

The Real Threat of the COVID-19 Pandemic to the University of South Africa (Unisa)

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Summary:

The real threat of the COVID-19 pandemic to the University of South Africa (Unisa) is neither occupational health and safety (OHS), nor working-from-home (WfH). Rather, it is the mushrooming of ODeL-like platforms from residential universities in South Africa, Africa and all over the world, as well as the threat of Unisa ODeL experts being poached.

1. Preamble

As has been my tradition since 2012, I occasionally ink a policy brief directed to Unisa management to raise matters of concern that demand immediate attention. This policy brief seeks to highlight to Unisa MANCOM and extended management the real threat which the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to Unisa. I argue that the actual threat the pandemic has brought to Unisa does not come from the common issues we have been grappling with, such as occupational health and safety (OHS), debates about who should be working-from-home (WfH), or annual salary negotiations.

Rather, the real threat that Unisa faces from the COVID-19 pandemic is the mushrooming of ODeL-like platforms from residential universities in South Africa, Africa and the world over. Related to this is the pending threat of mass poaching of Unisa ODeL practitioners by these institutions.

2. Learning by Doing and Building Back Better Post COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic caught organisations, families and individuals unawares and unprepared. However, as the old saying goes, “we should not let the COVID-19 crisis go to waste”. To this end, like many other entities, Unisa has been learning by doing, with the key objective being to build back better (BBB) post COVID-19, as well as



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having one foot ahead of everybody in the ODeL environment. By BBB post COVID-19, I mean Unisa must come out stronger, with more refined systems, which embrace scaled-up online teaching and learning.

We all agree that there remain challenges within our ODeL DNA, which nerve centre remains a modernised, effective and efficient information and technology communication (ICT) infrastructure and systems, as well as student readiness to go fully online (data affordability and availability of appropriate gadgets included). The “new normal” of having online examinations, online teaching, as well as WfH all demand that the ICT domain should be solid and jealously guarded.

Yes, Unisa remains the leader in ODeL! However, I am reminded of the following: Nokia, Kodak and Enron; Apple, Microsoft and Amazon; as well as LG, Samsung, Facebook and Uber. The first set represents companies which went down (even though they were global leaders at some point); and the second set is for companies which keep innovating and rejuvenating themselves (in which set I wish to place Unisa). The last set represents companies which have surfaced and have taken over markets in a very short space of time.

To forge ahead in an innovative manner and remain ahead of our peers in ODeL, Unisa should have rigorous self-evaluation protocols that assist in continuously improving our ODeL products and model.

3. Biggest Threat of COVID-19: Mushrooming of ODeL-like Platforms

As highlighted in the preamble, Unisa’s biggest threat from the COVID-19 pandemic remains the mushrooming of ODeL-like platforms from residential and other competing universities in the ODeL space. This development is likely to disrupt the manner in which higher education is delivered in a very, very big way, not only in South Africa, but within Africa and the world over. This disruption brings several threats to Unisa which include the following, among others:

- Direct competition for the attention of students currently enrolled at Unisa (especially given that Unisa is now also serving a constituency of young and fresh from school cohort).
- Direct competition from other institutions attracting our experienced ODeL staff, leading to Unisa possibly losing some of its expertise from both academic and non-academic spaces.
- The threat of the development of more effective ICT infrastructures by our competitors, leading to students opting to join these emerging ODeL or blended teaching and learning systems.

- The threat of being outpaced and outclassed in terms of general delivery by having our new competitors pitch their material and delivery models at higher quality levels through the use of innovative and attractive packaging of course materials that includes video lectures (both synchronous and asynchronous), Kahoot, YouTube, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, Skype, use of open educational resources (OERs), and so on.

4. Policy Recommendations

Unisa must continue to address persistent ICT infrastructure glitches as this is the heartbeat of an ODeL institution. Long-term thinking and visionary development of the best possible ICT infrastructure will be needed in this regard. This may involve getting the best minds available in the land or beyond to address this critical node of our ODeL model.

Unisa should reward innovation in the ODeL teaching and learning environment. In as much as there are direct benefits and incentives in the research, development and innovation space (e.g., publication incentives, research professors, etc.), there is a concomitant lack in the ODeL teaching and learning environment. In this regard, I wish to propose a Staff ODeL Course Delivery Package Challenge. This is where Unisa will set apart huge financial and other resources to incentivise staff who come up with innovative ways of delivering online education (including examinations). The incentive structure could be in the form of a significant monetary prize for themselves or funding to enable them to roll out their innovative ideas. The idea will be to come up with up to 10 excellent UNISA ODeL course delivery brands (or models) that can be replicated by other staff members given the quality that would be associated with the winning bids from this challenge. The challenge can be run in partnership with mobile and other online service providers.

Unisa should be on the lookout in terms of losing staff, an element that will have a double negative impact as these former employees may enhance delivery in their new environments.

Unisa should institute an evaluation of the effectiveness of the WfH model, as well as the current online examination system, with the view to further enhance the efficiency of such. The use of proctored examination processes to strengthen examination integrity needs to be investigated with the view to introducing it in the future. Online proctoring permits the invigilation of sitting candidates through webcam and the respondents' computer screens. This also allows for the verification of sitting candidates.

Like many other progressive private entities, Unisa should institute a lasting staff refresher model, with regular training of old staff and ongoing training of new staff on

the new ODeL models of delivery. This will be done with the sole purpose of enhancing our ODeL delivery model and ensuring that we remain in the lead.

Author Biography

Prof Godwell Nhamo is Chief Researcher and Exxaro Chair in Business and Climate Change at the University of South Africa (Unisa). The Chair is hosted by the Institute for Corporate Citizenship (ICC) under the College of Economic and Management Sciences. He has been instrumental in developing Unisa's roadmap and flagship programme titled the Green Economy and Sustainability Engagement Model (GESEM) approved by Unisa's ManCom on 22 January 2013. He continues to be dedicated to assisting Unisa to become a leading higher education institution in the field of sustainability, sustainable development and green economy transition as part of his deliberate in-reach oriented community engagement commitment.