The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor

OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD:
trends, progress and challenges[1]

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Introduction: Conceptualising the Developing World

The term "Developing World" is at once evocative and deceptive and, according to Raymond Williams, even "flattering". Intrinsic to the term are layers of meaning drawn from the ordering of the world and the power relations that distinguish between the namers and the named; the centre and the periphery. It is redolent also of the fact that there are in reality two worlds – one steeped in privilege, power, resources and control over its destiny and the fortunes of others; the other its direct antithesis. By virtue of naming, this 'other' world reveals the pervasive intellectual and economic hegemonies that have come to be taken for granted in contemporary political discourse. The description suggests, according to Williams, that "economies and societies pass through predictable stages of development according to a known model."[2] The condition of 'underdevelopment' reflects an externally imposed set of circumstances which societies and nations may have inadequate resources to respond to. The critique of these attitudes and processes may be expressed in terms of aid and not partnership, unequal power relations and "imposed processes of development for a world market controlled by others." (Williams: 104). Williams concludes that

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[1] Keynote speech delivered by Prof N Barney Pityana on the occasion of the M – 2009 23rd ICDE World Conference on Open Learning and Distance Education. "Flexible Education for All: Open – Global – Innovative" 7 – 10 June 2009, Maastricht, the Netherlands

[2] Raymond Williams: KEYWORDS: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society;1988, London; Fontana Press;p.103

In fact the pressure of what is often the unexamined idea of *development* can limit and confuse virtually any generalising description of the current world economic order, and it is in analysis of the real practices subsumed by *development* that more specific recognitions are necessary and possible.

It is within the framework of that critical, deeper understanding of "developing" that this essay will be based. This means both that the so-called "developing" world is not simply an undifferentiated mass, but that there are variations and measures of 'progress', with senses of identity and historical consciousness. The intellectual environment, culture and resources, therefore, are such that different approaches to higher education are applicable. Distance education in the developing world, therefore, may not be the answer in all respects. Rather what it holds up is a promise to bring those on the periphery of society within the net of opportunity through enhancement of talent and capacities.

The impact of global trends on the developed and developing worlds

The breaking of this deadlock, and the increase in global trade that followed, allied to new technologies and cultural shifts, has created a more fluid, less predictive yet more interdependent world. This world in flux has brought great opportunities along with confusion, change and anxiety. But such change poses great possibilities for us all and especially in Africa, that great giant finally beginning to stir itself from its enforced slumber. We need, then, to seek to understand these newer forces in play about us, attempt to define them and in so doing set the framework for policies that favour the poor.[3]

Such was a very confident world in 2005 - about the exciting possibilities of changing the arrangements in a more engaging world conscious of its interdependence, for whom Africa was a possibility and held potential, rather than the stigmatised and much-maligned 'basket-case' world of failure. The Commission for Africa sought to chart a new course and set a new tone in relations about Africa; ideals that resonated within and outside the continent. But that was not to be.

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[3] Declaration of the Commission for Africa, 11 March 2005; in *OUR COMMON INTEREST: An Argument;* London, Penguin Books, 2005,171.

Today, it is in a hugely complex socio-economic and political environment that higher education in the developing world must function and indeed grow, affected not least by the constraints, dynamic economic and political forces and trends which currently undergird higher education policy and practice. Add to this, developing countries' complex and sometimes volatile internal dynamics, then one is faced with an immense task of galvanising the developing world into action to liberate the potential of higher education in the service of humanity.

Probably the most immediate dynamic that we all have to contend with, is the current global recession, which began in earnest in 2008, and which is influencing to a greater or lesser extent, the policy making processes of governments as they seek to realign their national strategies to emerging social and political challenges. Higher education is being similarly affected, and higher education institutions find themselves having to realign and reprioritise in terms of their funding, capacity and resources. As this happens, one cannot but notice a growing trend towards cooperation, and an ever-growing reliance on technology as a means of management and delivery. A glance at international conferences on higher education currently suggests that the themes relating to technology are the overwhelming favourites.

Across the globe, the recession has impacted severely on a number of higher education institutions' financial reserves. Most have seen the erosion in the value of their investments almost overnight, plunging them into precarious financial predicaments and prompting the implementation of unanticipated cost saving measures, as well as changes and realignments in their strategies - over both the short and long-term - to ensure their sustainability.

In an article in the University World News, entitled *Universities lose billions as recession deepens* (14 December 2008), Geoff Maslen illuminates the extent of the impact:

> Few higher education institutions around the world appear to have escaped the collapse of financial markets. In Asia, Africa, North America, Europe, and Britain and down under in Australia and New Zealand, universities have been hit hard as the value of their investments in property and shares and, in many cases, their income from diverse sources crumbles. How to counter, or at the

very least cope with, this alarming situation - unique in the experience of university managers - will be the great challenge in the year ahead. ….With the worldwide collapse in financial markets, the result has been catastrophic. [4]

Furthermore, adults who may have lost their jobs are coming back into higher education in order to equip themselves with the skills that they need in order to compete for ever-scarcer vacancies. As this happens, higher education institutions, already battered by their losses and constraints, have to balance the demand for access from mature and new learners, for a limited number of places. In addition there is bound to be a shift towards those courses that will provide the knowledge and skills for economic relevance and earning power. Commerce, science and technology are likely to be over-subscribed, once again at the expense of the humanities, whose relevance in a technology-driven world, seems to be diminishing steadily.

Higher education the world over has already begun implementing "rescue" or contingency plans that include amongst others, the reassessment and realignment of institutional expenditure, the freezing of new appointments, retrenchments, and the sale of assets, including property, to offset losses. Such measures will in turn impact on institutional strategies, planning and operations. Adjustments will need to be made to prioritise projects, to allocate resources prudently and adjust timelines for project completion, amongst others. This will obviously result in disruptions to institutional operations. At best, the measures will slow down institutional growth and development. At worst, they could result in institutional stagnation and decay, which in turn, will have a negative impact on socio-economic development.

The recession will undoubtedly affect student access and mobility and one can only speculate about how the massive retrenchments and layoffs that we have seen over past months will change the current picture in time to come: not only in terms of the overall impact on the number of students able to access higher education, but also the outward mobility of students and the financial losses that may be suffered by higher education institutions who are host to such mobile students.

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[4] Maslen, G. GLOBAL: Universities lose billions as recession deepens. University World News. 14 December 2008. Issue 0057. http://www.universityworldnews.com/froms/donate.php

It is estimated that in 2004 at least 2.5 million tertiary students studied outside their homes; approximately 1.87% of the global student population of 132 million. Six nations, all of whom are classed as developed, host 67% of outwardly mobile students. These are the United States (23%), the United Kingdom (12%), Germany 11%), France (10%), Australia (7%), and Japan (5%). [5]

In absolute terms, the largest groups of mobile students come from East Asia and the Pacific at 701,000 or 29% of the world total, followed by Western Europe (whose numbers have stagnated over the past five years) at 407 000 or 17% of the world total.[6] China tops the list of outwardly mobile students at 14%, followed by India, the Republic of Korea, Japan and Germany.

Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest outbound mobility ratio (5.9%) which is almost three times greater than the global average. One out of 16 students from the region studies abroad. With 194 000 mobile students, sub-Saharan Africa accounts for 8% of the global total. In fact, the number of students abroad exceeds domestic enrolments for Cape Verde, Comoros, and Guinea-Bissau, It accounts for more than 50% in Botswana, Equatorial Guinea, Gambia, Lesotho and Namibia, and for more than 33% of students in Angola, Chad, the Republic of Congo, Gabon and Mauritius. In sub-Saharan Africa, all countries except South Africa, Nigeria and Liberia exceed the global average for the outbound mobility ratio. Zimbabwe has the largest group of students abroad (17 000) followed by Nigeria (15 000), Cameroon (15 000) and Kenya (14 000). [7] Every second student from the region (51%) goes to Western Europe, followed by South Africa (9 out of 10 of the 21%) and North America (21%). In fact, Developed Countries are increasingly competing for students in international education market. (OECD, 2005a)[8]

Outbound mobility ratios will show that Developed Countries are the main destination of outbound students, who in turn, are largely from Developing Countries. China

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[5] Global Education Digest 2006: Comparing Education around the World, Unesco Institute for Statistics, Montreal. 2006 pg 35.
[6] Ibid, pg 38
[7] Ibid pg 39
[8] Ibid pg 46. OECD (2005a) Education at a Glance, Paris: OECD

offers an interesting example of the current dynamics. Various estimates set job losses in China at around 20 million. China also has the highest absolute number of outbound students. It will be interesting to see how such job losses will impact on the current higher education ratios, as well as the respective countries' and institutions' economies and finances. The impact of the recession is only likely to be felt over the medium-term, but there can be no doubt that both developing nations and developed nations will be affected negatively – a signal perhaps, that we are more closely bound in our reliance on one another in today's global village, than we perhaps realize, or acknowledge. The question does surely arise as to whether in this environment one can credibly speak any longer about 'developing' and 'developed' nations. From what one observes there may be erstwhile 'developed' nations receding dangerously into the zone of 'developing' nations!

Contextualising Higher Education in Africa

The implications of these dynamics for developing countries are serious. Externally, donor funding will probably decrease - we have already begun to see evidence of this. Exacerbating matters is the acknowledgement in the 2008 Millennium Development Goals Report that:

- Developed countries' foreign aid expenditures declined for the second consecutive year in 2007 and risk falling short of the commitments made in 2005;
- International trade negotiations are years behind schedule and any outcome seems likely to fall far short of the initial high hopes for a development-oriented outcome.[9]

Co-operation and exchange agreements are likely to be scaled down and travel limited to a bare minimum. As governments battle to keep their economies afloat, it is quite probable that the budget spend for higher education will be reduced, necessitating the generation of additional revenues from different sources. In countries where resources are already limited, higher education will be seriously affected, and where we have seen some evidence of small but incremental progress over the past 5 years

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[9] Millennium Development Goals Report 2008. United Nations, New York. 2008. Pg 5

or so, especially on the African continent, higher education will be extremely hard put merely to ensure that those hard won gains are not obliterated.

In the Millennium Development Goals Report 2008 The Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, Sha Zukang makes the following observation:

> Most developing countries' efforts to achieve the MDGs have benefited from the improved economic growth and relatively low inflation that characterized much of the period since 2000. The immediate prospects are for reduced global growth and higher inflation. Both threaten continued success in reducing income poverty and are likely to affect progress towards other MDGs unless there is a commensurate response from all stakeholders. [10]

It is indeed the case that many developing nations, especially in Africa, are dependent on development aid to balance their national budgets. During times of fiscal crisis, education in general and higher education in particular will be among the early casualties. This means that states will no longer subsidize higher education to the extent that they did in good times, and as such, essential services like technology, library resources, laboratories and research funding, as well as salaries for staff will all be squeezed. The result will be increased drop-out rates, burgeoning unemployment, and an accelerated brain-drain by academics and researchers of excellence. More seriously, nations under such pressures will no longer be looking to their intellectual classes for creative solutions, and education may be in danger of being relegated to an unaffordable luxury. This is clearly a doomsday scenario that no nation can afford.

Open Distance Learning

For the Developing World ODL is a promising and practical strategy to address the challenge of widening access thus increasing participation in higher education. It is increasingly being seen as an educational delivery model which is cost-effective without sacrificing quality. On the African Continent where resources are scarce and higher education provision is poor, ODL has been accepted as a viable, cost effective means of expanding provision without costly outlay in infrastructure. Holding the

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[10] Ibid.

promise of economies of scale and expanded geographical reach, it is not surprising that many African governments are cashing in on this potential.

Yet, even as governments in the Developing World, and a significant number of higher education institutions too, delve into the possible benefits of ODL, they must guard against the uncritical acceptance and implementation of ODL as an "easy way out". They must also acknowledge the significant and serious challenges which have to be overcome in its implementation, including financial resources and intellectual capital, some of which have already been explored above.

Africa in particular, has to play a "catch-up" game at all levels of education and training. It is caught in a conundrum of high expectations, diminishing resources, minimal literacy, a skills deficit and a competitive environment, with a steady loss of its skilled people to the developed world.

And all the while, Africa has to participate in the global economy in the best interests of its people. It is quite probable that in an environment of fiscal crisis some states might be tempted to look to distance education as a 'soft' option. It may suggest a probability of massification of education and training, at minimal cost, and could allow the extension of higher education to the legions that were denied opportunities that are taken for granted in the developed world, as it would for those at work looking to improve their career prospects. The problem, however, arises where the learners are unemployed and unable to afford the cost of education, even in the distance mode. Governments may resort to flooding open universities with unsuitable and unmotivated learners who may have no prospect of success in their studies.[11]

Distance education is technology intensive. Many countries, especially in Africa are battling to afford the cost of bandwidth which would help leverage technology, which in turn has become essential for effective learning. Technology here means not just bandwidth, as such, but the necessary hardware platforms, software, processes and applications, including mobile telephony, necessary for effective student and academic management and learner support. Without competent and well-trained

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[11] Vide Report of the Conference of Ministers of Education of the African Union (COMEDAF), 8-11 April 2005, Algiers, Algeria.

academics in the artifice of distance education, learning materials may not be revised regularly as they should, there could be a tendency towards downloading open educational resources without critique or appropriate learning philosophy.

A dose of healthy scepticism about one ODL's latest fashion trends is surely not out of place in this company of scholars where received wisdom may be open to challenge and truth-claims challenged through the test of verification. There is a suspicion in some quarters that OERs are "dumped" onto open source sites when they become discontinued, or when registrations in such courses decline to unsustainable levels. The danger with this of course, is that their intellectual value declines along with their relevance and quality. I do not believe that it would be remiss to suggest that more could be done with cheaper technologies like radio and other multi-media applications. A sober assessment of the value and potential of OERs without underestimating their potential, but while guarding against unjustifiable zeal is called for. What is surely required is a genuine exchange of knowledge and interplay of ideas across all cultures and Continents. Perhaps a code of conduct or guidelines to practice in OER should become our collective responsibility to ensure greater and equal participation, and balance intellectual hegemonies.

And yet there can be no denying that distance education could be the answer to many nations' social problems, in that the unemployed could be engaged in learning, entrepreneurs could grow and could secure the means of social upliftment, and universities could become the spaces of free engagement which could lift national morale by way of critical, creative and innovative social and cultural activities. Distance education, properly conceived, could be the long-term strategy for national renaissance. I suggest that higher education, notwithstanding the social circumstances, remains an engine of development. Knowledge and its development and dissemination can transcend the confines of social deprivation.

Let there be no mistake about the drive in Africa for access to education and to invest in education for sustainable development. It is notable that the participation rate in higher education in Africa remains the lowest compared to just about any other region in the world. The Second Decade of Education in Africa, (2006-2015) was designed to build on the achievements of the First Decade, and capitalise on   later

developments like the emergence of the critical issues in the MDGs adopted by the Millennium Summit in September 2000, and the Dakar commitments of Education for All.

The drive is to enhance policy orientation for higher education, and ensure better trans-border cooperation through the creation of centres of excellence, harmonisation of curricula, and greater sharing of resources across the Continent.[12] This political will was given impetus by the Commission for Africa which paved the way for a partnership with Africa by developed nations. In its recommendations, the Commission made several bold assertions about the need for a renewed effort at capacity-building going so far as to commit the international community to invest US$500m a year over the next 10 years to "revitalise Africa's institutions of higher education and up to US$3b over 10 years to develop centres of excellence in science and technology, including African institutes of technology" (128).

The focus of distance education in Africa in recent years has shifted remarkably from mere assertion of desirability or seeking to make the case for distance education. A growing number of African states are in the process of establishing their own distance education institutions[13]. What is at issue increasingly is what needs to be done to ensure that distance education is sustainable, is properly resourced, is of a standard and quality such as to deliver on what it promises. It is necessary to ensure that there are mechanisms for increasing access to higher education, while ensuring that learners enjoy an educational experience that would lead to sound learning, resulting in educational success. In other words the reputation and utility of distance education has become a subject of much debate in Africa currently. Attention must be given in

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[12] Vide COMEDAF, Algiers, op cit

[13] Note the Concluding Statement of the All Africa Minister's Conference on Open Learning and Distance Education, Cape Town, 1-4 February 2004 identified the following:

- the need for a clear commitment to open learning and distance education by governments in order to improve access to quality distance education;
- the importance of policy frameworks for the optimal implementation of distance education;
- that careful planning is required if cost-effectiveness and excellence in distance education are to be achieved;
- that particular emphasis should be place on assuring the quality of distance education at all levels;
- the potential use of appropriate technologies in distance education;
- collaboration within and between countries as important to high quality and cost-effective distance education.

policy, regulatory and organisational terms to transportability (of qualifications and credits), cooperation and mobility of learning and qualifications at the systemic level.

It was in response to this very imperative that Unisa hosted a Stakeholders Forum under the auspices of the African Council for Distance Education (ACDE) in Pretoria in February 2008. The Forum saw participants reach consensus on the need to address and to shape meaningful collaboration among African distance education institutions, and to establish a quality assurance and accreditation agency for Africa.

A year later the ACDE has established two key units, driven by ACDE member institutions and convened by members of the ACDE Executive Board. The Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency, convened by Prof Olugbemiro Jegede is to be based at the National Open University Nigeria. The Collaboration Unit is based at the Tanzania Open University under the watchful eye of Prof Tolly Mbwette. That means that the two critical issues for the reputation and sustenance of distance education in Africa are now receiving focused attention. The effect of this arrangement will be to create a partnership between the African Union, the custodians of the Second African Decade, NEPAD and ACDE - marching *in sync* towards addressing the challenges of education in Africa. The effect of this could surely be that the vision towards an effective, efficient, affordable, accessible and quality higher education by distance learning could become a reality on our Continent.

At the 2nd ACDE Conference and General Assembly held in Lagos, Nigeria, hosted by the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), from 8 – 11 July 2008, Africa's reliance on and commitment to ODL was acknowledged, and the congruence of African thinking on educational priorities for the Continent was reflected in the six sub themes, namely:

- Open and Distance Learning and Teacher Development
- Meeting the Challenge of the Millennium Development Goals: Role Potential and Impact of ODL
- Capacity Building in Open and Distance Learning
- Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning

- Collaboration and Partnerships in Open and Distance Learning: Models, Challenges and responses
- E-learning and Open Distance Learning in Developing Nations: problems and prospects,

There was also a commitment to:

- build the capacity of African tertiary education institutions and their faculty for better management, financial sustainability and extension of their reach through delivery of distance education.[14]

I am aware of a number of initiatives that have been embarked on by colleagues for other ODL institutions and organisations on the Continent, in pursuit of these themes. Many of these will undoubtedly be reported on in this Conference.   However it would be remiss of me not to report on the influence and impact of the University of South Africa, on ODL delivery on the Continent, also in pursuit of the themes identified above.

The University of South Africa as the pre-eminent driving force of ODL on the Continent: Commitment and Challenges

As the only dedicated ODL institution in South Africa, and the largest provider of ODL on the Continent, the University of South Africa is a driving force for ODL on the Continent. Unisa enrols just under one-third of all publically funded headcount enrolments in South Africa, with approximately 262,000 headcounts in 2008. [15] Of these, just over 90% are South African nationals, just over 9% are African nationals, and just less than 1% is other foreign nationals. Their average age is now below 30 and they speak a diverse number of languages, including South Africa's 11 official languages and various international languages.

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[14] http://www.unescoorg/liep/virtualuniversity/media/document/ch10_AVU_Juma.pdf

[15] Out of a total of 741 383 enrolments in 2006, Unisa accounted for 226 769 headcount students. Also offering a variety of distance courses are the Universities of North West, Pretoria, Walter Sisulu, TUT all of whom account for 37 873 enrolments. Source: EDUCATION STATISTICS IN SOUTH AFRICA 2006. Unisa's enrolments in critical fields of study are no less significant: 26283 in SET, 95 605 in Business & Management and 25 513 in teacher education, as well as 5 460 Master's and 948 doctoral studies.

Unisa has the highest foreign student enrolment figures in Africa. 82% of students are currently part-time learners. Residentially, the vast majority of students are located in South Africa, with a smaller proportion in Africa and beyond. For this reason, Unisa provides its teaching and learning and administrative services worldwide. As such Unisa has a direct impact on higher education in South Africa, and increasingly, on the Continent, and its successes or failures will be reflected similarly.

Although Unisa is generally recognised as having played a pioneering role in the "first generation" of distance education, namely the correspondence model, it currently has all of the elements of 4th generation ODL, but needs to integrate them more systematically to raise the level to 5th generation, which is characterised amongst others, by economies of scale.

There is recognition too that formal capacities in ODL at Unisa need to be developed systematically. Unisa has itself recognised the need some years ago and set about establishing an Institute for ODL with the twin tasks of offering a range of qualifications in ODL while promoting practitioner driven research in the field. We envisage that ultimately all academic and professional staff must undergo relevant training in ODL as an essential part of their development. This resolve was realised by the establishment of the UNESCO Chair in ODL at Unisa in 2008. Currently Unisa has in place its own ODL Policy and it is in the process of rolling out the implementation plan in support of the ODL model.

A National Policy on ODL (currently being conceptualised) will help a dedicated distance education institution like Unisa function optimally as an ODL provider[16], meaning that it could ensure better flexibility and relevance, innovation in curriculum design, creativity in assessment methods and responsiveness to social needs, especially by way of research and short learning courses. An enabling regulatory machinery is critical for ODL practice to flourish.

Inherent in such a plan for Unisa, is a major investment in technology, especially in the training of staff and personnel, in the design of systems , mapping of processes

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[16] This was one of the recommendations of the All Africa ministerial Conference referred to above.

central the educational value chain from registration to qualification; in the development of business intelligence to ensure informed and evidence-based management decisions; and developing an enterprise architecture to maximise the benefits of technology by ensuring integrated technology, capacity, systems and processes, fitting seamlessly within the overall organisational architecture and management processes. We also have had to invest maximally in bandwidth to ensure smooth, fast and reliable technology operations at Unisa.

This year Unisa celebrates five years as a merged institution. In acknowledgement of this not insignificant milestone, Unisa has produced a review of five years of its existence as an ODL and comprehensive institution[17]. Quite remarkably for an institution of its size, the University has undertaken two extensive Quality Assurance processes. First a voluntary one in 2007 with the assistance of the Commonwealth of Learning who gathered an international team of experts to review every aspect of Unisa operations - academic and administrative - and who produced a very helpful report with commendations and recommendations[18]. We are very grateful to CoL for this service. We have already done much to apply the recommendations of the CoL Quality Audit.

Then in 2008 the University underwent a statutory quality audit by the Higher Education Quality Committee of the Council for Higher Education. Once again, the draft report built on the work we were already undertaking as a result of the CoL –led audit, as there was much congruence between the two processes. The draft HEQC Report is expected to be published soon.

Unisa's broad agenda is echoed in the Institution's mission statement, namely to promote critical scholarship from an African perspective and to fulfil the mandate of a comprehensive university by providing academic offerings which range from general academic to vocationally oriented programmes. As part of this process Unisa established the Centre for African Renaissance Studies (CARS) in 2003, with the aim of promoting a Multi-Inter-and Transdisciplinary (MIT) approach to knowledge by

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[17] FIVE YEARS ON TRANSFORMATION: 2004-2009; 2009:Unisa Press.
[18] CoL Report

focussing on African Renaissance studies and pursuing cutting edge research through an interdisciplinary paradigm.

With the ongoing recurriculation of Unisa's programmes and a new PQM architecture the University is geared to ensuring its major transformation objectives set out in its strategic plan, *UNISA 2015: An Agenda for Transformation,* and elaborated on in its Institutional Operational Plans which now span a 3-year timeframe.

The challenge for Unisa, as with all ODL institutions, is to endeavour not only to ensure access and affordability but to address national anxieties about drop-out, success and throughput rates. In other words Unisa is being challenged to make good its promise that distance education is neither second-rate nor a less successful mode of education. It only makes the point that distance education is a different mode and method of education delivery and that it ensures a higher than usual learner participation in the learning process, and builds on the intelligence of the experienced learner.

At Unisa we pride ourselves on the quality of our learning materials, we are advancing towards a comprehensive and integrated learner support programme, and we aspire to become a university well known for its support to students. Our assessments suggest that employers value Unisa graduates as efficient, reliable, knowledgeable, and independent. That goes a long way towards satisfying one of Unisa's strategic objectives to "Establish service-orientated, technology-enhanced learner support to increase retention and throughput."

Integral to the learner support offered by Unisa, is the Unisa library which is also the largest library of its kind in Africa. Besides enhanced postal and courier delivery of requested study materials, the library has implemented a workflow programme to enhance study material request services, an electronic information storage and retrieval system service, an electronic Theses and Dissertation web-based collection (in collaboration with other African Universities) and a digitalised study collection.

In 2009 the library launched the Unisa Institutional Repository, which is based on open access principles and which will preserve, manage and disseminate locally

produced intellectual output and research in electronic format. In support of this the library has dedicated research space with managed access and wireless connections. The library has steadily increased its holding of electronic resources. Full text e-journals now represent 88% of the number of full text journals available. Library commons are being established in a number of the regions and more recently the library announced that users could also use mobiles or cell phones and other hand-held devices to search the OASIS Library Catalogue.

Unisa also has its own free student portal. *my*Unisa is a web-based system for academic collaboration and study related interaction. This system has been developed to supplement and enhance academic interaction and improve communication between Unisa and its students, and to provide opportunity for engagement among students. The submission of assignments and updating contact details is easily done using the online environment which also includes access to administrative information such as biographical details, academic and assignment records, examination results and dates, and financial records. Students are given the opportunity to engage with class mates and lecturers through the online discussion forums and email. Additional resources and files are easy to access and official study materials can be downloaded if required. Students who join *my*Unisa get their own email account "*my*Life" email account free of charge. *my*Unisa is supported by Satellite broadcasting, which provides learners the opportunity to communicate with lecturers, fellow students and Tutors. There are 20 Satellite classrooms throughout South Africa.

Unisa participates in an international initiative to develop an open source collaboration and learning environment, "Sakai." The Sakai Community develops and distributes the open-source "Sakai, CLE" an enterprise-ready collaboration and courseware management platform that provides users with a suite of learning, portfolio, library and project tools. This technology was customized, enhanced and new functionality added to address Unisa's specific requirements.

The university is also a core member of a number of regional, continental and international ODL associations including, SAIDE, NADEOSA, DEASA, the African Council on Distance Education (ACDE) and the International Council on Distance Education (ICDE). The University plays a major role in many of these bodies and

their activities. Special mention must be made of the ACDE which is committed to ensuring greater cooperation and cohesion amongst ODL practitioners in Africa across a number of fronts. .

Unisa can report on several unique and impressive achievements and characteristics:

- One of Unisa's strategic objectives is to utilise information technology innovatively to develop cutting edge ODL teaching and learning practices and administrative and management support services. To this end, in 2008 Unisa committed a budget of over R240-million to enhancing ICTs.
- Unisa's College of Law is the top law research faculty in the country, with highly rated quality research outputs that exceed those of any of the other law departments in the country.
- The College of Economic and Management Sciences is the largest such faculty in the country whose headcount of approximately 129 000 students exceeds that of all of the other similar colleges in South Africa combined. This college also produces more that 37% of all of South Africa's Chartered Accountants.

There can be no doubt that ODL is gaining currency and momentum in Africa. New initiatives, partnerships and collaborations are being forged as Africans get to grips with their respective realities of higher education provision. I have on numerous occasions cautioned against fragmented and piecemeal ODL efforts and initiatives on the Continent and I remain concerned that we do not pay sufficient heed to the perils and pitfalls of such courses of action.

What remains for me is to reaffirm that as an institution, the University of South Africa is committed to building partnerships and collaboration across the Continent and particularly through the vehicle of the ACDE, to raise the standards of ODL practices, spread the extent of ODL practitioners, and assist new programmes and developments across Africa.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that educators the world over are facing hard times. Perhaps now more than ever before, we are faced with the realisation that if we hope to sustain

ODL delivery at its current rate (and hopefully grow it), we will need to set aside our prejudices and our long held "them-and-us" beliefs that have characterised relations between the developed and developing worlds. We will have to look afresh at collaborations and partnerships, preferably through a strategic lens that discourages fragmentation and piecemeal efforts and that encourages consolidation, cooperation and mutual benefit. We shall have to implement more rigorous institutional planning and management, and we will have to show far greater financial acumen in both our decision making and in the financial planning and in the current fiscal climate. I believe we have begun with that process.

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Maastricht, The Netherlands, 8 June 2009.