

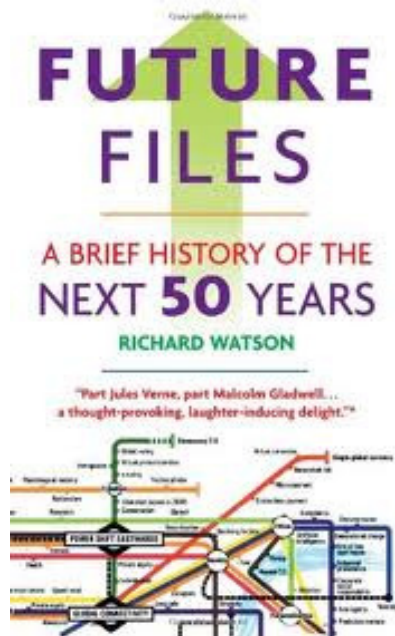


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IN THIS ISSUE:

- 1 *Preparing for the next 50 years...*
- 2 *Some pointers for thinking about a regional model for Unisa*
- 3 *News from Oxford*
- 4 *ODL Repository and blog*

1 PREPARING FOR THE NEXT 50 YEARS



A huge part of the ODL project this year was to imagine a future based on what we know of international ODL trends, a serious consideration of Unisa as a comprehensive institution in a developing world context and trying to imagine what ODL can be like in ten years' time. The latter part of the previous sentence is the tricky (and controversial) part.

I came upon a new edition of Richard Watson's (2010) book called "Future files. A brief history of the next 50 years" and must confess to have been intrigued, amazed, entertained and fascinated by his logic, his style of interrogation, and above all, his (in my view) very pragmatic approach to 'predicting' the next 50 years.

The year 2010 saw the adoption of a Unisa statement on gradueness – which states clearly what Unisa conceives to be the characteristics, values and capabilities of every student who graduates from Unisa. The next 25 years will see these graduates develop into managers, engineers, accountants, social workers, educators, biologists, and computer scientists (to mention a few) which will deal on a daily basis with the 'predictions' of Watson (2010). And as I read the book, I was wondering whether our curricula and pedagogies prepare our graduates sufficiently for the next 25-50 years?

It is impossible to discuss in detail Watson's (2010) exploration of possible and probable futures; therefore the following should be seen as an appetiser and an invitation for a number of conversations about our curricula and our pedagogies.

In this edition Watson (2010: viii-xi) includes 10 ‘mini-trends’ which will accompany 5 bigger trends that he thoroughly explores. The 10 ‘mini-trends’ are:

1. **Globalisation unraveling:** Due to the risks involved in the level of connectedness of economic, financial, social and political systems - an era of localisation is dawning, or in Watson’s (2010:viii) words, “resource-nationalism”- referring to countries’ refusal to sell natural resources to other nations “citing national security reasons”.
2. **Re-sourcing:** This is in response to the outsourcing of everything because of cost. Now everyone is starting to question the high cost of low cost – the fact that we have outsourced much of the clothing industry to China, for example, has resulted in huge unemployment and the costs implied in social benefits. According to Watson (2010: viii) countries and local economies will increasingly count the cost of outsourcing.
3. **Expecting less.** This refers to an increase of people questioning unbridled consumerism and adopting simpler lifestyles.
4. **Conspicuous non-consumption** where turning away from greed and the need to have more is becoming *en vogue* and a much publicised fashion statement.
5. **Unsupervised adults.** Adults are increasingly seen “as predatory until proven innocent” (Watson 2010: ix).
6. **Constant partial stupidity.** The increasing lack of the ability to concentrate and focus on what matters as a result of ubiquitous connectivity and “constant partial attention” (CPA) will result in constant partial stupidity (CPS). “This is the brave new world of too much information and not enough functioning memory” (Watson 2010: x).
7. **Digital isolation.** While humanity is more connected than ever before, we have also become more isolated than ever before - isolated from other people, while sitting next to one another, each connected to a number of devices and networks..., which will result in a...
8. **Flight to the physical.** Amidst all the connectivity, we will hunger for physical contact and a...
9. **Hunger for shared experiences.** While we will be spending more time connected to others than ever before, we will be more isolated than ever before and therefore crave for shared physical experiences like festivals, family meals, etc.
10. **Fear fatigue.** We have become tired of being constantly anxious. We are perpetually aware of global crises whether global warming, health epidemics, the next world war or the unpredictability of nature. There are so many warnings and predictions that don’t come true but we all know that the next one may turn out to be the big one which does happen...

In discussing these 10 new trends, Watson (2010: xii) states that these predictions are aimed to “drag people out of their preconceptions” and therefore these predictions have as aim to “open up a discussion about future risks and opportunities”.

The five big trends that will be signature trends of the next 50 years are ageing, the power shift eastwards, global connectivity, GRIN (Genetics, Robotics, Internet and Nano) technologies and the environment.

Within this broader framework, Watson (2010) continues to discuss trends in society and culture, science and technology, government and politics, media and entertainment, money and financial services, automotive and transport, food and drink, retail and shopping, healthcare and medicine, travel and tourism and work and business. He also discusses five things that will *not* change (Watson 2010:303) such as humankind's interest in the future and a yearning for the past, a desire for recognition and respect, the need for physical objects, actual encounters and live experiences, anxiety and fear and the search for meaning.

In his conclusive chapter, Watson (2010:296) moots the idea that the “future will not be a singular experience and neither is it a foregone conclusion. People of the same age, with the same job, living in the same street will experience the future in different ways and that future will be heavily influenced by local and highly personal events”. While it is true that technological developments will shape the next years, some of us may actually opt out of these changes and decide to become disconnected, go organic, move to somewhere rural and choose, according to personal criteria, for a slower and more fulfilling life. Others will embrace technological advancements and change their lives accordingly. One of the trends Watson (2010:298) proposes, namely the ageing population, will have huge impacts on society, on institutions providing education and medical care. In his final paragraphs, Watson (2010:301-302) points to his belief that the world “will become faster and more connected, and that we will feel more isolated and vulnerable as a result. We will turn our homes into sanctuaries and fortresses, and collectively year for days gone by”. Watson's website www.nowandnext.com (accessed 30 November 2010) is a treasure-trove of information. Do yourself a favor and visit the site!

At the end of his book, Watson (2010:307-310) provides an interesting list of sources – which has immediately triggered my own interest. Interestingly, while many of the sources are recent publications, there are also a number of ‘classics’ among his list such as Alvin Toffler's “Future shock” (1970).

Reading Watson's (2010) book prompted me to think about “future studies” as a module or even a degree programme at Unisa. Many universities do offer such courses and/or programmes and I was wondering in which school or discipline such a programme or course would “fit”? My gut feeling is that the course or programme should be the ideal platform for multi, inter and trans-disciplinary (MIT) studies. What would be the prerequisites for such a programme/course? What would be the outcomes?

The second thought that crossed my mind as I reflected on the book is regarding Unisa's statement on graduateness. The statement itself had been approved by Senate during 2010 and since then it may have disappeared from our radar screens.

When I shared our statement on graduateness in the course on Internationalisation that I am doing at Oxford Brookes University, there was much praise for the statement and a number of the participants have requested a copy of the statement. A number of participants also wanted to know how we assess whether our graduates have attained these outcomes!

Reading Watson (2010) just reminded me again of the beauty and relevance of the statement and of how, in a significant way, it will prepare our graduates for the times to come. The statement is as follows:

Unisa graduates

- (i) are independent, resilient, responsible and caring citizens who are able to fulfil and serve in multiple roles in their immediate and future local, national and global communities
- (ii) have a critical understanding of their location on the African continent with its histories, challenges and potential in relation to globally diverse contexts
- (iii) are able to critically analyse and evaluate the credibility and usefulness of information and data from multiple sources in a globalised world with its ever increasing information and data flows and competing worldviews
- (iv) know how to apply their discipline-specific knowledges competently, ethically and creatively to solve real-life problems
- (v) are critically aware of their own learning and developmental needs and future potential

“Measuring” the above statement against some of the predictions Watson (2010) highlights the necessity to make the statement come alive in our marketing campaigns, our study materials, our curricula and our assessment strategies. We owe it to ourselves. We owe it to the generations to come.

2 SOME POINTERS FOR THINKING ABOUT A REGIONAL MODEL FOR UNISA

The regional model of Unisa, with the resultant roles, functions and structures of the regions, has a particular history. The current model is based on a number of assumptions and perceptions which we need to interrogate to explore whether these assumptions and perceptions are still valid, and more importantly, whether they will be valid in 10 years' time.

Since the start of 2010, the ODL implementation plan involved thinking about a range of issues such as student support, the use of technology, admission requirements, alternative assessment strategies, our programme qualification mix and an institutional framework for understanding, predicting and managing student success and retention, to mention but a few. All of these issues have implications for our regional model.

One of the criticisms against the ODL implementation plan of 2010 was the fact that regional roles, functions and structures were not discussed earlier. While I try to understand this claim, I really don't think we were quite ready for such a discussion before now. With the conceptual model and implementation framework for student support at Unisa approved, new admission requirements and alternative assessment strategies formulated and tabled, and a clear institutional strategy for the use of a range of technologies emerging, we are now, possibly for the first time, able to have a bigger picture in mind when discussing the roles and functions of regional facilities.

As I reflected on 2010 and what has emerged so far, I started to plot some pointers for a discussion on a regional model. These pointers are *my own personal sense-making* and serve as an invitation to having a bigger conversation on Unisa's regional model.

- 1 Unisa is an ODL institution and not a face-to-face (f2f) institution. We have a different social mandate, vision and we are subsidized differently than f2f institutions.
- 2 Unisa's students do not have uniform characteristics and uniform needs. Not all students want or need to have access to a regional centre within a 100 kilometer range from where they stay.
- 3 Our distance education character, our openness, our programme qualification mix (PQM) as a comprehensive institution and our student profile do have specific implications for the roles, functions and structures of regional services.
- 4 Regional models and roles, functions and structures of regional services differ between ODL institutions and even between ODL institutions in developing world contexts. Though there may be pointers from other ODL institutions, Unisa will have to develop a context-specific and context-appropriate regional model and/or framework and flowing from this model or framework, determine the roles, functions and structures of regional services.
- 5 The geographical spread and profile of our students imply the necessity to look for an *appropriate combination and blend* of centralised and decentralised services. The appropriateness of such a combination and blend is determined by a range of factors such as context, institutional character, student profile, access to a range of technologies and the institutional calendar.
- 6 The fact that some services are and should be centralised and others decentralised *does not mean that those decentralised services are therefore also marginalised*. Processes and structures should be put in place to prevent decentralised services being marginalised and/or seeing themselves as being marginalised. Where there is a history of regional services being marginalised or seeing themselves as being marginalised, any debate on centralisation and decentralization should be carefully and respectfully negotiated through the establishment of clear communication channels and structures.
- 7 Technological developments and the effective and appropriate use of a range of technologies blur the clear-cut distinction between f2f and technology-enabled contact.

F2F contact does not need to imply the same physical and geographical location. Students can have f2f contact with the institution via a range of technologies. The contact between students and the institution, and between the different regional services and the central institution, whether synchronous or asynchronous, will increasingly become enabled and enhanced by the effective and appropriate use of technologies. In the past the physical presence of a regional service or agency was the *only* possible way to ensure synchronous and f2f contact between the institution and its students. *This is no longer the case.*

- 8 It is said that our students has a need for f2f support and contact. Yes, but does this imply being present in the same physical space? There is firstly a range of technologies that do provide for f2f interaction; and secondly, the rise of social networking sites and practices among a huge percentage of our student population *may* imply that their need for physical interaction has also changed. It is the contact that matters, not necessarily the medium?
- 9 If Unisa has a functional, professional and effective Call Centre, and support structures in place making optimal use of a range of technologies, students can have access to timely and appropriate support no matter where they are. Having distributed regional services is *one* way of taking the distance out of distance education. Advances in technology open up a range of possibilities which are and may be cheaper and more convenient for students and the institution. Should students' queries be timeously and efficiently addressed within 24 hours many students will no longer need to travel to a regional facility just to get the attention they deserve (and have paid for).
- 10 The history of student support at Unisa can no longer serve as basis the future of student support. In the past student support was seen and practiced as an add-on by service departments while academic departments concerned themselves with the authoring of study materials, setting of assessments and the marking of assignments and examination scripts. *Student support is a curriculum issue.* Student support, whether administrative, academic (cognitive) or pastoral can no longer be done ad hoc by a range of independent providers.

It would seem as if our rethinking on a regional model for Unisa does require us to rethink some of our assumptions and perceptions that led to the current model. It is one thing to make predictions based on past statistics and it is another thing to think out-of-the-box and think what regional services would be like in 10 years' time!

Let us start the conversation...

3 NEWS FROM OXFORD

This is my final week in the Oxford regional office of the Open University (OU) and it is going to be a hectic week. The office this morning looked like something out of a fairy-tale winter-wonderland as (more) snow had fallen overnight! Except for the cold (maximum of 1degree), it truly is a magnificent sight.

My research colleagues (Sharon and Fenella) and I have made huge progress with the analysis of the data and we are preparing a first feedback session to the Open University Business School tomorrow, Wednesday 1 December. I will be back in office on Monday 6 December 2010. I include three pictures of the campus this morning.



4 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 31 November 2010). The repository is updated on a regular basis and if you register on the repository, you will get notifications of any new uploads.

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Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this ODL Communiqué represent my personal viewpoints and do not represent the viewpoint of any other member of the Unisa community.