

ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 70, 3 AUGUST 2011

IN THIS ISSUE:

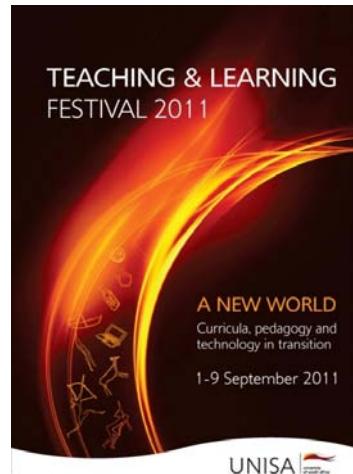
- 1 *Festival registration has opened*
- 2 *Adapt. Why success always starts with failure...*
- 3 *Visit by Yunnan University of Nationalities to the IODL*
- 4 *Celebrating teaching and learning at Unisa – a cocktail not to miss!*
- 5 *ODL news – update on current projects*
- 6 *ODL repository and blog*

1 FESTIVAL REGISTRATION HAS OPENED!

With less than 30 days to go, the registration for the Unisa 2011 Teaching and Learning Festival officially opens *today*, 3 August at **08:00**.

The registration for all the events will take place on myUnisa – by clicking on the following link - https://my.unisa.ac.za/portal/site/tl_festival

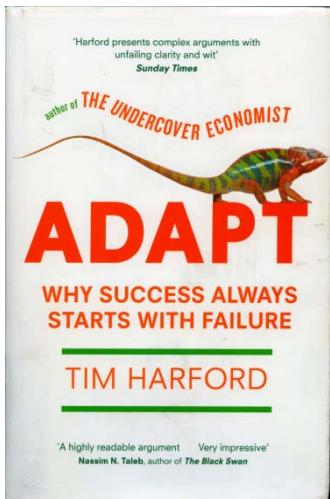
- On the left-hand side of this page click on ‘Sign-up’
- On the Sign-up page you will find a list of sessions you can register for
- To register for a session click on the session title under the heading ‘Meeting Title’
- On the session page, under the heading ‘Meetings’ you will find all the information relevant to that particular session, **please read the screen carefully.**
- Below the session detail, in the grey shaded area, on the right, under the heading ‘Action’, click on the ‘Sign Up’ button. After clicking the ‘Sign-Up’ button, confirmation text under the heading ‘Your Status’ will indicate that you have signed up. The booked session will now appear in the Schedule.
- To register for a second session click on the ‘Back’ button at the bottom left.
- After the Sign-up end date or if the session is booked to capacity you will **not** be able to book for that particular session any more.
- **Important:** There is also a ‘Cancel’ option available. We urge you to please cancel your booking if you are not able to attend a session as space is limited.



There is also a very helpful podcast on how to register on myUnisa and for these sessions! See the full programme at the end of this Communiqué.

Don't miss out on this great opportunity!

2 ADAPT. WHY SUCCESS ALWAYS STARTS WITH FAILURE



Tim Hartford has written a delightful book "Adapt. Why success always starts with failure" (2011) which questions our corporate preoccupation with grandiose and immediate successful projects and our deep discomfort with failure and adaptation.

Hartford (2011:1) starts off with great quote by Friedrich von Hayek: "The curious task of economics is to demonstrate to men [sic] how little they really know about what they imagine they can design". And this seems to be a *leit motif* throughout the book – how little we actually know. A really sobering idea for all our minutely-detailed five-year plans...

Also very sobering is the fact that "we have an inflated sense of what leadership can achieve in the modern world" (Hartford's 2011:6). He continues to claim that the complexity and fluidity of the challenges we face in the 21st century are of such a nature that no single leader or even super-heroes can fix (2011:6). It is not that Hartford (2011:7) does not acknowledge that expertise plays a role – but he makes it very clear that expertise and leadership are limited. "The problem is not the experts; it is the world they inhabit – the world we all inhabit – which is simply too complicated for anyone to analyse with much success" (2011:7-8). While individual and corporate successes are to be celebrated; these successes are often (if not mostly) short-lived – as revealed in the huge number of long-term failures of the 'successful' companies whom Tom Peters and Robert Waterman celebrated in their book "In search of excellence". While Hartford (2011:12) acknowledges that some corporations are successful, we should see their successes (however short-lived) against the backdrop of a "tangled history of failure, of all the companies and all of the ideas that didn't make it" (2011:12).

Hartford (2011:13-17) discusses how in the grander scope of things, evolution consists of trial and error as the *baseline* for the survival of the fittest. "Evolution is effective because, rather than engaging in an exhaustive, time-consuming search for the highest peak – a peak that may not even be there tomorrow – it produces ongoing, 'works for now' solutions to complex and ever-changing set of problems" (Hartford 2011:16). This leads Hartford to claim that "we are blinder than we think" (2011:17). He continues: "In a complex, changeable world, the process of trial and error is essential" (Hartford 2011:21; emphasis added). Hartford (2011:20) goes so far as to state that "trial and error is a tremendously powerful process for solving problems in a complex world, while expert leadership is not".

[Indeed a sobering thought in corporate cultures dedicated to the cult of the super Leader]

Hartford 92011:21-35) then continues to explore the impact of our present day's failure to embrace adaptation as a valid form of leadership. He relates the story of Peter Palchinsky, a 26-year old engineer in the Soviet Union in the early 20th century. Palchinsky's "sin" was that he continuously experimented and proposed small-scale changes as opposed to spectacular prestigious projects. Hartford (2011:23) states that the failure of the Soviet government's ability to plan and implement a turn-around strategy was their "pathological inability to experiment". Hartford (2011:23) writes: "The building blocks of an evolutionary process... are repeated variation and selection ... The whole system was unable to adapt". One example was the planning and building of the large Lenin Dam. Palchinsky "pointed out that smaller dams would likely be more effective... But Stalin was not interested: he simply wanted the world's largest hydroelectric project and gave the order to proceed..." (Hartford 2011:24). The project was a huge disaster.

"What Palchinsky realised [in contrast to the Soviet regime] was that most real-world problems are more complex than we think. They have a human dimension, a local dimension, and are likely to change as circumstances change" (Hartford 2011:25). According to Hartford (2011:25) Palchinsky's principles can be summarised as follows: "first, seek out new ideas and try new things; second, *when trying something new, do it on a scale where failure is survivable*; third, *seek out feedback and learn from your mistakes as you go along*" (emphasis added). In stark contrast to the more humble and tentative approaches proposed by Palchinsky, the central planners of the Soviet regime "decided what would be built, lulled into a sense of omniscience by having a map or a table of statistics in front of them" (Hartford 2011:26).

Palchinsky was murdered by the regime. He (and others like him) was denounced as "wreckers" (Hartford 2011:26) because of their criticism against the grandiose and spectacular plans of the regime. Hartford (2011:27-28) states that variation and adaptation in organisations are difficult because of politicians and corporate bosses' affinity of "large projects – anything from the reorganisation of a country's entire healthcare system to a gigantic merger – because they win attention and show that the leader is a person who get things done". According to Hartford (2011:28), this violates the first Palchinsky principle "because errors are common and big projects leave little room to adapt. The other tendency emerges because we rarely like the idea of standards that are inconsistent and uneven from place to place".

Not only is one set of standards contrary for the need to context-based adaptation, but Hartford (2011:28) goes as far as to state that "uniformly high standards are not only impossible *but undesirable*" (emphasis added). He states: "If nobody tries anything different, we will struggle to figure out new and better ways to do anything" (2011:29).

According to Hartford (2011:29), politicians and corporate bosses are notoriously *against* pilot projects and taking things step by step.

This is partly because politicians are in a hurry; they expect to hold on to a role for two to four years, not long enough for most experiments to deliver meaningful results. Even more politically inconvenient is the fact that half of pilot schemes will fail – many things do in a complex world – so the pilot will simply produce stark evidence of that failure. This is our fault as much as our politicians. We should tolerate, even celebrate, any politicians who test their ideas robustly enough to prove that some of them don't work. But, of course, we do not (Hartford 2011:29).

Hartford (2011:31-32) closes his first chapter by exploring why it is so hard to learn from mistakes. “Accepting trial and error means accepting error. It means taking problems in our stride when a decision doesn't work out, whether through luck or misjudgement. And that is not something human brains seem to be able to do without a struggle”. When we are faced with a mistake or a loss, “the right response is to acknowledge the setback and change direction. Yet our instinctive reaction is denial” instead of adaptation.

Reading this chapter in Hartford's book, I reflected on the following:

- The first issue that really made me to do a double-take is Hartford's (2011) emphasis on the fact that we are blinder than we think we are. Our leaders and corporate bosses are also blinder than we (or they themselves) think they are...
- We think we understand more than we actually do because we are often lulled into a sense of omniscience because of our ability to compile spreadsheets with endless statistics and analyses.
- Our plans and long-term forecasts are often based on the assumption of the ‘knowns’ and the ‘known unknowns’. Very seldom do our plans take into consideration the “unknown unknowns”.
- We are still enthralled by the notion of the super-leader who will lead us into the promised world. It is hard to accept that they don't exist. Today's modern world has become just too complex for one person to have all the answers – even if they claim to have them...
- The ODL project was in many ways a series of trials and errors. The successful trials were celebrated. The unsuccessful projects were haunted by the pointing of fingers and an inability to accept failure as essential to learning. It is almost impossible to outlive project failure at Unisa – it is recorded and remembered...
- Palchinsky's first and second principles of “when trying something new, do it on a scale where failure is survivable; third, seek out feedback and learn from your mistakes as you go along” stands in stark contrast to Unisa's preoccupation to go spectacular and grandiose with changes to the whole systems where failure is often not survivable.

- How does Unisa treat the “wreckers” – those who oppose the grandiose and spectacular?
- To what extent do we celebrate and support leaders who are more tentative, doing things on smaller scale, making mistakes and adapting plans?

3 YUNNAN UNIVERSITY OF NATIONALITIES VISITS IODL

[Received from Prof Ansie Minnaar, IODL]



On 25 July a delegation of Yunnan University of Nationalities paid the Institute for Open and Distance Learning a visit.

He Fu Sheng, the Deputy Director-General at Yunnan Provincial Department of Education led the Chinese delegation. Other members of the delegation were Zhang Yingjie (President of YUN), Chen Shibo (President of Kunming College), Dong Yunchuan (Dean of the Institute of Higher Education in YUN), Wang Yongquan (Director of High Education Division, Yunnan Provincial

Department of Education) and Long Wei (Deputy Director of International Exchange Centre, Yunnan Provincial Department of Education). The province of Yunnan borders Vietnam, Myanmar and Laos and takes up one fifth of China. Yunnan University of Nationalities (YUN) was founded in 1951 as a comprehensive university.

The objective of the meeting was to learn more on the successes and challenges encountered by Unisa. The discussions and questions were around open and distance education; managing an ODL institution; student and staff profiles; student support facilities at Unisa's regional centers; blended-and technology enhanced learning and the practical aspects of facilitation of experiential learning and Unisa's place in the national higher education landscape.

The group was also curious to discuss Unisa's growth and inquired how Unisa managed to grow and at the same time maintaining high academic standards. By the end of the visit the delegation of Yunnan University of Nationalities made it clear that they want to build international relationships with Unisa.

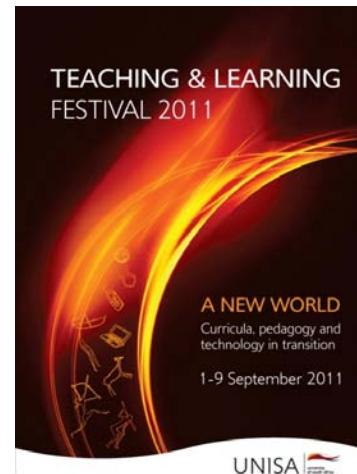
The Institute for Open and Distance Learning (IODL) regards this visit as an important milestone in promoting global partnerships.

4 CELEBRATING TEACHING AND LEARNING AT UNISA – A COCKTAIL NOT TO MISS!

The evening of Thursday 1 September will see a true celebration of innovation in teaching and learning at Unisa! While the Unisa 2011 Teaching and Learning Festival will have opened that day, the evening will really give an opportunity to *celebrate* teaching and learning.

The event will be unlike any of the other events hosted on the Unisa campus. The piazza in front of the Kgorong building will be transformed into an African village square with acrobats, flamethrowers, gymnasts, drummers, and of course, excellent food and array of drinks!

The event will definitely not be quiet...



At the event we will host and celebrate the contributions of almost 20 international speakers and workshop facilitators. We will give them an idea of what it means to celebrate humanity with all the joys and potential being human means. We will celebrate a number of lecturers who embrace innovation in the ways they teach and support our students. We will also remember the contributions two Unisa stalwarts made in putting student support at Unisa in the centre of being Unisa – namely Ms Thandi Ngengebule and Ms Evelyn Nyongo.

The event will also see the launch of the Unisa 2011 Teaching and Learning publication.

The event is free of charge – but only staff members who have registered for the event will be allowed on the premises. Please do not miss out on this celebration!

There will not be long speeches – but a lot of fun and celebration. Please make sure you book your place by reserving your place on the following link: https://my.unisa.ac.za/portal/site/tl_festival. Please take note that this Cocktail is a *separate* event as part of the Unisa 2011 Teaching and Learning Festival. Even if you cannot attend the symposium or any of the workshops, please join us for the cocktail?

The Cocktail event is open for all Unisa staff – whether academic or administrative or service departments. We really want to celebrate everyone at Unisa who makes teaching and learning at Unisa possible!

See you there!

5 ODL NEWS – UPDATE ON CURRENT PROJECTS

While the work of the six ODL task teams convened at the start of 2010 has been completed, a number of major projects are continuing as we move towards the implementation of ODL.

- Currently there are three E-Tutor projects at Unisa: the CEMS E-Tutor pilot, the Science Foundation E-Tutor project and the Distance Learning Aides project in End-user computing. While the CEMS E-tutor pilot is launching on 8 August, the other two projects have developed and matured over a number of years. In the light of the fact that Unisa wants to roll out E-tutoring in a big way from 2013 onwards, it is essential that we create a shared understanding of the elements in these three different E-Tutor projects that can be integrated and aligned as well as arrive at a critical understanding of the peculiarities of every context. On Wednesday 3 August representatives from these three different projects will have a first conversation in order to develop a standardised approach to E-tutoring at Unisa while allowing for the needs of specific disciplines and contexts. *We wish them all of the best!*
- The task team convened by Ms Louise Schmidt (CC & M) to standardise the use of SMS at Unisa is meeting on Wednesday 3 August to finalise a proposal which will serve at the next STLSC. While short and instant text messaging creates huge potential for various stakeholders at Unisa to communicate with different groups of students; there is an urgent need to develop guidelines and standardised procedures to ensure quality as well as prevent the overuse of this very helpful technology.
- The recording of all video and satellite broadcasting sessions was one of the lesser successful experiences of the ODL project. While the problems we encountered with the sending out of these recordings were at times extremely frustrating, we also learned an immense lot. One of the lessons we have learned is that it is almost impossible to record and post these recordings to students in a 16 week tuition period allowing enough time for production, duplication and posting. While the intention was very noble, it has proven a deeply uncomfortable lesson. Mr Ernie Blignaut is convening a team who will develop a proposal on the continuation of this project *beyond 2012. At present there are many indicators that the current practice is not sustainable.*
- The ‘Discussion document for an ODL pedagogy’ is currently circulated for comments. The finalisation of this document will allow us to have a shared understanding of what we already have in place and where there are gaps in our understanding and praxis of teaching in an ODL context. We hope to have the final proposal approved before the end of 2011.
- The exact roles of the regions in Unisa’s ODL pedagogy and the way we support students have been one of the outstanding elements of the ODL implementation plan. The external consultant, Dr Roger Mills (ex OU UK) has drafted an extensive report which was put out for comments to the Unisa community. The comments have now been interrogated and integrated into the document and the final proposal should serve before the STLSC shortly.

- The ICT enhanced teaching and learning 5-year plan was sent out for comments and a smaller task team has been convened to look at the comments and to compile a final proposal to serve at the STLSC of September 2011.
- Under the leadership of Prof Baijnath, a small task team has been convened to ensure that the necessary systems, processes, capacity and procedures will be in place to ensure the effective implementation of ODL.
- Prof Erasmus (VP: Operations) has convened a discussion forum to discuss the way faculty will change over the next number of years. The first meeting will take place via videoconference before the end of August 2011.

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

ODL Coordinator

Office of the Vice-Principal Academic: Teaching and Learning

Unisa

2 August 2011

+27 (0) 12 4293683 (office)

+27 (0) 823954113 (mobile)

prinsep@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.