Beyond access: Tailoring ODL provision to advance social justice and development

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Abstract

This article observes that while open distance learning (ODL) has demonstrably created greater opportunities for access to higher education opportunities, access alone is a necessary but insufficient criterion for advancing the twin causes of development and social justice. The article considers social justice and supporting learners in ODL, particularly in terms of what is taught and the ways in which teaching/learning is mediated. It argues that the demographics of ODL learners are changing and these changes should be considered and addressed. The article starts from the assumption that learning is a basic human activity, but observes that what is learned in higher education is both more systematic and more purposeful and therefore requires careful mediation. It considers the University of South Africa (Unisa) case, recognising a shift towards an epistemology of social-constructivism, where progressive scaffolding allows the learner to move to more independent learning. The article then identifies some of the key assumptions that need to inform changed practice in order to produce a deeper sense of connection and relevance with learners: from appreciating that learning resides with the learner, through to redesigning the distance learning approach. The article is basically a position paper for Unisa, but it seeks to manifest many of the root assumptions underlying its interpretation of ODL. As such it is hoped that the article will be of interest to international readers by providing an African perspective on challenges faced by higher education more generally.

Keywords: open distance learning, higher education, access, development, social justice, Unisa, open educational approaches, social constructivism, autonomous learners
ACCESS, DEVELOPMENT, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND ODL

Volume 31 of the *International Journal of Educational Development* focused on issues of access, equity and transition in low income countries with specific regard to schooling. Lewin and Little (2011, 336), in their editorial, noted that achieving universal access to basic education remains very challenging for low income countries ‘especially if this is conceived of in terms of an expanded vision which embraces worthwhile learning, equity and opportunities to transit to higher levels of education’. Provision of high quality education at all levels is widely recognised as the *sine qua non* for development and the need to be active and competitive role-players in a global knowledge society has seen increasing pressure to increase enrolment in higher education as well. A key argument in favour of open distance learning (ODL) approaches is that they can provide access to education opportunities for those who might otherwise be marginalised by work, ethnic, geographical or other factors, such as physical disability or age – thus uniting development and social justice concerns. But access is meaningless unless it leads to a reasonable chance of success. And success is meaningless if the programmes offered are not of high quality and/or do not provide access in turn to additional social, work or self-development opportunities. Within South Africa in particular there is need to respond to the constitutional imperatives of access, equity and redress and the University of South Africa (Unisa), as a dedicated distance education institution, offering a range of academic, vocational and professional programmes, is positioned to play a leading role.

By the end of 2010, according to audited figures, Unisa had enrolled 293 437 headcount students of whom 66.6 per cent were African and 60.5 per cent were female – two of the target groups for South Africa’s focus on the needs of previously disadvantaged individuals. In addition, 6.4 per cent of students were from other Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) countries and subsidised to the same extent as South African students in terms of SADC protocol, and another 1.4 per cent were from other African countries. In 2010, there were 26 073 graduates, of whom 65.2 per cent were African and 68.7 per cent were female. Also by the end of 2010, the percentage of staff who were African and/or female had grown from a low 44.07 per cent and 53.50 per cent respectively in 2004 to 55.1 per cent and 56.7 per cent respectively in 2010 (Unisa 2010a; Van Zyl and Barnes 2012). Although these macro figures hide enormous differences at individual module and programme level, and considering also the fact that between 10 per cent and 30 per cent of students in particular modules may drop out or stop out before, or do not turn up for, their examinations, the trend is positive and would seem to be in line with broad national developmental goals.

Such statistics present only part of the picture, however. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL 2006) asserts:

> Development depends on the creation, dissemination and application of knowledge by everyone. COL believes that technology can greatly facilitate these processes.
The techniques of open and distance learning give farmers the know-how to improve their livelihoods and rural women the knowledge to raise a healthy family. Schoolnets create communities of practice among teachers and give children access to the best materials. E-learning and the knowledge media are gradually enriching the curriculum for all universities.

Unisa agrees that the focus must be not only on numbers of students and graduates and the extent to which these reflect demographic realities, but also on the kinds of programmes offered and the ways in which they are offered.

Odora Hoppers (cited in an internal report, Unisa 2010b) argues for attention to be given to the ‘intellectual architecture’ of the institution, particularly in light of Unisa’s vision and the challenges of a developmental state. She notes that: ‘Society has problems; the academic has disciplines’ and that there is often a lack of congruency therefore between the academic world and the wider society. She further notes that the Developmental State paradigm of thinking has been part of a reaction to what happened during the 1980s and 1990s. Most post-independence countries were developmental states, but were ‘completely shredded’ by structural adjustment programmes. Hoppers argues that Development Education is not about ‘education and development’, nor is it about ‘education for development’. It is rather about the transformative propositions to be made based on the lessons of development and how this can be changed into (critical) pedagogy. She observes that a ‘pervasive institutional culture has taken form and stands as a wall of resistance. How do we disrupt and unravel the dominant culture of the institution?’

This argument usefully redirects the reader’s attention to what Morrow (2007, 2) sees as a distinction between ‘formal’ and ‘epistemological’ access. The former is concerned with how students gain access to the point of becoming registered students (if they choose to do so); while the latter deals with the nature of the teaching they receive once they are registered. Morrow (2007, 18, 20) argues that in the latter case lecturers are concerned with how they help students gain access to the kind of knowledge valued at a higher education level, and within a particular community of learning and practice, by providing systematic learning pathways that guide them from where they are to where they need to be as independent critical thinkers. As Freire (1985) notes, reading and study can either be an active and liberating process or a passive and mind-numbing process based on a ‘banking’ or ‘domesticating’ ideology: lecturers need to make a conscious choice to teach in ways that liberate and transform their students.

Unisa understands the promotion of social justice within an education development context, therefore it refers not only to the need to respond to the imperatives of access, equity and redress in terms of student and staff demographics but, more profoundly, to what is taught and how it is taught and the extent to which these choices are directed towards achieving a fairer distribution of opportunities and resources in a sustainable way. ODL approaches can contribute to this but only if interventions are designed explicitly in this way.
Louw (2007) and Havenga (2009) both note the diversity of definitions of ODL in the literature. However, the Unisa Council approved an Open Distance Learning Policy (Unisa 2008), which defines ODL as:

a multi-dimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, educational and communication distance between student and institution, student and academics, student and courseware and student and peers. Open distance learning focuses on removing barriers to access learning, flexibility of learning provision, student-centredness, supporting students and constructing learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed.

As Havenga (2009) notes, elements of this understanding are often in tension with one another; and the use of appropriate technology for purpose and context is a hallmark of ODL provision. This means that Unisa needs to manage tensions such as increasing support while keeping fees as low as possible or embracing the possibilities provided by technology for increased engagement while at the same time addressing the needs of those students who have not yet bridged the digital divide. Unisa also needs to manage the tension between the maximum choice for the individual student and the reality of the need for the developmental state to ensure that the limited funds it has available are channelled towards achieving national development goals. For example, the possibility is foreseen of a differentiated system in future in which the relative contributions of student fees and the state vary from programme to programme; and where there are options for students either to download digital course materials to their own devices for one fee or to receive learning packages with the necessary hardware and software included for a different fee. The national student bursary and loan scheme will need to make provision for both options. It is necessary to make informed decisions that will best promote the cause of social justice when seeking to resolve these tensions and to ensure that the university actively seeks to reverse any marginalisation such as that caused by the oft-quoted ‘digital divide’. This is where Unisa’s commitment to an ‘open’ form of distance learning provision comes to the fore. It commits the institution to providing meaningful access to a greater diversity of learners than is traditionally the case by, for example, providing recognition of prior learning (RPL) and foundational studies routes into formal education for those who do not meet the increasingly higher than minimum entry requirements set by other institutions. The institution will also have to provide learning resources, support and assessment opportunities in increasingly diverse forms to suit different students’ needs, for example, digital text versus audio-video formats; examination versus portfolio assessment; provision for different equipment and timeframes for different needs; and so on (Boskic, Starcher, Kelly and Hapke 2008). This in turn will require Unisa to keep track of its changing student profile.
CHANGING STUDENT AND GRADUATE PROFILES

Unisa’s Corporate Profile (n.d. c.2009, 15–16) observes that:

- Unisa provides access to a growing number of younger students with students in their twenties currently making up 47 per cent of the student enrolment figure;
- Unisa’s student profile increasingly reflects South African demographics. Female students account for about 57 per cent of the total registrations, while black students (Africans, coloureds and Indians) make up 76 per cent;
- 90.5 per cent of students are enrolled at the undergraduate level; and
- 18 per cent of students are effectively full-time students while 46 per cent are employed.

In addition to the above, some 70 per cent of students currently register for their courses ‘on-line’ either remotely via the Unisa website or by using one of the ‘self-service’ terminals at the various regional centres.

Similar changes are noted by the UK Open University, which is attracting increasingly younger students who are combining study with work and other needs (Murray 2010).

At the 17th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers held in Kuala Lumpur in June 2009, the Youth Forum made the following recommendations to education ministers which indicate some of the expectations of a new generation of ODL students:

- Student representation: Students should be involved in decision-making bodies within the education system.
- Mode of delivery: Arguing that traditional methods of teaching are not adequate in this age, the Youth Forum advised ministers to facilitate the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and establish a special Commonwealth fund for ICTs in education.
- School to life transition: Vocational and technical disciplines should be incorporated into the main stream system, and work experience and community involvement should be a mandatory part of the education process (COL 2009, 2).

So the age, needs and expectations of students entering ODL institutions are changing.

Has there been a concomitant change in the kinds of programmes needed and offered? Although a higher education institution (HEI) does not exist only to provide skilled ‘workers’, many students do undertake studies with the expectation that they will at least open up additional career opportunities. As the developing economies of the south grow there is increasing demand for graduates who are able to contribute meaningfully to the global knowledge society – balancing local and global imperatives.
It seems clear, however, from a brief perusal of situations vacant and predictions of future job trends that no university, not even a comprehensive one such as Unisa, could possibly offer programmes narrowly tailored to meet the particular demands of the particular positions that are available: rather universities need to identify and develop the foundational knowledge, skills and competences and nurture the independent learning skills and open-mindedness that will allow their graduates to complete their probationary training in the specific workplaces in which they find themselves – and then have both the willingness and ability to continue to learn throughout their working lives.

Universities will not be able to guarantee jobs for graduates in the present and future climate, but must prepare graduates as best they can for life-long learning and self-reliance. To this end, more synergy with government and industry is imperative and achievable through systematically designed and delivered work integrated learning (WIL) components in their professional and vocational programmes for example. It is suggested that so-called ‘soft skills’ need to be factored into the curriculum, especially emotional intelligence, information synthesis, adaptability, informed decision making, moral salience and future-oriented social discourse. Curricula can no longer be solely disciplinary based and should arguably encompass indigenous knowledge systems, civic studies, environmental awareness and issues of sustainability and be rooted in contexts of practice. In addition it should be possible to provide for the possibility of formal access leading to assessment and accreditation as well as providing for informal learning through the publication of self-contained ODL courses as open educational resources (OER). Indeed, Unisa is a founding member of the OER university (OERU).

A recent seminar of senior academics, called on to explore how Unisa should respond to the changing landscape, concluded:

- Curriculum reform is urgently needed to reflect an ambiguous and changing world and to prepare students to become change agents in that world.
- When aspiring to become the African university in the service of humanity, we should not falsely homogenise Africa but rather acknowledge its complexity and diversity.

Taken together, the discussion implies the need for programmes that are informed by the needs and aspirations of three key role-players, namely: employers, the state and wider civil society; students and academics, rather than any one of these in isolation – while actively seeking to provide space for minority and previously disenfranchised voices to be heard. It suggests programmes in which students actively engage not only with disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge, but also with the work and social communities that are served by the university (CHE 2007; Styrdom and Mentz 2010). It suggests the setting of assessment tasks in formal programmes that require active engagement with authentic real-life challenges rooted in a local context, and the solving of real problems; it suggests the need to nurture graduates who can make a positive difference to the world in which they live (Beets and Le Grange 2005;
CHE 2007; Kelly 2008; Nsamenang and Tchombe 2011). In short, Unisa’s vision of what a graduate should be will impact intimately upon the kind of curriculum that the university needs to offer. The two entities, the curriculum and the student, should be mutually constitutive in an ideal and ethical ODL environment that seeks to create the potential for development informed by concerns of social justice.

Unisa needs to understand the changing needs of workplaces and society, as well as local communities; examine how these match or fail to match the students’ and its own aspirations as an HEI; and then figure out what it all means for the learning and teaching activities it designs and the kind of assessment tasks it sets to help evaluate its progress. This does not, however, imply any constraints on the university’s research activities and the possibility of identifying future needs and possibilities that are not yet apparent.

This position paper proceeds from the assumption that learning is a natural human trait – humans learn things all the time and often unconsciously – but the kind of learning offered by a university is both more purposeful and more systematic than the everyday kind of learning. This means academics make choices about what to teach and why to teach it; then about how to teach it and who to involve, when and where in the teaching and learning process; and they also make choices about how to assess what has been achieved and how to evaluate this achievement against the original intent. These are curriculum choices and they are not value-neutral. There are also often differences between the curriculum as planned, as practised and as experienced – again influenced by who is making particular choices at particular times. The choices that people make are informed by their underpinning values and beliefs – whether implicit or explicit (complicated by the fact that sometimes what people say and what they do contradict each other). Thus, ontological and epistemological assumptions affect pedagogic choices and these in turn affect the curriculum that is practised and experienced.

**INTEGRATED PURPOSE-DRIVEN PROGRAMME DESIGN**

Curriculum as planned and practised is directed by the intentions of the educators and their own philosophical assumptions and these need to be constantly readjusted without compromising the ethical norms on which sound educational practice is based. At the present time, and slightly leeward of pedagogical assumptions in the North and East, Unisa’s current ODL practice is moving towards cognitive and social constructivist modes that, hopefully, nurture independent and critical thinking. This is consistent with a concern for providing liberating epistemological access as expressed earlier. But, the university must be constantly on the alert for ways and means that nurture even more effectively independent critical thinking not only in an ODL environment but as part of a developing nation that is eager to benefit from the effective use of technologies for teaching and learning.

A consideration of the discussions and possibly revised articulations of graduateness within the institution suggest that the Unisa community seeks to
work within a transformational paradigm informed primarily by three theoretical
frameworks, namely, African Philosophy, Critical Theory and Postmodernism.

It should be noted that there is no easy alignment here – since African Philosophy
and Critical Theory by their nature pursue a particular kind of agenda that emphasises
communitarian values and the responsibility of the individual to wider society;
whereas Postmodernism places much more emphasis on the individual and the
choices that he or she needs to make – often being interested in issues that challenge
the established norms of society.

However, all three approaches suggest that the current status quo needs to be
challenged constantly and would seem to support learning processes that are
characterised by cognitive and social constructivist pedagogy. Killen (2000, xvii–
xxviii) notes that there are several different interpretations of constructivist approaches
but points to the work of Snowman and Biehler (2000) who suggest that they all
share four common principles:

• What a person ‘knows’ is not just received passively but is actively constructed
  by the learner, thus meaningful learning is the active creation of knowledge
  structures from personal experience.

• Because knowledge is the result of personal interpretation of experiences, one
  person’s knowledge can never be totally transferred to another person.

• The cultures and societies to which people belong influence their views of the
  world around them and, therefore, influence what they ‘know’. In general, the
  understandings that people reach are largely consistent within a given culture
  and society.

• Construction of ideas is aided by systematic, open-minded discussions and
  debate.

Killen (2000, xix–xxi) argues that this implies pedagogical approaches that
foreground the need for scaffolding, that is, providing students with enough help to
complete a task and then gradually decreasing the help as they become more able
to work independently; use of realistic learning contexts; encouragement to engage
with multiple perspectives; and building on students’ prior learning and experience.
This correlates well with the application of Vygotskian theory and African traditional
practice, which emphasises learning through the support of more capable others (and
not necessarily the teacher). It further correlates with the generally consistent message
from education theorists for the past 100 years that meaningful learning requires
active student engagement, which is made increasingly possible by the affordances
of ICTs. This is done in ways that are simply impossible in mass lecture settings on
campuses or snail-mail paced correspondence studies (Ally 2004; BCCampus/COL
2008; Hardman 2005; Kinross and McKenzie 2009; Laurillard 2002; Nsamenang
and Tchombe 2011; Postle and Tyler 2010; Taylor 2012; Williams, Karousou and
Mackness 2011).

In an ODL environment, where the emphasis is on independent learning from
especially designed learning resources, this presents particular challenges. Mays and Swanepoel (2010) note that the development of appropriate learning resources that scaffold progressively independent learning is one of the key distinguishing characteristics of an ODL institution such as Unisa. However, development of appropriate learning pathways and resources involves a continuous and iterative engagement between the design phase, the development phase and the teaching, assessment and feedback phase which should ideally be characterised by the nurturing of sustainable communities of learning and teaching, that is, curriculum as process and praxis.

Holmberg (1995) observes that it is possible to organise distance education provision in several different ways, for example, institutionally, programmatically or student-need focused. Thus, the argument for a new ODL model at Unisa (Louw 2007) can be seen as a distinct conceptual re-centering from an institutional ‘product orientation towards a student-centred orientation’ (Unisa 2008a, 399).

Central to the revised emerging concept of ODL at Unisa are:

• The student walk as an organising framework i.e. taking cognisance of students needs prior to registration, during registration, during teaching and learning and after graduation;
• The foregrounding of integrated decentralised support;
• Explicit attempts to break down silos, encourage interdisciplinary teamwork and provide a ‘seamless’ experience for students, that is, the more holistic approach identified by the institution’s strategic plan and endorsed by both education change management theory (e.g. Fullan 1993) and ODL best practice (Holmberg 1995 and the many other sources consulted for the Louw 2007 report).

Moll (2003, 26) argues for the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE) that:

A stance of ‘learning-centredness’ needs to be adopted in relation to the opening of distance learning. Not only does this take into account the needs and outcomes associated with the individual learners, but it also incorporates a view of the whole learning relationship established in a distance education regime.

Mills (2003, 102–104) cautions, however, that

in the context of open and distance education, teaching (i.e. the production of learning materials) tends to take precedence over learning and student support ... by planning learner support as an integral part of a teaching and learning programme, rather than an afterthought which can be excised when times get difficult, institutions can demonstrate a recognition of the link between income generation and learner support.
The discussion now turns to some of the assumptions about learning that probably should inform programme design and learning support practices if ODL is to build access into success in pursuit of a developmental agenda informed by the principle of social justice. Although these assumptions stem from the perspective of Unisa, and its work in sub-Saharan Africa, we believe there will be resonance with other developing economies considering the mainstreaming of ODL in order to increase higher education enrolment rates from the current low of 5–7 per cent in comparison with a world average of 26 per cent (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley 2009, vi).

**Assumption 1: Learning starts with the students themselves**

On a recent visit to Unisa, Jarvis (2008) argued that ‘we teach people not subjects’. In other words, learning changes people: changing the way they think and/or feel and/or behave with regard to particular issues while recognising that there are often delays and disjunctures between what was intended, what was enacted and what was experienced and achieved. This means that in planning learning, Unisa needs to start with the learner profile and, in formulating learning outcomes that speak to cognitive/knowledge/foundational competences; affective/attitudinal and value-driven/reflective competences; and psychomotor/skills-based/practical competences, it needs to have both ends and beginnings in mind.

**Assumption 2: Learning requires active student engagement**

Unisa students start their studies with at least 20 years of prior learning and experience; are increasingly accustomed to engaging actively with their environment through a variety of media, for example, cell phones, Facebook, Twitter, gaming, web 2.0, and so on; are predominantly African and therefore more likely to be predisposed to communitarian inter-personal ways of engaging than perhaps students from Europe or North America; are increasingly more likely to question single viewpoints and established ‘authority’; and have life commitments outside of their Unisa studies. This implies the need to use students’ experience/prior learning as the starting point for discussing content, for example, through the use of scenarios and case studies or revision/refresher exercises presented in multiple formats; to solicit open-ended responses to activate students’ existing frames of reference/schema; and also to have some flexibility about ways of engaging in order to accommodate different real-life experiences (an issue that is currently being explored through Unisa’s engagement with the Council for International Exchange of Scholars (CIES)). Then, lecturers need to engage students in activities that require increasingly demanding critical interaction with the content (CHE 2007) and the views of others (colleagues, peers, community members, ‘experts’) in ways that will help them to assimilate or accommodate new ideas.
Assumption 3: Education is an intentional activity and adult education requires intentional dialogue

Figure 1 informs the discussion that follows. It indicates that learning involves an interaction between students and the life experiences and ideas that they bring to the planned learning experience; established bodies of content – a vicarious engagement with the thoughts and ideas of the thinkers and researchers of the past and present; and the active and intentional intervention of others (e.g. other students, tutors, academics and/or practitioners).

Figure 1: Learning through dialogue

The position taken here is that dialogue is at the heart of adult learning (Gravett 2005). Therefore there is a need to plan for a dialogic space (Rule and Harley 2005, 181–183) within which students reflect on their own experiences and assumptions then engage with the national and organisational context and the ideas of others through a variety of media, for example, cellphones, email and online discussions, activities (talk to a colleague; interview your grandmother), assignments (including the possibility of group assignments), projects (which could be community and/or work-based), workshops (where applicable to the achievement of the exit level outcomes) in increasingly ‘complicated conversations’ (Pinar 2009). Implicit in this concept is the belief that education is an intentional activity (although perhaps loosely so at some levels) and that the intentions of module and course designers, and those who participate in the learning process, are not value-free but rather are
grounded in particular theoretical assumptions – whether these are made explicit or not. It is therefore incumbent on academics to make explicit their underpinning assumptions: a dialogic space based on logical empiricism (and an implicit belief in the possibility of identifying the correct solution) will be quite different from one based on social critical theory (in which responses are conditioned by ideology and therefore contestable) or on Postmodernism (in which there may be multiple, equally valid responses to a single issue) for example.

**Assumption 4: Taking time to design**

It is believed that the thinking outlined above is already consistent with Unisa’s current Tuition and Assessment Policies and Procedures, including its Framework for a Team Approach to Course Design, which has been in existence since 2006. However, experience suggests that provision made at institutional level for effective design does not always translate into practice. It is believed in particular that decision-making about learning support, as well as the assessment and feedback strategy, is as integral to the design process as the determination of outcomes and content. It should be possible to see a coherent link between the theoretical assumptions that underpin the programme design and the learning support and assessment strategies integrated therein; the concomitant design at the module level; and practice during implementation as evidenced by ongoing critical, evidence-based evaluation planned and budgeted for in the initial design phase.

**Student support**

It should be noted that student support:

- covers a wide range of contextually sensitive possible activities and interventions;
- is wider than a remedial intervention; and
- is concerned with fostering interaction and dialogue.

After an extensive discussion of the literature on issues affecting retention and throughput and noting the diversity of approaches, Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011) argue for a socio-critical approach that explores the ‘fit’ or lack thereof between (transforming) individual student identity and attributes and (transforming) institutional identity and attributes as illustrated in Figure 2. They argue that an understanding of the complexity of the multifarious issues that affect student retention, throughput and experience is the key to successful implementation of ODL. The model militates against the notion of a one-size-fits-all approach to student support, on the one hand, and reinforces the notion of the need to think holistically, on the other. The model reinforces the importance of interaction with each individual student.
Simpson (2008) suggests that students’ persistence through the student walk as outlined above may in large measure be influenced by their motivation to succeed in their studies. He suggests that the focus of our interactions with individual students might therefore usefully adopt a proactive motivational support approach that draws upon recent findings in the fields of positive psychology and theories of the self. Such an approach, it is argued, would have the following characteristics:

- It would be individual – it would focus on individual student needs rather than a top-down one-size-fits-all approach.
- It would be interactive – it would allow learners to interact with their support rather than be a take-it-or-leave-it approach.
- It would be motivational – it would be informed by and use both Self Theory and the Strengths approach (Simpson 2008, 168).

Interestingly, the former University of Fort Hare distance BEd programme offered in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa chose to call its tutor-facilitators – *abakhwezeli* – ‘those who keep the fire burning’. It has also been the Unisa National Professional Diploma in Education experience that the motivational/sustaining momentum role of its tutors far outweighed their academic support role.
TECHNOLOGY FIT FOR PURPOSE

There is an online website for each of the 3,000 or so modules offered by Unisa (part of a sakai-based learner management system called myUnisa) through which students can download digital versions of learning resources; engage in asynchronous online discussion; access additional assessment activities; and submit assignments electronically. Utilisation of this resource by both students and staff is growing but varies widely from module to module. Although increasing numbers of students have some access to internet and email facilities, this is not always sustained as access and bandwidth remain constrained. Therefore print-based media remain the core technology in the short term although the university is committed to increasing e-learning and on-line teaching progressively, starting with postgraduate courses for which students could be expected to have organised access prior to enrolment and for which student numbers are often small enough to allow for use of some of the synchronous technology options such as Skype and Elluminate.

ACCESS FOR ALL: SUCCESS FOR MOST

Unisa can see the need for an overarching discussion to enable all other planned activities to make explicit the ontological, epistemological and pedagogic assumptions that underpin teaching and learning and inform all curriculum development, design, delivery and evaluation. This needs to be an active and ongoing conversation that informs planning, practice and review. Curriculum here assumes that content/course material, assessment and learning support/student affairs need to be addressed in an integrated way.

Taking this caveat into account, the following priorities can be identified:
1. Renewing our emphasis on teaching and learning through ODL;
2. Reimagining student support (learning support and student affairs);
3. Improving service to students.

All of this needs to be done in ways that allow Unisa to offer the greatest quality to the largest number of students. The university is committed to the use, adaptation and sharing of OER as part of this process and to the use of open educational approaches. Ehlers (2011) suggests that Open Educational Practices (OEP) ‘are defined as practices which support the (re)use and production of OER through institutional policies, promote innovative pedagogical models, and respect and empower learners as co-producers on their lifelong learning path’. In the Unisa context, however, this involves a wider commitment to educational practices that are accessible, transparent and accountable; that foster collaborative and flexible approaches to learning and teaching; and that are specifically geared towards providing meaningful access to quality educational opportunities for the poor and marginalised in society.
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