



ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 11, 28 APRIL 2010

AN OVERVIEW OF THIS WEEK'S COMMUNIQUÉ

1. *In the antechamber of hope*
2. *An overview of general trends arising from the proposals*
3. *Next steps*
4. *A reminder*
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1 IN THE ANTECHAMBER OF HOPE...

I am in the process of finalising the presentation of the reports of the different ODL task teams for inclusion into the agenda of the STLSC meeting of 10 May. While working through the proposals, I reflected on the expectations regarding these proposals in the light of the fact that there had been several ODL initiatives since 2007. These past initiatives tried to bring our teaching and learning assumptions and practices in line with international trends in ODL within our unique context. Three years later, there is an urgency to move towards implementing practices that would give gestalt to Unisa's aspirations to become a world-class ODL institution. The present proposals provide pointers for the implementation of ODL practices embedded in the specific needs and characteristics of our context as a developmental state; taking into account a "failed" schooling system; increasing government intervention in curricula and subsidy formulas; an institution that has "initiative fatigue"; and continued claims regarding the fragmented nature of Unisa's systems. But do these proposals go far enough? Are they too drastic? Are they urgent enough? Will these proposals herald a period of innovation, implementation and growth?

I spent the weekend reading "The Black Swan. The impact of the highly improbable" (Nassim Nicholas Taleb, 2007) in which Taleb explores a number of aspects inter alia our assumptions regarding the linearity between cause and effect. In his chapter called "Living in the antechamber of hope" he warns against our reliance on linear, positive progressions. "Linear relationships are truly the exception; we only focus on them in classrooms and textbooks because they are easier to understand" (page 89). He states that there "is little room in our consciousness for heroes who do not deliver visible results – or those heroes who focus on process than results" (page 89). For the last three years we grappled with processes and we were maybe disappointed that the past three years did not affect the changes we were hoping for. While recognising the non-linearity of how things happen and the overestimation (according to Taleb) of most generalisations regarding cause and effect, it does not, however, take away our hope and anticipation that the ODL implementation plan, this year, will have a positive and lasting impact... Only time will tell.

2 AN OVERVIEW OF GENERAL TRENDS ARISING FROM THE PROPOSALS

- Most proposals have highlighted the need for a systemically integrated ODL strategic and implementation plan taking into account the impact of enrolment capping according to the negotiated targets with the DoHE and the need for enrolment management; efficient and effective systems regarding staff procurement; the funding formula (ACHRAM); finalized and relevant PQMs; an appropriate ODL tuition model and optimum and appropriate learner support.
- Though there is an urgent need for general procedures and processes that supports the implementation of the different initiatives, a number of task teams indicated that the solution is *not* found in “one size fits all”. *To the contrary*. Whether it is colleges deciding on the need for developing a Higher Certificate, or admission requirements, alternative assessment strategies, use of technologies or student support; there is not one solution for all the different contexts and applications. The challenge is to agree on general principles and to find context-appropriate solutions and provide effective and optimal support for the implementation of such proposals.
- Having said that there seems to be consensus that, in most instances, we should not force a “one size fits all” there is an urgent need to reduce the clutter and the vast array of practices between the different colleges and stakeholders. The challenge will be to allow for strategic diversity but to commit ourselves to broad frameworks of understanding and practices as far as possible.
- A pressing issue Unisa has to address is our understanding of teaching and learning in an ODL environment. *There is not one role-player in an ODL institution who can claim to be more important than another*. Each of the role-players fulfils unique roles in ensuring effective teaching and learning. Maybe it is time for us to critically engage with all role-players and clarify roles, expectations, responsibilities and assumptions? We can no longer afford to speak of “us”, and “them”.
- Teaching and learning should be carefully planned to ensure the effective integration and utilisation of the expertises a range of role-players can offer, eg tutoring, academic skills’ development, counselling, regional support, etc. At present most of these services are delivered *ad hoc* and are not integrated and mainstreamed into the design of teaching, learning and assessment.
- The use of a range of technologies like the Internet, video-conferencing, satellite broadcasting and various multimedia should become an integral part of designing and implementing teaching, learning and assessment practices at Unisa.

A vital aspect becoming apparent in the different proposals of the ODL task teams is the critical need for effective, appropriate, trust-worthy and integrated systems, procedures and processes.

3 NEXT STEPS

The final proposals from the ODL task teams will be submitted to the STLSC meeting of 10 May (agenda closes 26 April). With the help of Corporate Communications and Marketing (CCM) we are in the process of developing an ODL homepage where, amongst other elements, I will post all the reports and updates.

4 A REMINDER

Everyone is invited to an open information session on the proposal for a longer courseware development cycle which will be held in **Pretoria on Monday 3 May from 13:30-15:00** in the Senate Hall. The information session will be repeated in **Florida on Tuesday 11 May, 14:00 – 15:30 to G41, 4th floor G block**. Please feel free to attend!

5 COMMENTING ON THE ODL COMMUNIQUÉS

You are also most welcome to comment on this (and previous) ODL Communiqués on the Unisa Staff website. On the right hand side of the Unisa Staff website, you will see a section titled “Important links” under which you must then click on “Blogs”. On the blog page, you will notice two links namely “E-connect” and “Open Distance Learning”. If you follow the latter you will be able to read and comment on the ODL Communiqués.

Thanks again to everyone who responds to the ODL Communiqués, whether in public or in private.

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