ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 59, 11 MAY 2011

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1   WHO DECIDES WHICH KNOWLEDGE IS WORTH THE MOST?

A discussion document is circulating at present suggesting a number of criteria for determining the *viability* of programmes. The document also refers to various examples in literature and other higher education institutions where a range of criteria are used; from examples mainly focusing on the economic viability and market-share of programmes, to more nuanced approaches where more quantitative and qualitative criteria are taken into account.

The current *draft* document suggests the following criteria to determine the viability of programmes and disciplines at Unisa:

1. The history of the development of the module and the alignment with Unisa's mission and vision.
2. The cost of offering the module.
3. What is happening in the market and broader society with regard to the field/discipline?
4. What is Unisa's market share in this field/discipline?
5. Student success in the field/discipline.
6. Quality of teaching.
7. Opportunity analysis – what does the future hold for this module?

It is very easy to accuse this initiative of managerialism and just a further sign of how higher education is selling out to the market (Giroux 2003). It is very easy (and tempting) to shout "wolf, wolf", raise the alarm and conjure up conspiracy theories ala Dan Brown; but how should we respond? Is the allegation of managerialism valid?

Like news bulletins - curricula include *and* exclude. Items included in a news bulletin are furthermore not necessarily portrayed in an "objective" light. The way an item is portrayed is the result of editorial policy *and* ideology; the time allowed for the news clip; the resources available to produce and broadcast the content; the skills of the presenter and choices the camera operators made and make and the nuances in the voice of the presenter. Despite the best disclaimers, items in a news bulletin are the end result of a number of choices made by a number of people, often consciously and deliberately, and other times, unconsciously.

Likewise, any curriculum and qualification mix is the result of deliberate choices made or in response to choices made for *and* by the institution…

It is very easy to allege that the current attempt to determine the viability of programmes and disciplines at Unisa is just another sign of the increasing impact of neo-liberalism on South African education. Some of this criticism may be justified, for example the seeming dominance of "employability" as mantra; the desperate fight for survival in the humanities and the uncontested belief and spin that advances in technology and the sciences will necessarily result in a more just, equitable and compassionate society (see e.g. Gray 2004).

The claim that the current attempt to determine the viability of programmes and disciplines is another onslaught on 'academic freedom'; however provides evidence of a very short and selective memory. We seem to forget how curricula throughout the ages served the Church (or religion), class, and different socioeconomic and political regimes. We forget how colonialism and apartheid shaped curricula. We forget how current government and regulatory bodies shape and determine curricula. The *context* of higher education has therefore always shaped and determined curricula.

But we also (maybe conveniently) forget how academics *also* chose and still make choices whenever new programmes or modules are developed. Academics decide almost on a daily basis which knowledge is worth knowing and accrediting. Often these choices, proclaimed to be done in service of the discipline and academic freedom; are embedded in and based on the personal interests of the academic or head of department; belief in the canonical status of some foci, or worst still, in service of the legacy of a pervious head of department whose legacy lives in the corridor of the department like a ghost and whose legacy we venerate in prescribing his or her text books.

So although many choices are made *for* higher education; we are in the business of making choices on which knowledge is worth knowing…

Let us now briefly look at the relationship between 'viability' and 'worth'.

To say that a particular programme or discipline is more *viable* than others, does *not* per se indicate that it is deemed to be more *worthy*. It means that in the particular context of Unisa who is subjected to specific funding regimes as an ODL institution; that although some disciplines may be *worthy* for other institutions to offer, these may not be *viable* not for Unisa. So when Unisa decides not to offer programme 'A', it does not say that programme 'A' is worth less than programme 'B', but rather that in the context of Unisa, programme 'A' is not *viable*.

Now for the (uncomfortable) question of determining the "worth" of a discipline and/or programme…

It is impossible to determine or judge a discipline's "worth" without some kind of external criterion. I personally don't think we should underestimate the role *context* play in decisions about which knowledge is more worthy than other knowledges. Some disciplines are considered to more worthy than others depending on the context, whether the judgment is made for example in South Africa, the United Kingdom, Aotearoa (New Zealand) or in Bahrain.

In the context of literature studies, for example, South African authors are hardly ever prescribed in a core module in the United Kingdom (or for that matter in Bahrain). In South Africa, it was up to recently assumed that authors from North-Atlantic discourses are worth more than our own. This was and is the legacy of colonialism and Apartheid where anything of African origin was automatically considered to be second-best and not as worthy as the North-Atlantic approved canons of knowledge.

As an African university in the service of humanity, we may and should consider some knowledges to be more worthy than others due to our specific historical context and national imperatives. Therefore the judgment that a particular programme or discipline is more worthy than another discipline or programme is directly linked to the continental, national and/or institutional context. The judgment then is not on the inherent value of the discipline or programme; but on the value or worth in a specific context. But with having and making choices comes responsibility…

We should be aware that our inclusions and exclusions impact on the nature and character of our graduates. The Curriculum Policy therefore deliberately states that our graduates should have a critical sense of location on the African continent with its histories, legacies, challenges and potential; but also be able to be sought after in international contexts.

The claim that is made that the current drive to determine the viability of disciplines and programmes is, *per se*, an example of managerialism and an erosion of "academic freedom" needs to be qualified. The unrestricted proliferation of modules and foci at Unisa in the name of academic freedom cannot, and should not be considered to be more worthy than genuine attempts to deal with the increased restraints on funding, access to resources and the inherent ideological nature of all the choices me make.

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Having said the above, I would like to conclude with a call for critical debate and action. We should remain vigilant and critical about the choices higher education and academics are forced to make due to the international (and national) hegemony of neo-liberalism and the noise of market-demands. We have seen in the history of pre-university curriculum development that fads and fashions come and go. There are ample examples on national and institutional level of ill-considered and "bang-bang" decisions that shaped and continue to shape curricula and teaching and learning.

So while we remain vigilant, let us also not be too quick to shout 'managerialism, managerialism' without due acknowledgment of the choices we *all* make on what to include and exclude in modules and programmes…

2   DON'T UNDERESTIMATE THE IMPACT OF SMALL ACTIONS…

During the Easter break I came upon a delightful book titled "The book of general ignorance. Everything you think you know is wrong" written by John Lloyd and John Mitchinson (2006). It is based on general misinformation we all believe in such as the the number of wives of Henry VIII (if you care to know), what feminists did (and still do…) with their bras, etc. In a next communiqué, I will share some of the delights of the book. But for now, let us reflect on the following…

Often we think that the small things we do on a day to day basis (especially in the context of Unisa as mega ODL institution) does not make a difference. Lloyd and Mitchinson (2006:11) quotes an "African proverb" which states the following:

"If you think you are too small to make a difference, try sleeping in a closed room with a mosquito".

3   IODL FLIES THE SEARCHLIGHT 2011 FLAG AGAIN!

[Received from Prof Ansie Minnaar, IODL]

The Institute for Open and Distance Learning (IODL) hosted the 2nd Searchlight Research Writing Workshop for 2011 from the 3rd - 6th of May 2011 at Leriba Lodge, Centurion. A total of 28 Unisa staff members across five colleges and other non-academic constituencies attended the workshop. The participants included senior academic, professional and administrative as well as novice ODL researchers. The presenters at the workshop were Profs Fred Lockwood and Santosh Panda.

 The workshop was opened by Prof Dele Braimoh (UNESCO Chair in ODL) who indicated that the purpose of the workshop was to provide academics involved in ODL research with the necessary tools and support in order to turn their research activities into publishable articles. Prof Ansie Minnaar welcomed the speakers and the participants and explained the objectives of the searchlight project and sketched the way forward.

Prof Santosh Panda is currently Director, Centre for Flexible & Distance Learning, the University Indira Ghandi, India. In the past, he has been Director of Staff Training & Research Institute and Inter-University Consortium for Technology-Enabled Education at Indira Gandhi National Open University; and Director of higher education policy and research at the Association of Indian Universities, India. He conducts research and contributes to international publications regularly.

Prof Fred Lockwood is Series Editor of the Routledge Open and Flexible Learning Series. In 2010 the fiftieth book in the Series was published and the series is the largest of its kind in the world. In the period August – December 2007 Fred was Interim President of the Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia. He provides professional advice in the field of open and distance learning to grant awarding bodies and conference organisers. He sits on the Editorial Boards of ten journals.

Profs Panda and Lockwood shared with the participants a number of trends in ODL research and discussed a number of criteria for publication. The Searchlight project has three explicit goals namely to create an infrastructure that will foster a desire to improve skills in research methods; enhance and sustain publication rates and increase and secure external funding for research.

Before the end of the four-day workshop, participants had an opportunity to present their work to the facilitators several times and got crucial feedback for further improvement on their research and article writing. Participants agreed that they enjoyed not only enjoyed the workshop but that they gained from the input provided during the workshop. .

Participants now need to finalise and submit their ODL research articles for publication in accredited journals.

 We are looking forward to the explosion of ODL research at Unisa during 2012!

Above: A photograph of the participants in the workshop

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4   DAISY-PICKERS OR NRF RATING?

On Wednesday 4 May I was privileged to attend an initiative in the College of Law where participants engaged with the challenges and opportunities of doing and publishing ODL research.

Some of the questions raised during the workshop included the following:

- Why should academics do research on topics such as the factors that impact on student success in the module they teach? Surely that is the responsibility of Unisa as institution?
- Doing research on different factors influencing teaching and learning in a particular module is more complex than is often assumed. Most academics are *discipline* experts and don't necessarily have a background in adult learning, pedagogy, curriculum development and instructional design. Most academics are also not necessarily comfortable in using research methodologies outside of their field of expertise.
- Research in teaching and learning is often looked down upon by colleagues and discipline experts.
- It is often difficult to find appropriate journals that are eager to publish research on teaching and learning in particular disciplines or fields.
- The turnaround time of some journals often results in researchers despairing or giving up on hearing from editors. By the time one does get feedback from a journal, one has often moved on and lost track of the particular research that you reported on. It can also happen that your data has become outdated due to the long process of getting an article reviewed (often more than once) and published.
- Collaborative research is not considered to be as worthy as individual discipline-specific research. Academics who do collaborative research are often referred to as "daisy-pickers" who are not doing "real" research that is worthy of NRF accreditation.

The workshop gave me much food for thought. I can identify with many of the issues that were raised during the workshop. The issue is not to contest the "truth" of these above statements, but rather to reflect on these statements and decide on how we can support and celebrate academics who do *want* to do collaborative research on teaching and learning!

There seems to be ample opportunities (eg NRF rating) where researchers who excel in discipline-specific research are rewarded and celebrated. If the scholarship of teaching and learning is as important as discipline-specific research, what can we put into place to support academics that do prefer to work collaboratively on teaching and learning?

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5   REMEMBER THE UNISA TEACHING AND LEARNING FESTIVAL 2011!

Since the establishment of Unisa as an examining body in 1916, there were several key moments that changed the way we taught and our students learned. For example, in 1946 a "division of external studies" was created which became the foundation for correspondence education at Unisa. The merger in 2004 had a major impact on our qualification structure but also resulted in the merging of different academic and professional departments who had different epistemologies and assumptions about what constitutes good teaching and learning.

In 2007 the merged institution embraced open distance learning (ODL) as character. Since 2007 we have tried to understand and imagine what the impact of ODL has on our qualifications, the way we teach, the technologies we use, our processes, capacities, and so forth.

From **1-9 September** 2011 Unisa will host a Teaching and Learning Festival which will not only celebrate how far we have come; but more importantly provoke discussions and reflection on what teaching and learning in the 21st century on the African continent can and should look like!

On Thursday 1 September and Friday 2 September Unisa will host some of the thought-leaders in international higher education. From Monday 5 September till Friday 9 September there will be workshops, seminars and discussion forums on different issues affecting teaching and learning.

I am sure that in a few years' time, we will look back at this Teaching and Learning Festival as one of the defining moments in Unisa's history as a world-class ODL institution! Watch this space for more details…

Please keep your diaries open?

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.