ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 27, 18 AUGUST 2010

IN THIS ISSUE:

1   FIVE MINDS FOR THE FUTURE

Now that Unisa's Senate accepted a definition of Unisa "graduateness", *maybe it is time to consider what type of academics will contribute to such a definition of graduateness?*
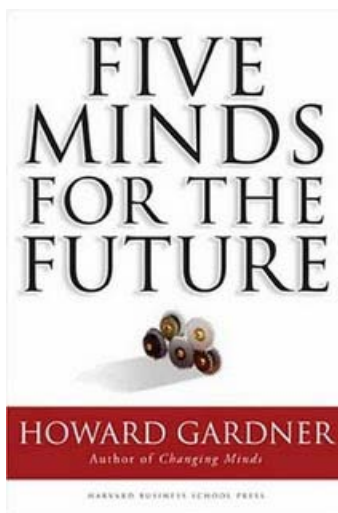
 If our graduates should be independent, resilient, responsible and caring citizens who are able to fulfil and serve in multiple roles in their immediate and future local, national and global communities; have a critical understanding of their location on the African continent with its histories, challenges and potential in relation to globally diverse contexts; are able to critically analyse and evaluate the credibility and usefulness of information and data from multiple sources in a globalised world with its ever increasing information and data flows and competing worldviews; know how to apply their discipline-specific knowledges competently, ethically and creatively to solve real-life problems and be critically aware of their own learning and developmental needs and future potential – *can we expect anything less from our academics?*

The first time I heard about the book by Howard Gardner "Five minds for the future" (2008) was in a presentation by Prof Pierre Joubert (BMR, Unisa) regarding the competencies that Unisa staff should have in future. Gardner (2008: xix) explores the concept of "existential intelligence" which he defines as "the capacity to raise and address the largest questions" in a world where "it is not possible for parts of the world to thrive while others remain desperately poor and deeply frustrated" and where the world of the future with its "ubiquitous search engines, robots, and other computational devices – will demand capacities that until now have been mere options" Gardner 2008:2). Gardner's book is worthwhile reading. He proposes five "minds for the future" namely a disciplined mind, a synthesising mind, a creating mind, a respectful mind and an ethical mind (2008:3).

Developing and nurturing these five minds will allow us to survive and thrive in the future in which the following trends will become even more pertinent:

- The movement of capital and other market instruments around the globe, with huge amounts circulating virtually instantaneously every day
- The movement of human beings across borders, with well more than 100 million immigrants scattered around the world at any time
- The movement of all matter of information through cyberspace, with megabytes of information of various degrees of reliability available to anyone with access to a computer; the movement of popular culture
- The movement and spread of "stateless terrorism" (Gardner 2008:16)

Without discussion Gardner's proposal of five minds in detail, the following points he makes are worth considering:

- *Re* the *disciplined* mind: Not only will depth of knowledge in a specific field become increasingly important; it will be paramount to be attentive to the cutting edge of developments in that discipline. In order to remain cognisant of new developments in a discipline, it will be more important than ever before to be lifelong learners and nurture a passion for knowing. Gardner (2008:43) quotes Rubinstein (the famous pianist) who commented: "When I don't practice for a day, I know. When I don't practice for two days, the orchestra knows. And when I don't practice for three days, the world knows it". We require nothing less than mastery and commitment from our students (and complain about their perpetual lacking in meeting our standards) – how committed are we to remain at the cutting edge of developments in our fields? How many of us survive with dated knowledge? What support will academics need to nurture and value a "disciplined mind"?
- Re a *synthesising* mind: Gardner (2008:67) warns against the "perversity" of taking interdisciplinarity (one of the new mantras at Unisa) too lightly. He proposes that interdisciplinarity cannot be called such unless it "entails the proper combination of at least two disciplines" (2008:53). If I understand Gardner correctly, he is not against interdisciplinarity, but rather raises the bar by calling for more care in using the term. Interdisciplinarity involves expertise in more than one discipline. Can we expect that of our students? Gardner (2008:69) therefore proposes multiperspectivalism *rather* than interdisciplinarity where students benefit from "exposure to different solutions, different methods of arriving at solutions, and different rubrics for evaluation of those solutions" (2008:69). A mad rush into interdisciplinarity runs the risk of being premature and undisciplined (2008:71). Gardner (2008:71) therefore proposes multiperspectivalism as an intermediate notion and a more sustainable and achievable position than the mantra of interdisciplinarity which is only rarely achieved (2008:73).

- Re the *creating* mind: Gardner (2008:83) writes "The creator stands out in terms of temperament, personality and stance. She is perennially dissatisfied with current work, current standards, current questions, current answers". While expertise is only reached after a minimum of 10 years in a specific field, nurturing a creating mind requires even more. I know some academics at Unisa who are perennially dissatisfied with their current work and current standards but less dissatisfied with their current questions and current answers…

- Re the *respectful* mind: Gardner (2008:107) chooses the term 'respect' above 'tolerance'. "Rather than ignoring differences, being inflamed by them, or seeking to annihilate them through love or hate, I call on human beings to accept the differences, learn to live with them, and value those who belong to other cohorts".

- Re the *ethical* mind: Gardner (2008:127) explores a 'good life' (ala Freud) – as capturing three distinct facets namely being good in quality (excellent), responsible (taking into account the implications of my actions on the wider community) and engaging and meaningful.

Gardner (2008:166) closes his proposition by stating that "an educational system is not worthy of its name unless its representatives can clearly articulate what that system is striving to achieve and what it seeks to avoid or curtail". And considering the many threats humanity faces in the 21st century, the respectful and ethical aspects of education is worth considering more important than ever before.

I think Unisa's statement of graduateness goes a long way to address Gardner's proposition. *Maybe it is time to re-consider what it means to be an academic at Unisa?* Have our academics become mere completers-of-tick-boxes, fillers-in-of-forms, followers-of-clearly-stipulated-procedures, and guardians-of-what-we-knew-when-we-graduated? Or do we support academics nurturing, developing, exhibiting and … teaching the five minds for the future?

2   TOWARDS A UNISA HIGHER CERTIFICATE

On 10 August there was a meeting of interested parties with regard to developing Higher Certificate at Unisa with generic and college specific elements. Many colleges are in the process of developing a number of higher certificates that are specifically focused on *vocational* pathways as well as developing higher certificates that may serve as alternative pathways into *specific* qualifications or schools.

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The five generic elements of a possible general Unisa higher certificate may include:

i.   An English proficiency module (the structure and key competencies may be generic but the application of those competencies could be college/discipline/school specific)

ii. A computer literacy module

iii. An introduction into higher education, ODL and the discipline – including academic literacy, study skills, time and life management

iv. Numeracy literacy – very basic numeracy skills and interpretation of graphs, pie-charts, etc

v.   Information literacy – how to search for information, how to evaluate the appropriateness of data/information, etc.

There are currently a number of modules developed by different departments which may serve the above purposes. A 'resource pack' with the curricula of possible modules will be compiled and circulated to the members of ODL Task team 1: Admissions for consideration.

3   REVISED MINIMUM ADMISSION REQUIREMENTS

ODL Task team 1: Admissions met on Wednesday 11 August to discuss the latest draft proposal drawn up by Prof Barry van Heerden (CEMS) and Dr Britta Zawada (CHS) and then refined by Prof Peter Havenga (Academic Planner). The meeting was unanimous in celebrating the progress made since the first discussions in the first semester of 2010. A number of compromises were suggested and a new proposal will be finalised by Dr Zawada and circulated to the Unisa community for input. The proposal will serve at the STLSC meeting in September 2010.

4   PODCASTING AT UNISA

A very informative *my*Unisa forum was held on Wednesday 11 August in which the *my*Unisa team under the leadership of Mr Johann Möller (ICT) introduced the Unisa community to the potentials (and pitfalls) of using podcasts in teaching and learning. A huge group of Unisa staff attended the presentation. As I sat and watched the presentation I realised

- how eager most academics are to really explore new and more effective ways of teaching and learning;
- how blessed Unisa is with a huge number of committed and passionate staff;
- how difficult it is for many academics to not only keep up-to-date with developments in their field of expertise, but also to continuously try to keep abreast with developments in ODL, pedagogy and technology.

I wondered whether we cannot find innovative and authentic ways of supporting and celebrating our academics. They need all the support they can get.

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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 17 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.

Drafted by Dr Paul Prinsloo
ODL Coordinator
Office of the Vice-Principal: Academic & Research, Unisa
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+27 (0) 12 4293683 (office), +27 (0) 823954113 (mobile), prinsp@unisa.ac.za

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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.

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