

Challenges for Open Distance Learning (ODL) librarians: taking advantage of new technologies in the Unisa Library

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Date: 21 September 2011

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Introduction

- Unisa – the only dedicated ODL institution in South Africa
- Largest provider of ODL on the African Continent

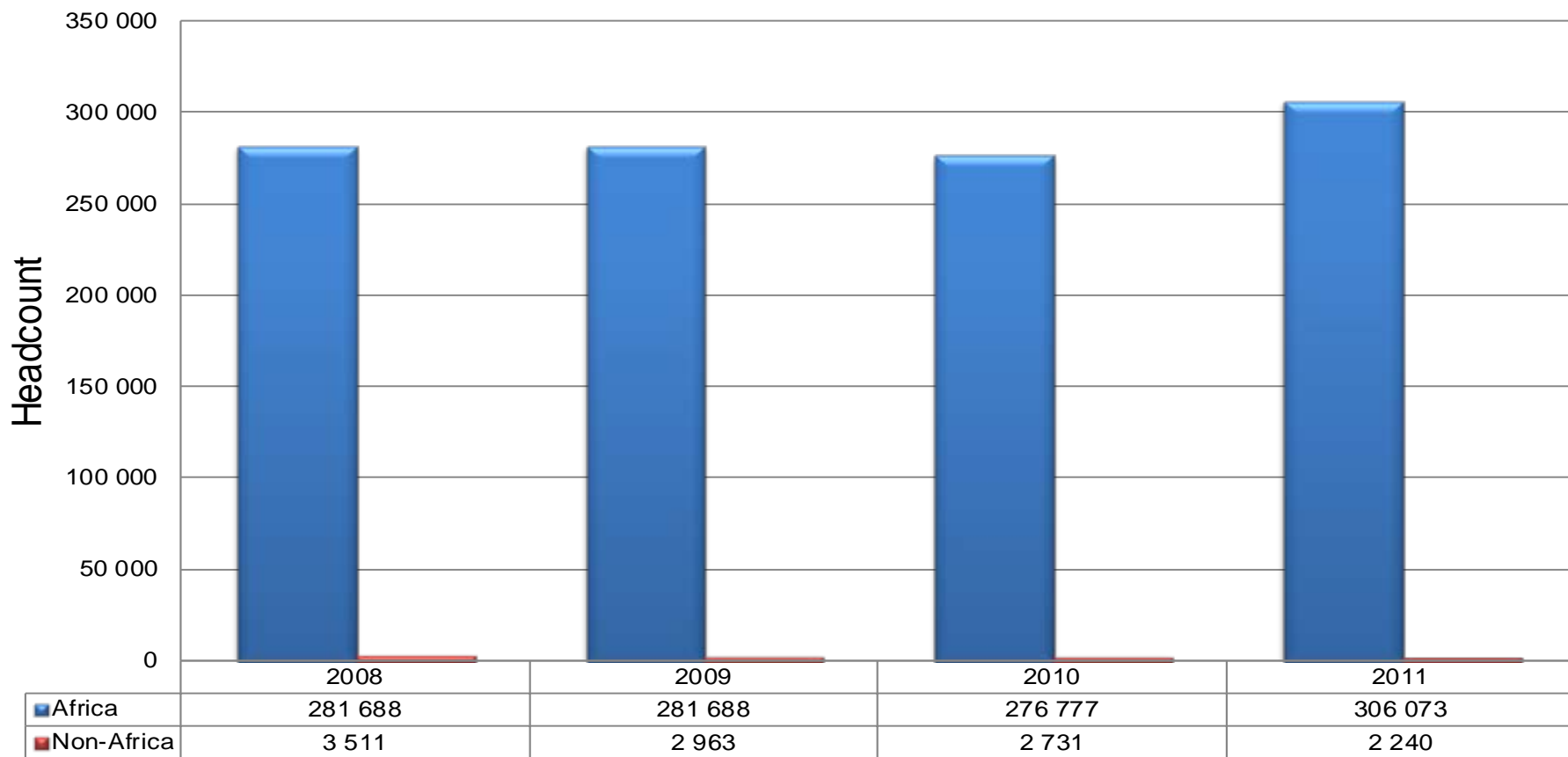
*Unisa librarians are challenged by one of the key Strategic Objectives of the Institution, which emphasises the importance of addressing the ‘needs of diverse learner profiles by offering **relevant learner support**, facilitated by appropriate **information and communication technology**’.*

Our paper also reflects on what the Unisa Library is currently doing to address the challenge of taking advantage of new technologies

- According to the *Department of Information and Strategic Analysis* (2011), the total number of students enrolled is above 300 000. Our library has to provide a service to all of these students.

Registrations

Formal Headcount by Africa & Non-Africa, Full Year 2008 - 2011



Non- Africa: includes Asia, Europe, America and Oceania.

Africa: includes all African countries.

Definitions

Unisa's Open Distance Learning Policy (2006) provides the following definitions:

➤ **Open Distance Learning (ODL):**

'as a multi-dimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, educational and communication distance between student and institution, student and academics, student and courseware and student and peers. ODL focuses on removing barriers to access learning, flexibility of learning provision, student centeredness and supporting students with the expectation that students can succeed'.

➤ **Learner /student support:**

'as a generic term applied to a range of services that is developed by Unisa to assist students to meet their learning objectives and to gain the knowledge and skills to be successful in their studies. LS includes: tuition, peer, in-text & administrative support'.

Purpose of this presentation

- According to Denscombe (2002:25), ‘there should be a reasons for doing research, if not, it would be pointless spending money and time undertaking the investigation.
- This study had the following purposes:
 - to explore the challenges faced by Unisa librarians in providing information effectively and efficiently.
 - to determine how far the library has gone in terms of offering relevant learner support with the aid of Web 2.0 technologies.
 - to recommend alternative solutions to the identified challenges.

Problem statement

- The main problem investigated in this study is the identification of challenges faced by Unisa ODL librarians.
- The aim is to discover ways in which the library uses new technologies to overcome some of these challenges.

Methodology

➤ Literature review

An in-depth literature review was conducted in order to understand all the issues related to the topic.

➤ Interviews

The researchers conducted structured, face-to-face interviews with **Deputy Directors** and **Managers** of the directorates within the library.

An interview schedule with open-ended questions was used to gather information.

Unisa's 2015 Strategic Plan

- In August 2005, the University Council approved Unisa's strategic plan, entitled *Unisa 2015: an agenda for transformation*, which outlines Unisa's vision, mission, values, goals and objectives from 2006 – 2015.
- This is a core document and forms the basis for institutional planning.
- The 2015 Strategic Plan commits Unisa to becoming 'the African university in service of humanity'.
- Unisa's institutional identity as an Open Distance Learning (ODL) institution was established in 2006.
- In 2008, the focus was on the implementation of an institutional ODL model.
- In 2009, ODL Task Teams were established.

ODL Task Teams & ToR

➤ Task Team 1: Admission

- * Make recommendations on generic admission requirements
- * Revisit the Admission Policy, and ensure that it adheres to ODL principles.

➤ Task Team 2: Higher Certificate

- * To introduce a single Higher Certificate for students meeting the NSC admission criteria for certificate programmes, in order to provide access to diploma/degree studies for students who do not meet the statutory minimum admission requirements for these qualifications.

➤ Task Team 3: Assessment

- * To document and propose the usage of alternative assessment practices (self, peer, portfolios, case studies, summative and formative evaluations, etc.).

➤ Task Team 4: Student Support

- * To revisit the definition of student support in the ODL Policy
- * To develop guidelines with regard to the holding of group discussion classes and the move towards using only satellite and videoconferencing facilities in the future (guidelines to include issues such as DVDs, podcasting, etc.)
- * To define the nature and purpose of the regional infrastructure in terms of ODL pedagogy.

ODL Task Teams...cont

➤ Task Team 5: Technology Enhanced Teaching, Learning and Student Support

- * To provide a conceptual framework for technology-enhanced support to students, taking into account the student portal ,MyUnisa, as well as podcasting, video, satellite, DVDs, etc.

Library: a learner support service

According to Prinsloo (2010:16), ‘student support is , and should be, central to everything we do at Unisa. Student support is of concern to everyone at Unisa- whether in the academic portfolio, or in administration, professional or support portfolio’.

- The library is a learner support structure
- It provides learners with access to information, i.e. both electronically and in print
- According to Igwe (2006:3), “libraries are indispensable in every facet of education”
- Effective library support to ODL learners is mandatory
- Unisa Library is committed to providing information effectively and efficiently (as reflected in the Library’s Service Charter).

“Unisa library is the **Heart** of the University”

Challenges faced by Unisa ODL librarians

A discussion of outcomes:

➤ **Branch librarians**

• **General challenges experienced**

What are the most common or general challenges you are experiencing in providing information to students?

Response: Information/computer illiterate students; clients unaware of services provided and where to find information; lack of training for remote clients; focus mainly on walk-in clients

• **Solutions in place for the above challenges**

Are there any solutions in place to curb these challenges?

Response: Yes, some of them are being addressed, but many of the services are still being developed with regard to walk-in clients; training is being developed to reach more remote clients

• **Challenges in using new technologies/Web 2.0**

Please identify the new technologies/ Web 2.0 applications you are currently using?

Challenges faced by Unisa ODL librarians... cont

Response: We market our services on blogs, Facebook, etc. Not used in an integrated manner.

- **If not, what makes it difficult to use them?**

Response: Uses not identified; time needed to discover/train.

- **Do you feel that there is a need to use these new tools (Web 2.0') in your section?**

Response: Yes, although being the branch in the main (Muckleneuk) library, our work focuses mainly on the walk –in clients.

- **Please suggest any new technologies that the library should consider applying**

Response: Can look at reducing or eliminating the need to come to the library for administrative matters e.g. renewals, membership, payments; more interactive systems.

Challenges faced by Unisa ODL librarians... cont

➤ Regional librarians

- **General challenges experienced**

What are the most common or general challenges you are experiencing in providing information to students?

Response: lack of awareness about where information can be found; geographical (diverse) location of our clients; different levels of information and computer literacy; cost of advertising of training (library) to our clients; need for our academics to encourage our students to read widely, compared to a 'prescribed book' type of education.

- **Solutions in place for the above challenges**

Are there any solutions in place to curb these challenges?

Response: all the information needed is available from our homepage, as well as via cellphone; mobile bus initiative has bridged some geographical gaps.

- **Challenges in using new technologies/Web 2.0 applications**

Please identify the new technologies/ Web 2.0 applications you are currently using

Response: Nothing at the moment, except for the upcoming initiative to have a Library Facebook page.

Challenges faced by Unisa ODL librarians... cont

- **If not, what makes it difficult to use them?**

Response: These new technologies are numerous and might be confusing to our clients; however, we need to have a presence in some of them.

- **Do you feel that there is a need to use these new tools (Web 2.0) in your section?**

Response: Yes, we need to create a presence for ourselves in different media.

- **Please suggest any new technologies/Web 2.0 applications that the library should consider using**

Response: With these technologies mushrooming everywhere, it would be best for them to reach some point of stability and maturation - it is all experimental at this point; presence in all or some key ones is a reasonable solution.

Challenges faced by Unisa ODL librarians... cont

➤ Information Search Librarians

- **General challenges experienced**

What are the most common or general challenges you are experiencing in providing information to students?

Response: to clarify the exact information need of a student; very often, students express their need poorly (this is either due to a lack of subject knowledge on the student's part or overly ambitious project plans).

- **Solutions in place for the above challenges**

Are there any solutions in place to curb these challenges?

Response: Yes, search forms help to set parameters for each search; we contact the student directly; conduct an information needs interview.

- **Challenges in using new technologies/Web 2.0 applications**

Please identify the new technologies/ Web 2.0 applications you are currently using

Response: Currently working on various applications – unfortunately, none are in place yet.

- **If not, what makes it difficult to use them?**

Response: time constraints; lack of available platforms to disseminate the applications; bureaucracy within the library.

Challenges faced by Unisa ODL librarians... cont

- **Do you feel that there is a need to use these new tools (Web 2.0) in your section?**

Response: Yes, they offer a fast and convenient way of supplying information to students.

- **Please suggest any new technologies/Web 2.0 applications that the library should consider using**

Response: No response.

Challenges faced by Unisa ODL librarians... cont

➤ Personal Librarians

- **General challenges experienced**

What are the most common or general challenges you are experiencing in providing information to students?

Response: Not everything is in electronic format; some students are not aware of services, such as online requests; some online training materials become obsolete when the library web page changes from time to time; some lecturing staff do not place all needed materials on e-reserves; some databases are not accessible outside of the Unisa campus.

- **Solutions in place for the above challenges**

Are there any solutions in place to curb these challenges?

Response: Lecturing staff are reminded from time to time to put materials on e-reserves for access; students are provided with guidelines for accessing library resources; online training materials are being developed for remote students, e.g. podcasts; partnering with academic staff to ensure that the information on MyUnisa project sites also reaches post-graduate students.

- **Challenges in using new technologies/Web 2.0 applications**

Please identify the new technologies/ Web 2.0 applications you are currently using

Response: MyUnisa and the Library Blog are the only technologies that are fully operational at present; still investigating the possibility of using other Web 2.0 tools such as Facebook, Twitter, Wikis, etc.

Challenges faced by Unisa ODL librarians... cont

- **If not, what makes it difficult to use them?**

Response: University-wide Policy/ Guidelines for using Web 2.0 tools; we need to ensure that the students will use them for educational purposes only; we need to market them vigorously if we want our students to use them; the pace at which these technologies are mushrooming might be a challenge; dedicated team to investigate the application of social networks.

- **Do you feel that there is a need to use these new tools (Web 2.0) in your section?**

Response: Yes, but only if the above-mentioned challenges are addressed.

- **Please suggest any new technologies/Web 2.0 applications that the library should consider using**

Response: Skype, Twitter, etc.

Strategies embraced by Library Management for using new technologies

“Success of the Unisa library depends on an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the relevance of emerging technologies...” (Henning, 2005).

“If Unisa is to be a leader in ODL, it needs to adapt to the rapid changes and keep up with Web 2.0 social networking tools” (Makhanya, 2009).

➤ Our Library Management:

- have taken major steps to ensure that operations within the library focus on accessibility; interaction; sharing; user-centeredness and use of relevant Web 2.0 tools.
- is encouraging a *shift* from old library practices to those of the 21st Century library.
- has established committees within the library to investigate the application of new technologies.
- this is evident in the **use** or **proposed use** of:
MyUnisa; Blogs & Blogging; Podcasts; AirPAC; RFID; Facebook; Wikis; Mobile phones; Satellite broadcast; Video-conferencing; etc.

Conclusion

- Today, technology is a driver of change @ the Unisa Library, and this will continue in the future.
- Currently, Unisa Library is lagging behind in the implementation of these technologies.
- Our clients are already using some of these tools, and their application in the library will eliminate the challenges currently being faced in providing services to clients.
- If thieves/criminals are taking advantage of the new technology by illegally scanning credit card information, we can legally use the very same technology to provide every user with equal access to information.

Recommendations

- The library needs a dedicated *Team* of librarians (expertise) to look at the identification and application of Web 2.0 tools.
- Peer training through College teams should be strengthened in order to promote the sharing of knowledge and skills.
- Unisa should have a clear **Policy** and not **Guidelines** that supports the usage of new technologies.

Questions?

I hope they're
not too difficult!



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Pictures

