



Trends & Threats In Online Learning

AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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UNISA

- **Founded in 1873 became UNISA in 1918**
- **Worlds first distance education institution by 1959**
- **Post-apartheid expansion in 1997**
- **Celebrated 140 years in 2013**
- **400,000+ students and 5,500+ staff**

7 Key Trends in Online and Distance Learning (ODL)

1. **Unbundling**
2. **The Rise of “Big Data” and Analytics**
3. **Rethinking Student Assessment**
4. **A Strong Focus on Return on Investment**
5. **Agile Approaches to Change**
6. **Technological Innovation**
7. **Co-Operative and Corporate Governance**

3 Threats to The Future for ODL

- **Quality**
- **Staying Abreast of the Changing Regulatory Environments World-Wide**
- **Making Education Affordable**

Africa's Success and Milestones

- **Growing number of ODL committed institutions**
- **OER Africa**
- **Open Schools in Africa**

What Other Jurisdictions Can Learn from Africa

- **Creativity**
- **Courage**
- **Collaboration**
- **Adaptability and Accommodation**
- **Our Own Voice**

Introductory Remarks

I left South Africa when the temperature was around 29 °C and arrived here when the daytime temperature is around -9 °C.

My experience so far is that the warmth of the people of Canada makes up for these differences in temperature! Mind you, it is still cold outside!!

It is good to be back in Canada and especially here in Ottawa at Carleton University – the home of the *Ravens*, strong science, technology and engineering programs, and real innovation.

I am intrigued by the work of Carleton's *Centre for Community Innovation* and the work you do in *Technology Innovation Management* – perhaps we can explore these in more depth later in the day.

About UNISA

Before I get to the substance of my presentation, you may need to know something about UNISA. I noticed that Carleton was founded in 1942 – at the height of the Second World War.

We began somewhat earlier. UNISA was founded in 1873 as the University of the Cape of Good Hope, becoming the first examining university in South Africa as UNISA in 1918.

We became seriously involved in distance education in 1959 – in fact, we were the world's first distance higher educational institution offering study guides, cassette tapes and some limited face-to-face education long before the Open University (UK) began operating in 1969-70.

By 1997 (post-apartheid), we were asked to expand our reach and focus more and more on distance education, merging with Technikon Southern Africa and Vudek. We have expanded and continue to grow, with more and more of our courses and programs being delivered online and, under my leadership, a strong focus on research and development, with a particular focus on online learning (we house the UNESCO African Chair in Open and Distance Learning), climate change (Exxaro Chair in Business and Climate Change) and development education (SARChi NRF South African Research Chair in Development Education).

We are also large – around 400,000 students and 5,500 staff. We're not as big of some of the largest universities in the world – The Indira Gandhi University, for example, has over 3.5 million students – but in Africa, we are a significant and substantial presence.

I provide this history in part because it is worth understanding that we are all engaged in a journey. We have taken over 140 years to get to this point and we are still learning.

Major Trends Impacting Open & Distance Learning

When one does trend analyses on Open & Distance Learning over a period of time, three key factors emerge:

1. Firstly, there are as many trends as there are practitioners. The art of strategic foresight is to identify trends which are not temporary, which are not just local, and which will have sustaining impact. I have identified seven.
2. Second, that many of the trends will have limited, or no bearing on your specific educational context in the short term, but may have longer term impacts, both on the competitive educational environment in which we now all function and, hence, on institutions.

3. Third, the IT environment is extremely dynamic and “faddish”. Often, altruism is a thinly disguised veneer for rampant profiteering and the “genuine developmental gems” – those beneficial IT innovations need to be carefully considered before embarking on transformation initiatives. The Gartner’s Hype Cycle for emerging technologies is instructive here. This analysis suggests that it takes an average of 5 – 10 years from what they very colloquially termed the “innovation trigger” (of the new technology) through the peak of inflated expectations, down to the trough of disillusionment, onto the slope of enlightenment and then finally the plateau of productivity.

Given the speed and rate at which new technological innovations are coming onto the market, it would be prudent to conduct a feasibility study to ensure that the factors of time and possible obsolescence are factored into their adoption, uptake and viable shelf life. Implementing new systems is notoriously difficult in terms of sheer operational logistics and cultural transformation. Getting out of legacy systems is also a struggle.

4. So with these cautions, I offer these seven suggestions as to trends and patterns, which will impact Open & Distance Learning.

Trend 1: Unbundling

When we look at developments globally, we see now an unbundling just beginning to occur. This includes:

- ✓ Separating who designs and develops courses from who teaches them and supports students as learners. All large institutions (e.g. UNISA, OU UK, Athabasca University) do this, but MOOCs are accelerating the scale at which this is happening.
- ✓ Separating out those who want to learn for learning's sake ("I have always wanted to study physics") from those who also wish to obtain credit ("I need this physics course to complete my degree"). Both can be in the same course, but have different perspectives for assessment.
- ✓ Separating out who designs and develops courses from those who assess student learning. Western Governors University, the American Council on Education, and many others are now providing competency and outcome based assessment for students who claim to have knowledge and skills and, following a proctored assessment, are awarded credit irrespective of where the student acquired that learning. In the case of several organizations, it is now possible to be assessed for credit and be awarded that credit, even though the learning (e.g. by MOOCs etc.) was undertaken elsewhere. Malaysia, for example, for their public universities, is proposing that all first year courses be freely available for all universities by MOOCs.
- ✓ Growth in transfer credit.
- ✓ Growth in work-based learning credit where learning which has occurred in the workplace is recognized as equivalent

to that which is needed for a degree, with up to 75% of a Bachelor or Master degree being earned in this way (this is an especially strong development in the UK – e.g. at Middlesex University).

Unbundling is also enabling new national policies and new ways of offering students choice, flexibility. Remember, I am not advocating here – just drawing attention to a trend which has consequences. Those who suggest our systems are being transformed – people like Clayton Christensen – are looking at unbundling. The new strategy being pursued by *Coursera* (a major MOOC provider) of closer ties with universities so that students can start looking at credit for MOOC's – reflects this trend in action.

Trend 2: The Rise of “Big Data” and the need for data analytics

We need a better way to crunch the numbers and identify what’s working in online education.

Big data coupled with cloud computing could unlock this discovery process. Look for more EdTech startups to tackle this in the coming year(s), supported by major investments of private capital. To this I would add, that as higher education institutions, we need to ensure that we are able to “mine” our data efficiently and effectively to determine student profiles, practices and capacities, and enable differentiated and personalized learning, to name but a few. This will enable us to allocate our financial resources, as well as our learner support to those areas and categories of students who require the most attention and support.

Many Canadian institutions are using analytics in marketing and recruitment of students and have been doing so for some time. But the trend I am referring to here is taking this much further. Analytics focused on student behavior is enabling us to offer much more focused intervention in learning, so that more students can be more successful and more engaged. Many universities and colleges are using data analytics to track what the student is doing – where they are in a course, what they get right and wrong in assessment, how much time they spend on problem solving or studying a specific text, etc. - and adjusting both how we can support that student, but also what kind of learning materials they need to support and accelerate their learning. These are powerful developments and we will see more of these in the near and medium term future.

Trend 3: Rethinking of student assessment

Sir Michael Barber, who was Tony Blair's education guru, recently released a paper (co-authored with Peter Hill) called *Preparing for a Renaissance in Assessment*. They point to a number of developments, which are starting to appear in schools, colleges and universities. These include, but are not limited to:

- Adaptive testing (for example, tests that evolve in real time on screen) will help generate more accurate tests and reduce the amount of time faculty spend on testing.
- Smarter, automated marking of exams will help improve accuracy and reduce the time faculty spend marking "rote" answers.
- Technology will help combine student performance across multiple courses and subjects.
- Assessment will provide ongoing feedback, which will help personalize teaching and improve learning.
- New digital technologies will minimize opportunities for cheating in exams or "gaming the system", something of real concern to many.
- New systems for automated question generation, based on assessment rubrics, so that faculty spend less time designing assessments and more time working with students on the feedback formative and summative assessments provide.

These are unstoppable developments. As someone who still gets to teach, setting and marking exams is painful. I would much rather spend my time working with students who are finding learning difficult or directing and focusing the energies of students who are fast tracking through a course.

This trend is strongly linked to big data and analytics, but is making much more use of machine intelligence and artificial intelligence. A great deal of work is being undertaken in the primary and secondary schools in North America, Asia and Europe along these lines and this work is having an impact on colleges and universities – it creates student expectations about how technology will be used and how instruction will be differentiated.

Trend 4: A Strong Focus on return-on-investment

Governments, many facing austerity and real challenges of the growth in demand for higher education coupled with managing the costs of expansion, are asking serious and substantial questions about effectiveness and efficiency. They are asking “bottom line” questions. Are we getting value for money from our universities and colleges? Are the degrees they offer relevant to the world in which we now live? Is the research they undertake socially and economically valuable? Governments are asking the ROI question. What is more, they are starting to demand that we each identify our competitive advantage and our economic value and are pushing collaboration, credit transfer and other “solutions” to make the system more efficient.

These are not necessarily new pressures, but they are starting to raise questions about the purpose of a university education and the value of a university experience. Some of my fellow Vice Chancellors are being asked: If a student is able to obtain an entire degree online and leverage transfer credits from courses obtained from around the world, do we need to have so many universities and degree granting colleges? Should all universities be comprehensive universities or should they compete for students through differentiating their offerings? What is the unique “value proposition” of your university? These are important challenges for us, but the key point here is that the nature, value and cost of a university education and its affordability are being questioned and this trend has implications.

There is another point I want to make here.

There are many startups and companies that jumped on the MOOC and online education bandwagon over the past few years. They lost a lot of money doing this and are now looking to monetize and get a return on their investment. This is being done through offering certificates, nanodegrees, and badges. The number of corporate programs offering certification of varying kinds is growing quickly, as are partnerships between universities and private sector interests (I see Athabasca University now offers a Master in Business Administration in association with the National Hockey League!).

Look for investors to start asking to be shown the money and colleges and universities looking for new revenue streams.

Again, when it comes to formal education, this has not gained traction – mainly as a result of concerns around quality, academic freedom and certification. The uptake of MOOCs is very difficult to quantify given the corruption of the data and difficulties around data corruption, but indications are that it is not the needy who are accessing and benefitting from MOOCs, but those who are interested in self-edification. MOOCs for both non-degree and formal education purposes within a quality assured context, such as that at UNISA, are still in their infancy and subject to very real concerns around Intellectual Property and the Protection of Personal Information to name but two. These have to be resolved and it is a time consuming process.

Trend 5: Nimble Approaches to Change

One of the key considerations in moving online is ensuring that your institution's business model has the built-in agility that enables it to adapt swiftly and with minimum disruption to operations and staff, to the very dynamic innovations emanating from the ICT environment.

This means having an intimate understanding of your institution and its capacity (including HR capacity, registrarial capacity, financial services capacity and the creative capacity for program design, development and deployment) to transform and adapt efficiently.

This is often underplayed – I would say to the detriment and disillusionment of many institutions or departments which have embarked on online learning.

The implication here is that systematic change towards a more flexible learning environment and a more engaging learning environment for students is not a “straight line from the past”. There are disruptive components which need careful management.

We need to ensure that the organizational leadership capabilities within our institutions – the readiness not just to embrace change, but to enable change – matches our ambitions.

In particular, leadership nearest the student needs to be able to deliver within their own teams the change that is needed as well as to lead across other teams, departments, faculties and campus locations.

Open & Distance Learning institutions require a different form of leadership and management, which demands the equal

treatment of both the academic and administrative staff components. This requires a delicate balancing act and the downplaying of the somewhat traditional them-and-us syndrome that tends to exist in most universities and colleges. The Open & Distance Learning model demands support/administrative staff that are highly qualified, proficient and accomplished in their fields (especially the ICT field), and this is too often swept under the carpet of “support services” and to be honest, a sense of entitlement on the part of academics. This reality requires genuinely innovative leadership, especially in a multi-lingual, multi-cultural country such as mine.

Making a commitment to change is not enough. Being able to enable change without increasing the sense of “loss” and anxiety for faculty is a tough and demanding task.

Trend 6: Technological Innovation

I have made some references to big data, analytics and the cloud, but there are other developments which show us that technology is relentlessly on the move. I will mention just a few, but my point is not about the specifics here but the trend: continuous development of new technology.

- **Gamification** - Making learning as much fun as playing a game is nothing new to those in education. But look for gamification and even project-based learning to play a larger role in online education. (*This is a pedagogical tool which in my view has yet to find real traction in courseware development on any scale amongst larger Open & Distance Learning providers*)
- **Personalized learning** - This may sound difficult when it comes to online colleges and online schools in general, but make no mistake – the influx of video-based synchronous virtual learning environments means one-on-one tutoring and personalized learning is going to become more of a reality than pipe-dream.” (*This is possible, but improbable where there are challenges around infrastructure, internet access and viable speeds, and students’ access to appropriate devices, etc.*)
- **Mobile learning** - There’s an app for that. You can already learn languages, web design, and a whole lot more on your smartphone. Time to bring online education into the mobile generation. (*To be honest though, most students who would be compelled to use their cell phones in the absence of laptops or other devices would not really benefit from this. The vast majority of UNISA’s students need quality assured formal qualifications that will assist*

them in finding gainful employment. They don't have the financial wherewithal to fund their current cell phone usage as it is. In our context they are a nice to have, and not a need to have).

These are the key trends.

We have to track and observe and encourage our faculty to innovate and explore, but institutional adopting of a technology requires a great many considerations. I simply urge a strategic focus for technology adoption – a focus on the impact of a technology investment on learning outcomes: Will it help students be successful as learners?

Trend 7: Co-operative and Corporate Governance

Co-operative Governance entails collaborations and partnerships that are aimed at maximizing shared resources and capacities, while corporate governance aims to instill the tenets of ethical, transparent and professional management and conduct, and stewardship of institutional resources, especially its financial resources, across the entire institution (including students).

To date, this has not featured very strongly in the higher education environment, to be honest. Perhaps we have all just made assumptions.

Our future will depend more and more on good governance, strong co-operation within and between institutions and between universities and others engaged in learning and education.

Here I will briefly mention the rapid growth of private interests in education, especially in the developing economies of the world. Basically these have arisen as a result of gaps in the market brought about by ongoing demands for access to HE and the allied lack of additional infrastructure globally, as well the financial potential of ICTs. We are witnessing an explosion of private providers, many of which are dubious to say the least. Many have an interest which is purely financial and whose “fly-by-night” operations are a blight on higher education. Their operations unfortunately tend to impact on those who can least afford it.

There is never such a thing as a free lunch and many of the seemingly altruistic motivations for the uptake of “free” online learning, is proving to be a myth. The sobering reality on both sides of the coin is that online education is expensive and that

expense often resides in unanticipated operational costs, including HR costs.

If we are to emerge stronger each year we need to do so co-operatively as public institutions committed to access, affordability, quality and effectiveness. In my view, this requires us to really strengthen collaborative governance. The key is to recognize that “going it alone” is no longer an option.

I have focused on seven key trends. I could have mentioned others – a renewed focus on quality, a growth in our understanding of the key components of student engagement and so on. But I think these seven trends have covered a lot of ground – they speak to the key issues we need to address as post-secondary institutions if we want to address access, quality and affordability.

Now let me move onto threats.

THREE THREATS FOR THE FUTURE FOR ONLINE LEARNING

I could list a great many challenges, threats and difficulties, but here I have decided to focus on just three. These are:

Threat 1: Quality

Not everything offered to students in the name of online learning or college and university teaching in general is of the highest quality. It needs to be if we are to win the hearts and minds of both faculty and students. A collection of Power Point slides connected to a voice at the end of the speaker is no longer regarded as acceptable as a quality online course. While we may need to rethink our notions of quality and focus more strongly on the student experience, improving the quality of the online experience – strengthening the connection between student and faculty member, making the learning relevant and fun, ensuring that the student gets appropriate, quality feedback in a timely fashion, making the best use of available technology to support learning and peer networks, using social media to connect the learning to a wider world, making great use of open education resources – all of this requires hard work, good design and investment.

South Africa is very fortunate in that Open & Distance Learning is an accepted component of South Africa's Higher Education system, which is quality assured. Very few other ODL providers, especially those in the developing nations can make that claim. But that means that Open & Distance Learning must eliminate traditional perceptions of inferior quality and status by proving its worth. With the narrowing of the gap between Distance Education and contact education

provision in South African Higher Education in particular, Distance Education providers will have to improve on the quality of their offerings; the levels of service; throughput and success rates; and most importantly, the caliber of their graduates.

Threat 2: Staying abreast of the changing regulatory environment

This is probably one of the biggest headaches we have, because as we all know, the regulatory environment is often a laggard and Higher Education Institutions continually struggle to overcome legal or policy impediments, such as outdated legislation and policies.

On the other hand, one finds the introduction of new legislation, such as the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPI) in South Africa, which is unbelievably difficult to implement.

Going onto the cloud would maximize institutional efficiency, but may compromise privacy.

Having students from all over the world means having multiple regulatory environments that have to be contended with when it comes to the privacy of student information. I'm sure I don't have to tell you of the minefield that is that of copyright and intellectual property, open sourcing and the like. UNISA remains in an ongoing process of problem resolution with respect to the regulatory environments in which it operates

To this, we can add the growth of litigation from students and others with respect to their experience of Universities and the constant focus on not just academic matters, but social and personal matters on campus.

Threat 3: Making education affordable

Access and affordability – this probably lies at the crux of everything we do, yet it remains one of the most intractable problems.

Over the next 12 years, the World Bank estimates a 25% increase in global higher education attendance from 200 to 250 million – some even suggest it may reach 262 million.

I would reiterate that quality online education is not cheap and that it will take many years to convert or design afresh quality assured programs for successful online delivery. There are very significant hurdles that need to be overcome requiring innovative thinking and the money to implement it (e.g. digibands for Signature courses). There are also cultural dynamics that have to be overcome, for example in the form of labour fears about lost jobs or redundancy and staff resistance to the uptake and learning of new technologies as well as the costs of making investments in the professional development for faculty.

As students are paying more and more of the costs of their own education and as governments face more and more austerity, then this threat simply intensifies in each budget cycle. Online learning is not cheaper than face-to-face, but can make learning more accessible for people. Trading off access, affordability and investment is a tough challenge that simply will not go away. When we add the requirement that all we do must be of the highest quality and relevant to social, community and economic development, it becomes a real challenge.

The threat here is the fantasy, which I gather is endemic in some government circles around the world, that online learning must be cheaper. The threat is also that cheaper means less

quality and less investment in the professional development and supports for those engaged in the design, development, deployment and delivery of online learning. These are real, not imagined, threats real misperceptions.

I could mention more threats that occur to me – the lack of online learning development and delivery skills among faculty, the low level of rewards for teaching versus research, shifts which are occurring in demography – but these will have to do for now.

AFRICA'S SUCCESSES AND MILESTONES IN ONLINE LEARNING

Africa is a huge continent and it is extremely difficult to gauge or even research the successes and milestones of individual nations. I would suggest that many of us share similar challenges around infrastructure and affordability. Open & Distance Learning is not especially prevalent nor as well acknowledged in Africa as it is in South Africa, but there is growing evidence that it is a growing force in some countries. There are few purely Open & Distance Learning universities. Open & Distance Learning is mostly practiced as a distinct institutional entity.

There is some positive evidence of inroads being made in the virtual environment (AVU acts as a consultant and implementer of Open & Distance Learning programs in universities) and I have regularly come across ad hoc examples of really innovative and proactive programs and collaborations in overcoming access and scholarship challenges. Generally though, as is the case in most places in the world, the promotion and success of Open & Distance Learning depends on political will and funding.

I will draw attention to some specific achievements.

Open and Distance Education Growth in African Higher Education

There are, however, a number of open and distance learning institutions offering higher education in Africa. Indeed, there are too many to list, but a special mention should go to UNISA, Nigerian Open University, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, African Virtual University, the Open University of Tanzania and a new institution emerging in Botswana - are all examples of African led initiatives, which are expanding access to and success in learning for Africans.

A great many courses are also offered online by campus based, more traditional colleges and universities. Blended learning is also growing quickly throughout Africa.

MOOCs are also growing. The World Bank in partnership with Coursera is supporting MOOC based work in Tanzania intended for the whole of Africa. The idea is to develop a series of MOOCs related to the knowledge and skills needed for market based Information Technology developments. Known as the SMART-Skills project based in a knowledge hub in Dar Es Salam. Similar developments focused on different skills sets, such as business management, are taking place elsewhere in Africa with the support of these same two partners (World Bank and Coursera).

We can say that, without doubt, online and distance education is fully part of the established fabric of higher education in Africa, is a fast growing component of higher education and is key to national development plans of a great many African nations.

OER Africa

We are also focused on the development, use and support of open education resources. Indeed, OER Africa is a fast growing part of this work and is currently focused strongly on building a bank of resources to support agricultural, teacher and health education initiatives.

Open Schools in Africa

Africa is a fast growing continent. It is not possible for every child to be educated in a public school by a professionally trained teacher from aged 5 to 18 – we have a long way to go as a continent to make this possible. One development that is helping is a focus on open primary and secondary education – what is known as open schooling.

Open Schooling is defined by two elements:

1. The physical separation of the school-level learner from the teacher; and
2. The use of unconventional teaching methodologies and information and communications technologies (ICTs) to bridge the separation and provide the education and training.

The "open" in Open Schooling refers to the openness of the system; usually there are no rules dictating student ages, prerequisites, content of courses or number of courses in which learners must enroll. As a result, Open Schooling meets the needs of a broad range of learners:

- Young people who missed out on schooling in their childhood can pursue a secondary education without having to attend classes with much younger children.
- Young mothers can learn at home and attend tutorials when necessary.
- Working adults can study while continuing to earn a living.
- People of all ages can acquire new skills and knowledge to improve their livelihoods.

Namibia is a good example of our challenges in Africa. Free universal primary education began in Namibia in 2013. Some 129 existing primary schools cannot cope with the new demand for places. The only response is a combination of expanding physical sites and launching open education programs to support both existing schools and students who wish to learn in their own community.

The Commonwealth of Learning (CoL), based in Burnaby, BC, Canada, is very engaged in the development of open schools in Africa, India and elsewhere in the Commonwealth. CoL is helping to increase access to quality education while increasing student achievement by providing teachers in developing countries with new technologies, tools and skills.

WHAT OTHER JURISDICTIONS CAN LEARN FROM AFRICA

- **Creativity** (Innovation) - we have learned to think very creatively and innovatively. This is born of necessity, but in South Africa, it has given rise to openness to creative and innovation thinking and a greater preparedness to support it.
- **Courage** and endurance in the face of adversity – we have acquired fortitude.
- **Collaboration** – we are very open to collaboration and to what others are able to bring to the table.
- Many of us have learned the art of **adaptability and accommodation** – which is a major plus when it comes to transformation.
- **We have a voice** – and we would like to have it heard and not have it raised for us! Much of what is said and done when it

comes to Africa and the developing world is very well meaning and indeed, we acknowledge and appreciate that. But equally some is opportunistic and exploitative. That is why I am very appreciative of forums such as this one, which provides just such a space.

Some implications for students, faculty, administrator, policy makers and others that arise from the systematic and focused pursuit of online learning by an institution

This has been a very high level almost ethereal view of developments in online learning, with a special focus on Africa. But I will end with some of the implications of all of these observations, which I think are relevant to all in the room:

- **We need to get excellent at being able to adapt and transform.** Depending on the caliber of students, student buy-in and uptake can be easy or incredibly difficult, and this is another aspect that is often overlooked. In South African legislation and policy students have formal representation on our University Council and Institutional forum and they make very sure that their voices are heard. Members of staff generally do not like change and so any transformation needs to be accompanied with appropriate communication strategies and implementation plans. In South Africa in particular, all of this needs to happen in an environment of ongoing national development and transformation – which Higher Education Institutional leadership an extremely complex and sensitive function.
- **We need to get better at collaboration and partnership building.** In a knowledge economy, collaboration is the DNA of development. Rather than compete, collaborate (except you should compete hard if you play for the *Ravens*).

- If you have to compete, learn the thinking behind co-opetition. We collaborate on design and development and then compete for students. The future is about collaboration, partnerships and collective action.
- **Innovation comes from those nearest the student.** I spend a lot of time in committees, board meetings and international gatherings. (Sometimes I think I must be being punished for some transgressions as a student!). I know that those working directly with students are constantly looking at ways to rethink what they do, to re-imagine how they can encourage and enable students to learn. Indeed, 95% of all innovation comes from adopting what others have done and then adapting this to your local circumstances. Whatever else we do, we need to encourage this front line innovation. This is why I have no hesitation in drawing everyone's attention to the Ontario Online Learning Portal for Faculty & Instructors that Contact North | Contact Nord operates, and that section within it that looks at "pockets of innovation". Here you will find out what your colleagues in Ontario are doing – there are over 100 examples of great innovations by Ontario universities and colleges to be found there.
- **Build Communities of Practice.** Many years ago, the Open University published an article called *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Learner*. The author argued that we need to become more connected and more compassionate to learners if they are to survive the demanding work of getting a degree online. I would say that it is the same for the faculty member designing, developing, deploying and delivering online. Just as we need to connect learners to peer support networks and to relevant student services, so we need to connect faculty to like-minded communities of practice.

- **Get systematic about an approach to flexible learning.** Students are not demanding technology enhanced learning. What they want is access to quality learning and faculty in more flexible ways. Look at the barriers – whether it’s the funding formulae, rules about residency, timetables, registration systems – and systematically commit to becoming a more flexible institution, relentlessly focused on the quality of the student experience.
- **More fully Leverage OER** – All of us are looking at how we can use open education resources in courses and student learning, whether we are talking about open source textbooks, open educational learning objects, open source laboratories and simulations. With over 1 billion open educational resources available – all mainly in English, Chinese, French or German – we have a lot to do, both in terms of expanding the availability of indigenous language resources, but also in making best use of these resources. UNISA is in the early stages of this journey, as I understand is Canada. But there is a major opportunity here.

Allow me to conclude by doing a promo for a major upcoming event in South Africa this coming October.

UNISA has been given the honour of hosting the 26th World Conference of the International Council for Open and Distance Education, to be held at Sun City from 14 - 16 October 2015. (The pre-conference begins on 13 October 2015).

This is the first time in its history that the conference will be held on the African Continent and the awarding of the Conference to UNISA, is both a testament to our global standing and stature, and our undisputed role as the leading Open and Distance Learning (ODL) University nationally and continentally. UNISA's national and continental footprint, and its well-developed infrastructure and capacity have entrenched its strategic value internationally and continentally, as a sought-after partner and collaborator.

The theme of the Conference is "*Building Capacities for Sustainable Open and Distance e-Learning Provision*," and it was chosen specifically by UNISA, with an eye to the developing world and the opportunities that it could present for growth in scholarship, global networking and the promotion of Open & Distance Learning as a means of access for large numbers of people, to quality higher education. The conference will also offer a wonderful opportunity for international exposure to our commitment to the green economy and sustainability. We are also including our regional and continual Open & Distance Learning colleagues to the fullest extent that we are able, so that the development opportunities presented by the conference, are leveraged maximally by the entire continent.

The 26th ICDE World Conference is UNISA's Conference priority for 2015 and you are kindly requested to ensure that every available opportunity is used to communicate, support and promote its success. I will be writing to all Executive Deans, Executive Directors, and Regional Directors similarly requesting their support, including the encouragement of staff and post-grad student participation, and I ask that you use your good offices to support their efforts to this end.

The 26th ICDE World Conference offers an unparalleled opportunity for UNISA to showcase its innovation, its scholarship and its cutting edge ODeL practice and I ask that we work together in ensuring that as UNISA's premier ambassadors, we leverage this opportunity to the fullest extent.