ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 22, 14 JULY 2010

IN THIS ISSUE:

1   RE-IMAGINING STUDENT SUPPORT

One of the major issues that we face in the ODL implementation project in this second semester is to re-imagine student support, and more specifically tutoring at Unisa. Before I continue, let me state it unequivocally that there is a lot that we can already be proud of in our student support portfolio. We have well-established organisational structures dealing with the appointment of tutors; the regional offices fulfil a crucial role in providing spaces for tutors and students to interact; more and more lecturers make use of videoconferencing and satellite broadcasting at Unisa; and our counselling and career advice services, and support to students with special needs are well-established and render a wonderful service to many students. We certainly have a lot to build on and to be proud of.

Being proud of what we have achieved and achieve on a daily basis, does however not mean that we cannot improve and increase the impact the range of student support services have on the retention and success of students. A part of our current portfolio of student support services are based on providing a *reactive*, *face-to-face* support to students. Whether it is the face-to-face tutorials offered in the regions, or the group discussions by lecturers visiting the regions, or the video conferencing and satellite broadcasting – these current strategies reach less than 15% of the student body. This is not a reflection on the services itself or the quality of these face-to-face interventions. The question is how to *increase* the reach of our student support. It is however important also to note that not all students *want* face-to-face support. And furthermore, not all students *need* face-to-face support. There is also anecdotal evidence that there may even be students who know that they need support, but somehow do not use the support we offer due to many factors such as cost, locality, content, motivation, perceived or real quality and value-added of the intervention etc.

Having said the above, let us explore a number of pointers for thinking about student support, and in particular, tutoring at Unisa.

1. Not all students *require* academic support throughout the whole of the semester, or at all.
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3. Students need support at different times of a semester, and can benefit from having access to a networked personal contact *when and if* they need support/advice.
4. A range of technologies allow student support at Unisa to take advantage of synchronous and asynchronous forms of sort that are *not face-to-face*.
5. Academic tutoring and pastoral care for that matter therefore do not need to be face-to-face. Considering the current number of students attending face-to-face tutorials we currently exclude almost 80% (if not more) of students of such an opportunity.

With the above pointers in mind, let me state a case for a different way of thinking about tutoring, and more broadly, student support at Unisa. What will tutoring (and student support) look like which is **personalised**; **integrates** different aspects of their learning experience; is **proactive; is targeted** at specific groups of students who share specific needs and targeted at specific times; is **quality assured** and evidence/outcomes focused; is **appropriate** to the level and needs of students and **recognises different stages** of a student's development; and is **enhanced and supported** by the effective, affordable and appropriate use of a wide range of technologies?

At my recent visit to the Open University (OU) I met with a number of stakeholders who are part of the OU's current engagement in re-visioning their student support. The OU distinguishes between the following four foci in student support namely

1. **COGNITIVE SUPPORT:** Integrated into the course design of the learning materials and resources by academics (the so-called 'central academics'), effective use of multimedia and provided by Tutors (called 'Associate Lecturers', ALs) who also mark assignments and provide extensive feedback to students. In the past these tutors (ALs) were appointed and managed by the regions but the OU is currently revisiting this practice.
2. **REFLECTIVE SUPPORT:** Pre-registration course and career advice and guidance, study skills, locus of control, self-efficacy, pastoral. Provided by several support departments, centralised and decentralised and also by ALs.
3. **SYSTEMIC SUPPORT:** Administrative and academic queries. Provided by the Regions, ALs and different support departments.
4. **AFFECTIVE SUPPORT: N**on-academic pastoral care and guidance which are provided by the ALs and different targeted counselling services.

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Kember (2007) warns distance education institutions in the developing world that the OU model is *not* necessarily effective in other contexts than the UK and that higher education institutions in the developing world should be very careful to 'just' apply models and ideas from the OU into their respective contexts. *Having said this, let us explore for a moment the OU model to see what and if we can use some of their ideas in a contextualised response.*

As you will notice, the role of the tutor (AL) in the context of the OU is much wider than just providing academic support and marking of assignments. The scope of the ALs also includes non-academic support and pastoral care. After considering the above I was wondering…

- What is the possibility for appointing a number of E-Tutors for all at-risk students? These tutors will then be appointed *before* the academic year starts and will on registration be linked to a group of up to 30-40 students. Such E-tutors would then make electronic and telephonic contact with the students allocated to them; answer e-mails and provide guidance before the assignments, after the assignments and in preparation for the examination. *The E-tutors will not provide face-to-face tutorials and do not need to be in the same geographic area as the students.*
- What is the possibility of asking our current markers whether they would be interested to fulfil the role of an E-Tutor for a group of allocated students? Persons marking for Unisa are already on Unisa's system and their appointment should be less cumbersome (or do I underestimate the bureaucracy of Unisa?)
- Our markers already have an academic background in the subject they are marking, and it may be that they will be keen to take on more responsibility, or am I wrong? I know there will be markers who will not be interested, but at least we can start with the willing (and the able?)
- The same may be true of our current base of tutors. How many of them will be willing to accept additional responsibility in being an E-tutor? If they had a choice, would they still prefer to tutor face-to-face? These tutors are already in the Unisa system and they have the necessary academic background. At present tutors can't be appointed unless there are certain numbers of students in a geographical region. This model of tutoring is therefore *reactive*. In E-tutoring there is no link between the tutor's and students' geographical location – and therefore these E-tutors can be appointed based on estimations of the previous year's registrations and an assessment of the number of students at risk. And appointing these E-Tutors is *proactive*.

The above thoughts are *in addition to* various other initiatives by different stakeholders to envisage an even better student support system at Unisa. As I become aware of other initiatives, I will use the ODL communiqués to raise awareness and inform the broader Unisa community of the details of these initiatives.

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I realise that the above ideas are dependent on many factors for example the connectivity of these E-tutors and groups of students, expertises, and a number of other factors. At present our tutor system only reaches about 15% of the total student population. Surely we can use our tutors and markers more effectively and strategically? And if we don't exclude any students from having access to face-to-face tutorials when there are enough students in a particular region, but rather increase the reach of our tutors to specific targeted students, surely we can reach more and have a greater impact on student success?

Reference: Kember, D. 2007. *Reconsidering open & distance learning in the developing world. Meeting students' learning needs.* Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group: London and New York.

2 TO NUDGE OR NOT TO NUDGE

I discovered a book which, unfortunately, did not live up to my expectations. *Nudge*, a book written by Thaler, R.H. & Sunstein, C.R. (2009) is about becoming aware of the choices we make on a daily bases, and more importantly, how we respond to choice-structures and hierarchies and how we structure choices for others. We all believe that we must have a free choice to do what we choose. We don't like to be forced to do anything and in ODL we believe that we should give students optimum freedom and choice.
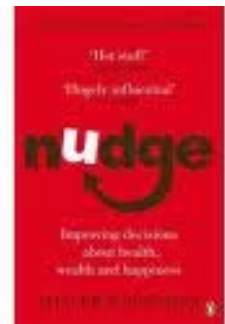
But what happens if our students do not make the 'right' decisions? For example, most students realise that they most probably take too many modules per semester but they still do. Many students know that they could benefit from spending more time on their studies, but they don't. (And before we judge our students too harshly, we all make very irrational decisions based on other considerations…).

The book by Thaler and Sunstein (2009) is about the way we structure choices for other people. These authors ascribe to a position that they call "libertarian paternalism". They acknowledge that they combine in this notion two "reviled and contradictory concepts" (2009:5). The *libertarian* aspect is emphasising that "people should be free to do what they like – and to opt out of undesirable arrangements if they want to do so" (2009:5). People should be "free to choose". The *paternalistic* aspect "lies in the claim that it is legitimate for choice architects to try to influence people's behaviour in order to make their lives longer, healthier, and better" (2009:5). Based on the fact that all of us make some very bad decisions despite knowing better, the authors propose that it legitimate to limit the choices individuals or groups of individuals have when 'we' know that they cannot or do not want to choose the 'healthier' or more wise option.

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The fact that we will then either limit their choices or actually make some choices *for* them, explains the paternalistic aspect of "libertarian paternalism". There is however an important added aspect in that individuals or groups of individuals is given the choice *to opt out* of the choice structure 'we' provide for them (covering the libertarian aspect of the concept). "Libertarian paternalism is a relatively weak, soft, and nonintrusive type of paternalism because choices are not blocked, fenced off, or significantly burdened" (2009:6).

These authors therefore coined the notion of "to nudge" which refers to "any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people's behaviour in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives. To count as a mere nudge, the intervention must be easy and cheap to avoid. Nudges are not mandates" (2009:6).

Though this book has its moments, I found huge parts of the book inaccessible due to the authors' referencing to unique American examples. But the book made me think of the choice architectures we provide students when they register at Unisa. We are very clear of the prerequisites and registration requirements for registering for particular qualifications and/or modules. We are very clear about compulsory assignments and prescribed materials. These will count as very *paternalistic* choice architectures (to use the notion proposed by Thaler and Sunstein, 2009). On the other hand we allow students to choose which modules to register first and how many modules to register for. This is in line with a *libertarian* choice architecture. I was wondering about the choices we allow students to make – *is there a possibility that we allow them too much choice?* We know that many (if not most) students overestimate their abilities – *is it not time to be more paternalistic in our choice architecture? How would being more paternalistic align with being "open"?*

Maybe it is worthwhile to explore libertarian paternalism as foundation for a choice architecture where we provide very well-founded 'nudges' to students to point them in more responsible and sustainable practices? We will not force them, but the 'nudges' will be well incentivised and supported. But students will still have the freedom to opt out. But it is not that easy…

If we know that there is a direct correlation between students' proficiency in the language of tuition and their chances of success, is it still responsible to allow students to register regardless of what we know? Will a nudge be enough or is it time to change our practices in line with research evidence? Is paternalism always bad in ODL? Will nudges be enough?

Interestingly, from my recent experience at the OU, it would seem as if many ODL institutions are grappling with the celebrated (and often much-hyped) notion of 'giving students the maximum amount of choice', to making some choices *for* students, based on evidence and good practice.

3   HOW THE ODL IMPLEMENTATION WILL UNFOLD…

As I have reported in the last two communiqués, this semester will be about finalising the practicalities and time-lines for implementation of the recommendations that were approved by the Senate meeting of 2 June. There is also a need to encourage synergy between the different initiatives. The process, in broad strokes will unfold as follows:

Before *mid-August* we will attempt to have a draft proposal on the table regarding tutoring at Unisa. Once we have this draft, we will explore three key areas:
- The use of a range of technologies and processes to support this tutor model and further increase the effectiveness of teaching and learning at Unisa.
- The role and infrastructure of the regions.
- Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for all staff at Unisa to celebrate what we already know and do well, but also to learn how to do things even better and more in line with our increased understanding of the complexities, challenges and opportunities in an ODL context.

By *mid-September* we should therefore have the above in place. We therefore foresee a possible workshop with representatives from the regions and students in the period between 23 August and 8 September.

4   THE INTERNET: THE DARK SIDE…

Last week's edition of *The Economist* was dedicated to the impact cyber-warfare will have on society, and ultimately human survival. The issue explores how different technological developments have revolutionised society, and more specifically warfare. Think about the impact of the chariot, or gunpowder, aircraft, radar, etc. While developments in technology has benefited society (and education), technology comes at a cost. In exploring the possibility and impact of cyber-warfare, *The Economist* (page 9) states that the "threat is complex, multifaceted and potentially very dangerous".

The impact of terrorists hijacking organisational systems and national networks has dire consequences. "The internet is not a 'commons', but a network of networks that are mostly privately owned" (page 10). This made me wonder about the utter frustration we experienced last week when the SEACOM cable had problems and Unisa lost its international connectivity for some time. As Unisa increases its online delivery and use of online technologies which rely on internet connectivity, how secure is Unisa's connectivity? How can we ensure that as we increase our online delivery of teaching and learning, that we can assure students that we have systems in place to ensure that their learning will not be negatively impacted on in an event of loss of connectivity? Just a thought.

5   IMPORTANT DATES

15 July, 15:00-16:00, TVW 10-24 (Kopanong): Meeting of ODL Task team 1 (Admissions)

19 July, 09:00-13:00: STLSC

20 July, 14:00-16:00, ORT8-16: Joint meeting of selected participants from ODL Task teams 4 and 6

29 July, 10:00-12:00, Senate Hall: 4th Occasional Lecture hosted by the IODL: "Social software, social networks, and online distance learning", Prof Panda. **On the last page of this communiqué is more information on this event.**

29 July, 15:00-16:00, TVW4-96: Joint meeting of representatives from ICT, Sound & Video, Despatch, DCLD

30 July, Launch of the Unisa International ODL Advisory Board

5 August, 09:30-11:30, Dr Miriam Makeba Concert Hall: DCLD Conversation Forum: "Being an academic in an unflat world"

5 August, 14:00-15:30, TVW10-24 (Kopanong): Meeting regarding Intellectual Property, Copyright and Social Networking

6 August, Florida, DCLD Conversation Forum: "Being an academic in an unflat world"

6 August, 14:00-15:30, TVW10-24 (Kopanong): A conversation about the development of higher certificates. Interested colleges to attend.

6   ODL REPOSITORY AND BLOG

All the ODL task team reports, the overview of the recommendations of the STLSC and other ODL documents are available on the Unisa Library's Institutional Repository at http://uir.unisa.ac.za/dspace/handle/10500/3072 (accessed 12 July 2010). The repository is updated on a regular basis and if you register on the repository, you will get notifications of any new uploads.

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.

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The Institute for Open & Distance Learning
presents the
4th ODL Occasional Lecture Series 2010
on

'Social Software, Social Networks, and Online Distance Learning'

This presentation critically analyses the significant use of various social software and social networks in teaching and learning. It contributes towards the transformation of individual and social identities in a community of practice. The technologies and networks are basically online, and therefore, have the greatest potentiality to facilitate/influence learning which is web–based as well as online. Within a framework of online learning, the placement of open source social technologies and networks is reflected and critically examined from a constructivist pedagogic perspective, and from the viewpoint of inclusion/exclusion and authentic knowledge."

by Professor Santosh Panda
University of the South Pacific, Fiji Islands

Professor Panda started university teaching as a Lecturer in Education in the early 1980s; and moved to the National Open University in India to rise to a full Professor of Distance Education in 1997, and consequently, the Director of its Staff Training & Research Institute of Distance Education. Besides a Doctorate in Education, he has a Certificate in Ed TV from BBC, UK; Certificate in Online Teaching from University of Maryland, USA; and has been a Senior Fulbright Scholar at the University of New Mexico, USA. Prior to his current responsibility as Director, Centre for Flexible & Distance Learning, University of the South Pacific, he has been Director of Policy & Research at Association of Indian Universities; Director of Inter–University Consortium for Technology–Enabled Education at IGNOU; He has visited, lectured, presented invited keynotes, and conducted workshops in about 24 countries and he sits in the Editorial Board of various journals. He has extensively published in the areas of open, distance, and online learning!

Thursday, 29 July 2010
10:00 -12:00

VENUE: Senate Hall, Theo van Wijk Building, Unisa Main Campus

Light lunch will be served.
RSVP before 26 July
Santa Parsons: parsocs@unisa.ac.za
Enquiries: (012) 429-3250/56

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