ODL COMMUNIQUÉ 52, 16 MARCH 2011

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1   ODL PODCAST 4: NOT CONTROL BUT COORDINATION

The duration of the podcast is 4:00 minutes. **Click on the icon on the right to listen to the podcast.**

As colleges, individuals and different stakeholders at Unisa embrace ODL, there are more and more initiatives claiming to be ODL related. Compare this to a number of years ago when the only mention of ODL was on the posters and banners on the *outside* of the Unisa buildings. Now ODL is one everyone's lips and there are some wonderful initiatives going on.

There are however also reasons for concern. As the initiatives increase, so does the potential for clashes and contradictions.

This is a plea for the support from *everyone* for a coordination of efforts, resources and initiatives.

Not centralisation or control, but coordination.

And may we have the wisdom to know the difference.

[If for whatever reason you cannot access the podcast (or prefer reading to listening), I include the script of the podcast at the **end** of this communiqué].

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2 REFLECTION ON THE MAKE AND USE OF PODCASTS

I confessed on a number of occasions that experimenting with podcasts while the rest of the Unisa staff is listening and watching, is a daunting task and not for the faint-hearted. Not only does my experimentation foreground my (in)competency in the use of podcasting software, but it also foregrounds my own reliance on (and understanding of) Unisa systems, servers and processes.

The previous two podcasts could not be included in the communiqués due to accessibility problems. I normally produce and post the podcast on a Tuesday evening. On a Wednesday morning I would normally check the link *before* sending out the ODL Communiqué. In both cases there was just something wrong on that moment and I did not have the time to resolve the issue or wait for the issue to be resolved before I sent out the communiqués.

This prompted me to reflect on how much we rely on the Unisa server and the Internet in general. And 99% of the time everything *does* work. But it is that 1% of the time when a link does not work, or some or other server is down, that it catches us unaware. It resembles the experience when you postpone to fill-up your car with petrol and when you decide to fill up; the petrol stations have run empty!

So what is good practice in making use of podcasts? Although links and servers are "up" 99, 9% of the time, *you never know*. I have therefore made available the transcript of this week's podcast at the end of this communiqué. Maybe this is anyway good practice considering that some students may actually prefer reading, or may have hearing difficulties or may find the accent of the person on the podcast difficult to understand?

If Unisa wants to embrace a range of technologies and tools such as audio podcasting in service of more effective teaching and learning, we will have to find ways to cope with the unexpected while we celebrate (and treasure) those times when things do work 100%!

I really would like to thank a number of for their continued support and care in my experimentation with podcasts, namely Mr Jason Ming Sun and Mr Nico Coetzee (both from Unisa Portal and Academic System Design) and Mr Johann Möller of the myUnisa team.

3 THE "SIGNATURE" OF A UNISA GRADUATE

In 2010 Unisa' Senate approved a statement on the character of Unisa's graduates. The statement is certainly bold and is aimed to inspire Unisa staff and students to aspire to achieving this by the time of graduation. The statement reads as follows (2010:14-15):

> Unisa graduates have, as a result of their successful completion of their studies in an ODL context, unique qualities. These qualities are included the following statement on graduateness.

Unisa graduates

(i) are 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

(ii) have a critical understanding of their location on the African continent with its histories, challenges and potential in relation to globally diverse contexts

(iii) 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

(iv) know how to apply their discipline-specific knowledges competently, ethically and creatively to solve real-life problems

(v) are critically aware of their own learning and developmental needs and future potential

The question is: How does Unisa achieve this? How will we know that our graduates have the above attributes? And more importantly: *How do we ensure that Unisa graduates have these attributes?*

The signature of a graduate is the result of multiple and multi-layered interactions between students, the institution, their communities and macro and micro contexts. These interactions include academic interactions, but also include thousands of personal interactions with staff, other students and contexts *outside* of Unisa. While many of these interactions fall *outside* of the control of Unisa (and the curriculum), while they do shape students' graduateness in often profound ways. What are *inside* the control of Unisa are specific interactions as part of the student learning journey such as the curriculum (encompassing formative and summative assessments).

The graduateness of a student is therefore the result of 30-plus modules over a period of five years or longer.

When we therefore think of specific actions to "produce" a specific character or combination of traits in our students, we should do well to remember that the signature of a student is a complex and multifaceted result of an often heady mix of context, curriculum and community. The Curriculum Policy therefore suggests that we seriously consider the following:

In order to support students to enhance these characteristics, academic departments are prompted to investigate possibilities to

(i) offer specific modules and/or

(ii) plan and implement a final capstone assessment in which final-year students can provide evidence of their graduateness

While specific modules may leave permanent imprints on students' characters, we should neither rely on, nor overestimate the impact of these individual modules on the final signature of our students. *Graduateness is the sum total of much more than its distinctive parts…*

This raises important issues regarding curriculum development at Unisa. In last week's communiqué I acknowledged that curriculum development in higher education and also in the context of Unisa is increasingly a contested space. As we seriously consider the different forces and agenda that shapes and impacts on curriculum development, let us also consider how we plan our curricula and learning experiences to contribute and "result" in graduateness.

Do we ever consider how the 30-odd modules relate and build on one another? Or do we trust that somehow graduateness will happen by itself? Is it possible to have a way to assess students' graduateness before we allow them to graduate? Do we care enough about the "signature" of Unisa graduates to seriously consider how our statement on graduateness impact on our curriculum planning, development and delivery?

4   MUMBO JUMBO 9: THINK STUDENT SUPPORT, THINK FACE-TO-FACE…

It is amazing to listen to colleagues (academic, support and administrative) when they reflect on ways to support students. It is as if we immediately think of face-to-face ways in order to solve their needs.

It is as if face-to-face is Unisa's default setting despite us being a distance education institution.

When we encounter a need, we immediately think face-to-face; regardless of the availability of a range of technologies and other ways of supporting and reaching out to our students.

One of the reasons (most probably the most important one…) why face-to-face is our default setting, is because we are held captive by the all-pervasive believe in the digital divide. We are so scared to make use of technologies because we believe that it will exclude *some* students. But we make these claims as if the offering of face-to-face discussion classes *don't* exclude; as if the posting of printed materials don't result in some students getting the materials *before* others, and some students don't get it at all; as if our students have unlimited resources and opportunities to travel to regional offices during the week and over weekends. As if…

Unisa's institutional operational plan (IOP) states unequivocally that Unisa aspires to be a sixth generation Distance Education (DE) institution. And yet whenever we think of offering support, we go into a default mode of thinking that this support *must be face-to-face*.

I do not for one moment believe that technologies are *the* saviour. I don't wear rose-tinted spectacles regarding the pitfalls of using technologies in supporting students. But goodness gracious, surely we must also consider the many opportunities that technology offers?

Surely we must also consider the exclusions that result from offering face-to-face support whether in tutorials, workshops, and group discussions?

5   THE MYTHS ABOUT E-LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A colleague of mine, Ms Dalize van Heerden (School of Computing) forwarded an article to me this week which made my toenails drop off. The article is written by Njenga and Fourie (2010) and is called "The myths about e-learning in higher education" (*British Journal of Educational Technology* 41, 2: 199-212.

The authors attempt to provide a sobering reflection on the hype and (according to them) ill-considered broad acceptance of e-learning in higher education. Very early in the article (2010:200) they allege that "technopositivists" deny "educators and educational researchers the much need opportunities to explore the motives, power, rewards and sanctions of information and communication technologies (ICTs), as well as time to study the impacts of the new technologies on learning and teaching".

The authors fail to disclose *how* educators and researchers are denied these opportunities. Rather than provide evidence of the denial of opportunities, they continue by lamenting the "compulsory enthusiasm" about technology "that is being created, propagated and challenged *repeatedly* by people who stand to gain either economically, socially, politically or otherwise in due disregard of the trade-offs associated with the technology to the target audience" (2010:200; emphasis added).

Ouch. Eina. Eish.

Again they don't provide any evidence for this claim that those who are enthusiastic about the affordances of technology stand to personally benefit from the adoption of technologies in teaching and learning.

Not only are these authors claiming to follow in the conspiracy-breaking footsteps of Dan Brown and expose evil master-plans; but they also mourn for an era lost. They seem to grieve for an era before all the hype surrounding e-learning. An era when the 'Book' reigned supreme, an era when lecturers taught and students obeyed.

In true myth-busting-Dan-Brown style (with less finesse, style and persuasion), they then continue to posit 10 myths of e-learning (2010:202-208).

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1. *E-learning is a saviour; its redemptive power is overreaching and every educational institution should adopt it.* Contradicting this statement, the authors (2010:202) acknowledge in a moment of lost concentration that "the redemption power of ICTs cannot be totally dismissed". Again they claim that higher education does not need saving. They don't provide evidence of any respectable international scholar in higher education that claim that technology makes bad teaching better, or that technology can and want to 'save' higher education.

2. *E-learning can replace human interaction.* Another sweeping statement. I must still find a respectable international scholar in e-learning that claims that e-learning *replaces* all human interaction. Duh! Whilst automated learning platforms do exist and play an important role in automated student self-assessment; I don't know of any claims to support their allegation. Human interaction in a well-designed and effective e-learning environment looks different from face-to-face interaction, but does not replace human interaction.

3. *E-learning cuts the costs of education, for instance, e-learning courses are cheaper to deliver than the traditional face-to-face or distance learning.* Yes, this should be seriously considered. There are authors that claim that e-learning and distance education are cheaper options. The offering of distance education and e-learning is not necessarily cheaper, but the costs look *different*.

4. *Providing numerous courses and an abundance of information is beneficial and can enhance learning.* Duh! This is equally true of our current preoccupation to supplement our study guides with readers and prescribed text books – thinking that more is better. This is therefore not only true of e-learning. Yes, the possibility of information-overload is a reality in e-learning. But it is also very real in current teaching and learning practices at Unisa.

5. *ICTs should become the primary medium of learning in higher education.* There are increasing calls for *blended* learning options and in some cases ICTs may be the most appropriate choice to become the primary medium. What is wrong with that? I am still to find an author that claims that ICTs is the only solution in all contexts…

6. *Leisure (including playing and entertainment) and learning are separate activities.* Mmm, I don't get this one. Do they claim that e-learning is all about playing and entertainment?

7. *E-learning will make HEIs more competitive and they must seize it or be declared institutionally redundant.* Have a look in any Sunday newspaper and notice how international higher educational institutions are offering courses to South African students. E-learning does increase the competition. And why would someone study at Unisa if they can study at an internationally accredited and celebrated institution through e-learning if it was not for the cost factor?

8. *Establishing the infrastructure (hardware and software) in e-learning is the most difficult part.* Here they have a point. The establishment is of infrastructure is not the most difficult part; people issues and change management are…

9. *E-learning will see the demise of the traditional classroom.* No one makes such claims. E-learning and the affordances of technology do however open up vistas never considered before.
10. *E-learning can decrease absenteeism and lower dropout among students.* There is enough credible international research that indicates that appropriately designed and delivered blended learning decreases absenteeism and lower dropout.

I think what frustrated me about the article is its lack of evidence and nuanced reasoning. It is so easy to make sweeping statements and find one or two proponents who would support your sweeping statements, while it is much more difficult to address the middle-ground where issues are no longer so neatly black and white, but where shades of grey reign.

I don't know of anyone at Unisa who claims that e-learning is *the* saviour. I don't know of anyone at Unisa who claims that e-learning will replace human interaction. I don't know of anyone at Unisa who claims that e-learning is *the* panacea for all of our teaching and learning problems.

But I do know some people who would not consider the potential of using a range of technologies appropriate to the teaching context and student profile.

6   MARKING BLOGS AND DISCUSSION FORUMS – 24 MARCH

Invitation received from the myUnisa team:

So, you want to stop paying lip service to ODL alternative assessment debates and feel a need to create innovative new ways to assess student's participation?

You may feel that creating any form of grading for participation in a discussion forum or blog is too labour intensive.

Come join us on 24 March at 10:00 to 11:30 in Exam Hall 1 and tell us exactly how you would like to deal with this kind of marking and to what extent it must be automated. Giving marks for participation in Blogs and Discussion forums could be a great way for continuous formative assessment.

Exam Hall 1 is big and you DO NOT have to RSVP to me but an indication of your intention to join us on the day will be appreciated in the sign up tool on this site.

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7 RE THE PROVISION OF PREVIOUS YEARS' EXAMINATION PAPERS…

I am still waiting for the response and will include it as soon as I receive it.

8 THE SECOND CELEBRATION OF INNOVATION IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

Join us on **Thursday, 17 March** (Senate Hall, 09:00-13:00) for the "Second celebration of innovation in teaching and learning".

We would like to celebrate examples of innovation in teaching and learning (including student support, administration, etc) at Unisa. The programme is as follows:

09:00	Programme overview	**Dr Paul Prinsloo** (ODL Coordinator)
09:10	Official Welcome	**Prof Rita Maré** (Vice Principal: Academic & Research)
09:20	• Taking the "distance" out of distance education: going the extra mile: the role of group discussions	**Mr Theo van der Vyver** (Department of Economics)
	• The use of satellite broadcasting in bridging the cognitive and emotional divide	**Ms Rochelle Wessels** (Department of Public Administration)
10:00	*Open discussion*	
10:20	• E-learning as maieutic: teaching Philosophy in ODL.	**Mr Callum Scott** (Department of Philosophy and Systematic Theology)
	• The optimum use of myUnisa in the teaching of Computing: pitfalls and opportunities	**Mr Jan Mentz** (Computing)
	• The new face of tutoring at Unisa: A pilot E-tutor project in Management Accounting	**Mr Anton Jordaan** (Department of Management Accounting)
11:20	*Open discussion*	

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11:45	Closing remarks: Teaching and learning at Unisa: the next generation	**Dr Paul Prinsloo**
12:00	Lunch	

9   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. The repository is updated on a regular basis and if you register on the repository, you will get notifications of any new uploads.

Drafted by Dr Paul Prinsloo
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15 March 2011

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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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10   THE TRANSCRIPT OF ODL PODCAST 4

Podcast number 4: Not control but coordination

Welcome to this fourth ODL podcast. The theme of this podcast is: Not control but coordination.

My name is Paul Prinsloo, I am the ODL Coordinator.

As the colleges and the different stakeholders at Unisa embrace ODL, there are more and more initiatives claiming to be ODL related. A number of years ago, the only mention of ODL was on the posters and banners on the outside of the Unisa buildings.

Now ODL is one everyone's lips and there are some wonderful initiatives going on. A number of ODL workshops are held.

I know of a number of initiatives planning ODL conferences, workshops and symposia. A number of colleges and departments want to invite ODL experts from all over the world. Teams and individuals from colleges visit the regions and make promises in the name of ODL.

Not only is there an increasing number of ODL initiatives at Unisa, but many of the initiatives contradict one another. In the name of ODL we promise the regions decentralised services and more regional offices. In the name of ODL we want to expand satellite broadcasting and video conferencing. In the name of ODL we want to build new buildings in order to offer students more face-to –face support. In the name of ODL we publish our research and stake our claims.

And many of these initiatives, claims, and stakes are contradictory. I am not judging the claims, but rather want to point out the contradictory character of many of these claims.

I do not for one moment want to propose that every initiative that lays claim to ODL should get permission from a central authority. The issue is not getting permission or someone having control over the different initiatives. This podcast is a plea for coordination and sharing of initiatives and resources. I want to plead for open communication and networking with regard to the different initiatives. If we continue to make promises and launch initiatives without coordination, it will defeat our most honest and enthusiastic intentions.

God forbid that we try to centralise all initiatives and try to control all efforts to engage with the opportunities and challenges of being an ODL institution. The issue is not control and centralisation. The issue is not censure. But we will need to find a way to coordinate our ODL efforts around approved policies, frameworks and guidelines.

The next six months will be crucial for the implementation of a number of policies and frameworks such as the Framework for a Team Approach, the curriculum policy, the development and implementation of a new regional infrastructure, the seven year development cycle for curriculum and learning development, rationalising the PQM, increasing our student success and retention.

This is a plea for the support from everyone for coordination of efforts, resources and initiatives.

Not central control, but coordination. And may we have the wisdom to know the difference.