



ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 63, 15 JUNE 2011

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1 78 DAYS TO GO...

There are only 78 days to go before the Unisa 2011 Teaching and Learning Festival! The festival takes place from 1-9 September 2011. The theme for the Festival is: *A new world: curriculum, pedagogy and technology in transition*. On Thursday 1 September and Friday 2 September Unisa will host international speakers including Prof George Siemens (Athabasca University, Canada), Prof Gilly Salmon (University of Southern Queensland, Australia), Prof Ormond Simpson (International Fellow, University of London) and Catherine Ngugi (OER Africa). The symposium will take place in the Senate Hall that can only host 230 people. *Please do not miss this opportunity to come and listen to and engage with international speakers at the forefront of critical engagement with thinking about higher education in the 21st century.*

From Monday 5 September to Friday 9 September there will be a series of interactive workshops and seminars hosted in the Kgorong Building. The workshops and case studies will cover themes such as: Using online technologies in postgraduate teaching; Pedagogical models and approaches for developing and using podcasts for your own modules and courses; OER in Africa – the what and the how; Connectivism and its implications for ODL teaching and learning; Learning and assessment in distance education – case studies; Integrating the use of technology for students with disability; E-learning and student success – what does the evidence tell us? Learning context and mobile learning; Dyslexia: dealing with students' reading and writing difficulties in ODL; and many more.

International experts from Makerere University (Uganda), University of the Western Cape (UWC), Leicester University, University of London, and South African Institute for Distance Education will facilitate these workshops.

Registration for the symposium and workshops will be free for all Unisa staff! **Online registration for the symposium and workshops opens 18 July. Don't miss this opportunity of a lifetime.**

2 IN DEFENCE OF PILOT PROJECTS

Mention the notion of ‘pilot projects’ to many members of the Unisa community and the look on their faces resembles that of a homesick mole with flu. There have been many pilots in the past that either disappeared after a while or remained forever in ‘pilot’ mode and never moved to full implementation. Often pilot projects may have been an excuse for not paying enough attention and effort to an idea to take it to full implementation. Sometimes the institutional mandate to really take these pilots seriously was sadly lacking. Pilot projects at Unisa often resemble buildings that never get finished as the number of recurring alterations and new ideas just prevent the project from reaching maturity.

Pilot projects at Unisa, in general, have a bad name. *There is however much to say to defence of the practice of pilot projects.*

The Harvard Business Review (HBR) of April 2011 has a number of articles dealing with failure of organisations and projects. Of special interest for the functioning of pilot projects in the context of Unisa are the following:

1. In discussing why many product launches fail, Schneider and Hall (HBR April 2011: 21-23) state that companies often cannot support fast growth after the product launch resulting in vast disappointment. Other reasons include that often a new product falls short of its claims and get bashed; the new item exists in “product limbo” not providing enough reasons to sway prospective customers; the product defines a new category and requires substantial consumer education – but doesn’t get it; or the product is revolutionary but there is no market for it. *Do some of these explanations ring a bell or not?*
2. Edmondson (HBR April 2011: 49-55) proposes a number of strategies to *learn from failure*. Of specific importance for the practice of pilot projects at Unisa is the spectrum of reasons for failure that Edmondson provides. The spectrum ranges from ‘*deviance*’ – where an individual refuses to adhere to prescribed procedures; ‘*inattention*’ – where individuals inadvertently deviates from specifications; ‘*process inadequacy*’ – where competent individuals adhere to prescribed specifications, but faulty or incomplete processes result in product failure; ‘*task challenge*’ – individuals face too difficult a task to execute these tasks reliably every time; ‘*process complexity*’ – where the process comprises many elements which break down when novel interactions are encountered; ‘*uncertainty*’ – where a lack of clarity about future events causes people to take seemingly reasonable actions that produce undesired results; ‘*hypothesis testing*’ – where an experiment is conducted to prove that an idea or a design will success or fail; and ‘*exploratory testing*’ – where an experiment is conducted to expand knowledge and investigate the possibility that leads to undesired results.

Many of these reasons for failure resonate with me reflecting on trajectory of recent pilots at Unisa...

Edmondson (HBR April 2011:54) furthermore asks whether pilot projects are tested under *typical* circumstances (rather than optimal conditions); whether the goal of the pilot is to learn as much as possible *rather than to demonstrate the value of the proposed offering*; whether it is clear that compensation and performance reviews are *not* based on a successful outcome for the pilot; and whether explicit changes were made as a result of the pilot. He states: "Too often, pilots are conducted under optimal conditions rather than representative ones. *Thus they can't show what won't work*" (Edmondson HBR April 2011:54; emphasis added).

Reflecting on the articles in the HBR (April 2011) I realised that when pilot projects fail or show major fault lines in the tectonic plates of Unisa; these pilots are often regarded (and remembered) as failures. If I understand the above authors correctly then we should rather hail these 'failed' pilots as successes because these pilots showed major inefficiencies or misalignments.

I realise that there is huge frustration amongst Unisa staff *and* students because of pilot projects that create expectations and then when they fail, staff and students are often left worse off than before. I also realise that all of us would rather have our pilot projects to be considered (and remembered) as successes than failures – but after reading the articles in the HBR (April 2011) I wondered...

In closing, I think that when we see pilot projects as learning opportunities to show us what does *not* work; we should

- Not create expectations that our pilot projects will solve all problems. We should rather see our pilots as tools to show us where major misalignments and fault lines in Unisa lie.
- Prevent harm done to staff and students. *We cannot jeopardise our students' often frail chances on success. We cannot jeopardise our staff members' professional integrity and commitment.*
- Consider seriously doing *smaller* pilots which have lesser impacts than trying to realign and redesign our whole organisational architecture using pilots as leverage.
- Seriously reconsider having many pilot projects demanding resources from the same departments. Often these pilots demand resources, systems, processes and procedures from HR, ICT, the Library, and a number of other stakeholders at the same time. Often these demands or requests are contradictory to one another.

In judging the role of pilot projects we should therefore seriously consider rethinking our assumptions about pilot projects and failures *before* we blame pilot projects as such.

3 AFRICANISING HIGHER EDUCATION

[Received from Dr Gerda Mischke, DCLD]

Original source: <http://www.businesslive.co.za/incoming/2011/06/06/africanising-higher-education>

By Prof Piet Naudé

Universities will only be "transformed" if their intellectual discourse is fundamentally shaped by Africa.

The first public meeting and debate I attended in my new post as deputy vice-chancellor (academic) was ably organised by the Centre for the Advancement of Non-Racialism and Democracy on the Nelson Mandela Metro University campus here in Port Elizabeth.

We were eloquently addressed by Prof Kwandiwe Kondlo, the head of the Centre for Africa Studies at the University of the Free State, on transforming the intellectual discourse in South African higher education. He is a well-published author and a superb role model.

I cannot do justice to his speech and the ensuing debate, but want to focus on one idea that came out of it. Universities will only be "transformed" if their intellectual discourse is fundamentally shaped by Africa. African intellectuals - specifically black academics - should play a crucial role in this process.

There is a very positive dimension in this view that one should affirm. We are universities on the continent of Africa. The questions we ask should be our questions. The answers we develop through research should be answers to issues arising from our context. Africans should write their own textbooks, which make sure the African perspective is given due regard, and not only as an adjective in western-dominated viewpoints. Students in our courses must be guided in understanding our continent and be challenged to commit to serving it.

African intellectuals, therefore, have a two-pronged task. They first have to make sure they are deeply versed in the knowledge tradition and scientific language of scholarship. And the fact of the matter is that this is a western tradition. So your first task as an African is to study very, very hard to match the best existing knowledge before you create and present an African perspective and shift knowledge boundaries in general.

We must also be careful to not overplay our hand. The idea of Africanisation is subject to limitations. We live in an age dominated by the successful marriage between science and technology. It can be shown that, for that to happen, a society must shift towards "enlightenment": a high regard for reason; emphasis on individual search for knowledge; an open challenge to tradition and authority; and practical application of theory under conditions of strict experimentation.

The reason Africa lost its dominance in higher education (remember the brilliant School of Alexandria and Augustine from Hippo?) and why it lost its leading position in science - so clearly evident from Egyptian engineering and Zimbabwean building projects - is quite simple: cultures that underplay (even undermine?) individual excellence and maintain strict social order through respect for tradition and authority struggle with innovation. The same happened in the then leading mathematics and science centres of the Middle East - the rise of fundamentalist versions of Islam was not conducive to open enquiry and the challenging of existing knowledge.

Furthermore, the empirical knowledge of the natural and related sciences can hardly be Africanised. There is only one periodic table, one law of gravity, one set of Mendel genetic laws and one Einstein theory of relativity. Yes, they are open to different and exciting applications in Africa. And they are open to revision, based on further empirical research. But they have gained a status irrespective of whether they were developed in America, Europe or Africa.

That is why our cellphones work and our aircraft fly and our bridges stand - there is not an African natural science that creates a credible alternative rendition of nature on which technology could reliably be built.

Yes, there are interesting alternative views of the world in Africa. Myths, oral histories, cosmologies and theologies provide wonderful insight into the condition of mankind. And those we should know. We should challenge western views of the world and critically question what is generally accepted. But we should not be naive about the quest for alternative epistemologies - it is going to be very difficult.

The transition from a (rural) African community to a university is therefore a tough one. You destroy innocence and ways of being. You meddle with identities to shape young Africans so that they can function successfully as global citizens. In short, you "westernise" their thinking and lead them through a personal and collective enlightenment.

If an Africanisation project does not understand its own ambiguity, African students will (again) pay the price.

**Prof Piet Naudé is the deputy vice-chancellor (academic) of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, and former director of the university's business school. He writes this column in his personal capacity. The opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the university.*

Source: <http://www.businesslive.co.za/incoming/2011/06/06/africanising-higher-education>

4 ASSIGNMENT PROBLEMS AND SYSTEM FAILURES

At a meeting of representatives from the Registrar's office, DSAA, Academic Planning, ODL and ICT on Monday 13 June; recent system failures regarding the submission of assignments were interrogated and discussed.

Various problems were raised – including server capacity, the impact of peak periods and the fact that some lecturers who initially opted for the onscreen marking option changed their minds at the last minute (for various reasons).

There was unanimous appreciation of the fact that we cannot allow these failures to happen again in the second semester. The purpose of the meeting was not only to explore the reasons *why* these failures happened, but more importantly to prevent that these system failures will happen again. It was agreed that a report will be drafted in time for the next STLSC meeting and circulated to the Unisa community after the STLSC meeting. The report will provide some background, make a number of recommendations and provide for short to long-term plans to deal with these problems.

5 ODL FORUM IN FLORIDA

On **Monday 20 May from 09:30 -12:00** there will be a critical interrogation of the implementation of ODL. The forum will take place in the Gencor Auditorium on the Florida campus. An overview will be provided of how far we've come in the implementation of ODL. But more importantly, the outstanding issues in the ODL project will be discussed. A light lunch will be provided from 12:00-13:00. Should you wish to join us for this discussion, please send an e-mail to Ms Ina Viviers (lviviers@unisa.ac.za) before Wednesday afternoon, 15th of June by 15:00.

See you in Florida!

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.

Drafted by Dr Paul Prinsloo

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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.