Declaring Innovation and Transformation to Mask Mediocrity is Manipulative—A Rejoinder to Unisa’s Havenga

Damtew Teferra, Ph.D

Last month, I wrote an editorial on this forum under a heading “Yearning for Outrage: ‘Unisa Take-Home Exam’ Recipe for Disaster”. An abridged version of this piece got published by City Press under a heading “This is a certificate in mediocrity”. Dr Peter Havenga, executive director in the office of the vice-chancellor at Unisa, wrote a counter response to my piece under a heading “This is academic innovation”. This article is a response to his piece.

The façade of “innovation”

Havenga provided a lengthy argument—even deployed a theoretical discourse—in innovation in assessment. He then concluded that “a lack of understanding of the developing scholarship of assessment” is driving the critical—and massive—reaction to the take-home exam regime. To be very clear: The issue here is not about assessment—and Havenga dangerously, if not deliberately, confuses the conversation. The conversation is about take-home exams designed for failed students so that they will be “creative” enough to pass it in 24 hours—by taking it home. And yet it was sneakily couched by Unisa as “non-venue based summative assessment system” (NVBSAS).

A Unisa team, including Havenga, which met on June 5, 2015 to review NVBSAS, identified massive challenges which include:

1) resistance to change;
2) perceived lack of access to technology by students;
3) failure to understand the capabilities of the learning management system, myUnisa;
4) ICT not being agile;
5) academics working in silos;
6) some academics venturing into the project unprepared; and
7) academic versus support staff issue.

One may wonder: Aren’t these deficiencies simply sufficient to drop this scheme altogether?
La contraire. According to the statement posted on Unisa’s website, under a heading, “Not for the fainthearted: changing assessment practices at a mega university”, the team, “in a creative brainstorming session” “was adamant that huge progress has been made and they were positive about the outcomes”.

Instead of developing appropriate learning methodologies to help needy students, Unisa is tempering—and confusing—the issue with assessment. Gimmicks such as frequent weighing of chicks do not help them grow—but feeding does. We recognize that Unisa is a distant learning institution which uses multiple forms of assessment—but this one appears to be crafted to push failed students out of the system, to raise its success figures. One does not need to be a rocket scientist to figure out the underlying intention of the so called “non-venue based assessment” scheme.

**Perverting “transformation”**

“It must be acknowledged that transformation in the South African higher education sector has been on the agenda for some time” Havenga continued to sermonize. He went on to say “We sometimes forget that academic transformation is integral to this process.” We must hold Havenga to account to explain what he meant by transformation in this context—but it appears that he is advancing the opening of the floodgates of mediocrity in the name of transformation. This crafty argument that invokes transformation in an effort to managing mediocrity is far from responsible, if not outright dangerous.

**Trusting academics**

“If it is accepted that academics are in the final instance responsible for quality,” Havenga went on pontificating that “they must be trusted to see that this is done.” For someone who has already charged those opposing the dubious “innovation” as “uninformed”, this assertion speaks volumes. Even a remote attempt to engaging with this erroneous assertion, in my view, would diminish the scope of the conversation and may push the intent completely off track. How this could even be used as an argument is indicative of the extent to which Havenga is scrambling to conflate the conversation. How could the introduction of this
dubious and self-serving scheme could be the business, let alone responsibility, of the academics in ensuring quality? I wonder.

**Money wagging the dog**

It is a public secret that South African institutions are experimenting with a host of approaches and strategies to scale up their resources including tinkering in productivity units. As funding, per capita, is dwindling it has become the major cause of regular disruptions in academic institutions—and hence increasing pressure on institutions.

On the publication of the earlier article, one of the vice-chancellors of a South African university wrote to me and said: “I agree [with the position of your article],” and went on to stress that “the decision [by Unisa] is outrageous but it shows you what subsidy-hungry universities are prepared to do these days”. I do not wish to pretend to know better than some forthright heads of such institutions on this matter.

**Soul searching**

Havenga declared “A subjective accusation of a reputable institution acting in bad faith, being a diploma grinder and unleashing mediocrity is both uninformed and offensive.” It must be clear that there is no intention of malice or offense in this conversation against his employer which also happens to be his alma matter; but if telling a “subjective truth” is described as “uninformed and offensive”, it would not help a productive and serious conversation. But then, if one ventures out to sell what sounds like a “defective” product, it must be ready to hear different reactions—mainly, if not exclusively, unfavorable ones.

I would also not attribute “reputable institution” to Unisa as Havenga tacitly injects it in the conversation in a tenuous effort to cling to the glory of its past. Many African universities of high “reputation” could have still declared that “ephemeral” title if time had stopped in the 1960s where they were fondly remembered for their excellence.

The former VC of Unisa Professor Pityana, as noted in the earlier piece, stressed that “Unisa’s massive dropout rates put the ‘university in danger of ruining its academic reputation’”. He went on to say that “the way the university operated was fundamentally
flawed and had no prospect for success.” At the 9th Annual Teaching and Learning Conference organized by the University of Kwazulu-Natal last month, the just installed CEO of the Council for Higher Education and the Pro-VC of Unisa until weeks ago, Professor Narend Bainath, declared Unisa as being at a crossroads of “a spectacular failure and a spectacular success”—but likely the former than the later given its massive growth and the “dysfunctional” practices that fostered mediocrity. It is curious if Havenga still considers these personalities, including his colleagues and superiors, as “uninformed” and their comments as “offensive”.

It may be time that Unisa undertakes some soul search instead of putting up irrelevant arguments or even decry critical observations to smother the conversation. In the face of massive evidence—by own academics (as noted in the earlier article), former vice chancellors, and many others—such reactions are neither warranted nor helpful.

The self-styled “reputation” of Unisa is pretty problematic despite widely held concerns and unfavorable views. Regardless, we must prevail to protect gullible consumers especially from Africa—where the impact of mediocrity may have spectacular implications. This is because many graduates end up in academic institutions with potential to spread mediocrity in the system and beyond. We, higher education experts, analysts and practitioners, are duty bound to challenge such dubious practices within our “industry”.

**Conclusion**

Unisa is an academic institution of distance learning which provides access to quite a large number of students—with contrasting quality. It is neither the interest nor the intention of this or earlier article to disparage this old and established institution which provides service to mass clienteles—at home and beyond. The piece is in no way intended to pass judgment on the status of the institution—nor its overall quality.

The article is an open and frank reaction against the new take-home exams regime which is now being deployed as a panacea to massive failure—as much as 95 per cent, according to Pityana. It is immensely disturbing to ignore this colossal failure; and furthermore it is professionally and morally forbidding to tolerate this so called NVBSAS panacea—which has a potential to short-circuiting the entire national higher education grid and beyond.
It is unfortunate that only very few in top higher education leadership positions in the country are visible in engaging in serious, open and unflattering conversations involving each others’ institutions. Yet, it is incumbent upon such leaders to speak against such schemes—in public—in the interest of academics, students, parents, governments, businesses and other members of society in South Africa—and beyond.

At the conclusion of his piece, Dr Havenga declared “It is time to move on”. Je refuse. I am not moving—anywhere. All who care about higher education need to resist and challenge this dubious exercise—which mocks innovation and trivializes the transformation agenda.

Dr. Damtew Teferra is professor of higher education, leader of higher education and training development and founding director of the International Network for Higher Education in Africa, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

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