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Compiled and published by the
Department of Corporate Communication and Marketing
Open Distance Learning Coordination Office and
Institute for Open and Distance Learning,

WELCOME



FROM THE PRO-VICE-CHANCELLOR PROF NAREND BAIJNATH

In their recent book, *A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change* (2011), Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown ask a crucial question: **What happens to learning when we move from the stable infrastructure of the twentieth century to the fluid infrastructure of the 21st century, where technology is constantly creating and responding to change?**

This question could be a suitable frame for Unisa's Teaching and Learning Festival with a slight adjustment, so that it reads: *What happens to learning for students in South Africa and on the continent when we move from the relatively ordered infrastructure of the past to the fluid and sometimes bewildering context of the 21st century, where technology is always just out of reach for a substantial proportion of our students but which we as an open distance university have a responsibility to make increasingly affordable and accessible* (with apologies to the original authors).

When the new structure for Unisa was originally envisaged, those responsible for the strategic planning of this institution were convinced that we needed a renewed emphasis on teaching and learning, not only to foreground our belief that, in an ODL environment, the student is always at the centre of what we do, but to emphasize that business should not go on as usual in our academic and administrative practices.

No longer is it pedagogically viable or sound to continue with outdated practices whereby the transmission of knowledge is a one-way process with the "sage on the stage", or in our case, the professor in her office. We wanted to imbue our academics with a "new culture of learning" even if this meant that they would have to go back to being students themselves. *Why did we think in this way?*

Well, very simply, because it was obvious to us that the pace of change was too rapid to ignore and that the profile of our students had also changed to a younger, full-time, diverse, and in significant parts – educationally disadvantaged mass, whose cultural capital was vastly different from that of our past student body.

To reach these students most effectively and to improve retention rates at our university, we need to put on new spectacles, engage in new practices and become life-long learners of new pedagogies and technologies, particularly those pertinent to online teaching and learning.

For this reason, we reconfigured the position of Vice-Principal Academic and Research to make way for two new posts, that of Vice-Principal Academic: Teaching and Learning, and Vice-Principal: Research and Innovation. The titles of these new posts were not arrived at haphazardly but point to the very real change of emphasis at Unisa. Teaching and learning signify a renewed attention to the ways in which we teach and the ways in which our students learn, and the amplification of research coupled with innovation signifies our determination to stay at the cutting edge of pedagogical practice through advanced and applied research.

We are poised on the cusp of dramatic change. How flexibly and responsively we are able to embrace change will determine our success in the future and it is my belief that the Teaching and Learning Festival is the harbinger of the change we so keenly anticipate, signalling Unisa's intent to position ourselves at the forefront as a truly African yet consummately global university.



MESSAGE



FROM THE VICE-PRINCIPAL ACADEMIC: TEACHING AND LEARNING PROF RITA MARÉ

The University of South Africa (Unisa) has, since its inception in 1873, undergone many changes in the way it develops curricula, the way it assesses students and the type of learning experiences it designs and offers. As Unisa grew into a fully-fledged distance education university, we embraced different challenges, for example, that of continuously upholding our social mandate to offer open access to any student who had university admission, regardless of race, gender or socioeconomic background. For many Unisa students, Unisa was (and still is) their only access to higher education.

As a distance education institution, Unisa has always sought creative and cost-effective ways to support student learning, offering lecturer-led group discussions at different regional centres, making use of audio and video recordings and, since the 1990s, offering face-to-face tutorial support for our students. The year 2004 saw the establishment of Unisa as the only dedicated comprehensive distance education institution in South Africa when it merged with Technikon Southern Africa and incorporated the distance education campus of Vista University.

Since 2007, Unisa has embraced open distance learning (ODL) with all its potential, challenges and responsibilities. Being and becoming an ODL institution necessitated the need to redefine our understanding of student support and to embrace the potential of a range of alternative assessment strategies, and of various technologies to support teaching and learning. We also re-examined our curriculum design processes and developed a statement on gradueness which boldly asserts that Unisa's graduates are on a par with graduates of the rest of the world; but our graduates are different. Our graduates have, among other things, a proven track record of being resilient and rooted in the needs and potential of the African continent, while being relevant in international contexts.

This publication provides a brief, reflective overview of Unisa's development from an examining body in 1873 to a fully-fledged ODL institution. We celebrate the advances we have made in addressing the challenges inherent in being and becoming an ODL institution. In this publication we also share some examples of faculty members who have accepted the responsibilities and challenges of teaching in an ODL institution and who use a variety of methods and technologies to increase the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

While Unisa has come a long way, we are constantly aware of the new challenges that await us in the 21st century. This publication also shares some glimpses of the future which awaits teaching and learning in a digital age where many of the past approaches to teaching and learning are no longer viable or appropriate. While many of the challenges and responsibilities inherent in being an ODL institution are daunting, we embrace the mandate of Unisa to be the African university in *the service of humanity*.



PREFACE



UNISA 2011: **A NEW WORLD – CURRICULUM, PEDAGOGY AND TECHNOLOGY IN TRANSITION**

From the dawn of time, humanity's survival has depended on what we know, the technology we use and how we share our knowledge. Times of prosperity, disaster, war, famine and abundance have shaped the stories we have told from generation to generation, both within and between communities. These stories were painted on rocks and in caves and were documented in the great library of Timbuktu and in the largest library of the ancient world in Alexandria. These stories were told and celebrated in the great kingdoms of Mapungubwe, the Ashanti and many others on the African continent.

Today we continue to build on these stories, which encompass both the golden and dark times of African history. We also believe that we are at a crucial point in Unisa's history – one where we are willing to embrace a new vision and develop a new character.

We are unashamedly an African university. We are also proud to be an open distance learning institution – with all the challenges, responsibilities and opportunities that ODL brings.

We are convinced that our graduates are on a par with graduates in other parts of the world. But our graduates are different in that they have a profound sense of the history, opportunities and challenges that are associated with living on the African continent. Their acute awareness of their location includes an awareness of the challenges and opportunities of a globally networked world and a planet that is facing increasing demands from a growing population. Our graduates are determined to serve humanity, no matter what it takes.

The Unisa Curriculum Policy (2010) defines graduateness in the Unisa context as follows:

Unisa graduates

- 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
- 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 knowledge competently, ethically and creatively to solve real-life problems
- are critically aware of their own learning and developmental needs and future potential



DR PAUL PRINSLOO
ACTING HEAD: INSTITUTE FOR OPEN
AND DISTANCE LEARNING (IODL)

TEACHING AND LEARNING AT UNISA



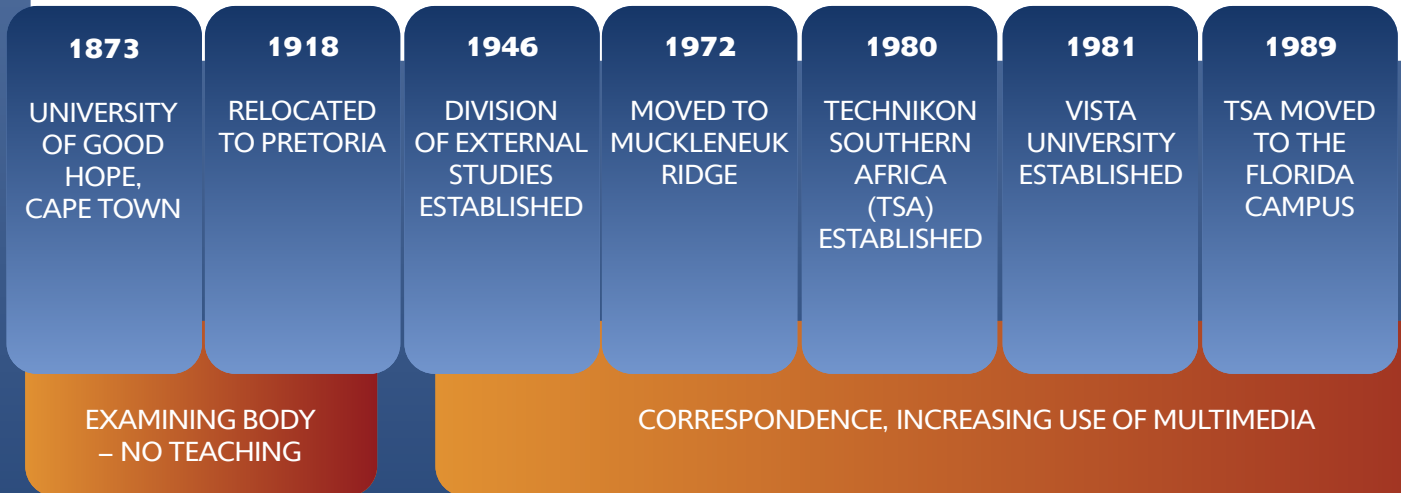
MILESTONES IN THE HISTORY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

The history of higher education in South Africa is closely linked with the history of the University of South Africa. Unisa started out as the University of Good Hope, which was established in Cape Town in 1873 and received a royal charter in 1877. The university was originally established, not as a teaching entity, but as an examining body for Oxford and Cambridge universities. In 1918 the university relocated to Pretoria.

The next key moment in Unisa's history was the establishment of the Division of External Studies in 1946. With this development, Unisa became a correspondence distance education institution with print-based materials as its main form of teaching. Throughout the apartheid years in South Africa, Unisa was the only access to higher education for many students; in fact, the first president of a democratic South Africa, Nelson Mandela, studied through Unisa while he was incarcerated.

The 1970s saw an increase in the use of radio and audio and video cassettes as Unisa embraced technologies to bridge the distance between the university and its students. Technikon Southern Africa (TSA) and Vista University were established in 1980 and 1981 respectively, and in 2004 Unisa merged with TSA and incorporated Vista University's Distance Education Campus (Vudec) to form the only dedicated comprehensive university in South Africa. It thus became the largest distance education institution in

JOURNEY TOWARDS BECOMING AN ODL INSTITUTION



Africa and among the largest in the world. The vision of this mega institution was to be “the African university in the service of humanity”. This new vision and character resulted in a new coat of arms rich in African iconography and symbolising the strength, heritage and dynamism of the new, comprehensive University of South Africa.

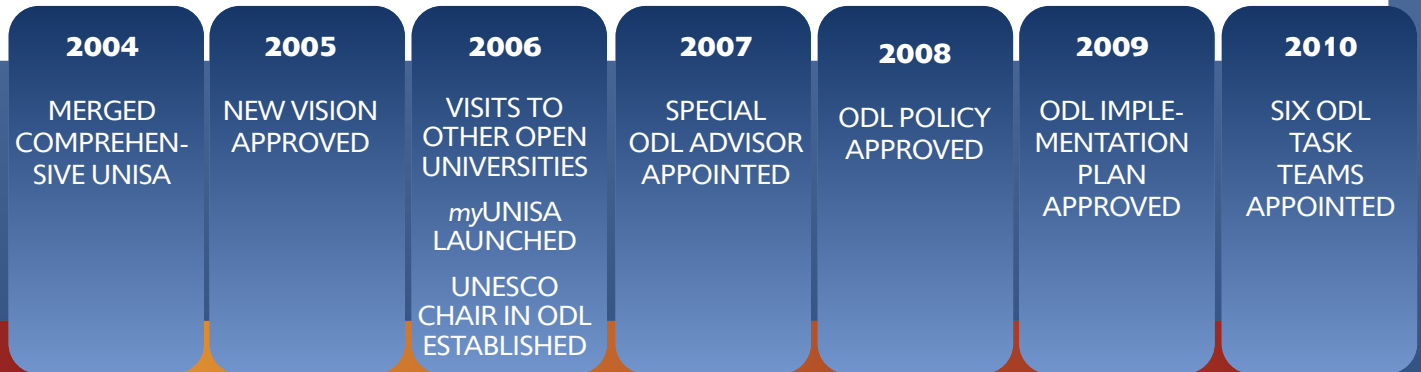
While Vudec, TSA and Unisa had all used a range of different technologies, the year 2006 saw the launch of an integrated learning management platform called *myUnisa*. Furthermore, in an effort to establish a context-appropriate model for open distance learning (ODL) at Unisa, the Open University of Malaysia, the Indira Gandhi National Open University in India and the Open University in the United Kingdom, among others.

A special ODL advisor was appointed, in the person of Professor Alwyn Louw, to oversee the institutional exploration of the nature and scope of being and becoming an ODL institution. In 2008 an ODL policy was approved and accepted as the seminal document shaping Unisa’s character as an ODL institution. As Unisa moved from correspondence and distance education towards ODL, there were various initiatives and processes aimed at aligning institutional processes in teaching and learning to advance its ODL character. In 2008 a number of at-risk modules were selected and redesigned with the purpose of integrating and optimising the affordability of a range of technologies and stakeholders, such as tutors and a network of regional offices.

While this initiative enjoyed some success, it became clear that a more comprehensive and structured approach was necessary.

Therefore, in 2009 a revised ODL implementation plan was approved and the implementation process started. The plan was comprehensive and entailed a critical rethink on a range of issues, such as Unisa’s admission requirements; the programme qualification mix (PQM); the formulation of a curriculum policy with a clear statement on graduateness; defining student support and developing a conceptual model for student support; rethinking the use of a range of technologies in teaching, learning and student support; rethinking the design cycle of learning experiences; designing an appropriate resource allocation model to realise ODL; rethinking the role of the regions; developing an ODL pedagogy; designing a student communication strategy; and exploring a range of alternative assessment strategies.

The year 2010 heralded the start of the implementation of the revised ODL plan for Unisa. Today, as Unisa looks back on its journey since 1873, it has a clear sense of the progress it has made and it celebrates and honours those who shaped Unisa into becoming a mega comprehensive ODL institution with more than 300 000 students. While the university takes pride in what it has achieved, it is mindful that the innovation and technological developments of the 21st century will continue to shape its character, curricula and pedagogies.



EMBRACING DISTANCE LEARNING AS A COMPREHENSIVE INSTITUTION

OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING PROJECT

Since the development of and approval of an open distance learning (ODL) policy in 2008, Unisa has grappled with various challenges associated with being an ODL institution. In 2009 the strategy was to develop a number of “power” or “pilot” modules to embed the way in which learning experiences should be planned and delivered, technology used, and face-to-face tutors and a range of other initiatives implemented to support teaching and learning in open distance learning. Although this initiative enjoyed some success, at the end of 2009 Unisa decided to redesign the plan for the implementation of ODL.

ODL plan

The new ODL plan was approved in November 2009 and comprised the following key focus areas:

- developing new generic undergraduate admission requirements, with due consideration of Unisa’s commitment to fulfil its social mandate and provide access, while also providing alternative pathways for students with different potential and risk profiles (It was also important to develop generic, college-specific higher certificates for students who need additional support and guidance.)
- developing a conceptual model to understand, predict and manage student success, retention and throughput
- investigating and supporting the implementation of semesterisation and addressing various initiatives to increase organisational efficiency
- simplifying the calendars
- evaluating the viability of the programme qualification mix (PQM)
- implementing a revised framework for a team approach to curriculum and learning development
- developing a strategy and implementation plan to design and revise curricula and courseware in cycles of seven years, according to second-order classification of educational subject matter (CESM) categories
- exploring alternative assessment strategies and methods
- developing and implementing a Unisa curriculum policy
- developing a number of postgraduate modules online
- exploring various initiatives to increase Unisa students’ access to affordable and sustainable internet access
- developing a definition of student support, with due consideration of the unique characteristics of Unisa’s students and the institutional profile and context
- developing a conceptual model and implementation plan for student support
- developing a conceptual framework and strategy for technology-enhanced and supported teaching, learning and student support

- finalising the Unisa student communication and marketing strategy
- developing a framework for ODL pedagogy, with clear guidelines for the roles of various stakeholders in the implementation of such a pedagogy, such as the regions and support departments
- ensuring the integration and optimum alignment of different systems, procedures and processes to support and sustain the implementation of ODL
- developing a comprehensive framework and strategy to emphasise ODL and to encourage continuous professional development (CPD) in ODL

Task teams

During 2010, six ODL task teams were formed to focus on specific elements of the ODL implementation plan. The teams were as follows:

Task team 1: Admission requirements

Professor Divya Singh, Assistant Principal, was the convenor of this task team, which examined generic admission requirements. As the single dedicated comprehensive ODL institution in South Africa, Unisa is the only opportunity to gain access to higher education for many students. The university has a very powerful social mandate to provide access to higher education to those who are – or previously were – excluded from higher education owing to factors such as admission and selection criteria at residential institutions; the limited capacity of such institutions to provide access; personal circumstances of students, whether employed or unemployed; and socioeconomic circumstances.

Unisa’s social mandate is, however, just one side of the coin; the other is to optimise students’ chances of success by allowing them to register for a range of qualifications appropriate to their potential. In January 2011 Unisa’s Senate approved the new admission requirements proposed by this task team, emphasising that no student who has access to higher education (as per national legislation) will be excluded from registering at Unisa. However, the university will only allow students to register for courses that are appropriate in terms of their individual profile and potential.

Task team 2: Higher certificates

This ODL task team focused on the design of higher certificates to provide appropriate access to students according to their potential. This team was led by Professor Rosemary Moeketsi, Executive Dean of the College of Human Sciences. At the Senate meeting of June 2011, a number of college-specific higher certificates were approved, which will fulfil a crucial role in providing students – who might otherwise have been excluded from higher education – with access to appropriate pathways.

Task team 3: Assessment

Dr Gugu Moche, Director of the School of Sciences, convened task team 3, which had a specific mandate to explore, document and propose a range of alternative assessment practices appropriate to the ODL character of Unisa, while also taking into account the unique character of each discipline and the student profiles. In 2010 a range of alternative assessment practices were approved; processes and systemic support are currently being developed to ensure the effective implementation of

these alternative strategies, including take-home examinations and projects, oral examinations, capstone modules and case studies.

Task team 4: Student support

Task team 4 had the mandate to define student support at Unisa, but also to develop a conceptual model to support the definition; the latter initiative was led by Dr Japie Heydenrych of the Directorate of Quality Assurance and Promotion. In 2010 the team's recommendations were approved, including a proposal to distinguish three distinct phases in student support, namely pre-registration, post-registration and post-graduation support. During 2011 a further classification was added and it was proposed that student support entail a comprehensive and integrated approach to provide students with appropriate administrative, emotional and academic or cognitive support. At the end of 2010, Senate approved the piloting of e-tutoring at Unisa, which will expand the rendering of tutorial support to students who are unable to attend face-to-face tutorial sessions.

Task team 5: Technology

Considering the increasingly important role that technologies play in higher education and, specifically, in ODL, task team 5, convened by Mr Deon van der Merwe, Director: ICT, looked at technology-enhanced teaching, learning and student support. The team developed a comprehensive conceptual model, differentiating between augmented, blended and full online learning. In 2011 the approved conceptual model was expanded into a proposal for a five-year ICT plan to enhance teaching and learning.

The focal points of this plan are as follows:

Focus 1: Increase, sustain and support affordable, secure, supported and reliable access for students and staff to a range of appropriate technologies and software.

Focus 2: Strategically differentiate between available and future technologies, and test and implement the operationalisation of these technologies over a five-year period.

Focus 3: Design and develop a change management strategy to support the focal points in this plan.

Focus 4: Support the creation and use of open educational resources (OERs).

Focus 5: Contribute to and support the institutional discourse and policy development on the social, ethical, legal and human use of technologies.

Task team 6: Student success, retention and throughput

Professor George Subotzky, Executive Director: Information and Strategic Analysis, led task team 6, which focused on student success, retention and throughput. This team was faced with the challenge of solving the student success, retention and throughput complexities at Unisa. International literature regarding student success and retention was not very helpful as it is mostly based on North Atlantic residential higher education research and is therefore less applicable to the unique and layered context of Unisa as a comprehensive ODL institution in a developing world. Student success at Unisa should also be seen against the backdrop of addressing the vast legacies of colonialism and apartheid.

Dr Paul Prinsloo, Acting Director: Institute for Open and Distance Learning, conducted a comprehensive literature review, which formed the basis of a framework and socio-critical conceptual model for understanding and predicting student success, retention and throughput at Unisa. The model provided new insights into the complexities of student success in an ODL and developing world context.

Early in 2011 the task team's final report was presented at a Unisa Senate meeting, where it was decided to establish an inter-stakeholder Student Success Forum, as well as academic support units in the respective colleges.

Progress and plans

By the middle of 2011, close to 70 recommendations had been presented at Unisa Senate meetings and most of them were approved. The final comprehensive framework and strategy for understanding, predicting and managing student success, retention and throughput was approved at the Senate meeting of June 2011.

During the remainder of 2011, the emphasis will be on the following:

- implementing the recommendations of the different ODL task teams
- implementing the team approach, the curriculum policy and the seven-year cycle, 2nd-order CESM-directed cycle
- designing and delivering e-learning and e-support while providing for other modes of delivery
- choosing technologies and increasing and supporting access to a range of technologies for staff and students
- ensuring that systems, processes and procedures are integrated, well resourced and supported, as well as piloted in the CEMS e-tutor pilot
- developing an ODL pedagogy with clear guiding principles
- aligning and supporting different initiatives within agreed-upon frameworks and supporting systems
- celebrating and supporting innovation in teaching and learning
- increasing the quality and range of administrative, academic and pastoral student support.

Unisa has achieved much in its transformation from a distance education university into an open distance learning university. But there are still a number of issues that need attention, including the following:

- the capacities and resources needed for the successful implementation of the initiatives and to sustain and grow organisational efficiency
- how to engage the institution and, specifically, the academic community to ensure academics are empowered and well resourced
- how to fulfil the university's social mandate to provide access to students previously excluded from higher education and to ensure the availability of appropriate pathways and support for all students
- how to ensure interdepartmental efficiencies in the value chain
- the role of specialised discipline knowledge and expertise in the ODL model
- the development of systems and procedures that will allow the maximum possible standardisation, while also affording flexibility
- how to address the special and specific needs of postgraduate students.

INNOVATION IN ACTION



CREATING A VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

**Callum Scott, Philosophy
and Systematic Theology
(Critical Reasoning),
College of Human
Sciences**

During 2010 and 2011, a number of events were held under the title *Celebration of innovation in teaching and learning*. A general call for nominations went out via Unisa's internal communication network (*econnect*) and ODL communiques to invite nominations of Unisa staff, at the forefront of innovation in teaching and learning. The purpose of these events was to celebrate innovative practices by lecturers who either broke rules or explored new practices; or lecturers who went out of their way finding new ways of supporting students.

The following case studies are by no means an exhaustive list of the creative teaching and learning practices at Unisa, but they do provide a mosaic of inspiring initiatives of lecturers and staff walking the extra mile.

I teach Critical Reasoning, and my primary method of communication with students is through means of the *myUnisa* portal. Thus, I can reach out as a real person, not merely a faceless lecturer.

Critical Reasoning expresses through theory and practice, the philosophical skill of reflecting on arguments, texts, and other phenomenon with a critical eye, and I expose students to flawed reasons, arguments and analysis against the students' personal arguments that they have acquired from the module.

In my own view, my best achievement since being a lecturer at Unisa has been engaging and interacting with my students through the construction of relationships. My students have come to feel less isolated, and more engaged with. This is evidenced by the massive increase in student activity on the *myUnisa* websites of the modules I am teaching. In one module there were over 40 000 activities in the past semester. In the Critical Reasoning module, while less students were registered the first semester of 2011, when compared with last semester, there has been an increase of 45,2% in student activity.

Another related achievement experienced in another module is an increase from virtual inactivity to almost 3 000 student activities on the website, despite being a relatively small module compared to Critical Reasoning. Students appreciate interaction with the lecturer. A relationship of ease forms and I have noted improved performance by students as a result of the *myUnisa* activity.

CHALLENGES

Initially reaching out to the students was arduous. Despite my ongoing efforts, I find the vast distances in open distance learning (ODL) is a massive problem and I have to continually create novel means of assisting students across this wide divide. There should be ongoing debate about balancing the number of students against the overall quality of tuition at Unisa.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

"It is refreshing to interact with a lecturer who is clearly passionate about both his subject and his students. I have to comment you on doing a great job. I am positive it is much appreciated by all students."



PROVIDING AN AUTHENTIC LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Rudi Pretorius, Department of Geography (Geography of Tourism), College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences



“In the immediate future it will be challenging for Unisa to keep good students without access to ICTs aboard.”

I provide students with an authentic learning experience on sustaining the interaction between humans (tourists) and the environment in a spatial-temporal context. I use the global environmental dilemma as the setting.

Using theory as the means for students to gain a better understanding of their selected destination, I engage them in collating a portfolio at the end of each study unit. So, by the completion of the module, students can present a folder of evidence showcasing their skills in dealing with tourist-environment (humans and natural world) interaction.

To motivate and ensure students are on track – and as means of interaction between students and me, I assign activities to be submitted during the semester. Many students experience problems in terms of time and effort required for these assignments, while others develop understanding about the modern world and the issues we face as well as the options available to deal with environmental issues.

CHALLENGES

I find open distance learning poses difficulty in facilitating effective student-lecturer interaction. If this aspect can be improved, it is possible to address many misconceptions students have about what I expect of them.

Also, student participation rates are low. Many students still do not use the myUnisa platform, in some cases not at all, and prefer working alone, using only their study guide and tutorial letters.

While a number of students have access to ICTs/internet submitting online assignments via ICT and myUnisa, the remainder submit handwritten copy and it's almost impossible within the limited semester time span for resubmission of handwritten assignments.

In the immediate future it will be challenging for Unisa to keep good students without access to ICTs aboard. We must not lose them. A case in point is a medium security inmate, who, with no access to any ICTs, submits excellent handwritten submissions.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

“My first assignment was not easy, requiring lots of research and information. But, it was interesting and fun, allowing me to be creative and think out of the box. After completing this, I feel good and am positive about my forthcoming results.”

POSITIVE RESPONSE ON VODCASTS

Kerry de Hart, Department of Taxation (Taxation of salaried persons; Taxation of individuals), College of Economic and Management Sciences and Directorate Curriculum and Learning Development



I apply practical situations in teaching both theory/tax law modules. Students have difficulty in putting theory into practice, so with Leonie Steyn's assistance, I recorded short vodcasts explaining difficult concepts in the (fringe benefits) study unit. I then worked through short examples with students, and I hyperlinked the vodcasts to myUnisa. The examination results on dealing with fringe benefits TAX 1501 revealed a marked improvement.

Vodcasts were available again this semester, receiving positive student response. But, we will only be able to compare if we have achieved significant improvement once all the exams have been marked. Other than the quantitative effect, there is also the Hawthorne effect, students feel like the lecturers care for them and they feel part of a learning community. Students are requesting that this type of support is added to all modules offered by Unisa.

CHALLENGES

Unisa needs to change its mindset. It doesn't provide support for academics in the new ever-changing technologies. I would like a technology team testing, supplying and training academics, with best practice guidelines.

Academics, and students, definitely need support for the new teaching era, particularly as students are already using new technology in entertainment and social communication.

At the moment extra technical work is done in academics private time; there is not a soundproof room with technical support and equipment available. It would prove vastly beneficial to hand over a vodcast with a title to a supportive technical team for editing and uploading.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

"The focus on key issues and the excellent use of myUnisa website set this department apart. I specially liked the department opening up more avenues of communication such as DVD presentations on difficult topics and my favourite periodic podcasts."

PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

Ari Swanepoel, Kerry de Hart, and Mark van Dyk, Department of Taxation (Taxation), College of Economic and Management Sciences and Directorate Curriculum and Learning Development. Also part of the team, but absent on the photo is Ruyaida Moosa.



“The DVD was really helpful, clearing issues with some topics. It instilled confidence and reassured me.”



We applied theory/tax law to practical situations in tutoring so that we could help students incorporate what they learnt in theory/tax law in realistic situations. The team recorded a DVD to assist students with the module, and next semester the DVD is going to be converted to podcasts.

The DVD recorded was based on a group visit situation in which lecturers were explaining and working through the theory applicable to an old examination paper, assignment 3 and various questions.

It was the first time this has been done at Unisa. Our unique situation is that the content of our course changes every year and therefore we cannot spend a long time recording and editing (the tax act is also only available from September the previous year).

CHALLENGES

We had difficulty convincing supporting sections about the validity of our programme. We really need both a central uniform plan going forward, as well as support for innovative initiatives. Some students get much input in one module, but none in another. A minimum plan needs to be effected, with the understanding that first-year students need more input; this lessens as the students progress.

Additionally, the volume of students is large. We also get a lot of students that do not have the skills to do what the subject requires and we have to use a lot of time to teach those skills which should already be in place.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

“The DVD was really helpful, clearing issues with some topics. It instilled confidence and reassured me.”

TUTORING THE E-MAIL WAY

**Klarissa Engelbrecht and
Gülbert du Toit, School of
Computing (End-user computing
practical), College of Economic
and Management Sciences and
Directorate Curriculum and Learning**



This year course of 120 hours delivers end-user computing in a developing world context to 25 000 students (20 000 in 2010). Electronic together with paper-based study material is used in the course that forms part of 99 different qualifications at Unisa.

In this course, we used distance learning aids (DLAs); a form of e-tutoring specifically designed to cater for the needs of the course. We had one DLA coordinator and 50 DLAs, who were recruited between January and May 2010, and we only provided e-mail support to students. This, after face-to-face tutors in 2009 proved a dismal failure, with such low student participation that it was impossible to determine the impact on the students' performance.

We believe, considering lessons learnt over the last 18 months, that predominant e-mail based tutoring using DLAs is the way of the future. Most students have e-mail skills and access to e-mails receiving them on their mobile phones. It is necessary to challenge increasing administrative demands placed on academics, together with ever-shrinking time frames to complete tasks. We believe DLAs should provide individualised, not bulk service, which would be better matched to skills and tools suitable to the specific modules academics teach.

CHALLENGES

Teaching a practical computer course by means of ODL is not easy; an obvious obstacle being the large student numbers. Most people do not believe 50 DLAs is adequate to support 21 000 to 25 000 students, and recruiting 50 suitable DLAs is, many believe, insurmountable.

We find the most pervasive problems lie in administration work. Contractual, claim and payment issues were most challenging – just when we thought we had addressed all concerns, new ones were raised. Many problems stem from marrying virtual, electronic services, with a paper-based system, which is imbedded in face-to-face tutor paradigms. Using scarce academic resources to deal with overwhelming administrative issues may have derailed the project – as did physically having to verify tutors presence, rather than evaluating the results of their work.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

"I enjoyed the effective use of technology, namely the internet. Even if it means offering this service at an extra fee to maintain and develop this website, I think we will see far stronger graduates."

SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH MXIT

Annelien van Rooyen, Department of Financial Accounting (Selected accounting standards and simple group structures), School of Accounting Sciences, College of Economic and Management Sciences



“ I looked for better avenues to reach my 3 000 students and to achieve good results.”

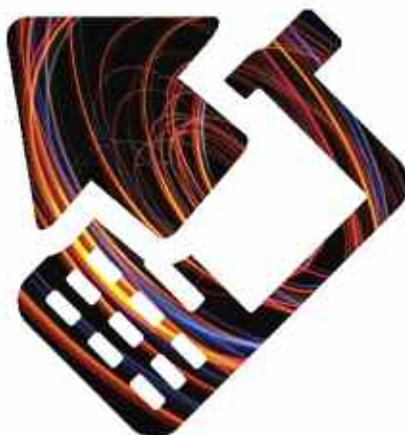
When only a very few students managed to attend group discussion classes in 2004, I looked for better avenues to reach my 3 000 students and to achieve good results. I needed technology that is easy to access, cheap and enjoyable to use.

In 2006 I started mobile intervention. Each Monday morning I sent 12 motivational, informational or academic support SMS texts.

The positive feedback from students led me to experiment with MXit intervention – an inexpensive, widely accessible and effective mobile communication tool used by students. They now communicate with me by MXit, day, night and over weekends, and they enjoy the process.

CHALLENGES

We are competing with local and international ODL institutions, and must be ready for the next generation of technology for ODL. New interactive devices are continually being designed and developed in the marketplace.



STUDENT FEEDBACK

“This is the only course where I feel motivated to study, and I can feel the lecturer’s support.”

“The lecturer’s sms messages – wow, they’re fantastic! I feel quite motivated.”

“Joining an online forum boosts morale, gives you a sense of belonging. Students are better equipped to help each other, like answering FAQs discussing work and helping fellow students get the right help from Unisa. I wouldn’t have got through my studies if not for the continuous on-line support.”

SMALL TEAM, MANY INITIATIVES

Theo van der Vyver, Department of Economics (Economics), College of Economics and Management Sciences



In my team I have five lecturers and 60 tutors, for an enrolment of 18 222 students. In 2003 we became the first Unisa department to introduce a multi-lingual glossary with the 400 odd economic concepts translated into Afrikaans, English, isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sepedi and Setswana.

We also created CD-Granules to explain difficult concepts in the module in an interactive manner, and students reported they found the work much more understandable than when they merely used a textbook.

A DVD of the syllabus was also developed. It incorporates real life examples, theory and contributions from renowned economists. Again, students reported that the DVD contributed to their understanding of difficult concepts. They can pause, rewind and forward the DVD as needed.

My department offers discussion classes for students twice a semester, and we use the SMS system to advertise the classes to students at 12 regional centres using 11 lecturers. Attendance in some centres is so large we run parallel sessions.

We use *myUnisa* for many purposes – including general announcements regarding change in assignment dates, discussion dates, exam results and list of top performers.

Additionally we posted additional weekly or monthly information on *myUnisa* about study guidelines for tutors and students about the format of assessments, important sections in the study unit, problems students experience, and supporting exercises from previous examination papers. In the 2011 first semester, 33 503 students visited this resource.

To assist local and international students with easy dispatching of material, we broke our study guide into smaller sections – and we have four satellite broadcasts per module each semester. The presentations were placed on *myUnisa* where we recorded 15 485 visits. We also answer students' questions on a weekly basis via the discussion forum.

We maintain a tutor project site, and are publishing tutorial letters, study guidelines, previous examination papers, announcements and results of the examination. Tutor training workshops are attended by the lecturers in the department. Tutor classes are also attended by lecturers to evaluate tutors' facilitation skills.

CHALLENGES

By not dispatching study material and tutorial letters on time, Unisa systems fail academics and students. This reflected on students' pass rates, especially in the first semester over the previous three years.

Secondly, the system does not make provision for written assessments within a semester for a module with such a large student intake, even when tutors assist with the marking.

Access to the internet, especially *myUnisa* is limited, and students without internet face problems. So the Unisa system lets students down. We are challenged by lack of access to technology for students and the upgrading of administrative systems.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

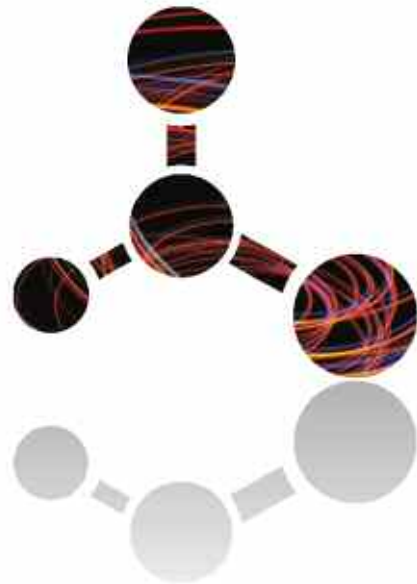
"Thank you for doing such a remarkable job in helping us to better our understanding of this course. You go the extra mile, and although we didn't get the DVDs your advice has been invaluable, so don't apologise for something beyond your control. I believe the effort we put in will show in the exam."

"I want to thank the Economics lecturer for making time to prepare so many slides for us. The resources available for this course have made it so much more enjoyable! I struggled to understand this module previously, but this time round I enjoyed studying."

SUPPORT IN SCIENCE PROGRAMMES

Science Foundation modules

College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences (CAES) and College of Science, Engineering and Technology (CSET)



Science Foundation Provision offers additional teaching support in selected modules with the aim to improve students' success rate in science programmes.

Upon registration, the Science Foundation Provision link the students to an e-tutor who supports their learning with myLife e-mails as well as on the myUnisa electronic learning platform.

Students are also offered face-to-face tutoring at designated Unisa learning centres, provided we can identify a tutor, and a minimum of five students attend each of the modules at the learning centre. Additional Science Foundation Provision support may also include peer mentoring and assistance with mathematics, English, computer literacy. This depends on students needs, which are evaluated.

We provided students with tutors' e-mails to assist with problems in learning.

Moses Kasirye (Engineering: CSET), Felix Fushai (Agriculture and Environmental Sciences: CAES), Temba Tshuma (Physics: CSET), Treasure Makhobotloane (Life Sciences: CAES), Thabo Motlotle (Mathematics: CSET), Thinashaka Ramurafhi (Chemistry: CSET), and, seated; Hentie Wilson (DCLD) and Michelle van Wyk (Geography: CAES) Also part of the team, but absent on the photo, Jan Kroeze, (Computing: CSET), Noluyolo Nogemane (Agriculture and Animal Health: CAES) and Tshwari Mohlala (Statistics : CSET)





INTERACTIVE LEARNING

Dalize van Heerden, School of Computing (Introduction to interactive programming), College of Science, Engineering and Technology



“There is only one thing making me love this module, the lecturer. She interacted with students, unlike in some modules where lecturers are quiet.”

This module provides students with an introduction to object-oriented programming so they can develop a working computer-based program. I use several facilities at *myUnisa* to provide student support.

The Unisa VLE offers students some interactive learning materials and the students are required to use the discussion forum as a question-and-answer space, to reflect on what they have learnt on the blogs, to test their learning using the self assessments, and to pace themselves using the learning units.

We send weekly announcements to assist with learning and pacing their studies, and provide podcasts to explain concepts that students may find difficulty with.

CHALLENGES

Academics need to be provided with proper administrative support systems that allow for cutting edge technology implementation and usage.

Currently, the lecturer needs to fulfil the role of the subject specialist, designer, developer, implementer, quality controller, facilitator, technical and software specialist. This is extremely time consuming, and leads to very little time to accomplish any other IPMS requirements set. Online study material is supposed to be done in a team approach with the lecturer being the subject specialist. But this is not implemented.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

“The course was planned and structured very well.”

“There only one thing making me love this module, the lecturer. She interacted with students, unlike in some modules where lecturers are quiet.”

USING TECHNOLOGY IN NOVEL WAY OF SUPERVISING

Jan Mentz, School of Computing (postgraduate master's students registered for the proposal module: mpset92), College of Science, Engineering and Technology



"I decided to use technology such as myUnisa to experiment with a different way of supervising postgraduate students."

I find much necessary technology has been implemented via myUnisa in the undergraduate course to facilitate learning. This plays a significant part in the ODL learning process with our student body. However, the same cannot be said for managing postgraduate students' learning in an ODL environment where technology has probably only extended to making phone calls and using emails.

I decided to use technology such as myUnisa to experiment with a different way of supervising students. Some of the features seems ideally suited to the task such as for example:

- Dropbox in myUnisa where I could receive a proposal, chapters ideas for research in a private way and load my feedback for the students individually.
- Forum - a kind of public groupthink space where students and other stakeholders can post questions and comments. The idea is to get a virtual thinking community going while supporting each other.
- WIKI – a more organised groupthink space where multiple stakeholders can work on the development of a body of knowledge.
- Blog – a personal space where the students and others can think out loud and receive feedback from the group.
- Announcements - general announcements about issues of interest to all students is made.



CHALLENGES

For the postgraduate supervisor the greatest challenge is to work out what it means to supervise "at a distance" whilst still being engaged with the learning process of the student.

There is an increased demand of postgraduate students to make use of technology in their learning experience. Unisa technology decision makers will have to follow an open and creative approach to apply technology in non-traditional ways to the challenge of ODL.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

"This module consists entirely of my own work. Since this is a research module, one has to find documents on the research topic either on the internet or in libraries. The module also makes greater use of lecturer support."

SATELLITE BROADCAST CLASSES MAKE A HUGE DIFFERENCE

Rochell Wessels, Department of Public Administration and Management (Public Decision Making, Intersectoral Collaboration 3 and Public Service Deliver), College of Economic and Management Sciences



I conducted three satellite broadcast classes for each of my four subjects last year and in 2011, and I have noticed an improvement in my students' results. The students like to know what their lecturers look like, and I too enjoy the interaction. I make the satellite classes more interactive by asking questions and communicating via their cell phones.

I also awarded two or three prizes at each class as motivation for student participation in classes. I designed a questionnaire, which I sent to all regional offices for students to complete on their experiences of satellite classes.

CHALLENGES

The large numbers of students assignments and exam marking take up a great deal of our time, where we could be focusing more of our time on research and developing innovative teaching methods. The innovative teaching methods take a lot of time and the workload is large.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

"Thanks for good lecturers who go an extra mile to help a student."



VIRTUAL TUTOR PROGRAMME THAT GUIDES STUDENTS

Bernard Serfontein, Department of Economics (Economics), College of Economic and Management Sciences



Our current project is the creation of a virtual tutor programme to guide students through the different learning and teaching resources that are available. Over the years, these resources consisting of printed material (text books, study guides and tutorial letters), knowledge granules, video clips, podcasts, WWW resources, articles from the financial press and powerpoint presentations, among other, were created in an unplanned way and the virtual tutor has to guide the student through all these resources. The virtual tutor also provides context and relevance.

CHALLENGES

It is important to overcome the distance between the lecturer and student, giving both student and lecturer an effective voice in the teaching and learning process.

TEACHING BY 'WAMI'

Denzil Chetty, Department of Religious Studies and Arabic (Religious Studies and Religion and Ecology), College of Human Sciences



Religious studies are crucial to understanding the diversity surrounding humanity. Religion shapes peoples beliefs, ideologies and the way they perceive themselves in the world. In recent years there has been a growing interest in the knowledge of the role religion plays in society.

I have developed a “web and mobile interface” (WAMI) connection kit, aimed at producing open dialogue in an ODL context. Through cyberspace physical distance is irrelevant and there is active open communication.

This method of elimination of barriers is referred to as the Freirean-style educational approach, which requires an intensive investigation of the social communicative world of students bringing understanding of different lifestyles into the teaching syllabus. Thus, the WAMI utilises a free website (Yola) to create a central platform Zinadoo (free mobile site), social networking platforms (Facebook and Ning), instant messaging chat (Skype and Chatroll), YouTube videos and Open Access Journals.

In recent years there has been growing interest in the knowledge of the role religion plays in society. Religion shapes peoples beliefs, ideologies and the way they perceive themselves in the world.

CHALLENGES

Unisa needs to progress over the next ten years and think along developing e-tools for a technological driven world. The technology needs to be affordable, accessible, and applicable. The concept of a lonely student sitting in a rural area under a tree without access to technology no longer applies and that mindset needs to change.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

“Your website is really amazing and enriching. I am from Mauritius and here we are limited and I feel isolated.”

“Learning takes place on Facebook itself by our lecturer’s comments or simple messages. Furthermore, Facebook is friendly and makes us comfortable to communicate with our lecturers.

Please Sir, promote it. It will be great to have such direct contact with our lecturers.”



POSTING A PRINCIPLE OF THE WEEK, EVERY WEEK

Willem Coetzee, Yolande Reyneke, Janelle van Zyl and Rendani Nzinga, Department of Management Accounting (Cost Accounting and Control), College of Economic and Management Sciences



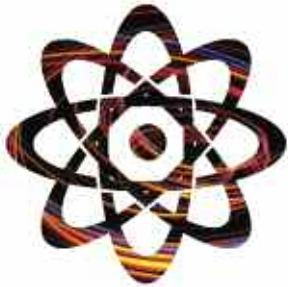
We have introduced a “principle of the week” initiative to BCom or BCompt students, whereby the principles of Management Accounting are posted on *myUnisa* each week. This contains a summary and simplification of at least one important principle of a study unit. We also offer support by email and phone to students who have already attempted the module seven to 14 times.

CHALLENGES

Students are faced with lack of resources – including access to *myUnisa* and they have limited time to study. Other, of many barriers, is the fact there is no personal contact between students and academics due to the large volume of students. Weaker students struggle to grasp some of the contents of the module, lowering the overall pass rate. Thus, it proves challenging to have an acceptable pass rate by assisting as many students as possible within limited time constraints. It's difficult to provide a high standard so students can be successful in their careers compared to graduates from full-time universities.



WORKING TOGETHER – INTERDEPENDENCIES AND INTERRELATIONSHIPS IN ODL



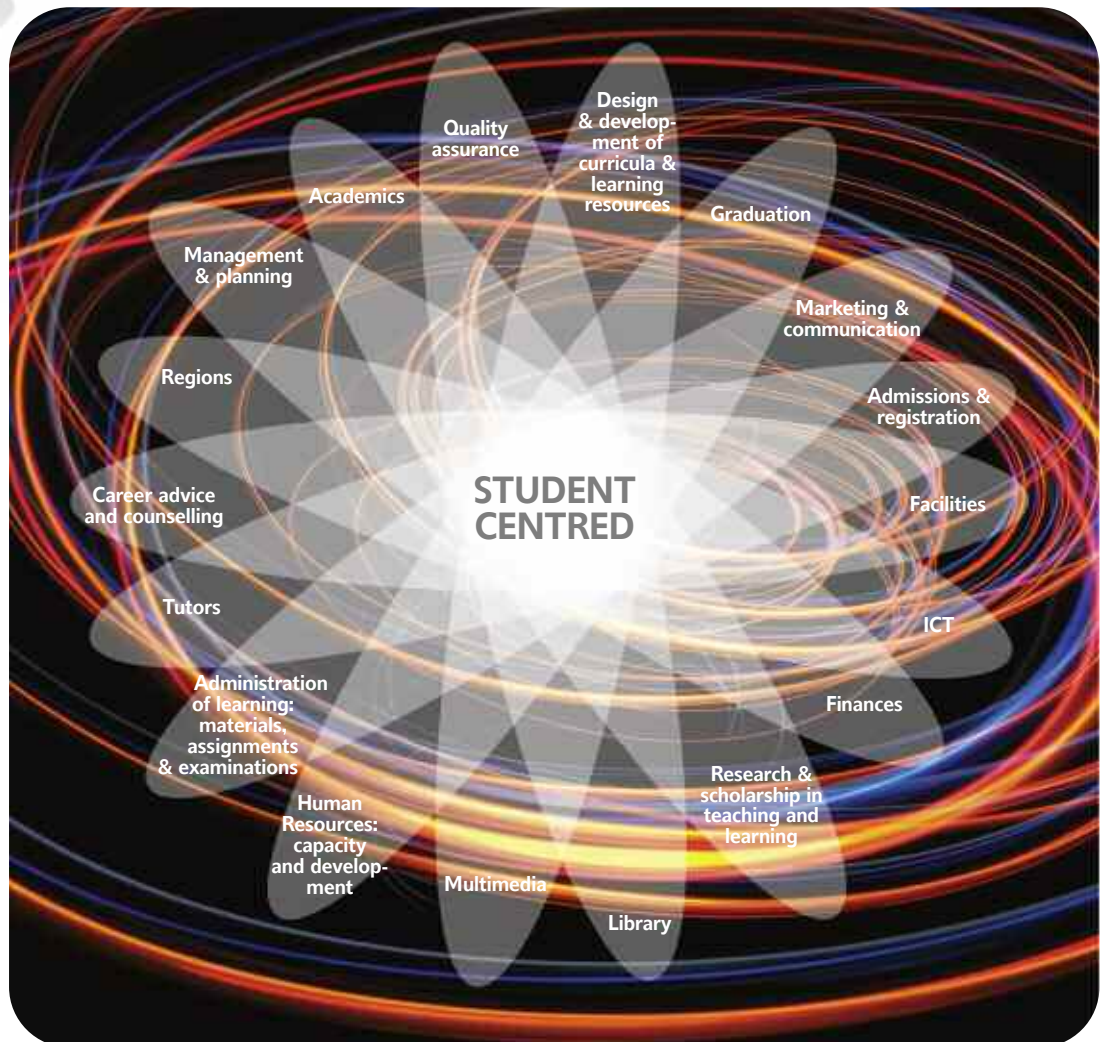
Innovative, effective learning and teaching in open distance learning are dependent on interrelationships and interdependencies amongst a range of stakeholders at Unisa and all of these stakeholders at Unisa are equally important.

The diagram below illustrates the interdependencies and interrelationships between the different stakeholders and how each one is linked to the others. All teaching and learning efforts are aimed at delivering the best possible learning experiences to the Unisa student, who is at the centre of the ODL model.

According to the Unisa's ODL policy the entire teaching and learning process – from registration to graduation to becoming an engaged alumnus – revolves around the student. Students are therefore invaluable stakeholders in the development of curricula.

Students' current epistemologies and prior learnings should form an integral part of planning the curriculum. The life-worlds, experiences and expectations of students should be taken into account in structuring the curricula. Unisa's curricula should contribute to their fulfilment of their educational goals, whether personal fulfilment or in preparation for employment.

REALISING ODL: FROM THE IDEAL TO THE REAL...



REACHING OUT



Students are taught how to use various toys and teddy bears when assisting or counselling children.

Community engagement in higher education is performed in various ways depending on the context, institutional character, curricula and pedagogies, faculty and student profiles and a range of other factors. In general, community engagement can resemble corporate social investment (CSI), where an organisation supports a community initiative financially; or it can resemble corporate social responsibility (CSR) where organisations assist communities with practical assistance. Examples of CSR would be the cleaning up of neighbourhoods or empowering communities in different ways including skills training.

Increasingly, corporations, including higher education institutions, embrace the type of corporate citizenship (CC) by means of which organisations fulfil their citizenship duties in different communities through socially responsible practices and the sharing of resources. In higher education, service learning is often integrated into the core curriculum where students become part of communities to apply their learning in practice, without any remuneration.

Whatever the specific approach followed with regard to community engagement in higher education, it often functions on the periphery of the curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and research. Accordingly, Unisa's Bright Site project is an excellent example of a community engagement and service learning project situated in the nexus of the curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and research.

BRIGHT SITE PROJECT

The Department of Social Work's Bright Site project is guided by inclusive, people-centred ideas and aligned with Unisa's vision "to be in the service of humanity". The community is regarded as a source for teaching and learning, and research. This ensures the relevancy of the university and social work training for the community.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

In the Bright Site project the community is viewed as a context for research and service learning (teaching), as well as a focus and beneficiary of research and service learning. The focus is on building collaborative partnerships which include the various departments, institutes and centres of Unisa as well as various stakeholders in the community.

In the project, Unisa resources, as well as available resources within the community, are brought together in the interests of the community. Activities such as capacity building for organisations, facilitating change processes and the development of short learning programmes all form part of the project.

SERVICE LEARNING

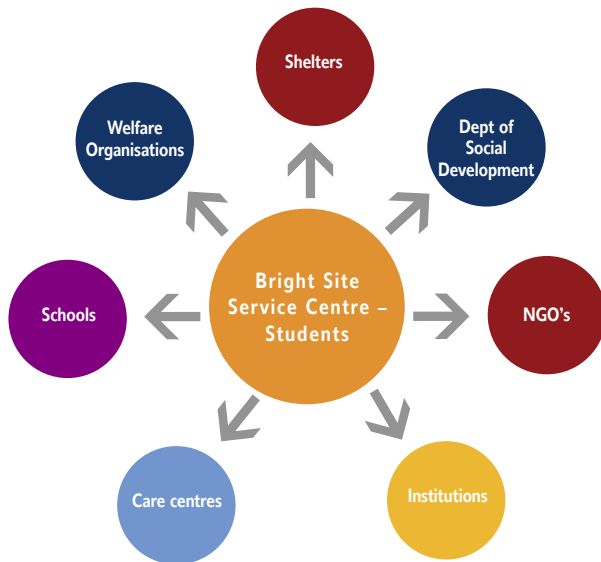
Service learning links with the teaching and learning pillar of higher education. The Council for Higher Education (CHE) emphasises service learning as applied learning directed at the needs of the community and integrated into an academic programme and curriculum. The Unisa Bright Site Service Centres are developed according to the model proposed by the CHE.

The South African Council for Social Service Professions requires of a qualification for social work for fourth-level social work students to include practical work. As such, the Bright Site project functions as a service learning site where the students are placed to render services to identified communities via the NGOs, schools and welfare organisations in the communities.

MODEL OF BENEFICIAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE STUDENTS AND THE COMMUNITY



SERVICES OF STUDENTS THROUGH EXISTING ORGANISATIONS



The Know your Rights card game challenged students to think about what is in the best interests of a child and who decides on this right. Through this exercise, they were encouraged as social workers to translate the vision of children's rights into practice for all children, wherever they are, and for each moment of their day.

The Department of Social Work allocates students to the Bright Site Service Learning Centre and these students render services such as casework, group work and community work through the various organisations under the supervision and guidance of the Bright Site project. In this way they provide services to the community whilst the capacity of existing organisations is strengthened. Currently, the Bright Site project is functioning in Pretoria and Durban and further expansion to Polokwane is planned.

RESEARCH

Research conducted through the Bright Site project focuses on issues within the communities. There is also a strong link between the teaching and learning, and research components. All social work students have to participate in a research project during their placement at the Bright Site Service Learning Centre. The Bright Site project offers research opportunities for academic staff at Unisa.

GLOBAL PRIZE

The Bright Site Project of the Sunnyside Service Learning Centre was placed second in the third annual MacJannet Prize for Global Citizenship. The project received \$2 500 (approximately R17 000) to help support the programmes activities. In addition, two representatives of the Bright Site Project attended the Talloires Network Global Leaders Conference in June this year at the Autonomous University of Madrid, Spain.



The Bright Site Project, the Department of English Studies and the Jesuit Refugee Services offered English classes to French speaking refugees living in the mid city and Sunnyside, Pretoria. The certificate ceremony took place in January 2011. This project is also funded by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Pictured is a group of French speaking refugees and asylum speakers who attended the certificate ceremony.



TEACHING AND LEARNING – FUTURE PERSPEC- TIVES



*“Widen access,
increase quality,
lower costs.”*

What does the future hold for teaching and learning? How will open distance education develop over the next decade? What will be the most important challenges facing higher education? How will the roles of academics and students change? Experts in education and invited speakers at Unisa’s first teaching and learning festival share some of their views on the future of teaching and learning at higher education institutions.

WIDEN ACCESS, INCREASE QUALITY, LOWER COSTS

Gilly Salmon: Executive Director and Professor (Learning Futures) at the Australian Digital Futures Institute (ADFI) at the University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia

In a world of incredible resources for informal learning, challenges to the long-held and loved role of higher education are occurring. The overarching key objective for universities over the coming years is to facilitate sustainability and transformation of learning experiences and their impact. Students are gradually driving the new opportunities. Change must be achieved by increasing participation, achieving 21st-century digital literacy for staff and students and new learning design.

Open distance learning has experienced huge growth. While it stands to benefit from evolving technology, which has great potential to provide transformation and meet aspirations such as mobility and access, there is a need for new operational, business and learning design and delivery models to avoid rising costs.

Few distance learning providers are exploiting technology really well – learning technologies are disruptive and rarely favour existing providers. So the challenges are simple objectives, requiring complex dynamic solutions: widen access, increase quality, lower costs.

TECHNOLOGY BRINGS ABOUT CHANGE

George Siemens: Strategist and researcher at the Technology Enhanced Knowledge Research Institute at Athabasca University, Canada

In education, the most prominent changes in technology over the past several decades have related to how information was created, shared and evaluated; and how people were able to connect with one another despite physical space limitations. These two elements have a dramatic impact on teaching, learning and research.

These developments have influenced, for example, how courses are structured. Traditionally, a course has been a bounded information structure, created by educators or instructional designers long before learners start the course. Courses have also been limited in scope, usually comprising an educator, possibly a few assistants, and thirty or more learners. This model is not sustainable and, in future, courses will include multiple teachers and faculty members from around the world – sometimes through the use of open educational resources and at other times in the form of large collaborative global classrooms. Educators will no longer be confined to one or even two classrooms or courses.

They will move fairly seamlessly through learning spaces with students from around the world. Even courses that have a physical classroom component will rely on external expert and learner contributions through the use of video, games and mobile devices.

The ubiquity of mobile devices will produce increased (generally automatic) connections between different life roles and learning tasks. What is learned in a formal course will be supported and augmented by automatic notifications when a reasonable connection exists in our personal lives. Curriculum will be intelligent and delivered to learners based on need, previous learning history and life circumstance. Assessment, when combined with ubiquitous mobile devices and intelligent curriculum, will be continual and ongoing, rather than at the conclusion of a learning experience. Knowledge domains will be mapped to reveal concept relatedness and learners will be able to track their progress toward mastery of those concepts through the full breadth of life activity.

MOBILE PHONES: KEY DRIVERS OF EDUCATIONAL CHANGE IN AFRICA

Dick Ng'ambi: Master's programme convenor at the Centre for Educational Technology, University of Cape Town

According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) World Telecommunication/ICT indicators for 2010, only 9.6 per 100 inhabitants in Africa use the internet compared with 65 per 100 inhabitants in Europe. This suggests that the internet is unlikely to be the key game changer in education in Africa. However, Africa is reported to have the highest quota of mobile subscribers per 1 000 inhabitants in the world, and it is further estimated that in the next five years, Africa's buying of mobile phones will increase by 550%.

If higher education wants to remain relevant, it would be a serious misjudgement to ignore such a pervasive technology in society and to frog technologies that are successful in the West. Predictably, mobile phones will be key drivers of educational change in Africa, irrespective of whether we like it or not.

The educational sector in Africa is extremely slow at recognising the huge potential of devices owned by nearly 100% of people. The word "slow" may be inappropriate: mobile phones are demonised (students hide them when they see a teacher pass by) and school policies ban mobile phones without critical engagement, thus passively supporting counter-policies. As the new generation of educators takes centre stage, these new teachers will teach with the aid of technologies, will support mobile learning pedagogies as part of the teacher education curriculum, and will reverse educational policies premised on "digital hate", which will foster innovative uses and educational change. Common sense logic will prevail in the next five to ten years and many will be asking the question, "Why did we not do this earlier?"



“Mobile phones will be key drivers of educational change in Africa.”





“In future, ODL needs to recognise that retention is its most serious issue and that there must be a real willingness to tackle it.”

STUDENT RETENTION AND SUCCESS ARE CRUCIAL

Ormond Simpson: Fellow, Centre for Distance Education, University of London External Programme

HG Wells' words, “civilisation is in a race between education and catastrophe,” are as true now as when he wrote them more than 70 years ago. The catastrophe he was referring to then was world war; the catastrophes now may include increasing poverty and global warming. Hence the great need for higher education, with open and distance learning well placed to meet this need. ODL has much greater reach geographically and socially than conventional education and, crucially, it is far more economical for both governments and students.

But there is a substantial challenge: current graduation rates in ODL are often less than 20% and, frequently, even lower than 10%. This is completely unsatisfactory. It is unethical to recruit and charge people for courses which have such low rates of success. Such rates of attrition vitiate the financial and fairness case for distance learning.

However, this challenge also presents an opportunity to change. In future, ODL needs to recognise that retention is its most serious issue and that there must be a real willingness to tackle it. There should also be valid research, using randomised controlled studies, into what could increase retention.

My guess is that such research will discover that the most important retention activity will be for institutions to reach out to support their students proactively and motivationally. It will not be in the development of more sophisticated e-learning methods – not in South Africa, where household internet access is only around 12%. Any support system that waits for students to come to it will never have any substantial effect on retention. It may be through mobile phones, where access in South Africa is nearer to 70%, but whatever form it takes, it will depend on institutions' reaching out to build human relationships with their students, using the most cost-effective media available.

DELIVERY OF QUALITY AND RELEVANT INFORMATION

Gilford Hapanyengwi: Director at the Computer Centre, University of Zimbabwe

Some call it information overload, others call it information relevance, but it all comes down to quality and diversity of information – information that gives you a competitive advantage.

Getting quality and relevant information to the student will be most important in the future. With real broadband internet to the mobile device now all but guaranteed, access speed will be taking a back seat. Two distinct functions will emerge for the teacher, namely delivery of basic information and managing of application information. While basic information entails foundation information that builds a person's understanding of a discipline, application information is information that gives the person a competitive advantage.

The access of first-grade institutions online will have a tremendous effect on the quality of education. While non-local first-grade institutions are very good at delivering basic information, delivery of application information – notwithstanding globalisation – has a lot to do with culture, norms, environment and relevance.

The “local” university will have to take on two identities: firstly, the university has to be a global quality player in the delivery of basic information; secondly, it has to preserve the local culture, norms and environment in the delivery and understanding of the application information.

The “local” university should influence the country-level quality controller of education to enforce or encourage the adoption of the local norms in the application information. Aggressive implementation of local values in the educational system should be paramount. Properly packaged knowledge should drive growth in industry and commerce within a given country.

INSTITUTIONS NEED TO SHARE BEST PRACTICE AND RESOURCES

Jaideep Mukherjee: Beyond Distance Research Alliance, University of Leicester, UK

The first decade of the 21st century has seen a massive growth in and easy availability of learning technology platforms, as well as the adoption of a wide range of innovative networked technologies that were not originally designed or promoted for use in learning and teaching. Innovation in education has been embraced in a way that has been compared to the appearance of the mass-produced, printed book.

Driven by innovations in learning technology, the key concepts that have emerged as central to institutional thinking in education are innovation and openness. To have the maximum impact, innovations in learning technology have to be chosen carefully in keeping with the institutions' needs and ambitions, and once adopted, they have to be embedded in everyday pedagogic practice within the institutions, with the aim of making innovation a part of the mainstream.

Ways in which these innovations can be achieved are by introducing and implementing change that is based on researched and evaluated evidence of impact on student learning; by raising the skills levels and capabilities of all members of the institution, supported by schemes of recognition and reward for creating innovation and institutional efficiencies; and by continuing to explore technologies and pedagogies considered "beyond the obvious" to prepare for, and secure, a future that is characterised as unseen, unknown and uncharted territory for learning and teaching.

Institutional planning and strategies in the area of learning technology need to be radically reoriented towards providing and designing services for students and staff that are both highly tuned to disciplinary and individual needs and efficient; such strategies must also make provision for building service, teaching and research infrastructures that are both flexible and cost-effective.

Just as individual academics, innovators and research teams customarily share their findings, knowledge and results through various established forums, pioneering and successful institutions should share best practice much more readily, as well as making educational resources available.

MANY FACETS TO STUDENT SUPPORT

Vicki Goodwin: Dyslexia specialist, United Kingdom

Our understanding of dyslexia has already changed a great deal over the past few years and will continue to do so over the next ten to 20 years. Brain-imaging and deeper understanding of the ways in which people learn will continue to contribute to a recognition of the range of issues and the levels of difficulties that affect (to a greater or lesser degree) areas across the curriculum. We will also gain a clearer understanding of the best ways to support learners, as there is scarcely one specific improvement for a dyslexia student (such as excellent presentation of materials) that does not also improve learning for all.

Technology will continue to enhance learning opportunities as long as search facilities are also improved and students are not lost in a bewildering world of Moodle-learning platforms, unable to locate documents or forums, burdened by unrealistic timing expectations or required to spend as much time sending an assignment electronically as composing it.

Greater care will ensure that the students of the future study from carefully presented materials in a variety of formats – hopefully, those that are ready for students to access without constantly requiring additional materials from overburdened libraries. Materials available on a computer allow some students the support of text-reading facilities to aid faster reading and comprehension and more opportunities to reread, as necessary.

Increasingly, it is likely that the need for motivation and support of the self-esteem of learners will influence the practices of pedagogy online, not only because this is more supportive in developing successful learning, but also because it is more cost-effective.



“Innovation in education has been embraced in a way that has been compared to the appearance of the mass-produced, printed book.”

EMPOWER EDUCATORS TO USE TECHNOLOGIES

Simon Kear: Keeper of the Media Zoo, Beyond Distance Research Alliance, University of Leicester, UK

The fact that the world is becoming increasingly networked offers tremendous opportunities for national, regional and global higher education and ODL. New and increasingly cheap technologies allowing data to scurry along these networks leads to greater access to education, the sharing of good practice, open educational resources and 24/7 learning.

As keeper of the Media Zoo, I see the greatest challenge in this bright new world as being the absolute and fundamental necessity of helping committed educators utilise these technologies for the benefit of their learners to confront and rectify pedagogical problems. The Media Zoo exists as a place where academics can engage with the “technological wildlife” in a safe environment and be comfortable in the knowledge that it contains only evidence-based “animals” – admitted to the Zoo as the result of peer-reviewed research.

In my experience, learners – and none more so than those in ODL – are asking that higher education adapt to this networked world, and more and more educators wish to acquire the technological skills to make the necessary changes. A facility like the Media Zoo exists to bring these two needs together. While its focus is on enabling and empowering the educator, the needs of the learner lie at the centre of everything the Zoo does.

ODL CAN TAP INTO A VAST NUMBER OF OPPORTUNITIES

Paul Birevu Muyinda: Senior lecturer of Educational Information Systems at the Department of Open and Distance Learning, Makerere University, Uganda

With increasing proliferation of ICTs in the teaching and learning process, ODL is permeating institutions of higher learning at unprecedented rates. ICTs have increased learners’ capacity to communicate and access information-rich repositories via the internet. With such resources at their disposal, learners are more empowered than ever before.

To a traditional faculty member, student empowerment is considered a threat to their very existence. This challenge requires a shift in teaching and learning methodology from the traditional mainframe approach to a more social constructivist approach reminiscent of the client-server model, where faculty is part of the learning community, but not a sage-on-the-stage. Collaborative and interactive technologies such as mobile devices and Web 2.0 technologies can facilitate social constructivism in ODL, but not enough research has been undertaken on their pedagogical and androgogical affordances in ODL.

Further, whereas rapid technological development is good for ODL, the associated challenge is that it presents technological and knowledge waste. Very often, before an individual can start appreciating the skills acquired through expensive training in the use of a given learning management system, a new version of it – or a completely new learning management system altogether – is adopted. Consequently, preoccupation with coping with rapid technology change consumes precious time and resources for open and distance learners and faculty alike.

Other challenges in ODL relate to funding, competition among ODL institutions, lack of recognition/accreditation for online qualifications in some countries, limited skills for ODL facilitation and lack of ODL policy frameworks and strategies – especially in dual-mode institutions.

Challenges aside, ODL can tap into a vast number of opportunities, primarily “the global village opportunity”, where learning is not restricted by visa requirements; the increased need for lifelong learning; the emergence of learning organisations; and the increasing demand for higher education arising from the millennial development goal of education for all.



SHARING AND PARTICIPATION ARE IMPORTANT

Tessa Welsch and Tony Mays: South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE)

The pace of change in the connected global knowledge economy will continue to rise exponentially as ubiquitous and cheaper access to digital information increases. This will place increasing pressure on institutions to develop more flexible curricula and modes of provision. It is clear that a strong foundation of literacy, including digital literacy, numeracy and life skills, will be essential for learners of all ages to be able to make discriminating choices from among the wealth of information available. It is impossible to do this without some grounding in traditional disciplines, but there must also be gradual and purposeful integration of multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary approaches to the elucidation, investigation and addressing of complex real-world challenges.

The need for continuous high-level lifelong learning is already fast outstripping both the capacity of traditional higher education institutions as well as the government's ability to fund them. The only way that it will be possible to address this need is for scarce resources to be more evenly shared through processes of collaboration rather than competition, the development of high-quality open educational resources and the provision of the kind of varied decentralised learning support that has traditionally characterised the best ODL practice – increasingly, but not exclusively, this will be digital in nature.

There needs to be both national and institutional investment in ICT – hardware, software and support – for both staff and students. But there also needs to be much greater investment in staff development for teaching in ways that emphasise shared meaning-making, rather than the delivery and regurgitation of predigested knowledge. This will mean, inter alia, debunking one of the prevailing metaphors for learning, that of “acquisition”, and rather placing greater emphasis on “participation”, as well as consciously building students' skills to participate in “co-creation and sharing”. It should also be noted that the kind of sharing suggested is not simply that between the student and the teacher, or between peers/fellow students; it is potentially much broader. Publishing is the mode adopted at many more levels than hitherto.

ADAPT TO NEW, EVER-CHANGING REALITIES

Catherine Ngugi: project director of OER Africa, a SAIDE initiative

Over the next ten to 15 years, the role of higher education – namely to prepare individuals to provide intellectual leadership in whatever fields they may choose to apply their education – is unlikely to change. However, the ways in which these individuals will need to be prepared is already changing, and higher education institutions (HEIs) must also be prepared to adapt to new and ever-changing realities.

One such reality is that for many years HEIs have largely assumed that students who enter them, either from the world of work or from secondary education institutions, have already acquired the basic skills of literacy, numeracy and critical thinking. Yet, as this is not necessarily the case, HEIs will have to decide how they are going to direct their limited resources to support students to acquire these basics skills, while simultaneously mastering the relevant curriculum.

At its best, distance education is overtly conscious of the need to provide students with the scaffolding they require to work through a syllabus in the absence of face-to-face interaction with a lecturer. As the use of computers and access to the internet become more and more ubiquitous, institutions will have to adapt to new ways in which their students, who may be used to searching for and making use of content on the web, learn.

Monitoring the quality of digital content that they develop and use to teach their students will remain their responsibility – just as it has been when selecting appropriate textbooks and references to bolster their teaching. HEIs will have to provide both staff and students with proper support to make the best possible use of available technologies to enhance good teaching and learning. Such support should range from providing a reliable IT backbone to training and retraining staff.

Finally, if people cannot see the relevance of a new initiative, they will not embrace it. The use

of open educational resources (OER) must be aligned with particular needs identified by the faculty or their students. The use of openly licensed educational materials has provided practical opportunities for learning or relearning pedagogical skills such as materials development and course design and technical skills such as using search engines and labelling resources properly. In addition, it has served the needs of students to acquire basic, clinical and surgical skills where relevant resources either did not exist (eg in the language needed) or were simply too expensive to acquire legally.

Some of those who have developed and used open educational resources have found them much more cost-effective for problem-based learning approaches than embarking on lengthy and costly copyright clearance procedures – or violating copyright.

“There needs to be much greater investment in staff development for teaching in ways that emphasise shared meaning-making.”





“One of the greatest challenges for universities today is the massive scale of the demand for higher education globally.”

TAME TECHNOLOGY WITH INNOVATION IN PEDAGOGY

Palitha Edirisingha: Beyond Distance Research Alliance, the University of Leicester, UK

More so than at any other time, universities have a pivotal role to play in a changing global environment. Expectations for Unisa as a key educational institution in Africa are no different: the university is expected to be a hub of innovation, to contribute to societal development, to attract and develop talent and to create new knowledge to fuel the economy, to mention just a few examples.

Unisa also has the social responsibility of providing opportunities for all learners, from across the wide spectrum of social and economic backgrounds and abilities.

Taming the technology with constant innovations in pedagogy, coupled with building on learners' capabilities and their expectations, can bring about immense opportunities for overcoming the university's challenges.

The potential of learning technologies can be harnessed for efficient and effective production, distribution and use of learning material that is readily available and easily accessible to both teacher and learner. Access to a variety of information and communication technologies can be exploited in the service of learning and to meet the needs of learners in a transformative way. We can innovate our pedagogies by helping students to engage in peer-to-peer activities and in the co-construction of knowledge, as well as being part of a community of learners and practitioners.

Finally, learners of today and tomorrow will continue to grow up with a variety of digital, mobile and personal technologies around them. Therefore, it is important to understand the competencies and experiences that they bring with them and to support their appropriation of technologies to enhance their own learning.

NOURISHMENT, INSPIRATION AND SUPPORT FOR LEARNERS

Gabi Witthaus: Beyond Distance Research Alliance, the University of Leicester, UK

One of the greatest challenges for universities today is the massive scale of the demand for higher education globally: almost 100 million learners are eligible to enter university but cannot afford to do so, and even if they could, current institutions could not accommodate such numbers. The combination of the ever-wider and faster reach of the internet and the proliferation of open educational resources provides potential opportunities for these learners and raises the possibility of large numbers of learners studying independently and then merely seeking accreditation from higher education institutions. Can we conceive of a teacher-less (lecturer-less/ tutor-less) university? Only with difficulty; most of us continue to believe in the largely intangible value that the lecturer adds. The experimental models springing up now, such as the OERu (www.wikieducator.org), Peer-to-Peer University (www.p2pu.org) and People's University (www.peoples-uni.org), recognise this need for human support. The survival of these self-organising systems in the ODL landscape in future will probably depend on the extent to which they promote guided discovery and generate the necessary nurturing and scaffolding for learners to engage deeply and critically with their subject matter.

A second challenge is to ensure that learners who are already enrolled in our universities get the best quality learning experience and outcomes possible. Today's students have access to a vast body of content on the web and can often communicate directly with subject matter experts online. In this context, the role of educators is changing dramatically. They need to help students filter the information flow and they have to recognise the interdependence that exists between themselves and their learners, both for their own growth and that of their students, in the rapidly changing environments of our various disciplines.

What is needed is a self-perpetuating system that provides nourishment, inspiration and support for learners. If this can be achieved for current students, higher education might just be in a better position to address the needs of that 100-million-strong cohort waiting in the wings.

NEW TECHNOLOGIES, NUMEROUS OPPORTUNITIES

Ray Randall: Chartered Occupational Psychologist, University of Leicester, UK

The development of new teaching technologies has created numerous opportunities for innovation in the delivery of university courses. Podcasts, e-books, online tutoring (eg through video conferences or discussion boards) and even *Second Life* have broken down many of the traditional barriers to the delivery of courses. More than that, these technologies offer opportunities for tutors to engage with students in ways that enhance their learning far beyond that which can be offered by traditional classroom teaching alone.

Huge potential for the development of distance-learning courses is evident. Already distance-learning students are offered exciting opportunities to immerse themselves in study with realistic material designed to foster deep learning through active study. The challenge is now to make the most of these opportunities by innovating in a way that meets the diverse needs of demanding student populations. Current trends indicate that students want to study to obtain higher levels of qualifications and they also want to study while working and developing their careers. If the technological advancements of the past ten years offer any clues to the future, the technological barriers to online teaching will have largely disappeared within the next decade. This will allow educators to focus on helping learners to engage more with open-access materials and all the innovations that technology will have to offer.

Educators will need knowledge of the capacity of this new technology and they will have to be able to integrate this with a strong understanding of how humans learn, develop and use new knowledge and skills.

Technological solutions provide more opportunities for students to access teaching materials and work with these materials in many different ways. This means that traditional 9-to-5, face-to-face support and passive learning will no longer be enough to meet students' needs and expectations. The role of the tutor is also likely to change: knowledge is now much more accessible and therefore tutors are likely to spend less time delivering information and more time helping students to critically evaluate and apply their knowledge.

Given the savings and opportunities it offers, it is likely that web-based teaching will dominate the higher education environment. Educators must continue to work at the cutting edge of these developments to maximise the impact and value of their own expertise.

“Traditional 9-to-5, face-to-face support and passive learning will no longer be enough to meet students' needs and expectations.”



“The technological barriers to online teaching will have largely disappeared within the next decade.”

AN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING CHARTER



**By Dr Paul Prinsloo
Acting Head:
Institute for Open and
Distance Learning (IODL)
and ODL Coordinator**

A charter encompasses definite characteristics, obligations and rights that relate to a specific organisation, group of people or organisational focus. As a verb, to charter means “to privilege, to license”. The aim of the open distance learning (ODL) charter is not to replace the ODL policy or other organisational policies and strategic objectives, but rather to delineate definite points which serve as points of reference for mapping a specific course of action for the next five years.

ODL CHARTER

1. Unisa provides open, caring and stimulating, central and distributed, working and distance learning environments in which employees and students flourish and achieve their career and study goals.
2. Unisa offers focused and well-structured qualifications which, on completion, result in an open future for sought-after and independent graduates who can make a difference in their communities, places of work and the world at large.
3. Unisa’s admission requirements are appropriately open and provide students with a range of supported pathways to reach their potential.
4. Unisa embraces, optimises and supports a range of technologies for effective registration, administration, and well-designed technology-enabled teaching and learning opportunities.
5. Students have access to a range of online, print-based and face-to-face (F2F) opportunities to assess their own potential, readiness and need for resources for studying through ODL and in specific disciplines.
6. All students, undergraduate and postgraduate, have access (from pre-registration to post-graduation) to a menu of support services including counselling, academic literacy programmes, career advice and study skills development. The services include the following:
 - face-to-face tutorials
 - personal e-tutors (academic and administrative support)
 - study orientation and examination preparation sessions through F2F contact, video conferences and satellite broadcasts
 - free access to the previous year’s examination papers and memoranda
 - SMS communication with Unisa
 - round-the-clock technology and system-related support
7. Online registration is user-friendly and supported through well-designed registration processes, generic admission requirements and clear qualification structures.
8. Unisa qualifications provide for ample and appropriate use of a range of well-designed, effectively integrated, coordinated and supported experiential learning opportunities.
9. After graduation, Unisa’s alumni become part of a pool of qualified and experienced professionals from which F2F tutors, e-tutors, e-mentors and full-time employees are sourced.
10. All assignments can easily be submitted online via myUnisa using a range of affordable devices.
11. Students choose from a range of delivery options from full online learning with no materials provided to all materials and correspondence provided in print. These options have different support and price structures.
12. All postgraduate examinations are non-venue-based, and an increasing number of undergraduate examinations are also non-venue-based.
13. Lecturers deliver up-to-date academic support using a range of audio and video, synchronous and asynchronous options which are available online (or sent to students) and, in the case of recordings, are downloadable on iPods and mobile devices; or on CD-Roms and DVDs.
14. Students have access to all prescribed material and recommended material in e-book or electronic format.
15. Unisa has an efficient and world-class student profiling and tracking system which follows all student activity and interaction with the institution, and provides actionable intelligence to lecturers, F2F tutors, e-tutors and e-mentors, and administrative and support staff.
16. Unisa employees and students are supported by effective, integrated and coordinated systems, procedures, policies and structures.

¹ Appropriately open admission requirements allow freedom of choice embedded in institutional responsibility to optimise students’ chances of success.

