



ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 10, 20 APRIL 2010

AN OVERVIEW OF THIS WEEK'S COMMUNIQUÉ

1. Some personal comments on the complexities the teams are facing.
2. Progress report of **ODL Task Teak 6: Student success and retention**.
3. General progress overview.

1 SOME PERSONAL COMMENTS ON THE COMPLEXITIES THE TEAMS ARE FACING

As the task teams finalise their proposals in time for the meeting of the STLSC of 10 May, I sense that there is not one task team who is *not* confronted with the complex nature of proposing “solutions” to specific challenges, whether admission requirements, student support or strategies to improve student retention and success. There is immense pressure on the different task teams to propose implementable solutions that can really make a difference in student success. Russel Ackoff, in an interview in 2003, warned that “simple solutions” are dangerous. When managers and organisations are faced with complex situations, they often disregard the complexity of the situation and respond by proposing “simple, if not simple-minded solutions to problems”. Facing complex situations make many people very uneasy and their first strategy is to resolve the discomfort as soon as possible by implementing “best practices” from elsewhere. We need, however, to find solutions that would be appropriate to our unique “mix” of factors as a comprehensive ODL institution in a developing world context.

The main challenge the task teams faces is to propose solutions to problems which are inherently *system-related*. *Fixing one part of the system will not fix the system*. Systems are more than the sum-total of the different parts. “Fixing” assessment practices or “fixing” student support is counter-productive if the systems, assumptions and interrelations between the different parts of the system are not addressed. Ackoff (2003) states that the “whole has properties that none of its parts have... You have to understand how the interactions of the parts, and the parts with the whole and its environment, creates the properties of the whole”.

Once the proposals from the different task teams are on the table, we should be able to get a glimpse of overarching themes and the systemic problems that need to be addressed. There are already some recurring themes and pointers towards the need for systemic change. For this purpose, the ODL implementation plan has proposed the formation of a multi-stakeholder team that will address systemic issues. The team will convene in the second semester.

2 **PROGRESS REPORT REGARDING ODL TASK TEAM 6: STUDENT RETENTION AND SUCCESS**

At their first meeting on 10 March, **Task team 6: Student retention and success** proposed to broaden their original mandate to develop “*an institutional success and throughput strategy for Senate approval by June*”. A smaller team were formed consisting of Prof George Subotzky (DISA), Ms Yuraisha Chetty (DISA), Ms Moeketsi Letseka (CHS), Ms Hentie Wilson (DCLD) and Dr Paul Prinsloo to draft such a strategy. This smaller team had their first meeting on Friday 16 April. The meeting was very fruitful and the team decided on a writing strategy for the draft. As the strategy will have to encompass the different proposals from the other five task teams, a draft strategy will be submitted to the STLSC of 10 May while the final strategy be finalised in the second semester.

3 **GENERAL PROGRESS OVERVIEW**

Considering that the “ODL Implementation Plan Kick-off” only took place on 10 February, the teams knew from the start that they will have limited time to draft their proposals. The teams consisted of representatives from all possible stakeholders in the Unisa community, often making it impossible to find dates for meetings on which everyone would have been available. Another complicating factor was that in some teams the representatives had to consult with their colleges before they were able to submit feedback, while other teams were confronted with getting feedback from stakeholders who were either busy marking, or preparing for the submission of tutorial letters, etc. Regardless of these constraints, the different teams found ways around these challenges. Many of the teams were “document-driven” – drafting documents, asking team members to comment on drafts and then redrafting the proposals.

All task teams must submit reports/proposals to the STLSC meeting of 10 May (agenda closes 26 April). I will provide summaries of the key recommendations from the reports to stimulate debate and to keep the wider Unisa community updated regarding progress made.

Thanks to everyone who responded to the ODL Communiqués, whether in public or in private.

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