ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 49, 23 FEBRUARY 2011

IN THIS ‘BUMPER’ ISSUE:
1 ODL Podcast 3: Exploring the pitfalls of E-learning
2 The starfish and the spider. The unstoppable power of leaderless organisations
3 Mumbo jumbo 6: Unisa is an Apartheid institution because white students pass and black students fail....
4 Comments on last week’s Mumbo Jumbo re the provision of examination papers...
5 A lift going nowhere? Interrogating the framework for a team approach to curriculum and learning development.
6 Induction 2011: Star ship Unisa: To boldly go into the unknown, to learn, to teach, to inspire...
7 Important upcoming ODL events
8 Follow the sun: An online conference
9 ODL on the Florida campus
10 ODL Repository and blog

1 ODL PODCAST 3: EXPLORING THE PITFALLS OF E-LEARNING

In this week’s podcast I explore the claim that we should not underestimate the pitfalls of E-learning. In this podcast I share my personal views that just as it is a danger to underestimate the dangers of E-learning, likewise we should also consider the pitfalls of not embracing the affordances of technology. I seriously doubt if I wear rose-tinted spectacles regarding the dangers (or potential) of E-learning. The question however is not whether we can afford to embrace the affordances of technology, but whether we can seriously afford not to...

Click on the icon above to listen to the podcast. The podcast is 5:28 minutes long.

2 THE STARFISH AND THE SPIDER, THE UNSTOPPABLE POWER OF LEADERLESS ORGANISATIONS

The authors describe the purpose of the book as follows: “This book is about what happens when there is no one in charge. It’s about what happens when there’s no hierarchy. You’d think there would be discord, even chaos. But in many arenas, a lack of traditional leadership is giving rise to powerful groups that are turning industry and society upside down” (Brafman & Beckstrom 2007:5).

Before they start their first chapter they make the following statement: “The absence of structure, leadership, and formal organisation, once considered a weakness, has become a major asset” (Brafman & Beckstrom 2007:7). Anyone listening?

**What attracted me to the book?** I suspect that the current state of ODL at Unisa challenged me to think about ways to provide guidance and coordination. There are more and more ODL initiatives and it is difficult to keep up with the different initiatives arising from different stakeholders such as the regions and the colleges. People do not ask permission to invite ODL experts. Almost no day goes by without a new initiative from someone somewhere. Many of these initiatives make claims on existing and future resources. All these initiatives are uncoordinated and often haphazard. As the number of initiatives increase, the possibility of contradictions and misalignment therefore increases exponentially. And facing this situation, I was challenged to think about the role of leadership and coordination in the ODL project.

Brafman and Beckstrom’s (2007:11) first chapter deals with the first court case against the peer-to-peer sharing of music by the big music companies. Though the court case was won by the organised music industry and the initial provider of free music downloads (Grokster) was closed down; the court case did not stop the free sharing of music, on the contrary. *It exploded.* The harder the music industry fought, the stronger the opposition grew (Brafman & Beckstrom 2007:15). The authors compare the losing battle the music industry fought (and still fights) with the inability of the Spanish to overwhelm and conquer the Apaches. The Spanish could conquer the Aztecs and the Incas, but somehow they could not conquer the Apaches. Part of the reason was the fact that the Apaches were *decentralised*. The Apaches had no central government and were scattered, yet had a coherent culture and value system. Their survival did not depend on having a central authority like the Aztecs and the Incas.

This brings Brafman and Beckstrom (2007:34) to exploring the central metaphor of their book, namely the difference between a spider and a starfish. While the outer appearances of a spider and a starfish show some resemblance, the two creatures are vastly different. If you chop of a spider’s head, it dies. “The starfish doesn’t have a head. Its central body isn’t even in charge. In fact, the major organs are replicated throughout each and every arm” (Brafman & Beckstrom 2007:35).
Not having a central “head” makes moving forward a significant achievement. “For the starfish to move, one of the arms must convince the other arms that it’s a good idea to do so. The arm starts moving, and then – in a process that no one fully understands – the other arms cooperate and move as well” (Brafman & Beckstrom 2007:35). This is quite an achievement considering that there “is no central command” (Brafman & Beckstrom 2007:35).

There are examples of modern organisations that work like this – for example, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) where there is no central organisation, no one controls membership and the only thing that binds the organisation together, is a subscription to the twelve recovery principles. “There’s no application form, and nobody owns AA” (Brafman & Beckstrom 2007:37). In stark contrast to the efficiency of the AA as an example of a leaderless organisation, is the USA government’s response to the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster. The inability of the US government to have responded timeously and appropriately can be ascribed to the “spider” qualities of the response… “… before the spider could react, information had to be relayed up to the head, and then the head had to process the information, strategise and finally react” (Brafman & Beckstrom 2007:39). The authors warn that the issue is not that open systems (such as the starfish) necessarily make “better” decisions, but that open systems are “able to respond more quickly because each member has access to knowledge and the ability to make direct use of it” (Brafman & Beckstrom 2007:39). Therefore open systems celebrate not having a central intelligence system, because the intelligence is spread throughout the system (Brafman & Beckstrom 2007:39-40).

Open systems can also easily mutate and spread very quickly (Brafman & Beckstrom 2007:40-41). And anyone who doubt the connectedness and fluidity of the world our graduates will face, should take note of the diagram Brafman and Beckstrom (2007:44) provide in which they illustrate the move from individual agency in the 1890s (with regard to the music industry) to the origin of the independent record labels in 1945, to the emergence of the “big five” in 2000 to the quick and dirty spread of peer-to-peer networks in 2006. I found the questions Brafman and Beckstrom (2007:46 et seq.) raise regarding the dangers of centralisation in a fluid world extremely interesting. Their questions include 1) Is there a person in charge? 2) Are there headquarters? 3) If you thump it on the head, will it die?

In Chapter 3 (2007:59 et seq.) Brafman and Beckstrom discuss a number of examples of “starfish organisations such as Skype, Craigslist, Apache, and Wikipedia. Brafman and Beckstrom (2007:67) write: “In an open system, what matters most isn’t the CEO but whether the leadership is trusting enough of members to leave them alone” (2007:67).

One thing that caught my eye (and heart…) is the statement Brafman and Beckstrom (2007:74) make that if you “put people in an open system … they’ll automatically want to contribute”.

UNISA university of south africa
Open systems, according to Brafman and Beckstrom (2007: 85 et seq.) stand on five legs namely circles, the role of the catalyst, ideology, pre-existing networks and the role of the champion. Without going into detail, I found their discussion of life in circles very interesting. Circles in open systems self-regulate and are anything but “lawless. Instead of rules, they depend on norms” (2007:90) and these norms are more powerful than rules... The role of the catalyst is the person who initiates circles and then fades into the background (2007:92). The catalyst therefore cedes the control of the idea to the group, sooner than later (2007:93). “A catalyst is like the architect of a house: he’s (sic) essential to the long-term structural integrity, but he doesn’t move in” (2007: 94). The ‘thing’ that holds the house together is a shared ideology (2007:95). Essential for the survival of open systems and networks is the role of the champion (2007:98 et seq.). While the catalyst inspires and connects, the champion takes the idea to the next level. He or she is like a Rottweiler and does not let go (2007:99).

The book is not without its mistakes. One of the frustrating elements of the book is its frequent use of lists - very much like those lists and lists of bullets in many of our study guides... I found those lists to be over- simplifications of complex phenomena. For example, Brafman and Beckstrom (2007:120 et seq.) provide a list of “catalyst tools” which include tools such as 1) Genuine interest in others; 2) Loose connections; 3) Mapping; 4) Desire to help; 5) Passion; 6) Meet people where they are; 7) Emotional intelligence; 8) Inspiration; 9) Tolerance of ambiguity; 10) Hands-off approach; and 11) Receding. This last “tool” implies that the catalyst, after he or she has mapped the network and established the connections, they leave, they don’t move in... (2007:128). The problem with these lists and lists of characteristics or tools or values, is that when the list gets long (I suspect any list of more than five points is in trouble...), the list becomes so general that it loses its impact.

The rest of the book includes explorations of hybrid organisations (combining the best of both worlds), fighting decentralised open systems such as Al Qaeda and speaking “starfish”.

So where does this leave my reflection regarding the ODL project with the book as background?

I really think ODL at Unisa should become more of a starfish than a spider. And we are almost there. But the arms of the starfish are not necessarily moving in the same direction. Some believe we should expand face-to-face tutorial programmes. Others believe that technology is providing us with ample opportunities to move away from face-to-face. There are some that want to centralise Unisa’s services and others that believe that decentralisation is the way to go. Some want the expansion of satellite and videoconferencing facilities, while others hold the view that cheaper technologies will soon make these technologies obsolete, especially for teaching and learning purposes. Some see the future of ODL as a spider and some (including myself) see ODL becoming a starfish. If ODL at Unisa is to become a starfish, it is crucial that the different legs share the same value system and that we agree on some key pointers – otherwise we will be a starfish not going anywhere...
Since 2007 a number of key pointers have emerged, and I think that before the middle of 2011 we should agree on a number of key pointers and strategies. And then I suspect it will be time to let go – and trust the starfish to find its way in the ocean – to mutate and change, to grow and expand. The challenge would be to find a balance between centralisation and decentralisation.

So from my side I would love to facilitate consensus on some key pointers before the middle of 2011 (much like an ODL manifesto or charter) – and then trust the different sections of this wonderful organisation to work out context appropriate responses. I truly believe, like Brafman and Beckstrom (2007:74) that if you “put people in an open system ... they’ll automatically want to contribute”.

3 MUMBO JUMBO 6: UNISA IS AN APARTHEID INSTITUTION BECAUSE WHITE STUDENTS PASS AND BLACK STUDENTS FAIL....

In the previous communiqués we started to explore some of the general assumptions and often unquestioned beliefs regarding teaching and learning at Unisa. This week I want to explore the claim recently made at the inauguration of Prof Makhanya that Unisa’s examination results resemble Apartheid South Africa.

Let me immediately start by stating that I believe that we will still deal with the legacy of Apartheid for many generations to come. Race mattered in the past. Race still matters. And if I read the signs, race will continue to matter for a very long time...

Let me further add that although race matters, it is not the only thing that matters or shape student success. Issues such as your gender, your age, your access to financial support, your ability (or wish) to procreate, your HIV or Aids status, your access to sanitation and health care, your proficiency in the language of tuition and many other things also (equally?) matter. Race is therefore not the only thing that matters when we discuss the examination results of Unisa.

Simplistic claims that Unisa’s examination results resemble Apartheid South Africa sent (and send) shivers down my spine. Not because I am untouched by the plight and aspirations of many of our students, but exactly because I am deeply touched. I am increasingly aware of the defining nature of things outside of our control that shape our lives – such as the race and gender into which we are born, the parents we have (or don’t have), our access to essential stimulation in our early childhood years, our access to good quality primary school education, our access to good quality teaching and supporting environments in our secondary schooling years, and so forth. These things are outside of our loci of control. Yet we carry the impacts of these things for the rest of our lives. Often the crude impact of the above mentioned things become visible the moment students (black and white) register at Unisa. The registration forms they meticulously fill in therefore often hide many of these things that inevitably shape their choices and their chances on success.
Unisa’s registration forms are at the same time evidence of our students’ determination to break free of the bounds that shaped them, and evidence of the chains that still bind them. Every lecturer at Unisa can testify that there are white and black students that pass despite of and in the midst of many odds. The stories of many of our students, black and white, are often told in defiance of the odds they faced and continue to face.

So where does that leave us?

In developing curricula and learning experiences Unisa continuously look for ways not to exclude any student from identifying with the examples used in the study guides. We painstakingly take meticulous care to ensure that we meet students where they are and then structure rich environments for active learning to allow them to reach the envisaged outcomes. Yes, of course we can do better, but at least we are commitment (and on record) that we want to improve the quality and effectiveness of our teaching.

We are not always sure of the same amount of dedication and care of all our students’ efforts. We know that many of our students register for too many courses. We also suspect that many of our students do not seriously consider the fact that each module they register for will require at least eight hours of concentrated effort per module per week. There is also the evidence that many students try to cram as much as possible in the weeks before they write the examination. Many of our students also do not make use of all the extra support that is on offer, despite the availability of lecturers, tutors, and a range of support services.

Considering the care and commitment of most of Unisa’s lecturers to really be of help to students, the harsh claim that Unisa’s examination results resemble Apartheid South Africa, really sent shivers down my spine.

Yes, we can still do better. Yes, we really can take more care. Yes, we are concerned about the impact of Apartheid on generations of youth that want to break out of the chains that bind them and their families. We are equally concerned about new inequalities. But we can only do so much. Studying through higher education is a two-way contract. We don’t want to force students to register for fewer modules. We cannot do the assignments for our students. We cannot read the materials on our students’ behalf. We cannot. We should not...

So having said the above, let us turn to the issue of race. If it is true that black students do not pass as often as white students, I do believe that race is a proxy for a number of things such as stated earlier in referring to schooling backgrounds, and past opportunities. I don’t think anyone would dispute this. But in the same breath being black does not automatically mean disadvantaged while being white does not automatically mean privileged.
At present the majority white students have the opportunity to study in their home language, which may be Afrikaans or English. There is enough international research to indicate that studying in your home language does play a role in student success. Therefore white students currently may have an unfair advantage over black students studying in a second or third language.

So where does it leave Unisa? Should we opt for only English as language of tuition? This will however not resolve the unfair advantage students with English as home language will still have. Should we offer tuition in all the official languages? How do we develop learning materials and assess student performance in all official languages? How does one moderate such assessment? But then the most important question is: If we provide tuition in all the official languages, will they pass more? Though language is an important factor in student success, it is not the only factor. It may even not be the most important factor. The cost, effort and practicalities of providing all our modules in all the languages may not directly impact on and increase student success. Maybe it is time to sober up? I think there are other things that Unisa and students can do that will have a significant impact on students’ chances of success – like students committing to eight hours per module per week, commitment, motivation and making use of all offered support. And if Unisa can continue to seriously address issues of access to technology and prescribed text books, and ensure that modules do not require more than 120 hours of engagement, we may go a long way...

I know race and language are emotional issues. Wars have been fought over them. And I realise that reading this section may have raised your blood pressure whether in support or in opposition. Or maybe you are just astounded by the complexity of the challenges we face.

4 COMMENTS ON LAST WEEK’S MUMBO JUMBO RE THE PROVISION OF EXAMINATION PAPERS...

Using metaphors has become very popular in South African politics. I can say that “I want to kill you”, or that “I am willing to kill to prove my support for a particular person or cause”, and when I am confronted, I can always say that I was speaking metaphorically. I can promise people heaven and hell, only to defend my statement by claiming that my words were taken out of context, or interpreted literally while I was speaking metaphorically.

With the above disclaimer I can therefore boldly assert that the section in last week’s communiqué on the practice of providing students with the examination papers of previous years set the cat amongst the pigeons, or was the final straw that broke the camel’s back? By this I don’t assert to be the cat or claim that lecturers are pigeons or camels or any other unclean cloven-hooved animals, whether domestic or wild. All I intend to say, literally, is that the reaction I got on the section indicated that a (raw) nerve was touched...
Comments I received in writing or at knife-point (figuratively speaking) included questioning the applicability of the Access to Information Act to the provision of previous examination papers to students; assertions that yes, we actually can run out of questions to ask in certain modules and where does that leave us?, to claims that working through previous examination papers supports rote learning and does not encourage critical thinking; and the claim that two hour examination sessions really does not allow thorough investigation of students’ competencies... In next week’s communiqué I will ask a legal expert for more information on the impact of the Access to information act on Unisa’s practice of providing previous years’ examination papers. Watch this space. Blessed are those who are patient. Metaphorically speaking.

5 A LIFT GOING NOWHERE? INTERROGATING THE FRAMEWORK FOR A TEAM APPROACH TO CURRICULUM AND LEARNING DEVELOPMENT

You are cordially invited to join us on Tuesday 1 March, 11:00-13:00 (Dr Miriam Makeba Concert Hall) for a critical interrogation on the implementation of the Framework for a Team Approach in Curriculum and Learning Development. The first Framework for a Team Approach in Curriculum and Learning Development was approved by Senate on 25 October 2006. A revised version was approved on 17 March 2010. It is therefore 5 years since the first Framework, and almost a year since the revised Framework was approved. Why was it revised? What has happened since? Anecdotal evidence suggests that the Framework has not been implemented. Is the Framework like the lifts at Unisa – the lights in the lifts are on but are not operational; or worse still, you may be in the unfortunate position of being stuck in one of them going nowhere... Join us for this critical interrogation of the Framework, the rationale for having such a process, the critical success factors and the unresolved issues.

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<td>Official Welcome</td>
<td>Prof Peter Havenga (Executive Director: Academic Planning)</td>
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<td>11:10</td>
<td>Setting the scene: From 2006 to 2010: an overview</td>
<td>Dr Paul Prinsloo (ODL Coordinator)</td>
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<td>11:30</td>
<td>Implementing the Framework: views from the coalface...</td>
<td>Ms Lynette Naidoo (Communication Science)</td>
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<td>12:00</td>
<td>Panel discussion: How far are we with implementation? What works?</td>
<td>Prof Peter Havenga (Academic Planner)</td>
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<td>What doesn’t?</td>
<td>Ms Liana Griesel (Department of Strategy, Planning and Quality Assurance)</td>
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Please let us know whether you want to attend? Space is limited to 200 people. Please RSVP before or on Friday 25 February at mokoets@unisa.ac.za
6  **INDUCTION 2011: STAR SHIP UNISA: TO BOLDLY GO INTO THE UNKNOWN, TO LEARN, TO TEACH, TO INSPIRE...**

Those of you, who have grown up in the age where Google, Blackberries and Wikipedia are your daily bread (or daily fix...), may not quite understand the allure that the Star Trek movies had (and still have) on many of us. The Star trek movies of the early 1970s, opened vistas of an era when humankind would embrace space travel and discover the unknown. Now, looking back, these movies still embody the dreams and fantasies of an older generation. Just hearing the sound track is still enough to give me goose bumps...

This year’s Induction hosted by the DCLD took as theme: *Star ship Unisa: To boldly go into the unknown, to learn, to teach, to inspire...* The visual theme of the Unisa buildings on the Pretoria campus was designed by Ms Laura Schultz of Sound, Photography and Video, one of the most talented and committed staff members I know. The picture shows Unisa drifting through space as a colossal space ship en route to unexplored spaces.

The choice of the metaphor and image for this year’s Induction is insightful and hopefully prophetic. Unisa really finds itself at a tipping point of either embracing and boldly exploring the unknown; or remaining comfortable in our belief that the networked world will pass us by and that we don’t have to embrace the affordances of a new age in teaching and learning.

The staff on the Star ship *Enterprise* (the name of the star ship in the movies) boldly went where no one else went before them. We would like to congratulate the team from the DCLD with their continued dedication to inspire the rest of us to boldly go into the unknown, to learn, to teach, and to inspire each other. We wish you and the cohorts of February and March all of the best!

7  **IMPORTANT UPCOMING ODL EVENTS**

**Monday 7 March 2011 (Senate Hall, 10:00-12:00): ODL Forum - Using portfolios as alternative assessment practice.** During this event we will explore current practices and interrogate the challenges and opportunities of using portfolios as formative and summative assessment opportunity. Dr Leonie Steyn and Dr Willa Louw (both from the DCLD) went to the USA on an International Unisa Fellowship and visited New York University, Virginia Tech and Michigan University to explore the potential of E-portfolios.
During this forum they will provide feedback and a panel will discuss the potential and challenges of mainstreaming the use of portfolios (and E-portfolios) at Unisa.

Please let us know whether you want to attend? Please RSVP before or on **Wednesday 2 March** at mokoets@unisa.ac.za. We would like to provide a light finger lunch and knowing how many people will come will allow us to plan accordingly.

**Tuesday 8 March 2011 (Senate Hall, 11:00-13:00): ODL Forum – Social technologies: Noah’s ark or Pandora’s Box?** As more and more lecturers are using various social media platforms (eg Facebook, Ning, Twitter, etc) there is huge potential to either increase the quality of teaching or potential for a disaster... Join us for a critical exploration of the issue. Please RSVP before or on **Wednesday 2 March** at mokoets@unisa.ac.za. We would like to provide a light finger lunch and knowing how many people will come will allow us to plan accordingly.

**Thursday 17 March 2011 (Senate Hall, 09:00-13:00):** The “Second celebration of innovation in teaching and learning”. We would like to celebrate examples of innovation in teaching and learning (including student support, administration, etc) at Unisa. I will share the programme in next week’s communiqué! Watch this space... Please RSVP before or on **Monday 14 March** at mokoets@unisa.ac.za. We would like to provide a light finger lunch and knowing how many people will come will allow us to plan accordingly.

**8 FOLLOW THE SUN: AN ONLINE CONFERENCE, 13-15 APRIL 2011**

From the organisers:

Follow the Sun is the sixth learning futures festival of the **Beyond Distance Research Alliance**, which this year is co-hosted by the **Australian Digital Futures Institute, University of Southern Queensland**. Both institutions like a challenge, so we will be working with their colleagues at ADFI to put on a truly global online conference by having hosts in three countries to cover three time zones - UK, USA and Australia.

Put simply, Leicester will run the conference for 8 hours before passing onto Seattle for the second shift of 8 hours. Seattle will in turn pass it onto Toowoomba for the final 8-hour shift, before the conference is brought back to Leicester exactly 24 hours after it started. This cycle will be repeated once. Technically, this shouldn’t prove any more problematic than a traditional online conference.
We will be using the Connect 8 conferencing platform (kindly provided and supported by their conference sponsors Adobe and CollaborATE), as well as Second Life and Moodle, and all conference sessions will be recorded and ultimately processed as open educational resources.

The innovation at the heart of Follow the Sun lies in its embracing of our increasingly borderless, 24-hour digital society. Delegates will have the opportunity to engage with the conference at a time that suits them. Low-cost technologies allow us to break down geographical barriers: our friends at Unisa in South Africa are able to share the same presentation slot as those at Bahria University in Pakistan. Our conference format also removes the constrictions of time.

The keynotes include Sugata Mitra (Professor of Educational Technology, School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences, Newcastle University, UK); Charles Jennings (Former Chief Learning Officer for Reuters and Thomas Reuters, currently Managing Director of Duntroon Associates, a UK-based Learning, Performance and Productivity consultancy company); Terry Anderson (Professor and Canada Research Chair in Distance Education, Athabasca University – “Canada’s Open University”); Gardner Campbell (Director, Academy for Teaching and Learning, and Associate Professor of Literature, Media, and Learning, Honors College, Baylor University, USA); Ron Oliver (Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning) at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia); and Gilly Salmon (Professor of Learning Futures and Executive Director of the Australian Digital Futures Institute at the University of Southern Queensland).

Simon Kear (from the University of Leicester) writes: As Unisa is an institutional member of ICDE http://www.icde.org/, all your staff and associates are entitled to an individual flat rate of GBP25 with no registration deadline. This means that our early bird discount for a group of 5 (GBP125) is the same as 5 ICDE individual prices (http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/beyond-distance-research-alliance/festival/register-for-the-festival). It’s important that everyone registers with their institutional email address so we can collate them at the end. And of course, your presentation team will not be paying anything.

9 ODL ON THE FLORIDA CAMPUS

I realise that it is extremely inconvenient, frustrating and also inconsiderate that all of the ODL forums take place on the Pretoria campus. I sent a request for dates to the three Executive Deans of the colleges who are represented on the Florida campus, so that we can at least try to host some of the forums also on the Florida campus. I am still awaiting the dates and will organise ODL events on the Florida campus as soon as the dates are finalised.
10  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. The repository is updated on a regular basis and if you register on the repository, you will get notifications of any new uploads.

Drafted by Dr Paul Prinsloo
ODL Coordinator, Office of the Vice-Principal: Academic & Research, Unisa
21 February 2011

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

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.