially and by people who need to be in contact with each other.

This research study shifts the focus to open and distance learning where there is a need to further bridge the gap of communication between the ODL providing institutions and students through the new and increasingly accessible technologies like cellphones and their SMS service.

### **3. Research Methodology**

A survey of students enrolled for the Diploma in Youth Development during the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester of 2004 was conducted between the months of November 2004 and February 2005.

The students contacted through cell phones had all provided their cell numbers on their UNISA registration forms. These students are enrolled for first and/or second level of the DYD.

The survey questionnaire was, however, sent out to all UNISA DYD second semester students to sensitise all students on UNISA's use of the SMS and in this way encourage them to update their cell phone records at UNISA.

An SMS was sent to inform students on the due date of their examination results and the closing date for the 2005 first semester registration. The text on the SMS read:

"Unisa results for Dip Youth Dev to be released on 13 Dec 2004. Registration for 2005 closes on 1 Feb 2005. Enq: Khomotso (012)4296919"

A questionnaire was later mailed on the 16<sup>th</sup> February 2005 to all DYD students (168 students) to assess the effectiveness of SMS communication. Responses from 57 students were received representing 34% return. This paper reports on the findings from these responses.

The second stage of this research involves surveying the 2005 DYD students. Already three SMSs have been sent to students. The first 2005 SMS was sent in May to 132 students registered for DYD in 2005 encouraging them to send all outstanding assignments. The second SMS was sent to all students before they wrote June/July examinations wishing them luck. The third SMS was sent to students informing them of the date when the results will be released and also the closing date for 2005 second semester registration. Questionnaires are due to be sent to students in August to assess the effectiveness of SMS. The results of these will be compared with the findings contained in this report.

34% questionnaire return rate was regarded as good under the circumstances (many rural students), though the authors would have preferred a higher figure. Telephone follow-up on questionnaire return were made. 53 students (31.4%) had their phones on voice mail or the number did not exist. Voice messages were left for 30 students (17.8%) who did not answer their calls. A second follow-up telephone call to these two groups was made a day after with limited success. Others called back after receiving the voice message.

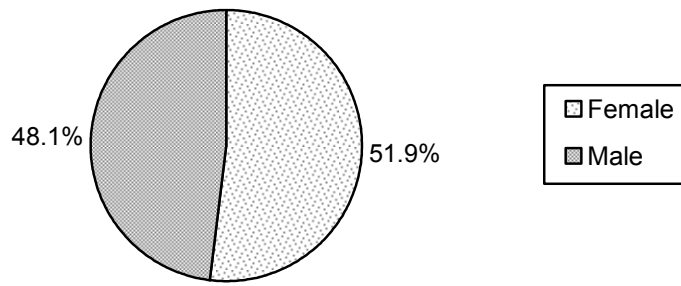
From the questionnaires received, some of the students did not answer all the questions, hence the difference in numbers on the different questions discussed in the findings below. 21% of those who did not answer question 3 and 4 are students who did not receive any SMSs because they did not provide numbers or these had changed. Below are findings from the survey.

## 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1. Demographic details

#### *Gender*

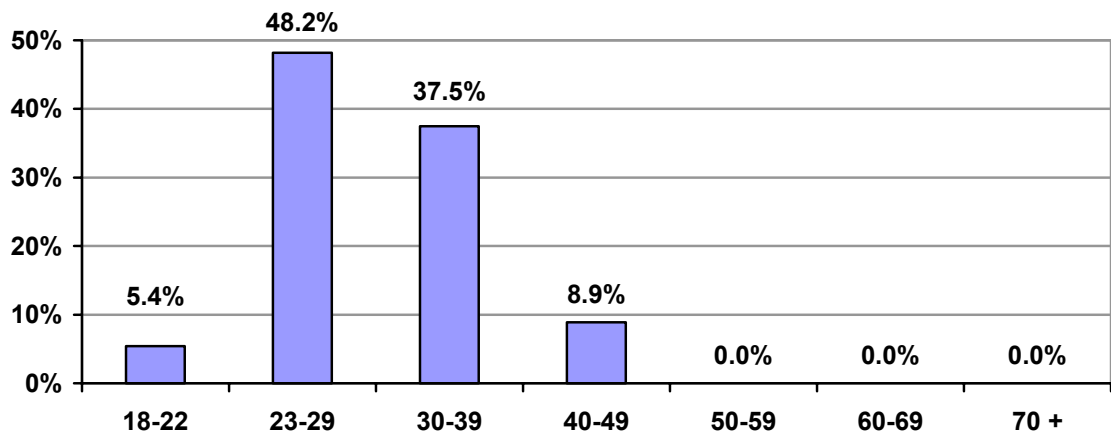
Of the 57 respondents who returned questionnaires, 54 (94.7%) indicated their gender. The gender break down was 30 (51.9%) female and 28 (48.1%) males.



#### *Age*

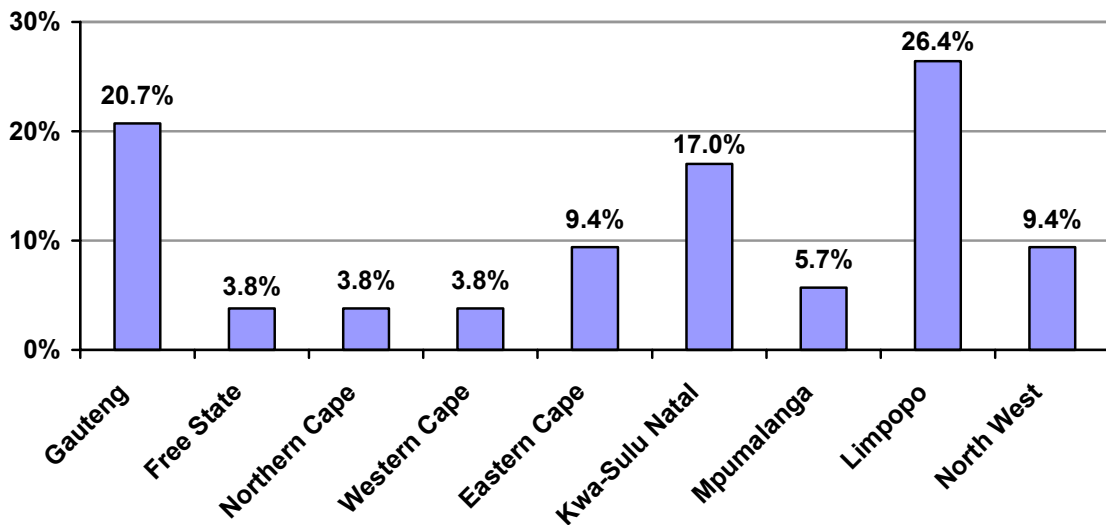
Number of responses = 54 (98.2%).

A large majority of the respondents fall under the youth category, that is ages 18 to 35. Looking at students aged between 18 to 29 only, they made up 59.6%. For a youth development programme, this is apposite indicating that the programme is reaching its main target audience. This also confirms the popularity of cell phones among youth.



*Province of Residence*

Number of responses = 53 (92,9%)



This indicates that DYD in all nine South African provinces have cell phones.

Most of the respondents (26.4%) came from the Limpopo Province followed by Gauteng with 20.7%, and KZN with 17%.

The Eastern Cape and North West provinces responses were 9.4 % each.

The lowest responses of 3.8% were from Free State, Northern and Western Cape.

#### 4.2. Views on SMS communication.

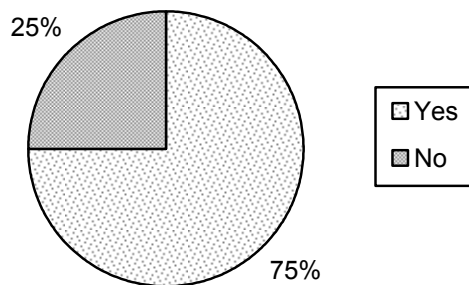
The questionnaire also solicited students' views of on various aspects of SMS usage for communication between the institution and students. Responses on questions covering these aspects are summarised below under each of the questions asked.

**Question: Have you received any SMS communication from UNISA?**

(N = 57 responses)

75% of the responses confirmed receipt of SMS communication.

As indicated above, the questionnaire was sent to all second semester DYD students, that is, including those who had originally not provided cell phone numbers on their registration forms. The 25% no response represents this latter group.



**Question: Have you changed your cell phone number recently? And if so, have you provided your new number to UNISA?**

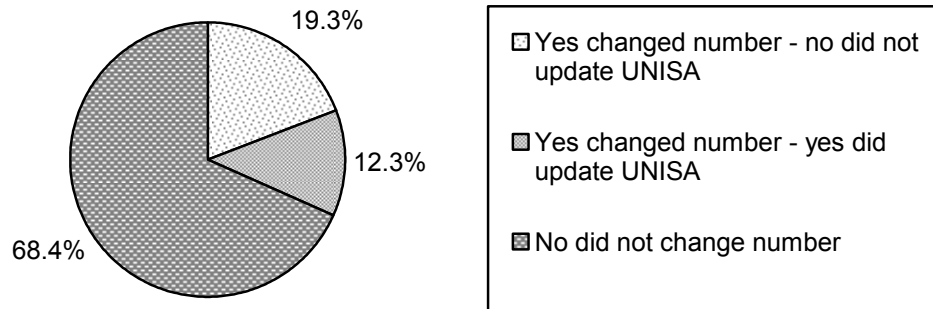
(N =57)

All respondents answered this question.

The cell phone numbers of 80,7% of respondents were current, that is 68,4 % had not changed their number since registration and 12,3% had changed numbers and informed UNISA.

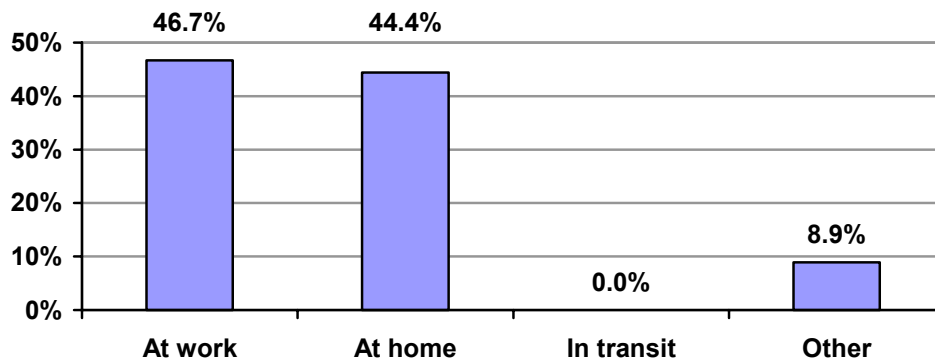
That 19.3% of the respondents changed numbers but did not update Unisa, indicating the need to regularly request students to update their information.

It can be deduced that 68.4% was part of the 75% that indicated receipt of SMS communication in question 1 above while the 19.3% were part of the 25% that did not receive SMS communication.



*Question: If you have received SMS communication from UNISA, where were you typically when you received the SMSs?*

(N = 45)

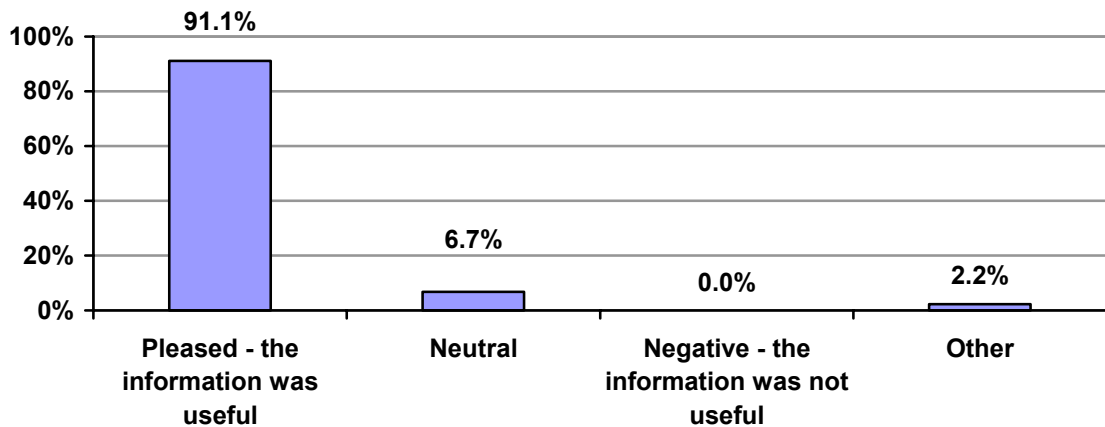


The majority of respondents were either at work (46,7% or at home (44,4%)

The 8.9% "other" responses were either far from the phone, had left the phone with someone else (wife), were in town shopping or had not informed UNISA about their new cell numbers.

*Question: How did you feel when you received the SMSs?*

(N = 45)



That such a high majority of respondents (91.1%) were pleased and found the information communicated to them to be very useful and also that there were no negative responses, indicates support for SMS communication between the ODL providing institution and its students.

It is assumed that the “neutral” (6,7%) responses were from the same group as the “other” (2,2%) who had found the question either not applicable or had mentioned that they did not receive any SMS from UNISA.

As students were never informed before hand that they will be receiving SMS communication at any time during their studies, the reasons why they were pleased are crucial. These reasons fall within the following categories and a few actual students’ views have been cited:

Category	Reason
Happy/pleased/glad/great	<p><i>I know the time and date for my results in order to be ready for them.</i></p> <p><i>It came to me that now the information will flow fast to students and time will be saved. I also believe the institution will not hesitate to keep us posted in terms of any information regarding studies.</i></p> <p><i>UNISA is the only institution with thousands and thousands of students but can afford to make sure that each students receive the necessary information in time. All the information will reach their students in good time, good in consultation. This university cares much about their students.</i></p>
Surprised	<p><i>I did not know they (results) will be very early before Christmas. But I said it's okay so that we have leisure time knowing what's up about my status, whether I completed or not.</i></p>



Felt important/special/proud	<p><i>That urgent messages can be delivered in time for I was eager not knowing when will I get my results.</i></p> <p><i>Felt special</i></p> <p><i>Felt good and proud to have received this from UNISA.</i></p> <p><i>That I am an important person to UNISA although I'm studying through distance learning.</i></p>
Anxious	<p><i>I wanted to call immediately to know my results.</i></p>

Even those students who did not receive SMSs were very positive about this method of communication:

*I have not received an SMS, however, if I could have received I would be excited.*

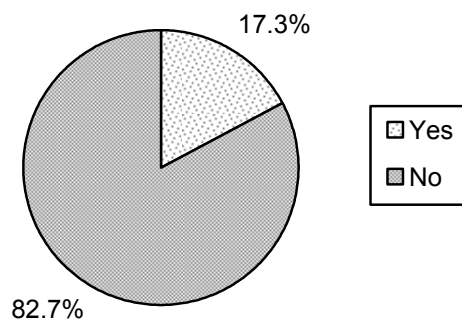
*I was a little bit surprised, because I never received any SMS from UNISA before. But all in all the SMS was helpful.*

**Question: Did you respond to any of the SMSs UNISA sent you"**

(N = 52)

The 82.7% that did not respond felt that the message did not need any response.

Those who responded (17,3%) used the number provided on the SMS. This gave some of the students a platform to ask other questions relating to other aspects of their studies and/or to express their gratitude on being recognised as important clients of the University. Some responded because they were "checking the service mentioned on the SMS; "enquired about the results and I was helped with my results"; responding to "show sender how thankful you are for the SMS.



**Question: Would you like to receive regular contact from us through SMSs?**

(N = 54)

Only 1.9% of the respondents would not like to receive regular contact from the University. The reasons for this need to be investigated but could relate to not having cell phones.

96,2% want regular contact through SMSs and 38.9%, 40,7% and 16,6% respectively would like to receive contact weekly, monthly and twice a semester.

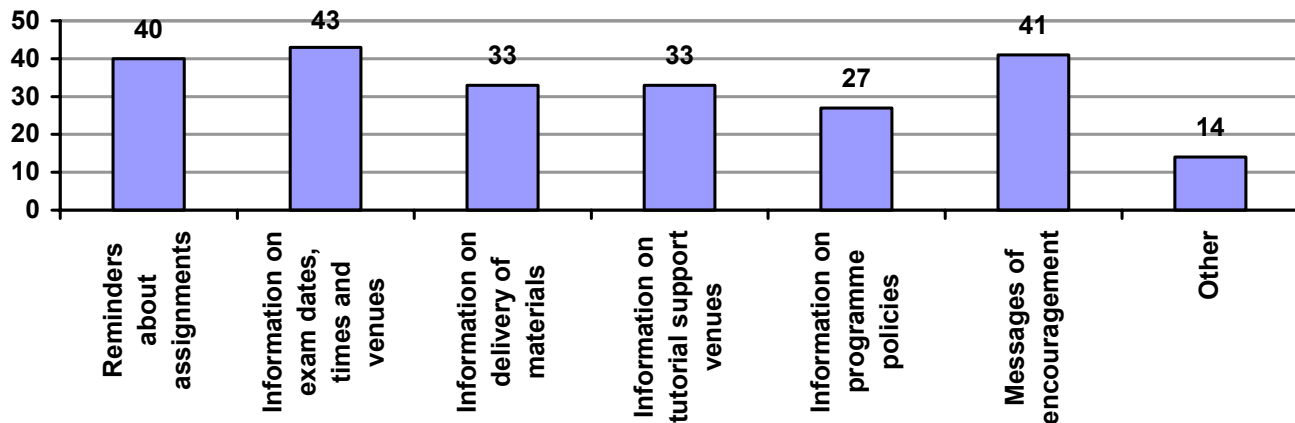
The “other” responses wanted contact for “important stuff pertaining to my course” or “just with things related to my specific needs.

**Question Please comment on your preferences for continued contact with UNISA through SMS communication. Why would you like to receive regular contact.**

<p><i>To keep up to date with the studies</i></p>	<p><i>To help keep me updated about issues regarding my course.</i></p> <p><i>To be updated on new developments with regard to the programmes registered for.</i></p> <p><i>To be updated of my tutorial classes and also to know if all my assignments are received.</i></p> <p><i>To provide me with latest information/changes.</i></p> <p><i>It will help me to be kept posted regarding the latest development in connection with our studies.</i></p> <p><i>Because I'm from rural areas, so this would help me keep updated about my education and assignment</i></p>
<p><i>To be informed</i></p>	<p><i>Why I will like to receive regular contacts because I will like to be inform on what is happening, To keep in touch and be informed at a regular basis.</i></p>

**Question: What aspects of your studies should these SMSs cover? (please check all that apply)**

Note: Numbers in the chart below are tallies of number of responses and not percentages.



The “other” responses included miscellaneous items like graduation dates, new available courses, examinations and assignment results, registration closing dates, payment due dates and SRC meetings and elections.

**Question:** Please comment on the effectiveness of a SMS system for supporting learners in a distance education programme. In what ways do you believe the use of SMS will affect your learning experience?

Responses to this question covered the following categories:

Category	Reasons
Demonstration of UNISA’s interest in students’ studies and keeping them updated	<p><i>Well in my opinion this is the most effective way of communicating with students and helps them to see that UNISA is as interested in their studies as they are and it will also help to keep students updated</i></p> <p><i>It will help us to be informed of what is happening about education</i></p>
Increase students’ motivation, confidence and gives direction	<p><i>It gives direction and confidence that you’re heading in the right direction since the campuses are far from easy (access) and it’s not easy to get information in the right time and you become outdated.</i></p> <p><i>Will keep on motivating me on issues pertaining to my studies. Particularly issues pertaining to youth in my country.</i></p> <p><i>It affects my learning experience by making sure that I am aware of what I am supposed to do and by when. Since there are no regular classes to attend one can feel sort of on his own and the information that is sent via SMS helps students to be on their toes and serious about their work. It bring about</i></p>

	<i>accountability, one cannot claim they didn't know what was going on as they are regularly updated on the progress of their studies.</i>
Keep abreast with ICT development	<i>Development is part of our lives, so let's give it a chance and see what it bringing into our lives. If the system is not working then a chance of changing is there.</i>

## **5. Conclusion and next steps**

These findings clearly indicate DYD students' approval of communication between themselves and UNISA through SMSs. Students were pleased, and/or pleasantly surprised to receive. ODL students are isolated and such contact from the university is reassuring and motivating.

They also indicate the suitability and reliability of SMS communication in instances where up-to-date cell phone numbers are available. Students have also found it to be efficient and convenient. The importance of regular updating of students information is, therefore, essential. There is also an indication that if students know that the institution uses SMSs as a means of communication with them, they are likely to update their records.

The students' preferred frequency of SMS communication, that is weekly and monthly, might turn out to be costly for institutions, especially where there are large student numbers and course offerings. The twice a semester suggestion seems feasible and could even be increased to three or four SMS covering such aspects as welcome and introductory messages; contact about progress with studies e.g. assignment due date reminders and/or tutorial support matters, pre-examination, support, results/feedback and registration matters.

The next steps of this research are to survey the 2005 DYD students who received 3 different SMS in 2005. The results will be compared with this SMS survey of 2004.

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