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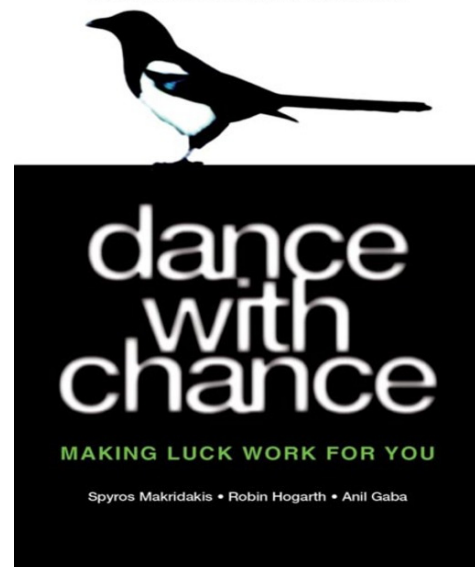
IN THIS ISSUE:

- 1 *Dancing with chance*
- 2 *Different initiatives, running in all kind of directions...*
- 3 *News from Oxford*
- 4 *News from the STLS held on 15 November 2010*
- 5 *ODL Repository and blog*

1 DANCING WITH CHANCE

I bought the book by Makridakis, Hogarth and Gaba (revised paperback edition, 2010) “Dance with change. Making luck work for you” on the airport and at first I was not sure whether I should buy the book! The subtitle “Making luck work for you” sounded like some shallow and cheap recipe by authors who prescribe ten easy steps on how to get rich, loose weight, get to the top (wherever that is...) or whatever. I did not buy the book immediately but paged through it, put it down, went to have a drink, and just before boarding I decided to take a chance (pardon the pun) and bought the book. What a pleasant surprise the book was/is! The book turned out to be anything but ten easy steps to riches, but rather a very thoughtful (and at times entertaining) exploration of how there is actually very little that we control in life. This is a very sobering thought for anyone who is trying to affect organisational change...

“Written by true experts. Informative yet so much fun to read!”
Nassim Nicholas Taleb, Author of *The Black Swan*



The book reminded me of the work of Taleb (2007) “*The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*” and “*Foiled by Randomness: The Hidden Role of Chance in the Markets and Life*” (2005) which I referred to in a previous communiqué.

What will ODL be like in 2015? Though there are a number of key trends that are starting to emerge, there is still a lot that we don’t know. Makridakis et al (2010:ix) write that a key insight is “to accept uncertainty and recognize exactly what can and cannot be predicted – the limits of predictability. Only then can we realistically manage the uncertainty we confront in our daily lives and avoid falling victim to the vagaries of chance”.

We all suffer from the “illusion of control” that “fools us into thinking the future is more predictable and less uncertain than it really is. Or worse, we believe we can influence chance events through our own actions” (Makridakis et al 2010: x). These authors propose that “giving up the illusion of control actually increases the *genuine* control we have over our lives”. They call this the “paradox of control”. They continue: “To dance with chance is to accept the role and importance of chance and to take advantage of the opportunities it creates while avoiding its negative consequences” (Makridakis 2010: xi).

While all of this may sound as if there is nothing that we can do and that we are to surrender to the whims of chance, these authors actually propose that once we understand how little control we actually have (therefore letting go of the illusion of control), the less paralysed we are by hesitation and the more control we can take for our actions and their results. While there is a lot *outside* our locus of control, we “clearly control our decisions” (Makridakis et al 2010:13).

At the Senate Tuition and Learner Support Committee (STLSC) of Monday, 15 November, the meeting approved the new generic admission requirements for undergraduate registrations at Unisa. *This was a major decision.* The quality of students coming into the higher education sector falls hugely outside the control of Unisa. Though many employees at Unisa may feel that we should not allow underprepared students into the system, Unisa as the only dedicated comprehensive ODL institution in South Africa and the largest one on the African continent cannot afford to close its doors. What we do have control over, is *how* we allow these learners to Unisa. The new admission requirements therefore mean that no student will be refused entry at Unisa if they meet the minimum statutory requirement. This is one of the bravest moments in Unisa’s long history. We will remain open. But we will allow students into *appropriate* qualifications and learning journeys based on evidence that they are sufficiently prepared. Instead of being paralysed by inaction and complaining about the quality of school-leavers, the STLSC took a brave and responsible stand.

While 2010 saw a number of such brave acts and decisions (such as the curriculum policy, a commitment to increase the connectivity of our students, etc), there are a number of issues that are still clouded in uncertainty such as the future of the regional offices in an ODL environment and the suggested move towards online teaching and learning. It is very easy to be paralysed by these issues due to the histories of these issues, the staff involved, the claims and counter-claims and the fact that any decision will impact on personal lives, relationships and personal dreams and aspirations. While becoming paralysed is one danger, it is, unfortunately, not the only danger. There may be the temptation to call in the gurus, or to benchmark, or to look for one or other latest innovation or management fad. Or better still, we may think that getting in consultants may actually deliver the goods....

“There’s certainly no shortage of people who claim they can help. Gurus are everywhere” ((Makridakis et al 2010:112). These gurus claim to have the most simple solutions to all our problems – and they find captive audiences in individuals, organizations, and yes, also at Unisa, who believe that the appointment of consultants or benchmarking holds to key to everything we don’t know. But do they?

Makridakis et al (2010:114) reflect on how many of the fads and fashions like “reengineering”, “Total Quality Management” or TQM, “Management by Objectives”, and many others have been discarded after a while after much disappointment and often, as result of reengineering, disrupted lives and morale. Makridakis et al (2010:115) state that not only do these theories deserve to be forgotten, but “the phenomenon as a whole, with its repeated pattern of growth and decay, *should be remembered by any manager seeking for a quick fix or miracle cure*” (emphasis added). These “pied pipers of management’ often promises solutions that due not require real effort. Makridakis et al (2010:118-119) also critically reflect on the notion of “best practice” and then they discard the notion of “best practice (made popular by books such as “In search of excellence”) because these claims “over-sampled success and under-sampled mediocrity and failure”. It is easy to state that something is “best practice” because it works in some contexts, but often these claims do not investigate *all* the instances in which the particular practice was/is tried and tested. The claim of something is “best practice” therefore does not stand the test of scientific rigor and analysis. Makridakis et al (2010:120-121) propose that in order to arrive at claims of “best practice”, we have to sample both failure of these practices and their successes; we will have to have “large, representative samples over long periods of time; include solid attempts to refute the claim/theory underlying the notion of “best practice” and test these claims of so-called “best practice” in “new environmental conditions”. At the end of their chapter on the roles and claims of gurus and the notion of so-called “best practice”, Makridakis et al (2010:136) state that we “can’t count on research studies based on detailed dissection of past performance as a guide for the future. To do so is – once again – to fall victim to the illusion of control”.

For me personally, one of the moments of the book that will stay with me for some time, is the reflection by the authors on a poem by Heraclitus regarding a person stepping into the same river twice. The second time however, the river is the same, but the water has moved on. Makridakis et al (2010:138) then states “you can’t step into the same river twice” – the river has changed by the time you step into it again. In searching for solutions that would work in our context, it will be fatal to think that the so-called “best practices” produced in different contexts will necessarily have the same results in our context. In searching for a solution it is very easy to fall for the latest fad or fashion in management theory or the various claims of consultants.

There are no easy answers to many of the dilemmas we face. It is easy to make claims that we should just close down a particular section, or move them to another location in the university. It is easy to claim that because something has worked at the old TSA or the old Unisa that we must resurrect the practice. You cannot step into the same river twice.

Times have changed. It is easy to look elsewhere for solutions. But I am afraid, we will have to grapple with the issues and find appropriate solutions for our context. We will have to carve out what is “best” of us.

Legend has it that when someone asked Michelangelo how he manages to carve a horse from a block of granite, he replied: “You just chip away everything that does not look like a horse”. We will have to find and describe our horse and then chip away anything that does not look like a horse.

And our picture of the horse is becoming clearer. A number of ODL Communiqués ago I shared a personal vision for ODL in 2015. There were many very positive responses on the draft. And I think that we should refine the draft and accept it as a framework, as an agreed point of departure. Once we know where we want to be with regard to ODL in 2015, then we have a picture of our ‘horse’. Then we just need to carve away anything that does not look like a horse...

When we can agree on the picture of ODL, it will be easier (but not necessarily less tiresome or painful) to start to think about and re-imagine academics, regions, the library, and a range of other core functions and roles at Unisa.

I started this reflection with stating that there are many uncertainties that await us. But some key trends are emerging. There are many things outside of our control. Knowing that, and accepting that, we can start to take decisions which align with our vision. And slowly (but surely) chip away everything that do not look like our agreed and shared notion of ODL in 2015.

2 DIFFERENT INITIATIVES, RUNNING IN ALL KIND OF DIRECTIONS...

I know I made myself very unpopular during 2010 with many stakeholders and/or individuals for requesting that certain initiatives be placed on hold till we have a clearer understanding of how ODL is developing. There was nothing wrong with the proposals except for a nagging sense that I had that these initiatives was in line, and will be in line with Unisa growing to be a fully-fledged ODL institution in 2015. I therefore requested for some initiatives to be placed on hold till we have a better understanding of in what type of ODL institution we are developing.

Various ODL task teams developed conceptual frameworks, and tabled recommendations to the STLSC and Senate, where most of them were approved. Now we are in a position where these approved recommendations and frameworks provide us with key pointers for any initiatives that are now tabled. We cannot continue to act as if we are acting in a vacuum, as if there are no frameworks to guide our thinking. As stated in the *previous* section, there are still some unclear areas that we will have to map and carve out. But we have made huge progress this year and instead of focusing our energies (and resources) on worthy but not related activities, we can rather pool all of our energies and resources in ensuring that we implement the approved frameworks?

3 NEWS FROM OXFORD

The focus of my International Fellowship at the Open University Business School (OUBS) is to explore the perceptions of different stakeholders regarding the “international” character of the MBA the OU offers. Like Unisa, the OU has many international students registering for different qualifications. The MBA the OU has the reputation of really trying to ensure that students develop the necessary capabilities to apply in their own contexts wherever they are. On the one hand there is the notion that students register at a European university because of the perceived status of a European qualification. Whether we like it or not, in the world of business, a European MBA just sounds ‘better’ than an African or Indian MBA... The course development teams at the OU however are very aware that they are presenting courses from an Anglo-Saxon point of view which may not apply in the contexts of students. There is therefore a strong commitment to try to include as many as possible/appropriate spaces where students can critique the standpoints and theories presented to them and to interact with lecturers and tutors to collaboratively make sense of managing in an increasingly global marketplace. We sent a survey to students, employers, tutors, faculty and administrators in which we explore their perceptions regarding the purpose of an MBA and how it affects the curriculum and modes of delivery. We are in the process of analysing the data and some interesting things are emerging. By next week I should be in a position to share our initial findings with you!

During this period in Oxford, I am also doing an online course at Oxford Brookes University on the internationalisation of the curriculum. We are 25 participants in the course and we are scattered all over the world. The basic issue we are grappling with is how to universities address the increasingly international and multicultural student bodies, as well as the fact that graduates will increasingly work in multicultural and international contexts. I thoroughly enjoy the course and have had opportunity to share Unisa’s statement on gradueness in which Unisa celebrates both the local and the global. There was huge support in the group with regard to Unisa’s approach and I had several requests to share the policy!

4 NEWS FROM THE STLSC HELD ON 15 NOVEMBER 2010

Unisa took a major step on Monday 15 November when the STLSC approved the new generic admission requirements for undergraduate students. The proposal will now be tabled at the first Senate meeting of 2011 for approval. Well-done to the ODL task team 1 who really battled to balance Unisa’s social mandate of being open with the equally important issue of not allowing students to register for qualification for which they are not sufficiently prepared.

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 16 November 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.