



## ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 28, 25 AUGUST 2010

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### 1 **WAKING UP FROM OUR RIP VAN WINKLE-LIKE SLUMBER**



With the current debate and public outcry on the new proposed curbing of public access to information, I was reminded of a book by William Gumede and Leslie Dikeni titled “The poverty of ideas. South African democracy and the retreat of intellectuals” (2009) in which they scrutinise the role of intellectuals (read academics) in the new South Africa.

In the “Introduction”, Gumede and Dikeni refer to Pityana who states that the state of public debates resembles the state of health of a democratic society. Pityana says: “In such debates the nation examines its shortcomings and strengths, surveys the infinite variety of views and opinions and treats everyone with respect, exercising tolerance and promoting meaningful communication” (in Gumede & Dikeni 2009:1). The authors bemoan the fact that under the presidency of Mbeki, the “space for debate, dissent and public dialogue was significantly narrowed” (2009:1). Gumede and Dikeni (2009:2) further state that the “absolute loyalty” demanded to “the cause” resulted in dissenting views facing “...ridicule, marginalisation and attacks on their integrity. The smear is one of the most devastating weapons for stifling debate and silencing critics”. They plead that South African intellectuals should “wake up from their Rip Van Winkle-like slumber and work towards a new progressive agenda for the renewal and reconfiguration of society (Gumede & Dikeni 2009:4).

In his contribution, “Intellectuals, the state and universities in South Africa” (pp 143-152), Jonathan Jansen mourns the fact that “[m]ore than ever before, intellectuals are more likely to be found outside rather than inside the South African university” (2009:143). Jansen (2009:144-146) attributes this statement to a complex of conditions called “managerialism” which are characterised by key shifts, including “the shift in the authority of academics from individuals to the broader collective, the management” in which academics must have permission to speak out critically regarding issues of public interest;

the “shift in the authority of deans from a primary responsibility *downwards*, to the academics who appoint them, to a primary responsibility *upwards*, to the senior managers who now contract them under the new and revealing title of executive dean”; the shift from the “authority of academics over their own work to the ever-greater surveillance of external authorities, such as the Council of Education (sic), which also make decisions about whether programmes are worthwhile or not”; the shift in the authority of academics “over their right to decide what is worth teaching within universities”; the shift in the authority of academics “towards greater and greater decision-making over routine matters by academic administrators with less and less control over core functions ... that enable academic work to proceed”. Jansen (2009:146) further states that universities “in this age of managerialism, have opted for less visibility on the major social issues of the day, rather than greater and more critical engagement with those issues”. He wonders what the impact will be of the “combination of external surveillance and internal self-censorship” on the meaning of *being* a university (2009:148).

The cost of speaking truth to power is, according to Jansen (2009:150) that academics’ access to certain kinds of research funds dries up; academics’ expertise is ignored within government commissions and expert panels, and that academics are disqualified from seeking more senior positions in the academe(emphasis added). Jansen (2009:151) states that at the end academics do a cost-benefit analysis and *often decide that speaking out is not worth the cost*. The choices academics face in speaking out are “tough and even painful questions, and only a fool would risk superficial and trite answers. But what makes these questions even harder is the fact that the withering away of the public intellectual has meant that those who stand up and speak truth to power are more likely to be seen as oddities or even eccentrics precisely because there are so few others doing the same” (2009:151). Jansen (2009:152) closes his essay by stating “In every country, the quality, depth and sustainability of democracy depend crucially on the treatment of intellectuals”.

Reading the essays in the book (Gumede & Dikeni 2009) prompted some personal thoughts about the role and identity of academics at Unisa as an ODL institution. Does the ODL implementation processes harness the intellectual and critical capacity of academics, professional *and* support staff or is the ODL plan a new strategy of managerialism in action? Some of the criticisms levelled at the ODL processes refer to the feeling of a number of academics that administrative systems and procedures dictate academic matters.

Despite some concerns and criticisms I really don’t think that the ODL implementation plan is governed by non-academic rules and procedures. I honestly believe that the ODL implementation process is allowing *all* stakeholders at Unisa to critically engage on teaching and learning and what we *all* can contribute in order to be more effective. One often hears the complaint that one of the stakeholders at Unisa considers themselves to be more important or more strategic than another stakeholder.

We cannot afford territorialism in the implementation of ODL. There is not one recommendation of any ODL task team that was not sincerely reflected upon, critically considered by all who would be affected by the recommendations and as widely communicated to the whole of the Unisa community. I really want to believe that the ODL implementation process is creating spaces for critical engagement with issues that concern all of us. We cannot ridicule, marginalise, smear and/or question the integrity of any of the stakeholders in the ODL implementation process.

While the jury is still out on the governments' plans to seriously curtail the access to and publicising information, my wish is for the ODL project to create opportunities for a rediscovery of agency and voice, engagement and respect for different perspectives. It is critical that the ODL implementation plan creates a safe space for all stakeholders to interrogate what *being* an ODL institution means. It may require some of us to wake up from our Rip Van Winkle-like slumber and work towards the renewal and reconfiguration of Unisa. It will also require public spaces where all stakeholders at Unisa can interrogate and dialogue proposals and ideas, without fear of marginalisation.

## **2 FEEDBACK FROM THE STLSC OF 23 AUGUST 2010**

The STLSC that took place on 23 August was (relatively) uneventful as many of the task teams and groups are in the process of finalising their recommendations to be tabled at the last two STLSC meetings of this year. Yet, a number of points should be pondered on...

During the discussions on the offering of a number of higher certificates, concerns were (again) expressed regarding the wisdom of offering more qualifications while Unisa is already facing a huge number of unsubsidised students. In the discussions that followed, it was stated that in a short-term view the issue of unfunded students was indeed an important issue. Should we however consider the long-term plans of DHET to increase participation rates at universities and colleges to 50% in the age group 18-24, it would seem as if the case for expansion and growing Unisa may still be very open. The discussion regarding the development and offering of higher certificates are therefore currently in a liminal space where the different issues of providing alternative pathways for students, ensuring access with success, and enrolment planning and management interact with short-term and longer-term goals. DISA has prepared an insightful briefing regarding the DHET Strategic Plan: 2010-2015 (available from <http://heda.unisa.ac.za/heda/fsMain.htm>, accessed 24 August 2010).

Three other reports that is really worth reading (also available from the mentioned site) are

- The challenges facing South Africa's Secondary schooling system and their implications for higher education (Ms Mercy Sondlo and Prof George Subotzky)
- Research outputs in South African Public Higher Education, 2008 (Ms Yuraisha Chetty and Prof George Subotzky)

- Disabled students at Unisa: Baseline information and analysis (Ms Lerato Tladi and Prof George Subotzky)

The ODL coordinator has been tasked to convene a meeting between HR, DSPQA, TSDL and academic departments to clarify the appointment of tutors and tutor-markers and to, where possible, streamline the processes and procedures.

Also at the STLSC, ICT tabled a very interesting proposal regarding increasing the connectivity of students. The proposal will be workshopped and fine-tuned before it will go out to tender.

### **3 AN OVERVIEW OF FUTURE MEETINGS**

- A meeting of the smaller working team of ODL Task Team 6 will take place on Tuesday 31 August 2010 in ORT8-13.
- A meeting focused on clarifying the issues around pre-registration assessment and the possibility of using the National Benchmarking Tests (NBTs) at Unisa will take place on Tuesday 31 August.
- ODL Task team 4 will meet on 1 September 2010 from 12:00-13:30 in Samuel Pauw, Seminar 1.
- The smaller working committee on finalising the implementation of the Senate decision regarding Satellite Broadcasting and Video Conferencing will meet on 2 September.
- The finalisation of guidelines regarding Intellectual Property, Copyright and Social Media will take place on 2 September, 12:00-13:00.

### **4 TOWARDS AN ODL PEDAGOGY**

One of the outcomes of the ODL Implementation Plan for 2010 was the finalisation of a conceptual framework for an ODL pedagogy. As the ODL implementation process unfolds, we grow in our understanding of the complexities and opportunities of teaching and learning in an ODL environment. International literature of ODL pedagogy is focused primarily on how ODL institutions harness the power of a range of technologies in service of increasing the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning. There are also examples in the international domain where pedagogy is driven by technology – and then fail.

Using appropriate technologies effectively *does* form a huge part of what teaching and learning in an ODL institution is about. But we have come to realise that technologies cannot (and should not) drive the process. Therefore it is crucial that Unisa considers what teaching in an ODL institution involves before we react to the latest technological fads and fashions. Having said that, the range of technologies now on offer opens up opportunities that were previously unheard of. In the next few ODL Communiqués we will start exploring elements of an ODL pedagogy – what it is, and can be. Watch this space...

## 5 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 at <http://uir.unisa.ac.za/dspace/handle/10500/3072> (accessed 24 August 2010). The repository is updated on a regular basis and if you register on the repository, you will get notifications of any new uploads.

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.

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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.