



ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 12, 5 MAY 2010

AN OVERVIEW OF THIS WEEK'S COMMUNIQUÉ

1. *New realities, old maps?*
2. *An overview of the proposals of the different ODL Task Teams*
3. *Next steps*
4. *Commenting on the ODL Communiqués*

1 NEW REALITIES, OLD MAPS?



Margaret Wheatley in her book “Leadership and the new science” (2006), reflects on the maps of antiquity that were incomplete and, at times, completely wrong. Yet, the incompleteness of the maps did not prevent adventurers and explorers to venture out into unknown territories, often with dire and unexpected results. While present-day adventurers and travellers no longer use these antique maps for travelling or exploration purposes, organisations often use obsolete maps of reality and get stuck in outdated ways of thinking and being. “It’s time to realize that we will never cope with this new world using old maps. It is our fundamental way of interpreting the world – our worldview – that must change ... The more we rely on them, the more disoriented we become” (2006: x-xi).

Due to the uncertainties of letting go of what we know, and the uncertainty of what we don’t know, it is very easy to look for maps that were produced in different contexts than our own. Wheatley (2006:8-9) writes “... I don’t believe that organisations are ever changed by imposing a model developed elsewhere... In every organisation, we need to look internally, to see one another as the critical resources on this voyage of discovery...” She warns that we “rely on habit, rather than creating new responses” (2006: xi).

The different ODL Task teams were faced with taking our present context seriously. This context looks vastly different from the context in which the first admission criteria were phrased, assessment practices were established, a three-year cycle for the development of curricula and study material was designed, student support was considered to be optional and the issue of student success and retention was at times a peripheral concern. In our present day context we “need the courage to let go of the old world, to relinquish most of what we have cherished, to abandon our interpretations about what does and doesn’t work... (Wheatley 2006:7). *Watch this space...*

2 AN OVERVIEW OF THE PROPOSALS OF ODL TASK TEAMS 2, 4 AND 5

ODL Task team 1: Admissions will submit a preliminary report, and *ODL Task team 3: Assessment* has submitted a report with no recommendations but with a proposal that the team be granted time for further investigation. *ODL Task team 6: Student retention and success* are still in the process of finalising its submission.

2.1 RECOMMENDATIONS OF ODL TASK TEAM 2: HIGHER CERTIFICATE

- 2.1.1 It is vital for the university to determine and communicate exactly where its focus and growth will make the most meaningful impact on the needs of the country. Thereafter, the impact to be made by the offering of such a Higher Certificate should be investigated.
- 2.1.2. The university needs to heed the warning from the CoL and HEQC Audits never to aspire to be everything for everyone.
- 2.1.3. A more integrated ODL strategic and implementation plan is imperative. This plan should ensure stabilized enrolments in accordance with the DoHE's targets as well as efficient and effective systems regarding staff procurement, the funding formula (ACHRAM), finalized and relevant PQMs, an appropriate tuition model and optimum learner support.
- 2.1.4. Colleges that have both the need and resources to introduce one or several Higher Certificates should be encouraged to do so.
 - (i) The need could be based on the requirement to reach comprehensiveness targets.
 - (ii) With DISA's assistance, such colleges should establish the number of students who complete the NSC-Higher Certificate in order to get a sense of how many students potentially require university access via the Higher Certificate route.
 - (iii) The Higher Certificate should rather be a well-designed vocationally oriented self-sufficient product and not necessarily a means whose end is to avail access to diplomas and degrees.
 - (iv) Should the Higher Certificate serve as a means to further access to higher qualifications, the college(s) should ensure that such a Higher Certificate articulates into *existing* diplomas and degrees and that the need to proliferate programmes is eradicated.
 - (v) They should confirm that financial support by, e.g. NFSAS, is available for students' registrations for the Higher Certificate.
- 2.1.5 In the context where many disciplines offered at Unisa do not require Work Integrated Learning, the description of the Higher Certificate by the HEQF, as a certificate that "typically includes a simulated work experience or work integrated learning (WIL) component" should be understood to mean that WIL or simulated work experience is not necessarily a *sine qua non* of offering all the Higher Certificate at Unisa.

- 2.1.6 The Foundation Programme offered in CSET may provide crucial pointers with regard to the support of students identified as at risk and the success of the extra support they received.

A vital aspect becoming apparent in the different proposals of the ODL task teams is the critical need for effective, appropriate, trust-worthy and integrated systems, procedures and processes.

2.2 RECOMMENDATIONS OF ODL TASK TEAM 4: STUDENT SUPPORT

- 2.2.1 Profiling of students (as early as application phase) in order to determine the possible needs of students (this can be informed by statistics from DISA) is essential to assist with planning for targeted support and to assist with their performance during the learning phase. A profiling system should provide actionable information regarding students' preparedness for higher education (academic and non-academic), students' location (in terms of distance from regional centers, tutorial programmes), students' connectivity, students' motivation and locus of control, etc.

Factors that necessitate specific assistance to particular groups should be isolated and informed by such a profiling procedure/system. A detailed proposal for the student support that will be offered for targeted groups should be submitted to the STLSC for approval and implementation.

- 2.2.2 An assessment should be done of entry level student support provided by all the relevant departments. The aim is to better introduce students to ODL and to the Unisa system and to ensure that they receive all the help, preparation and support that will enable a strong start to the learning phase. Academic skills needs should receive specific attention. A report to STLSC should make recommendations regarding the improvement of specific areas and the seamless integration of such early services.
- 2.2.3 The apparent "distance" between the current TSDL and colleges does not contribute to an integrated learning support system that addresses the needs of specific students and groups of students with support needs. Tutorial support (capacity, training, and scheduling) should be integrated with college activities (this is a matter of planning and coordination rather than physical presence). A report and integration plan (involving all stakeholders) should be submitted to STLSC for approval and implementation by July 2010.
- 2.2.4 The system for the recruitment, appointment and remuneration of tutors should receive dedicated attention for HR, the Colleges and TSDL. A joint working group should address the specifications and implementation plan for a new system (the tutor model proposed by Proctor and her ODL team should be used as a reference). The efficiency (turnaround) of the system is paramount for a successful tutor system can be greatly enhanced through the use of technology. A plan should be submitted to STLSC for approval and implementation.

- 2.2.5 The training of academics and tutors in the ODL environment should be streamlined and made more effective (this training relates to learning support specifically). Training for both academics and tutors should involve both generic teaching skills (for tutors in general) and for specific disciplines in colleges. A training plan should be drawn up and submitted to STLSC for approval and implementation.
- 2.2.6 Regional capacity and facilities should be assessed in line with the recommendations and plans made in other recommendations regarding the improvement of learning support in the regions. Suggestions for the improvement of regional learning support and a quality assurance system, based on the actions in other recommendations, should be submitted to the STLSC for approval and implementation
- 2.2.7 The needs for tracking students during the learning phase in assessing student performance and to target learning support to specific students and groups of students should be compiled and submitted to DISA for integration into the current tracking system developments. A report should be submitted to the STLSC for approval.
- 2.2.8 Targeted support cannot be provided to students too late in the learning phase, as they will end up being frustrated with their own performance. The efficiency and value of the first compulsory assignment to all students should be revisited in order to enable a strong start for students in the learning phase and also to diagnose particular problems with students that can be addressed as early as possible in the learning phase. A report for the redesign and implementation of the first compulsory assignment – as it will inform the start of the learning phase – must be submitted to STLSC for approval and implementation.
- 2.2.9 The possible role of alumni, successful students (peers) and community members in the support of current students should be investigated – improvement in this area can assist students and make the Unisa support system more effective and more efficient. A report should be submitted to STLSC for approval and implementation. Alumni and industry partnerships can also inform the entry of successful students into the world of work.
- 2.2.10 The use of technology to facilitate learning support (with student access in mind) should be assessed and a report should be submitted to STLSC for approval and implementation with ICT and the relevant support departments.
- 2.2.11 Guidelines should inform the provision of such support services based on critical points in the learning phase (addressing support before and after assessment and also any continuous support). Such guidelines will also be needed for the integration of tutoring and learning support in the planning, design, development and delivery of all modules.

A small task team should be appointed to develop concise guidelines in collaboration with DCLD and colleges (based on the Framework for a Team Approach). The model and guidelines should be submitted to STLSC for approval and implementation.

- 2.2.12 An assessment should be made of continuous support that is provided to students across all three phases - all forms of continuous academic and administrative support should be assessed. For example, academic questions, administrative enquiries and all other forms of communication should be addressed and recommendations be made on how to make it more efficient in terms of resourcing and organisational positioning. A report should be submitted to STLSC for approval and implementation by support departments.

Regarding videoconferencing the team recommends:

It is impossible to replace *all* group discussions with satellite broadcasting and video conferencing. Our current facilities are not be able to cope with a greater demand and expansion will be too costly. Future expansion of both technologies may have to be considered against the recommendations below. Although satellite broadcasts and video conferencing have many advantages and are a good substitute for some discussion classes, most of the lecturers who were interviewed indicated that these facilities are second best and that they still prefer discussion classes. It seems, however, that financial constraints have forced them to resort to the use of Satellite Broadcasting (SB) and Video Conferencing (VC) (Niemann & Mays, 2010).

2.2.13 Expansion of facilities

The financial implications of the expansion of our SB and VC facilities should be investigated. If these technologies replace all others for discussion classes, including face-to-face visits, it can have far-reaching costing implications in terms of facilities and other resources. (Recommendations 2 and 3 have reference to this).

It is important to distinguish between modules with group discussion classes and those with formal functioning tutoring where extensive contact is possible, and to present a scenario that will guide the presentation of group discussion classes (via the technologies under discussion). In this regard the following:

- (i) Modules with tutorial programmes in place are encouraged to make optimal use of the tutors in providing guidance or academic support. Academic departments are responsible for the training and guidance of these tutors. *In these modules group discussions lead by lecturers should be discouraged.*
- (ii) In modules with *no* tutorial programmes in place due to small student numbers, lecturers will be encouraged to make use of either video-conferencing or satellite conferencing *instead of group discussions.*

- (iii) When lecturers make use of satellite transmitted group discussions, these sessions should be recorded and sent to *all* students.
- (iv) Where the nature of the module and/or the specific needs of students cannot be addressed through a tutorial programme or video or satellite broadcasting, group discussions may play a vital role in supporting students. Considering the cost to students (and Unisa), and the fact that not all students are able to attend these group discussions, lecturers should be encouraged (and supported) to make use of podcasts which can be made available to all students.

2.2.14 Suitability of SB and VC for discussion classes - planning, design and quality assurance

The use of discussion classes and formal tutoring is an academic decision and should be managed by academic departments with regional support.

Modules with a high enrolment have the financial resources to consider alternatives, whereas modules with a low enrolment cannot afford face-to-face visits. Group discussion classes should not be the rule if formal tutoring is affordable because of larger enrolments. Guidelines and standards should be developed for the use of these technologies for modules where this kind of contact is suitable and educationally sound. These guidelines have to be based on sound ODL principles and must be developed and implemented in collaboration with DCLD.

Although the use of SB and VC is high in some modules, the Task Team expressed concern about the lack of planning, design and quality assurance for satellite broadcasting and video conferencing. In most instances the “talking head” and low levels of interactivity do not justify the use of such technology. The transmission of content and summaries of materials do not enhance the learning experience. Face-to-face contact without the proper educational considerations and planning does not contribute to a quality learning experience as contact on its own is not sufficient reason for the use of SB and VC. Therefore, discussion classes should be properly planned and integrated with the tutoring and support needs of students in a specific module.

2.2.15 Student access and distribution

Discussions via these technologies should always be recorded and made available to students free of charge. (If recordings were not possible, some form of summary or transcript should be made available to students free of charge, and as soon as possible.)

2.3 RECOMMENDATIONS OF ODL TASK TEAM 5: TECHNOLOGY ENHANCED TEACHING, LEARNING AND STUDENT SUPPORT

- 2.3.1. Academics *must* make use of the wide range of technologies already available within Unisa. Every academic staff member has to take responsibility for teaching and facilitating learning by actively engaging with students using these technologies. The use of technology should become part of every academic staff member's performance agreement and staff that excel in this should be rewarded. It is recommended that an incentive scheme be devised for implementation in 2011.
- 2.3.2. Unisa should make extensive use of the many possibilities technology presents for new and innovative ways to assess students, especially for formative assessment. Many alternative ways of assessment are already available, or could easily be deployed within Unisa.
- 2.3.3 24/7 access to broadband internet connectivity should be a prerequisite for employment of tutors. This will not only ensure better service delivery to students, but also remove geographical and time barriers when considering the employment of tutors.
- 2.3.4. Unisa must assist students to gain access to technology-based teaching and learning opportunities, electronic resources and online student support. This can be facilitated through the student computer initiative, national partnerships (eg multipurpose community centres), the provision of computer centres at regional centres, enhancing mobile capabilities of existing Unisa ICT infrastructures, etc.
- 2.3.5 Differential (lower) pricing should be available for students who do not receive paper-based courseware or submit paper copies of assignments.
- 2.3.6 Unisa must establish a centre of excellence to research, develop and deploy innovative technology solutions for teaching, learning and student support. In addition, the centre must provide opportunities for academics to experiment with new technologies, teach them how to use existing and newly deployed technologies and provide reliable support (technical and pedagogical).
- 2.3.7 Unisa must take a firm stance in terms of the usage of and the contribution to open educational resources (OER) and open source software (OSS).
- 2.3.8 Unisa must establish a well-indexed e-learning object repository, such as Alfresco. This repository must form part of the enterprise content management (ECM) system that is currently under investigation by ICT.
- 2.3.9 Unisa should deploy a synchronous online whiteboarding system that can facilitate collaboration through application sharing, chat, audio, video etc. Athabasca University and many others, including the Open University of the UK (which went through a very extensive selection process), are using Elluminate. Preliminary trials done by ICT and DCLD, as well as experiences of staff participating in conferences conducted via Elluminate, were very positive.

3 NEXT STEPS

Please take note that the proposals from the different ODL Task Teams will be discussed at the STLSC meeting of 10 May. The different proposals will be posted in the Library's Institutional Repository for ODL within this week.

4 COMMENTING ON THE ODL COMMUNIQUÉS

You are also most welcome to comment on this (and previous) ODL Communiqués on the Unisa Staff website. On the right hand side of the Unisa Staff website, you will see a section titled "Important links" under which you must then click on "Blogs". On the blog page, you will notice two links namely "E-connect" and "Open Distance Learning". If you follow the latter you will be able to read and comment on the ODL Communiqués.

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

Drafted by Dr Paul Prinsloo

ODL Coordinator

Office of the Vice-Principal: Academic & Research, Unisa

4 May 2010

+27 (0) 12 4293683 (office), +27 (0) 823954113 (mobile), prinsp@unisa.ac.za