



## ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 58, 4 MAY 2011

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### 1 HOW MUCH DO WE KNOW? HOW MUCH DO WE CARE?

We often hear at meetings that “*they* should not be in higher education”. The “*they*” in the statement refers to students who are often ill-prepared either for the challenges awaiting them in higher education; or the specific challenges of studying through open distance learning (ODL). The statement may also refer to the situation where students are not sufficiently prepared for the financial cost of studying through Unisa, finding prescribed text books (and sharing them with a number of other students) and making ends meet to attend any possible support on offer. “*They*” who find studying through Unisa difficult because of having registered for too many modules; not having enough resources; or just being bewildered by our processes and systems (or lack thereof) – “*they*” don’t belong in higher education, it is claimed.

Just after the Easter weekend I took a student to Olievenhoutbosch, southwest of Pretoria. As we drove into the neighbourhood, dodging potholes, empty beer bottles, neighbours returning from a previous night in town, dead (and live) rats and trying to keep direction amidst the noise of a neighbourhood waking up on a Sunday morning (or still as part of their Saturday night festivities); I realised how little we know about the lives of many of our students.

John (not his real name) shares a small house with family members (the sons of his brothers for whom he also cares on a salary as security guard). He is one of the fortunate ones with running water close to his home and electricity (which a friendly and competent neighbour helped him to have access to...).

Entering his small house, I was amazed at how scantily furnished it was. I noticed the many certificates on the wall – previous awards and qualifications. I looked around. “There is no desk here? Where do you study?” I asked. He replied that he and some other 20 Unisa students make use of the community centre’s “library” where they can study till 22:00 at night. The centre is about 3 km from his house.

As I drove back I realised how little we know about the lives of our students. John is most probably one of those who should not be in higher education (according to many)... He studies through NFSAS and with the help of a sponsor. So far he has passed more than 20 modules of a qualification with 34 modules. He wants to be a chartered accountant. I have known him now for the last three years and am witness how he struggles to make ends meet, caring for family members and trying to do five modules per semester.

Presently he is a security guard who works permanent night shift at a block of flats with no guard room. He studies during the day, and work at night. He has now taken unpaid leave to prepare for the examinations.

How much do we know about the lives of our students? How much do we care when we make decisions about prescribed text books? How much do we need to know about the lives of our students to be really a university that serves humanity? How much do we care?

## **2 SELLING OUT HIGHER EDUCATION – BY HENRY GIROUX (2003)**

In 2003 Henry Giroux wrote an article titled “Selling out higher education” (*Policy Futures in Higher Education*, 1(1): 179-200) which is vintage Giroux – scathing in its attack on the increasing market-driven approaches in higher education. Though written in 2003, the article resonates deeply with some of the challenges higher education faces in South Africa; as well as resonating deeply with some of the discourses at Unisa.

Giroux (2003:180) bemoans the fact that democracy (in the context of the United States of America) has been replaced by “the lure of the lottery, casino capitalism, and the Dow-Jones Industrial Average”. This also affects higher education resulting in the fact that “there is no vocabulary for political or social transformation, critical education, democratically inspired visions, or critical notions of social agency to expand the meaning and purpose of democratic public life and its connection to higher education” (Giroux 2003: 180). Curricula and qualifications serve the market and promotes employability as the sole criteria for evaluating the viability of academic offerings and qualifications. The purpose of higher education, at least in the context of the USA, is to “produce compliant workers, depoliticized consumers, and passive citizens” (Giroux 2003: 181). “Public spheres are replaced by commercial spheres as the substance of critical democracy is emptied out and replaced by a democracy of goods, consumer lifestyles, shopping malls, and the increasing expansion of the cultural and political power of corporations throughout the world” (Giroux 2003: 181). Higher education has become the “handmaiden of corporate culture” where “academic disciplines gain stature almost exclusively through their exchange value on the market, and students now rush to take courses and receive professional credentials that provide them with the cache they need to sell themselves to the highest bidder” (Giroux 2003: 182).

In this context higher education is aimed at maximising profit and minimising cost where students are 'customers' and the status of academics are increasingly determined "through their ability to secure funds and grants from foundations, corporations, and other external sources. Instead of concentrating on critical teaching and research aimed at the public good, faculty are now urged to focus in on corporate largesse" (Giroux 2003:183). The downsizing of humanities in higher education worldwide is the result of the increasing reign of "rapacious capitalism" (Giroux 2003: 181) where knowledge is seen as "venture capital" addressing "market niches" in corporatised regimes where "management models of decision-making replace faculty governance" (Giroux 2003:184).

"As corporate culture and values shape university life, corporate planning replaces social planning, management becomes a substitute for leadership, and the private domain of individual achievement replaces the discourse of public politics and social responsibility" (Giroux 2003:184-185). Business leaders such as Bill gates, Jack Welsch and Warren Buffet are celebrated as "educational prophets" (Giroux 2003:186) and this results in the instrumentalisation of knowledge and undermining "forms of theorising, pedagogy, and meaning that define higher education as a public good rather than a private good" (Giroux 2003:188).

In stark contrast to the selling of higher education to the highest bidder, Giroux (2003:188) pleads that we defend higher education as "moral and political practice". The continued downsizing of faculty and the move towards appointing more and more contract staff results in creating "a permanent underclass of part-time professional workers in higher education" which "not only demoralizing and exploitative for many faculty who inhabit such jobs, but such policies increasingly deskill both partial and full-time faculty by increasing the amount of work they have to do, while simultaneously shifting power away from the faculty to the managerial sectors of the university" (Giroux 2003: 190). Giroux (2003:191) warns that held "up to the profit standard, universities and colleges will increasingly calibrate supply to demand, and the results look ominous with regard to what forms of knowledge, pedagogy, and research will be rewarded and legitimated".

Contesting the corporatisation of higher education means defending higher education "as a site that offers students the opportunity to involve themselves in the deepest problems of society, to acquire the knowledge, skills, and ethical vocabulary necessary for what Vaclav Havel calls 'the richest possible participation in public life'" (Giroux 2003:193). Giroux (2003:194) then turns his critical gaze to the role of academics in today's higher education landscape and states that

Too many academics have retreated into narrow specialisms that serve largely to consolidate authority rather than critique its abuses. Refusing to take positions on controversial issues or to examine the role of intellectuals in lessening human suffering, such academics become models of moral indifference and unfortunate examples of what it means to disconnect learning from public life [continues on the next page].

On the other hand, many left and liberal academics have retreated into arcane discourses that offer them mostly the safe ground of the professional recluse. Making almost no connections to audiences outside of the academy or to the issues that bear down on their lives, such academics have become largely irrelevant.

Curricula and pedagogy should be re-imagined and reclaimed to become sites of empowerment, energising students “to seize such moments as possibilities for acting on the world, engaging it as a matter of politics, power, and social justice” (Giroux 2003:195).

A lot of what Giroux (2003) says in this article resonates deeply with the beliefs of many academics and other staff at Unisa. Many other authors agree with Giroux’s sentiments, such as the article by Kathleen Lynch (2006), “Neo-liberalism and marketisation: the implications for higher education” (*European Educational Research Journal* 5(1): 1-17).

Although there is a lot in both articles that I agree with, I missed a broader sense of how higher education throughout human history served *different* masters. Whether these masters were the Church (or religion in general), the ruling or certain socioeconomic classes; higher education throughout history served the highest (or most powerful) bidder. Even though many academics would romanticise the time when they had sole jurisdiction over what and how they taught; they forget how higher education served disciplinary knowledge and regulatory bodies, often despite indications that these knowledges do not prepare students for the messiness of injustice and vast inequalities of life on earth...

I totally agree with Giroux that higher education (and Unisa) should again embrace education as “moral and political practice” preparing our graduates for serving humanity and not the market or “rapacious capitalism”.

In today’s economic climate with increasing pressures to do more with less; Unisa cannot and should indeed not lose sight of the issues of cost and market niches. *But those are definitely not the only determinants*. The current proposal containing a number of criteria for establishing the viability of programmes indeed includes the criteria of costs and market-share; but also includes other criteria such as serving Unisa’s vision and mission.

After reading the article by Giroux (2003) and Lynch (2006) I was reinvigorated in my belief that Unisa’s vision to serve humanity provides a very visible and necessary counter-narrative for the current corporatisation of higher education, also in South Africa. The approved Unisa Curriculum Policy states explicitly that Unisa’s curricula should embody our vision to serve humanity and prepare graduates for more than employability.

If Unisa sells out to the highest bidder (whether the market or other powers), we should change our vision.

### 3 WHEN LEADERS BECOME MONSTERS – BY CLEM SUNTER

Published 20 April 2011 on <http://www.news24.com/Columnists/ClemSunter/When-leaders-become-monsters-20110420>

[I came upon this article before the Easter break and found it riveting reading. Although Clem Sunter wrote the article in the context of the political debates in South Africa; the article also serves as a warning for us...]

Textbooks and courses on leadership deal only with the positive aspects which turn a person into a good leader. This article corrects this deficiency by concentrating on the five delusions which turn a leader into a monster. Like booze, they go to the head so that even if a leader starts out being reasonable, he ends up being a monster through absorbing these delusions.

They are as follows:

#### 1. I am always right

This delusion means that you go to war on second-rate intelligence. You reject any facts which contradict your view of what the world should be like. If you are absolutely proved wrong, you merely offer the excuse that you thought you were right at the time and you always do what you think is right. You surround yourself with yes-men. You do not even countenance the presence of a court jester who might serve you up with unpalatable truths coated in humour.

#### 2. I am in total control.

This delusion means that anybody who disputes your control is regarded as an enemy. It starts with intimidation of your political enemies, but is soon followed by secretly gathering an elite group of assassins who take them out. When the public defy you, you send in the army to sort them out. Even if you end up in control of nothing, you are still living in the castle amid the ruins.

#### 3. I am immortal.

This delusion means that you hang on until you actually die and then maybe get embalmed. You feel you are indispensable even when you have long passed your sell-by date. You reject grooming any outside successor because that person could become a threat. The baton has to be passed on to one of your children so that you can rule from the grave.

#### 4. I am the most popular person around.

This delusion arises from gauging your popularity from your followers, many of whom owe their positions and wealth to you. It also arises from the fact that they know this and protect you from the ugly truth. Sometimes the delusion continues until you get a knock on the door in the bunker, at which point you are shocked to be informed that the game is over.

### 5. My ends justify any means.

This delusion is the most dangerous of them all, because you are prepared to kill millions of people as a result of some warped ideology to which you have become addicted. Human rights are an irrelevance in your pursuit of the great idea.

Read the rest of the article on the link provided above...

## 4 WHEN WELL-INTENDED PLANS GO WRONG – THE SEVEN ‘P’S OF POOR PLANNING

After circulating a communiqué to the Unisa community trying to address the late sending out of recordings of video and satellite broadcasts; a colleague sent me this link regarding the 7 “P”s ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/7\\_Ps\\_%28military\\_adage%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/7_Ps_%28military_adage%29)). The “P”s stand for “Proper Prior Planning Prevents Pretty Poor Performance” (in a euphemised version...). There is also a list of 12 “P”s referring to “Purpose, proper prior planning, passion, patience, persistence and perseverance prevent pretty poor performance”.

I guess, after following the link he sent, I was somewhat taken-aback as I felt the criticism was not really fair. In retrospect, it is easy to defend the decision and processes that led to the decision by Senate to send to all students (free-of-charge) recordings of all satellite and video broadcasts. The aim of the decision was to prevent students from being excluded from these initiatives because they could not attend these broadcasts (for whatever reason). The team planning the proposal that served at the STLSC and Senate meetings were representative of all sections of Unisa. We thought we covered all our bases. We thought we thought of everything.

*But we clearly didn’t.* From the moment we realised that things were not going according to plan, we managed from crisis to crisis, having to make split-second decisions based on the information we had at that particular stage. Looking back I realise that what we thought was “proper planning”, clearly was not perfect. I have learned a number of lessons through this exercise:

- In an ODL institution the different sections delivering teaching and learning are interdependent. If one section fails or has problems in delivering on a project, it affects all departments. We may develop excellent study materials, but if the materials don’t reach our students in time, we fail. We may record satellite and video broadcasts and make available to students free-of-charge, but when the PowerPoint slides used in the broadcast are of poor quality or readability, we fail.
- We need quick and reliable feedback loops to bring early warning signs and systems to the attention of people who can actually do something about preventing disasters from happening. This was not in place, and resulted in us doing crisis management well into the crisis.

We will try our best to do better in the second semester.

## 5 ACTING HEAD OF THE INSTITUTE FOR OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (IODL)

Since the news broke that I was appointed as Acting Head of the Institute for Open and Distance Learning (IODL) at Unisa; many staff sent me e-mails to wish me well. Thank you to everyone!

I will fulfil the dual roles of being Acting Head and the role of being ODL Coordinator. May I receive the necessary wisdom and courage to do this with integrity and humility.

The ODL Communiqués will therefore continue and I hope to continue to support the implementation of ODL through these regular communiqués.

## 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](#). 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.