



*The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor*

**PROF MS MAKHANYA**

**PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA**

**SCOP PANEL DISCUSSION**

*From Regional to Global: Critical Leadership, Quality and Partnership Issues Facing Online, Open and Flexible Learning Universities*

**CHARLES STURT UNIVERSITY, AUSTRALIA**

**20 – 23 NOVEMBER 2016**

***FROM REGIONAL TO GLOBAL: CRITICAL LEADERSHIP, QUALITY AND PARTNERSHIP ISSUES FACING ONLINE, OPEN AND FLEXIBLE LEARNING UNIVERSITIES***

Thank you Andrew, fellow panelists, respondents and colleagues

I would like to begin by querying the notions inherent in the framing context of this discussion, which continues to focus on traditionally held beliefs around the potential and promise of ODeL. Contrary to the suggestions about the loss of local and regional identities I see ODeL becoming an amorphous global movement that does not have any particularity or identity, but only a generic impact. Global Higher education is, in fact, already seen as a “soulless global machine.” Moreover, HE is increasingly regarded as an outdated, elitist, commodified

construct, whose agenda is driven by the few, without due cognizance of the many. I am suggesting colleagues that we are increasingly out of touch with, and alienated from, those whom we purport to be serving – and this is particularly true when it comes to ODeL.

I foresee a time where the local and the regional will become more important than the global. Globalised models and concepts are more and more under scrutiny and in politics, populism is challenging neo-liberal formulas as countries begin to place a greater emphasis on local knowledge that can be harnessed to the greater benefit of local communities. Our students no longer want generic qualifications and are beginning to demand curricula that are tailored to their contexts and their lived experience. Employment has, after all, a regional aspect to it. Globalisation debates are being challenged and a growing voice is denying notions of universality. We need to be asking ourselves: in this context, what does internationalization really mean?

Globally we are experiencing an upsurge of populism, nationalism, fundamentalism and xenophobia, manifested in mass migrations, Brexit, the election of Trump, religious fanaticism and widespread student unrest. Much of this has to do with the fact that ruling elites, through their insatiable quest for profit and power, have become so manifestly corrupt and insular, that they have lost touch with the people on the ground. Instead of speaking with them, they have for too long, been speaking *for* them. The consequences for higher education are massive.

When it comes to **opportunities**, we need to be asking: How do we exploit the potential of local knowledges in order to be relevant in our respective societies? By this I don't mean merely pushing indigenous knowledge systems. We need to look at our niche areas of excellence, and use these to our advantage, locally and globally. We can no longer merely imitate northern and western ideas, conceptualisations and canons. We need to develop our own curricula and pedagogies and tailor them to whom we teach and how we teach. In this scenario, Unisa could for example, be a hub on the African continent for higher education, including at postgraduate levels. As I have said, regionality is growing, not shrinking.

We need to reinvigorate the ACDE and other similar bodies, and in so doing we need to acknowledge, respect and integrate to a far greater degree, the regional and continental

differences in the ICDE membership (for example the distance education constituencies of the Global South). Where does their knowledge reside and what is their contribution, in real terms, to global knowledge? We have not yet begun to explore that sufficiently. We need to ask ourselves: How does one bring the collective knowledges residing outside of Europe and North America and make it a part of Northern knowledge, thus influencing the proportion in the ICDE to reflect a more holistic composition?

How can we influence that process through creative teaching, niche research and community based knowledge? How does this register on the Richter scale of curriculum? At present, community knowledge, including subjects such as agriculture, are marginalized as being of lower importance and less sophistication, whereas they could add to the global body of knowledge in a meaningful way and be transformative in many emerging economies. This is particularly pertinent in the context of the SDGs. Instead, Sciences have been put on a pedestal to the detriment of other knowledges, irrespective of where they reside. In fact, science is in danger of being seen as elitist purely because of its current domination of education.

There is also a **risk** that the current perceptions of ODeL will result in its relegation to a lesser MOOC-based, superficial and unaccredited, profit-driven status, not to be taken seriously when it comes to “real”, accredited education. I fear that the current focus on quick profits is redefining views on education within the global sector, in line with technological innovation and financial gain. And while we who are in the field understand these multiple interpretations of “education”, the public does not. For the vast majority, especially those in the developing world, education is still about the Three R’s. So while MOOCs may for example be a viable innovation for marketing contact universities, they do not provide the full suite of qualifications desired by those who seek access to formal education. As DE providers increasingly climb on the technology bandwagon for technology’s sake, we run the risk of entrenching the perception that DE is actually not worthy of accreditation, that it has no real value, that it is too commercialized, too automated, and that there is no real depth of scholarship in its offerings. As we become increasingly automated, we run the risk of losing the human touch. The current trajectory of ODeL runs the risk of making people redundant, of trivializing the human

interaction in HE by believing that it can be conducted entirely in the virtual environment. Facebook and Twitter are already being questioned in this regard. Will we soon be questioning scholarly intelligence? What are we losing? (We are already witnessing a lively post-humanist discussion). There is abundant evidence of a push-back from society against the perceived elitist corporatization of the world.

I would like to suggest that the ICDE runs the risk of bringing about its own redundancy by supporting a false perception of sophistication purely linked to the uptake of technologies, which are in fact caricatures of reality. Technological savvy runs counter to reality. In this view DE will decline more quickly than contact institutions, because communities of practice are harder to maintain in the virtual world than the physical, especially where technology is the end, and not the means.

I suggest that what we are currently witnessing is a growing rejection of the technology consensus. Education is after all an intellectual pursuit. To what extent are intellectual needs being satisfied? For example, what would distance education look like using the potential of artificial intelligence at undergraduate level – what would it do to the notion of teaching? Should we not be exploring this as educators?

As **leaders**, how do we accommodate the growing tide of student resistance to traditional conventions and conceits of HE in its current form? There is a populist challenge to the importation of a generic model and imposing it in another context. Students are using their contextual frames of reference to question what they have learnt and are finding that knowledge and experience are dissonant. What is connection between teaching and lived experience? As a result, we are finding that elitism, globalism and colonialism are being lumped under the same banner simply because of Northern dominance.

Leadership does not yet understand the changed nature of the university. What does inclusivity really mean? It is not just about diversity. At some level the knowledge being breathed into institutions has to be contextual and reside in locality to ensure its relevance. Acquiring knowledge is not just about employability. It goes much deeper than that. It must resonate

with lived experience and the formation of human identities and sense of worth. I would suggest that in this regard Southern leadership is more in touch than Northern.

This disaggregation has been a long time coming but we have failed to act on it and we need to ask ourselves why. We are witnessing the struggles of the EU, the rejection of elite traditions often ruled from Brussels, in favour of a focus on national identity, for example, in Greece and Scotland. We see this disaggregation in global rankings where universality is claimed through, for example, six indicators that in reality find a very narrow band of resonance. The universality of HE is not valid in comparison to a decade ago.

**In South Africa we have a crisis of leadership in Higher education.** Nine out of 26 VCs have resigned. We have a vacuum in leadership. The notion of the team is also opaque as universities are increasingly mirroring the many divisions in society. There is little sense of unity. All seems to be unravelling – factionalism is prevalent and we are witnessing ongoing attacks on democratic institutions, including universities because they are seen to be part of the “establishment.”

Colleagues, the “One size fits all” concept of higher education no longer applies. The world is becoming disaggregated and so is higher education. I believe that 2016 will go down in the annals of HE - and history - as the year when the “people” began to speak. We would do well to listen. As the ICDE we need a thorough overhaul to reflect a more realistic portrayal of the global reality of HE and the genuine potential of ODeL in this context.