# ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 13, 12 MAY 2010

AN OVERVIEW OF THIS WEEK'S COMMUNIQUÉ

1. *Preferring our comfort zones*
2. *Feedback from the STLSC meeting of 10 May*
3. *Next steps*
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1   PREFERRING OUR COMFORT ZONES

Zygmunt Bauman, in his book "Liquid Modernity" (2000:18), refers to an apocryphal version by Lion Feuchtwanger of the famous episode from the "Odyssey" (Homer) where Circa, a minor goddess, turns Homer's sailors into pigs. Hermes comes to Homer's rescue and provides him with an herb, which when rubbed on the pigs, will restore their humanity. As Homer tries to "emancipate" the sailors-turned-pigs, they run for cover. He manages to trap one of the swine, a sailor with the name of Elpenoros, and rubs him with the wondrous herb. The "liberated" Elpenoros is anything but grateful for the "liberation" and verbally attacks Homer asking:
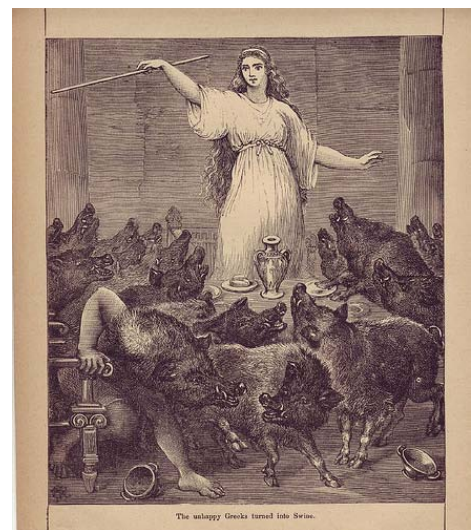
> So you are back, you rascal, you busybody? Again you want to nag us and pester, again you wish to expose our bodies to dangers and force our hearts to take ever new decisions? I was so happy, I could wallow in the mud and bask in the sunshine, I could gobble and guzzle, grunt and squeak, and be free from mediations and doubts: 'What am I to do, this or that?' Why did you come? To fling me back into that hateful life I led before? (in Bauman 2000:18).

Bauman then continues to contemplate on the question "Is liberation a blessing, or a curse?" (2000:18). After reading this account, I could not help but think about the reception of the recommendations of the different ODL task teams. These recommendations are anything but perfect but they propose in many cases a *total* rethink of the way we have been doing business the last number years. Whether it is questioning the almost canonical status of the use of multiple choice questions, or proposing a different development cycle for curriculum and learning development, the proposals propose a *critical* re-imagination of ODL. The question is whether we would seize the opportunity to reconsider some of our established assumptions or practices or will we blame the ODL task teams for upsetting our comfort zones? Only time will tell.

2   FEEDBACK FROM THE STLSC MEETING OF 10 MAY

The STLSC meeting of yesterday, 10 May, started at 08:00 and we ended close to 16:30! Most of the recommendations of the different task teams were approved for referral to the Senate meeting in June. The following overview is not a comprehensive list of the recommendations that were approved and referred to Senate for approval, but highlight some of referred recommendations:

1. The STLSC accepted the recommendations of **ODL Task team 1: Admissions** regarding the minimum language requirement of 50% on Grade 12 level in the language of tuition for both diploma and degree studies as an *admission* requirement. It was also approved that students who have between 50-60% in the language of tuition will be placed on an "extended curriculum" in their first year of registration. These students will be limited to register only for 4 modules in the first year of registration and they will receive additional *learning* support. They should pass at least 3 of the 4 modules to be allowed to continue with their diploma or degree studies.

2. The STLSC approved the recommendation from **ODL Task Team 2: Higher Certificate** not to institute a single Higher Certificate but rather to allow colleges who have identified a need for such a certificate, to develop a Higher Certificate. There will be an opportunity for interested colleges to meet and exchange expertise and views, and investigate possible collaboration in developing such certificates.

3. The various alternative assessments proposed by **ODL Task team 3: Assessment** were approved and the team was asked also to also explore oral examinations, group assignments and take-home examinations. There is also a need to develop quality standards and procedures for all assessment practices.

4. The definition, conceptual framework for student support and various recommendations regarding video conferencing as recommended by **ODL Task team 4: Student Support** were approved. The team will now, among other things, design a tutoring system with input from all stakeholders.

5. The recommendations of **ODL Task team 5: Technology enhanced teaching, learning, and student support** were approved which included

   - 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.

   - 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).

- All academic staff at Unisa to undergo mandatory professional development in a comprehensive use of VLEs (Virtual Learning Environments), including Elearning, etc. The DCLD is tasked to develop a proposal for professional development in Elearning for submission to the STLSC meeting of 10 August.

6. Most of the recommendations of **ODL Task team 6: Student retention and success** were approved, including:
   - the Unisa conceptual framework is endorsed as the common reference point for all institution-wide initiatives to enhance student success;
   - that DISA develops an appropriate framework for the monitoring and evaluation of Unisa's student success initiative for approval by the Student Success Subcommittee and, in turn, the STLSC. In terms of the approved framework, DISA will monitor trends and evaluate the impact of interventions and will report through the Student Success Subcommittee to the STLSC. This will facilitate the continuous review of practices & identification of new proactive interventions;
   - in consultation with relevant experts and role players, DISA develops and implements an appropriate Student Profile Survey instrument. This will allow the gathering of rich information on students' socio-economic and educational background, current socio-economic status and life circumstances, connectivity to technology and the extent of effective use of this, and a self-assessment of academic aptitude, study and time management skills, attitudes and practices. On the basis of this, students' readiness and risk will be able to be assessed. This, in turn, will allow student support services to be more effectively directed towards the actual life circumstances of our students;
   - It is recommended that the reliability and validity of a self-assessment instrument to measure and score student readiness and risk is investigated. If possible, this instrument will provide the means to guide students towards more realistic course loads and appropriate forms of student support, in accordance with the recommendations of the respective task teams focusing on these issues
   - the on-time delivery of study materials is identified as an immediate high priority and that all required resources, expertise and capacity are deployed in order to find a lasting solution to this problem to ensure that Unisa's systems are based on industry best practices. In particular, quality assurance measures should be developed for all aspects of the production, stock control and dispatch processes in order to increase efficiency.

The fact that almost **70** recommendations were tabled at the STLSC by the various ODL Task teams, and that most of these were approved, indicates a willingness to really reconsider assumptions and established practices.

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3   NEXT STEPS

The recommendations of the different ODL task teams will now serve at the Senate meeting of June 2010. What has become apparent at the STLSC meeting is the need for synergy and integration between the work of the different task teams. Though there may be a need for some of the task teams to continue working, we also need to address the need for integrating the different initiatives and address the implementation of the recommendations of the teams. The ODL Implementation Plan foresees the establishment of a cross-functional team to look at systems and procedures (ODL Task team 7) and the establishment of this team may address many of the cross-cutting issues. *Watch this space.*

4   ODL REPOSITORY

I would like to thank Ms Ansie van der Westhuizen of the Library and Ms Tshoanelo Mokoena of the ODL office who uploaded all the communiqués and task team reports onto the Library's Institutional Repository. At present 50 items have been archived that consists of two collections, namely *ODL Research Outputs* and ODL Communication and Task Team Reports. These are accessible at http://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/3072.

We will keep the repository updated and once you have registered on the repository, you can select to receive updates regarding new postings.

5   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.

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