Yearning for Outrage: “Unisa Take-Home Exam” Recipe for Disaster

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This article was triggered by an article “Unisa take-home exam embraces the future” in *Mercury* (14 August 2015). I first read about the story in the *Sunday Times* (2 August 2015), under the heading “Unisa's ‘open-book’ tests raise spectre of ‘massive cheating’”. The original article in its opening noted: “Struggling final-year students at South Africa's biggest university will be allowed to write openbook tests at home [with a 24 hour turn around] in what has been described as an attempt to push through more graduates.”

I hoped this recipe for disaster would unleash a storm in the academic and professional circles in South Africa. If that is happening, I have yet to see it. I am writing this critical commentary to quash this new dubious practice and prevent it from expanding its roots on African soil where Unisa holds considerable presence beyond its “primary” borders.

The Claim

The article published in *Mercury*, quoting Unisa’s executive director of academic planning, Peter Havenga, said “These [take-home exams] are structured questions which the [undergraduate] student can work on and submit back to the lecturer. We have realized it is working, we know the benefits of it.” Havenga was also quoted as saying: “these intervention methods had improved the pass rate of students who were struggling to complete their courses because of their failures to pass some modules”.

Furthermore, the education and training officer of the student representative council has been quoted as saying in the *Sunday Times* article: “The concession system had widespread support among the student body… It becomes too much of an expense if you have to repeat a whole semester because of one or two modules.”

It is disturbing how such self-serving and ungrounded pontifications are casually rendered here that flout the sanctity of academic values, principles and etiquette.

Unisa’s Stature: From the Chief’s Mouth

According to a study published in *Studies in Higher Education* in 2014 by Moeketsi Letsekaa and Victor Pitsoeb, both staff at Unisa: “Unisa is an open distance learning (ODL) institution that provides higher education opportunities to working adults who would otherwise not have the opportunity to acquire a higher education qualification at full-time contact institutions.” They went on to note that Unisa has challenges in providing “learner support, especially access to and use of the university’s online portal – MyUnisa, by the majority of students whose rural location precludes access to online facilities. Other challenges include
conceptions and articulation of recognition of prior learning (RPL), and of the university’s poor throughput rate.”

Citing Macfarlane (2006), Letsekaa and Pitsoeb quoted Unisa’s own Principal and Rector at the time, Professor Barney Pityana, as acknowledging that Unisa’s massive dropout rates put the “university in danger of ruining its academic reputation”. Pityana went on to say that the way the university operated was fundamentally flawed and had no prospect for success. He lamented that “pass rates” were appalling: About 20 courses were identified where the dropout rate was as bad as 95%. Yet this institution of such a state and with mass enrollment was miraculously ranked 13 on the recently unveiled, but massively flawed, Times Higher Education ranking of the continent’s institutions.

To be sure, the contribution of distance learning institutions, such as Unisa, is paramount to ensuring access to atypical students as well as those from marginalized communities. Throughput, lack of learner support and other challenges are common problems of such institutions.

“Student-Centered Methods”—A Charade?

In the Mercury article, Havenga went on to profess “the new methods were a paradigm shift in which the future of teaching and learning lay[.] It was a shift from the ordinary that Unisa had to employ to keep up with the ever-changing world of academia, where the pass rate had to be improved through student-centered methods.” The following catch phrases need highlighting: “paradigm shift”, “ever-changing world of academia”, and “raising the pass rate”.

This thinly unveiled diploma milling is not about student learning; it sounds like an attempt to manipulate student throughput. It is not about student-centred methods, it feels like a reckless student-passing scheme in the narrow self-interest of the institution. Even more so, the “ever-changing-world-of-academia” hyperbole appears to be designed to mask the dangerous act of handing out diplomas to failed students out of institutional interest in raising productivity.

Passing Struggling Students: Shortcut to Success?

When students struggle for whatever reason, the least sensible response from an institution, especially an academic institution, is to not caucus how to help students pass the exams they failed. The amulets of this so-called “intervention” were nothing less than a smoke screen to let these failed – not struggling – students pass the exams. It is pretty curious how the words are carefully crafted to call the students “struggling”.

The dangerous message goes further with this phrase, also from the Mercury article: “these intervention methods [are intended] … to pass some [failed] modules”. This lifeline is
concocted as an “intervention method” when it starkly stands out as an enticement to students to explore their “resourcefulness” to pass their failed modules with a 24-hour miracle.

What happens to an electrical engineer student who fails his “core subjects” but passes his other “secondary” subjects? According to Unisa, the failed student “would be required to research some subjects and consult in others” in the take-home exam to pass the module! The catch word here is “consult others”. The American-franchised popular TV show “Who Wants to be a Millionaire” comes to mind, where a contestant is given three lifelines when met with difficult questions including “phone a friend”. These so-called interventions may be nothing more than a “phone a friend” façade to lend a hand.

For sure, I would not consider hiring this electrical engineer to wire my house, let alone elevate him to build and manage a national electrical grid, least of all the troubled Eskom (South Africa’s National Power Authority). In the increasingly spiking culture of fraud and plagiarism, the notion of “research in 24 hours” and “consulting others” in exams in the world of rampant academic fraud and plagiarism is simply irresponsible.

**Urge for Bona Fide Exit**

It may appear condescending to dare challenge a long established, if not necessarily a leading, institution such as Unisa on “student success”. That said, if an institution cares to address the shortcomings of a student, the first intervention is not to drop bona fide approaches in favour of dubious ones. A caring institution would instead consider, among other approaches, establishing a host of strategies to equip deficient students for passing the exams and acquiring credentials – with integrity. For instance, supplemental exams and repeating modules already exist as alternatives.

To be more direct, unleashing half-baked doctors, engineers, planners, nurses and teachers on society by established entities, as universities are, may cross the threshold of recklessness. This is exactly why professional bodies must independently and vigorously exercise their roles as gatekeepers in an increasingly loose world of academic callousness and duplicity. One hopes that the respective responsible bodies in South Africa, such as DHET, HESA, CHE, and SAQA, reign on this issue. The recent de-accreditation of one of Unisa’s bachelors programmes by CHE is a welcome intervention (*Mercury*, 7 September 2015).

**Diploma Mills vs. “Diploma Grinders”**

We live in the world of diploma mills. Even more so, we live in a country where individuals are endowed with the audacity to take institutions to court when they are outed for plagiarized credentials. The power of public opinion seems to have been tempered to such an extent that fraudsters roam around publicly – and unashamedly.
Such take-home exams as conceived by Unisa may be described as an act of “diploma grinding”, if they do not actually technically qualify as an act of diploma milling. Even worse, it takes much more effort to exorcise the demons of diploma grinders than those of diploma mills.

Unleashing Mediocrity

Unisa takes pride in enrolling more than 300,000 students from South Africa, the continent, and beyond with regional offices, for instance in Addis Ababa. According to Ashton (2012):

Unisa receives disproportionate numbers of complaints, most of which remain unresolved. Those receiving responses generally get a stock reply. Over the past 12 months Unisa received 2130 complaints and responded to only 177 of these. No other educational institution has a complaint rate approaching this. These complaints probably represent the tip of the iceberg. …Worse yet, all of these complaints emanate from within South Africa – how many of the thousands of external students have no available channel to voice their concerns? Research has found unhappiness with Unisa both in neighbouring countries as well as further afield http://sacsis.org.za/site/article/1298

There is thus considerable imperative to confront this emerging and distractive menace in the interest of not only South Africa but also the continent and beyond.

Conclusion

Unisa’s take-home exam is a bad joke on the academic marketplace that should not be simply ignored but forcefully euthanized. Unisa must be persuaded that it is unleashing mediocrity not only on South Africa but also others beyond the country’s borders. Furthermore, this academic folly may have direct reputational implications for South African institutions as a whole.

In an ideal world of high integrity, sense of duty and affluence, take-home exams are often used in a limited scope – but not to circumvent the valley of failure. In a country such as South Africa where as many as 60% of students are food insecure, experience hunger and do whatever it takes to get food – even turn to prostitution (Louw, 2015), expecting an adequate level of integrity may be way too unrealistic. These inherent South African – more so African – realities dictate immediate abandonment of this self-serving and disastrous academic malfeasance.

On another Mercury article (20 August 2015), Professor Jonathan Jansen, Vice Chancellor of the University of the Free State and an active commentator on education – who has just launched a fee-free student registration regime at his institution – had this to say: “Some South African universities … were guilty of dishing out a ‘version of Bantu education’ to their students, rather than ‘challenging the socks off’ them.” I cannot agree more.
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Selected sources