PROF MS MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

KEYNOTE ADDRESS: GLOBAL EDUCATION FORUM

Online, Open and Flexible Higher Education for the Future We Want: From Statements to Action --
Equity, Access, and Quality Learning Outcomes

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Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, colleagues

In a 2012 article entitled ***The End of the University as We Know It,*** Nathan Harden, Yale alumnus asserts:

> The higher ed revolution is coming. Just a few decades hence, half the colleges and universities in the United States will have disappeared, but schools like Harvard will have millions of students……in fifty years, if not much sooner, half of the roughly 4,500 colleges and universities now operating in the United States will have ceased to exist. The technology driving this change is already at work, and nothing can stop it. *The future looks like this: Access to college-level education will be free for everyone; the residential college campus will become largely obsolete; tens of thousands of*

professors will lose their jobs; the bachelor's degree will become increasingly irrelevant; and ten years from now Harvard will enroll ten million students……..

Harden says: In this article, I consider the disruptive impact of technology and the enormous changes coming to the business of Higher ed. [1]

Also in 2012, Ernst & Young a multinational professional services firm, and one of the "Big Four" accounting firms with a virtually blanket global presence, produced a thought-provoking report on higher education entitled: *"University of the Future: A thousand year old industry on the cusp of profound change*[2]*,."* The fact that one of the *Big Four* accounting firms should release such a report is surely a sign of the "profound change" to which they refer.

Well with all due respect, and from where I am sitting - "I don't think so." The examples cited touch on a core concern for many educationists today: Much of the commentary on the current status of higher education, many of the sometimes wild prophecies about the future of the university, and many of the so-called *education authorities*, are in fact not in education at all - they are in business – more pertinently, they appear to base their assumptions and predictions on the role of technology in a knowledge-driven society as a vehicle for mass access to quality higher education. My first questions to this august gathering are these: *"Is higher education in service of technology or is technology in service of higher education, and, where is the voice of the seasoned, eminent educators in this conversation?"* I trust that we will be hearing many of those voices over the next few days.

I would like to suggest that as educators we have been enthralled – momentarily I hope - by the potential of technology to open up access to the masses, to the extent that we have neglected our true calling and purpose – that is, educators providing quality higher education. Somewhere in this seductive global conversation, scholarship, knowledge production and community engagement in their purest and most productive forms, have become subsumed in a tidal wave of techno-speak, of *e-evangelism*, and I fear that we are in danger of sacrificing quality and excellence in higher education on the altar of an

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[1] Harden, N. *The End of the University As We Know It*. The American Interest. *Volume 8, Number 3, Published on: December 11, 2012*

[2] Ernst & Young. (2012). *University of the future: A thousand year old industry on the cusp of profound change*. Retrieved January 4, 2013, from, http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/University_of_the_future/$FILE/University_of_the_future_2012.pdf

amorphous mass of unproductive and superficial mediocrity. And I fear that our graduates will similarly reflect those levels of mediocrity – ironically in a world that is crying out for excellence and innovation. We have already wasted too much time. This then, colleagues, is a metaphorical *call to arms*, a call to re-assert scholarship and our students – and not profit - at the centre of university education. We need to restore the balance and to assert our identity and calling as educators. Technology, I aver, should be the *facilitator* and not the driver, of higher education.

And it is from that premise, and the assumption that the future that we want is *quality, equitable, and accessible higher education* that I will address my topic today. I would also like to state from the outset, that mine is a pragmatic approach, driven by the realities of higher education, particularly in developing nations, and shaped and influenced by a very fundamental belief that a *one-size-fits-all* approach to higher education delivery, especially if driven by external agencies, is simply not feasible or desirable.

21st Century HEIs are indisputably places of "*both* scholarly endeavour and business" (Ernst & Young, 2012). The scholarly endeavour produces the valued outputs such as graduates, research, new knowledge, and community engagement which positively impact on the growth and development of society, while business principles and practices aim to achieve maximum institutional efficiency and productivity. The successful integration of the two requires efficient and effective leadership and management and the creation of a conducive organizational climate and culture. I am of the view that in ODeL this vital component has been neglected, to our detriment. Schein (2010:22) asserts: "if they [leaders] do not become conscious of the cultures in which they are embedded, those cultures will manage them. Cultural understanding is desirable for all of us, but it is essential for leaders if they are to lead." [3]

Technology *is* an ever-present reality and reminder of a world reorienting and reorganizing itself around new principles and ideas, and it truly *does* impact on every facet of our lives. But that in itself is not new at all.   Our forebears faced similar challenges in the Industrial Revolution, as did those in the Renaissance and so on. I am in fact reminded of the elegant words of Thomas Mann who said:

"What I believe, what I value most, is transitoriness. But is not transitoriness — the perishableness of life — something very sad? No! It is the very soul of existence. It imparts value, dignity, interest to life….. Life is possessed by tremendous tenacity. Even so, its presence remains conditional, and as it

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[3] Schein, E., Organisational Culture and Leadership: A Dynamic View. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2010

had a beginning, so it will have an end. I believe that life, just for this reason, is exceedingly enhanced in value, in charm."[4]

So, while we would all like to believe that the altruistic rationale for education remains largely unchanged, its aims and application in terms of its role in society, its mode of operation, its economic structure and value and its leadership and management are lending impetus to the need for its fundamental reorganization and reorientation along new and different lines. Successful universities of the 21st Century will need to craft business models that are dynamic, agile, forward looking and equipped to navigate the opaque future of higher education in the coming decades. Aligned to this, they will need at their helms, leadership that understands its context and that is able to achieve the buy-in necessary to effect culture change and institutional transformation towards the institutional mission. And the pillar around which all of these should revolve, is quality scholarship, for long term institutional stability. What they do not need to become, is profit-driven centres of mediocrity.

Three key considerations therefore, need to underpin all considerations around *Online, Open and Flexible Higher Education for the Future We Want.* The first is context.

While the 21st Century higher education institution will undoubtedly have to reorient itself to new ways of thinking and doing, it will need to do so cognizant of its particular national environment; including its strategy and policy environments. *Online, Open and Flexible Higher Education* is manifestly different from one country to the next and to assume all-accommodating business and delivery models, is an exercise in futility. Consider for example, the fact that at the University of South Africa, Open, Distance and eLearning is fully subsidised, quality assured and mainstreamed into South Africa's higher education system. We are not in education to make a profit. While third stream income is a definite consideration, it is not our "reason for being". Many of our peers from across the globe cannot make the same claim. We work in vastly differing political and policy environments, all of which have a fundamental impact on both our freedom to navigate our environment, and our business and leadership models. I can mention for example, the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPI) newly promulgated in South Africa, and the Patriot Act recently amended in America. Both have very significant implications for *Online, Open*

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[4] The Hesse-Mann Letters The Correspondence of Hermann Hesse and Thomas Mann 1910-1955 Hardcover – 1975. by Hermann Hesse (Author), Thomas Mann (Author), Anni Carlsson (Editor) Jorge Pinto Books

and Flexible Higher Education. Both need to be approached and dealt within their given contexts. For many this emphasis on *governance* is new and uncomfortable, but in a very real sense, 21st Century ODeL is in its infancy and much of what we have understood it to be traditionally, is now stagnant, if not moribund, particularly in terms of its operationalisation.

Aligned to the different policy contexts, one would need to revisit traditional delivery models. Over time the Western World has offered some excellent models of ODeL (Moore and Kearsley 2005: 23-24[5]; Taylor; 2001[6]) setting out "phases" or "generations" of distance education which are aligned to technological development in their countries. Yet, as comprehensive as these are, they do not provide a *home*, or *suitable fit* for many of the DE institutions in developing nations - *because* I would suggest, they are premised on a world view, culture, context and needs that are inherently different. How, in such models, does one for example, factor in the realities of a yawning digital divide *within the same institution* and *nationally;*, national socio-economic and cultural disparities and backlogs; political whimsy; excruciating and disparate levels of poverty; and little or no access to the internet? And yet, we all practice DE with varying degrees of success. In fact Unisa is particularly successful, and we most certainly cannot be categorized comfortably in any of the prevailing Western models. The question arises: Would a model conceptualized by a developing nation have universal applicability to the developed world? I doubt it; *so let us also acknowledge the contrary.* We share entirely different contexts, and if we are to move forward, we need to acknowledge that models need to be context-bound conceptually, and not externally imposed and assumed to be universal

Every "business" model is rooted in an institutional culture, which to an extent characterizes both the ethos, structure and leadership style prevalent at the university. Organizational cultures are not discrete; they transition and overlap –I would suggest that this is the norm rather than the exception. However, where this does occur there are likely to be varying levels of cultural dissonance at both the individual and institutional levels, which brings added layers of anxiety and stress and this can also impede meaningful leadership and management. This is particularly relevant when it comes to leading and managing an ODeL institution, where there is often a complex "innovation- push and legacy- pull" tension at work.

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[5] Moore, M G & Kearsley, G. 2005. Distance Education: A Systems view. Second, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
[6] Taylor, J.C. 2001. Fifth Generation Distance Education. Available at: http://www.usq.edu.au/electpub/e-jist/docs/old/Vol4 no1/2001docs/pdf/Taylor/pdf. (Accessed 4 April 2008).

Leadership, management and governance, have in fact been a severely underestimated aspect of ODeL (In fact of 21st Century HE in general). ODeL institutions require a different form of leadership and management, which demand the equal acknowledgement of both the academic and administrative staff components. This requires a delicate balancing act and the evening-out of the somewhat traditional t*hem-and-us culture* that tends to exist in most universities. *Quality* ODeL demands support/administrative staff that are highly qualified, proficient and accomplished in their fields (especially the ICT field) and this too often, is characterized as "academic support" rather than co-facilitation of Teaching and Learning. *Quality* ODeL also requires a conducive culture which supports the mindset transformation in particular, required to deliver it. This presupposes genuinely innovative, transformational leadership, as well as meticulous governance. Ensuring a clear understanding of an institution's complex character and the dynamic between culture, structure and leadership and management will assist in transforming, shaping and building the university towards a cultural balance that will enable optimum functioning and efficiency. A failure to do so will inevitably result in stagnation and ongoing disruption. Barriers to institutional efficiency and transformation are created when varying institutional cultures "compete" simultaneously, in the same institutional space.

A second key point that I would like to address is that of quality, which is directly linked to my first point around *context.*

Robert Pirsig, in his famous book entitled Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance (ZMM) asks: *"Quality…you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is. But that's self-contradictory. But some things are better than others, that is they have more quality, but when you try to say what quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes poof!...Obviously some things are better than others…but what's the "betterness"?...What the hell is Quality? What is it?"* (1974: 178).[7] On the other hand, the Australian Universities Quality Assurance Agency (AUQA) asserts that quality is holistic fitness-for-purpose[8]

It seems then, that quality is also contextual, and this is important in regard to Distance Education. As already mentioned, while Unisa is in the *relatively rare position* continentally *and* globally, of being an integral part of South Africa's higher education system - funded , quality assured and accredited in like

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[7] Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values,* William Morrow & Inc. (NYC). *1974*

[8] (Woodhouse, David. (2009). introduction to Quality Assurance, AUQA.

manner to our residential institutions, the same cannot be said for most other DE providers, either in terms of funding or QA or both. So the question is: How does one define, ensure and assure quality in DE provision? Given the various geopolitical contexts in which we operate – can one feasibly do so? What role should quality fulfill?

At the moment we have no truly satisfactory answers. We speak of badges, credits, certificates, of OER, virtual and online universities, of joint degrees, of sharing courseware and institutional capacities, of having the student pay for assessment via the institution that will confer a formal qualification, and so on; but so far we have not been able to provide the kind of quality assurance that will give these modes of provision the *gravitas* and *status* that would ensure mass buy-in and uptake. Despite *all* of the *e-evangelism* that we have heard and experienced over the past decade or more, extolling the potential of ODeL to bring education to the masses, (especially via MOOCs and using OERs) there is limited and fragmented evidence of successful, *quality-assured formal education on any kind of scale,* and with any kind of formal accreditation. And that of course, goes to the heart of ODeL concerns around quality.

When it comes to quality ODeL, we are sometimes inclined to conflate *education* and *information.* In the developing world context, the difference between *education* and *information* is often the difference between *survival* and *edification*. Most developing world students simply can't afford edification. They want education - and a formally recognized qualification that will give them access to gainful employment and open the door to improved socio economic circumstances. And we know that's what most employers want too. And yet we have a long way to go before employers the world over accord badges the same acknowledgement as an accredited certificate, diploma or degree. Most DE students enter higher education from a position of disadvantage – and they don't want that perpetuated by an inferior quality education. So we have to come up with creative, acceptable quality models or alternatives for ODeL, where I suspect, programme design, student support, assessment and professional development will feature quite centrally. The lure of mass access cannot override the need to ensure quality. Sub- standard, unemployable graduates will end up being a liability, and not an asset, to our societies.

So perhaps we should be acknowledging upfront, that in fact ODeL means different things to different people and that offering an online course in philosophy at a residential university, that is facilitated by an external agent, for free or for a minimal cost, to privileged students, is diametrically opposite to being mandated by law, to provide formal, accredited ODeL to disadvantaged students. (Even the acronym "ODeL" speaks to its massive diversity in meaning and application.) As yet one finds little

formal acknowledgement of these very real sub categories in ODeL, nor any attempt to stratify ODeL along these lines. Unless we make an honest effort to do so we are likely to spend our energies fruitlessly trying to apply some kind of conformity to a *phenomenon* that cannot conform, that is metamorphosing as we speak, into an ODeL, mythical "Hydra." This kind of diversity is likely to become more pronounced as more and more residential universities and private institutions start offering their iterations of ODeL.

Technology has undoubtedly triggered new ways of thinking and doing in higher education. However, those of us in ODeL know all too well the promise and pitfalls of ICT innovation, especially in regard to the need to expand access and the rather tenuous lure of economies of scale. In my view, technology should be an instrument for achieving excellence in scholarship, student support, institutional efficiency and service delivery. It should <u>not</u> dictate to the university a business model, based on potential, possibility and/or profit. That is a recipe for failure. Technology is primarily a supporting, *facilitating* instrument.

Contrary to popular opinion, quality ODeL is NOT cheap**,** despite the perceived potential of large scale delivery. Course design and development for quality online education is a specialised field requiring trained developers, and getting the supporting systems in place is an extremely costly exercise. It takes time - a long time - to create anew or convert (and quality assure) existing courses into online format, especially where there is a QA regime in place. There are significant logistical considerations in terms of timelines, staff training (professional development for faculty), student support and implementation, assessment models, monitoring and evaluation. There are also leadership, cultural and governance dynamics that have to be addressed (I have mentioned those), including for example, fears around job losses or redundancy and staff (and some student) resistance to the uptake and learning of new technologies, as well as a multitude of unanticipated technological and political challenges, which can be extremely onerous – and costly to resolve. Colleagues, these are realities which occupy much of my time on a day-to-day basis. How, in this type of context, will we quality assure ODeL on scale?

I do however foresee a very significant role for technology in ODeL, which is not vested so much in access and scale, but rather in the domains of higher education and institutional analytics, and equally importantly, capacity development. And this brings me to my third point – that of **<u>capacity.</u>** The internet has opened up access to an unbounded repository of knowledge that needs to be filtered, selected and applied carefully in our operational, pedagogical and research endeavours. (This of course links back to

my comment of the legalities of its use and dissemination, so the amount of available knowledge is simultaneously a facilitating and an inhibiting factor.) Effective ODeL presupposes the gathering of massive amounts of data, especially in regard to student numbers, profiles, demographics, socio-economic status, areas of student growth, access to the internet, subject choices, learning preferences, levels of progress to name but a few. Currently this data is not being properly gathered, mined or analysed and that is a serious failing on our part.

If we were able to implement the appropriate technologies and employ appropriately qualified and experienced staff, we would be able to mine and analyse the data to determine for example, where our institutions' financial resources could be best employed (especially given that we are the ethical stewards of our institutions resources); where learner support should be directed; which courses could feasibly be offered fully online; what strategies and instruments could and should be implemented to ensure quality assessment; and what pedagogies would best ensure deep learning and critical thinking, including amongst vulnerable students - and who those vulnerable students are. Analytics also offers fantastic predictive opportunities, especially in regard to institutional research and trends and concomitantly, in informing strategy and planning, project management and of course, monitoring and evaluation. I suspect that we are currently so focused on income generation through MOOC's, SLPs, or through disparate pedagogical innovations that we lack a comprehensive, integrated approach to leveraging ICTS to our broad, coherent benefit.

It is also true that the digital era requires a mindset that may in fact be alien to the thinking and training of many academics that are likely to feel threatened by the radical changes that they are required to absorb and apply. As such, ICT adoption by staff and faculty is also a key barrier to cultural transformation and institutional efficiency.

Underlying this lost opportunity is a lack of capacity development. This in fact, is a *make- or –break* factor for efficient quality ODeL delivery. We need to ask: *What programmes do we have in place, to ensure that firstly, our carrying capacity is determined accurately and secondly, that our human resources capacity is developed in line with our institutional strategy and needs?*

The virtual world has brought to the fore the notion of global partnerships that could entail the sharing of faculty, resources, courses, students and even qualifications. Leadership and management will need to make very well informed decisions on their business models and their missions. Whatever that

choice, universities that move increasingly online will need to work from a very solid and adaptable basic infrastructure, while being sufficiently agile in both policy, processes, structure, capabilities, capacities and mindset to keep abreast of the rapid innovation and turnover in ICT development – or face a constant threat of technical redundancy.

Globally we are beginning to discern a fall in enrolments in higher education, including ODeL, and I would like to believe that this is as much a symptom of failed expectations on the part of both the student and the provider in regard to providing quality online education and what it means to be a successful ODeL student, as it is of financial considerations. We have in recent times read of many instances where funding has been withdrawn and programmes cancelled because of non-performance. Interestingly one is also beginning to see more and more questioning – even resistance - from the global academe precisely around notions of knowledge quality, content and mastery; this in the face of a perceived deliberate "dumbing down " on the part of some institutions in order to ensure throughput and profit. It would seem that in these instances the numbers game, and not the graduate game has tended to prevail and quite rightly, academics are beginning to question the relevance and value of their professions in this environment. Whether we bemoan neoliberal tendencies or whether our fingers point to any other scapegoat, we all need to ask ourselves which category we fall into. Perhaps the time has come for some really honest introspection around our intentions as educators.   Who do we serve?

 As far as a way forward for *Equity, Access, and Quality Learning Outcomes* is concerned, I would revert back to the contextual nature of quality assurance and the distinct and varying models of ODeL and suggest that it might be time create anew - to let go of that which has not worked, especially in the developing world context where ODeL is relatively new, and to perhaps consider continentally/globally agreed quality principles, values or criteria that can be easily adapted to individual contexts, benchmarked globally and peer reviewed via existing global/continental ODeL structures and bodies.

The University of South Africa has made a deliberate decision to respect its context, even as we participate in the global dialogue on ODeL. The first five-year phase of our 2016 – 2030 strategy has been developed and focuses on the three core areas that I outline hereunder.

GOAL 1: *Towards becoming a leading ODeL, comprehensive university in teaching, learning, research, innovation and community engagement based on scholarship.* We are focused on quality and have adopted an incremental and carefully considered approach to online delivery. For Unisa quality cannot be sacrificed on the altar of mass, mediocre *bang-for-bucks* programmes. We have also embarked on a

very comprehensive assessment project, which is looking at ways of conducting quality secure assessments online – amongst others. We will be methodical and pragmatic in our approach, bearing in mind that being innovative *can* happen in a structured and informed way. We are in the business of educating, not informing. Our reputation is at stake.

GOAL 2: *To craft and embed an agile, innovative, sustainable and efficient operational environment*. In line with the need for us to be rooted in our context, Unisa is currently undergoing a fundamental process of restructuring and re-alignment to ensure consonance with our policy and leadership context and our transformational imperatives. In addition we are ensuring that sound and transparent governance, including ethics, risk and co-operative governance form the bedrock of our institutional culture and operations. We are of the view that this will provide a natural and necessary filter for irresponsible decisions around expenditure, the quality of our offerings and decisions that might impact on institutional sustainability

GOAL 3: *Harness ICT to support the transformation of the core business to enable high performance, service and quality to all its communities*. We are focusing on our support/operational infrastructure to ensure institutional efficiency and effectiveness and service excellence in line with our available capacity. This includes the current and incremental implementation of a brand new student system and a number of other very significant IT platforms. Our academics are simultaneously being given the space to create and innovate with technologically supported courseware, but all envisaged online courses will be piloted in a planned manner and tested and approved for quality and effectiveness before they enter into domain of what we consider to be formal education.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, now more than ever before, as we are faced with ongoing calls for access to higher education, we are called to be pragmatic and selective in our approach to, and uptake of, those instruments which we believe will produce the desired outcomes. Unisa is *already* delivering approximately 700 mass, quality assured and accredited courses to about 400 000 students, and we have been doing so for decades - courses which incidentally, are recognized by all commonwealth countries. So, as prudent stewards of our capacity and resources, we have to ask ourselves if we could maintain the same levels of quality if we were to immediately deliver all these courses fully online. *Currently* the answer is "not really." Not in the current context.

However, we are making the necessary investments that will catapult us into that space within a short space of time. For example: we are extending Unisa students' online access and support to ICT resources

by providing ICT connectivity to the Department of Basic Education's Teachers' Centres; we are collaborating with the Department of Correctional Services to provide access to Unisa's online resources to offenders that are registered with Unisa; we have commissioned satellite connectivity to nine mobile buses; we are partnering with public libraries; we are working on the business case of establishing information pertaining to the spatial distribution of all our students; we are migrating the WAN remote sites to SANReN where all Unisa remote sites are migrated to the SANReN backbone; we are upgrading the LAN to configure a platform that enables scalability for future expansion based on our requirements for growth; we are expanding the wireless network by increasing the number of access points to accommodate online training; we are extending the Virtual Private Network (VPN) to assist our staff/faculty who are in Science, Engineering and Technology – to comply with the college's requirement for VPN access for M & D students who require access to laboratory applications for simulations; we are providing high speed broadband connectivity, translating to increased bandwidth demands through the SEACOM and WACS international links; we are implementing an Electronic Content Management System (ECM) solution; we are replacing the Student Information System – as a result of this system we introduced online applications, registrations, student accounts and so on; we are on the verge of introducing the Student Relationship Management (SRM) solution – webchat, multimedia, virtual assistance and social media. All of these are using our Learning Management System i.e. myUnisa. Of course while we are moving in the right direction, it is at our own pace, in our own best interest and in terms of our own unique model and available capacities.

The point to be made is that in 21st Century higher education if we want *Equity, Access, and Quality Learning Outcomes in Online, Open and Flexible Higher Education for the Future we want,* we need to consider context, quality and capacity and to have the boldness and creativity to look at bespoke options that will ultimately be consonant with our calling as educators.