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AN OVERVIEW OF THE STRATEGIC OER POSITIONING OF THE ONLY DEDICATED ODL UNIVERSITY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Authors:
Ms Kerry de Hart
Department of Taxation,
Unisa
dhartkl@unisa.ac.za

Prof Truida Oosthuizen,
College of Economic and Management Sciences
Unisa

Abstract The focus of this paper was to establish the current situation at the only dedicated ODL university in Southern Africa, the University of South Africa (UNISA), regarding the use of and contribution to Open Educational Resources (OER). It was the intention of the authors to determine whether the university has any institutional position or intention in this regard and whether the policies of the institution are conducive towards Open Educational Practice. Information was gathered through a review of institutional strategic documents, research papers and reports, communication by the Vice-Chancellor both within the institution and to external stakeholders, as well as specific academic practices in this regard. The results of the review indicate clearly that the university has been positioning itself to take advantage of this movement and institutional policies and resources are being brought in line with this position. This means that academic colleges at the University of South Africa will be required to establish their own positions in this regard, in order to contribute to and benefit from the OER initiative.

Keywords: ODL, OER, UNISA, distance education, open courseware, HEI policy

1. Introduction
Who gives knowledge away for free? A call for universities and academics to move towards the use of and contribution to open educational resources (OER) is often motivated by the fact that education at universities is financed by public funds and therefore should be available to the nation, as well as the argument that knowledge is not owned by any one institution once it has entered the public domain (Atkins, Brown, & Hammond, 2007). Institutions of Higher Education merely offer variants of the same knowledge using their own methodologies and learner support (Butcher, 2012).

The challenge to meet the growing demand for higher education seem insurmountable in developing countries, and especially so in Africa. The mission statement of UNISA encompasses, inter alia, offering education to the African continent where the resources and opportunities for education are scarce. The use of open educational resources will assist UNISA in meeting the need for further and higher education on its own continent and in its own country.

2. Background
The University of South Africa (UNISA) at present, was constituted on 1 January 2004 after a merger of the old University of South Africa, Technikon Southern Africa, and the incorporation of the Distance Education Campus of the Vista University, VUDEC (UNISA, 2009). The merger resulted in UNISA being South Africa’s only dedicated Distance Education University (Makhanya M. S., 2012).
The merger provided the impetus and necessity for UNISA to examine its role in society and to ascertain how the new opportunities, challenges and synergies brought about by the merger could be leveraged. UNISA was also impelled to restructure and harmonize its structures, processes, procedures and the programme qualification mix.

Given UNISA’s comprehensive identity and its perceived role in South African higher education and future increased role in education on the continent, it was necessary that the university construct a new mission, vision, values and strategies for the future. One of the outcomes was the development of a new vision -“(t)owards the African University in the service of humanity”.

An aspect of UNISA’s mission statement, is a commitment to “(p)rove quality general and career-focused learning opportunities, underpinned by principles of lifelong learning, flexibility and student centeredness” (UNISA, 2010).

During 2008 the University Council approved an “Open Distance Learning Policy” (ODL Policy) that placed UNISA in a new dimension with regards to becoming an open institution of higher learning, rather than merely an institution for distance learning. The policy defined the concept of open learning as: “an approach to learning that gives students flexibility and choice over what, when, where, at what pace and how they learn. Open learning is all encompassing and includes distance education, resource-based learning, correspondence learning, flexi-study and self-paced study” (UNISA, 2008). By approving this policy and adopting the definition of ODL, UNISA combined the characteristics of distance education (a method of education provision) and open learning as its modus operandi.

Changes in both the education environment and the possibilities offered by the development of information and communication technology has led UNISA to already redefine itself as an open distance e-learning (ODeL) institution. Thereby transforming from a limited model of open and distance education, and being committed to e-learning.

Early in 2012 UNISA management communicated that the Portfolio for Teaching and Learning must provide, amongst others, quality ODL tuition and support services to students (UNISA, 2012a). Being the only dedicated ODL-university in South Africa, is a strength that motivates a wider and more open tuition model. It is also acknowledged that the expanded reach through ICT for enhanced learner support is an opportunity that the university and education cannot afford to miss (UNISA, 2012a).

3. UNISA and OER

If UNISA is not to miss the opportunity of becoming part of the global education trend of OER and resource based learning then it is important to ascertain the current status regarding OER usage. Contributions can be measured by reflecting on a couple of factors that will give an overview of the current position as well as the direction in which the University is moving. Decisions and changes in a university setting are shaped by policies and champions. Without policies there is no guide for the direction in which the institution is moving (Bateman, 2008). “Policies emphasise educational innovation and organisational change in educational institutions” (OLCOS, 2012). In light of the fact that this paper strives to give an overview of Unisa and OER, the starting point will be to reflect on UNISA’s current policies. This paper will also consider UNISA’s stance with regard to contributing toward OER’s and the practice thereof and on the other side of the OER coin, the use of OER’s in Unisa. Other than policies and contributions to OER, there are also practices that are indicative of a university following the global trend of Open Educational Resources and courseware, like institutional repositories and portals. This paper will also examine UNISA’s standing in this regard.

An overview of the strategic OER positioning of the only dedicated ODL university in Southern Africa
3.1 Official UNISA documents that reflect institutional OER position

As part of preparation for an as yet unpublished report, a review of Unisa official documentation was undertaken by Archer & Prinsloo (2012). The authors selected 27 Unisa policies, strategies, implementation plans, regulations and other documents (from now on referred to as Unisa documents) for review as they were held by the authors to have potential to influence the Unisa environment in respect of OER (personal communication, 2012). This review found that:

- An all-encompassing OER strategy is necessary for Unisa, one that could guide future policy development as well as the review of existing documents. However, in light of this not currently being available, it was found that policies often encouraged the espousal of OER.
- Since 2010 four policies (Curriculum policy, Implementing the curriculum policy, ICT-enhanced teaching and learning strategy and Institutional Operational Plan 2012-2013) had been adopted by the university which specifically mention OER. These documents provide inter alia for the use of creative commons license, a Unisa portal, the provision of support for developing OER as well as tools for OER.
- There are shortcomings in that 21 of the 27 documents disregard important facets of OER and some documents even introduce measures which will or could hamper the adoption of OER by academics as well as the contribution of the Unisa community to OER.
- Policies or strategies also need to be revisited so that the online teaching environment is encapsulated in all of UNISA’s documentation.

It is evident from the review (Archer & Prinsloo, 2012) and from our knowledge of policies in the university, that older policies need to be revisited so that all procedures in the university are aligned – one incongruity that comes to mind is the Policy for prescribing textbooks which should state that OER must first be evaluated before a “copyright” or proprietary textbook may be prescribed.

Unfortunately policies are only as good as the practice that is enforced. The truth is that lack of knowledge of policies, enforcement, disabling factors or skills often result in policies not finding their way into practice. There needs to be clear communication regarding implementation of policies, a certain amount of activism and enthusiasm by champions. In order to ascertain if the policies have been sufficient to drive the university in this direction, one needs to identify where application has taken place. Currently, in Unisa the College of Education is urging the incorporation of OER rather than proprietary textbooks in their curriculum development. Other Colleges in UNISA need to put similar strategies in place, where appropriate. The authors are not aware of any similar practices in the university, but this is not to say that they do not exist in small pockets but not as college initiatives.

3.2 UNISA as a contributor of Open courseware:

The other side of OER is the contribution towards resources and courseware. In terms of UNISA’s social justice mandate as the “university in the service of mankind”, the UNISA community should be encouraged and enabled to contribute to open courseware and open resources. There are few examples of this in the Unisa community that the authors are aware of. The list is therefore not exhaustive.

- Open short courses – life consumerscience, household food security, learn to speak an African language
- Open resources – Econ tutor (UNISA, 2012c)

The Centre for Accounting Studies is also launching an open resource in 2013, “Ethics in Accounting”. The module will be a freely available add-on to one or more of the modules offered.
by the centre. It is not envisaged that it will lead to a credit in a formal qualification but rather as an enhancement to existing or newly developed modules.

One of the pillars of OER is the use of collaboration or communities of practice to make courseware and resources openly available. An example of collaboration that is unfolding is the establishment of SATEA (South African Tax Educators Association). Founding members from most of the South African Institute of Chartered Accountant (SAICA) accredited universities have formed a coalition in order to inform research and for the purposes of tuition collaboration.

Taxation is a subject where content changes annually because of the changes to the Income Tax Act. The content of university courses at the accredited universities is onerous and prescribed by the professional body so that students can pass a professional qualifying exam. Tax academics have thus formed a unit that will initially produce podcasts/vodcasts as open resources that will be freely available on YouTube Edu. It is envisaged that this collaboration will lead to the development of taxation open courseware as well as research outputs.

3.3 UNISA, OER and the web
Education is increasingly using technology for delivery and therefore a way to share open resources or courseware is through the use of repositories and portals. UNISA has an institutional repository situated on its open portal where about 5 000 items are available for sharing and it receives about 200 000 hits per month (www.unisa.ac.za/OER accessed 23 July 2012). Of these resources, 657 are from the College of Economic and Management Sciences.

Unisa Open has the following to say about itself “a portal to help students, staff and any OER users and producers worldwide to source high-quality resources. It provides a space for conversation and a starting point for those just making their acquaintance with OER. It also provides a showcase for the OER work being conducted at UNISA” (UNISA, 2012b).

3.4 Other expressions that corroborate OER endorsement by UNISA

OER University (OERu)
UNISA is one of 14 founding anchor partners of the OERu. Their planned contribution to the OERu logic model is stated on the web page as follows: “On the African continent we seek to ensure the viability of higher education in the digital age. Our envisaged contribution to the components of the logic model for the OERu could possibly include:

1. Open curriculum: Selected contribution to OER curriculum
2. Open student support: Sharing our model of online student support – myUnisa
3. Open pedagogy: Contribution to the development of digital learning literacies
4. Open pedagogy: Sharing models of pedagogy and pedagogical policies
5. Provision of OER assets (textbooks, tutorials, journals)

The reason why UNISA joined OER Tertiary Education Network (OERTen) is stated as “Our vision to be ‘the African university in the service of humanity’, our locatedness on the African continent and our significant global footprint place us in the unique position to represent African perspectives within the OERTen network while displaying local relevance and global consciousness” (2011.11 Founding OERTen anchor partner statements).
Stance of UNISA leadership
Towards the end of 2011 the Principal and Vice-Chancellor of UNISA made the following statement in personal communication with the Minister of Higher Education and Training in South Africa: “The OER movement’s aspiration to open access strongly resonates with our open distance learning model where spatial, geographical, economic and demographic boundaries must be reduced to facilitate and increase access to higher education. We are in no doubt about the powerful potential of OER to change the nature of our social relations. By radically reconceptualising normative educational practices in our schools and in our universities, OER will change the way we think about education on our continent, but it will do so only when we have carefully considered its distinct advantages and usages for Africa.” (Makhanya M., 2011)

At the 2012 World Open Educational Resources Congress, UNESCO, Paris, UNISA became a signatory to the 2012 Paris OER Declaration and the institutional statement strongly emphasised UNISA’s commitment to OER (UNISA, 2012c). During June 2012 Prof Makhanya signed the Berlin Declaration to Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities (Mbambo-Thata, 2012).

4. Conclusion
It has been acknowledged that UNISA cannot ignore the movement to OER especially as it can be closely compared to the African culture of Ubuntu. As shown in the overview above, UNISA is committed to the OER movement and although the movement is a decade old since the coining of the phrase, UNISA is at the beginning of embarking on a new direction in its journey, one that will change the way that many activities are performed. There are still many challenges (these are a paper on their own) however the university management has indicated a strong commitment towards embracing the initiative.

By embarking on this journey UNISA can be a conduit through which education becomes the right and responsibility of the masses both within South Africa and on the African continent and “education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” Nelson Mandela.

Note:

1Comprehensive universities offer both vocational diplomas and academic degrees.
References


Makhanya, M. (2011, December 7). Personal communication with Mr Nzimande.


