

# NWU Teaching and Learning Conference on Embracing Institutional Change: Responsiveness, Collaboration and Success on 29 May 2018

## Address to the guests and staff of the NWU (Roots Conference Venue)

### Embracing Change: the NWU Curriculum Transformation Project and questioning how we define student success and experience.

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#### Introduction and acknowledgements

Good morning everyone and welcome to this special event to explore new developments at the NWU in which the emphasis on change in terms of all the aspects of teaching and learning, is show-cased, explored and interrogated with a view to developing and enhancing best-practice. On behalf of our Vice-Chancellor, Professor Dan Kgwadi, and the management I wish to welcome not only our colleagues from across the NWU, but also a number of special guests:

Prof Wayne Mackintosh, Founding director of the OER Foundation and the UNESCO, Commonwealth of Learning and ICDE Chair in OER at Otago Polytechnic;

Dr Tony Mays, Manager: Unit for Distance Education, University of Pretoria (Groenkloof);

Ms Brenda Mallinson, Learning Technologies and OER Consultant;

Prof Paul Prinsloo, Research Professor in Open Distance Learning (ODL) UNISA

Prof Willie van Vollenhoven, Chief Director for the Centre of Teaching and Learning (CTL) at NWU;

Prof Mamolahluwa Mokoena, Director, Student Academic Development and Support

Mr Rassie Louw, Manager, Teaching and Learning Environments;

Dr Gerhard Du Plessis, Director for the Focus Area for Curriculum Development in the CTL;

Dr Esmarie Strydom, Director for the Focus Area for Staff Development in the CTL and

Dr Jessica Pool and Dr Manuela Fernandes-Martins, who together with a supportive group of administrators and colleagues, helped to organise this event. Thank you for the energy and work that went into this event.

All our colleagues and guests presenting papers in the next few days; thank you also for that interest and passion for teaching and learning.

In 2017 when I opened the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Conference at the NWU, I was pleased to meet a dear colleague and luminary in our higher education sector, Professor Brenda Leibowitz, the SARCHI Chair of Teaching and Learning at the University of Johannesburg as keynote speak. It was with a great deal of sadness and shock that we learned of Brenda's passing last month and so at the opening of this event I want to pause for a moment to acknowledge the contribution Brenda Leibowitz made to teaching and learning in the sector, and specifically to the discipline of academic literacy development at many of South African universities.

Also in 2017 I paid attention to the risks we faced as University unless we embarked on a systematic planning process in terms of curriculum transformation. Given the complexity of the NWU, and its investment in contact and continuous education programmes (both the formal distance education programmes as well as non-formal courses such as short learning programmes), curriculum transformation has to be proactively directed and lead through the development of teach-learning expertise on the one hand, and the recognition of leadership displayed in Faculties, on the other hand.

The NWU Strategy (2015-2025) and NWU T-L Strategy (2016-2020) emphasise urgency concerning expansion of the NWU academic offering via the distance mode of delivery, inclusive of integration of appropriate ICT for blended and online education opportunities, and it reaffirms our commitment to multimodal and multilingual provision. One would be tempted to imagine that excellence when considered in this light, must surely be measured in terms of the degree to which teaching-learning displays and reflects innovation as described in The Common Strategic Assumptions for NWU feature the following: "an increased demand for distance, technology-enabled tuition and flexible tuition models".

What progress are we charting since 2017? Two examples come readily to mind. The first is that in recognition of the guidelines, Faculties embarked in October of last year on a five year planning cycle to allow for designing, approval and accreditation of new qualifications, to be aligned to the NWU Teaching-Learning Strategy and to be aligned to the strategic directions of the University in terms of contact and distance education. Also in 2017 the revised academic promotions criteria assed through Senate and for the first time place of teaching-learning expertise alongside the prominence conventionally accorded to research, was

placed on an equal footing, making it possible for academics to be promoted, not only on the basis of research, but also on teaching learning-research balance. To my mind we are thus aligning academic's professional commitment to personal development within the contexts of their areas of specialisation and at the same time creating the institutional architecture, in terms of planning, to align our resources to the realisation of human resource development on the one hand, and student support and development, on the other hand.

This morning I want to touch on how we define success in terms of our Student Value Proposition and its role in the transformation of curriculum. In particular I thought to touch on deepening our understanding of NWU policy statements with reference to the influence of important education theories that help us make sense of what we mean when we speak of success, or inclusion, or self-direction, or experience. The emphasis is thus not so much on the levels we have touched on earlier in this year when the focus has been on how to plan for multimodality, how to anticipate the needs of the student audience in terms design, virtual or online learning experiences, and to focus instead more carefully on how we could choose to describe student experience in the attainment of success. That experience speaks to two analytical levels: the experience of formal academic support and the experience of development inside and outside the classroom. The point of making reference to education theory is not simply to illustrate themes or echoes emerging from the literature that find their references within our policy frameworks, Declarations and strategies, but rather to engage with the theory so that when strive to realise the elements of a successful student experience in the classroom, or when we attempts to categorise those measures we apply to measure our students' or our own excellence as University, we do so from a sufficiently deep and informed understanding.

Transformation of the curriculum entails two components: the first focus on the renewal of existing curricula in terms of the new directions of the NWU and latest innovations in relation to pedagogy, design or the use of ICTs for learning. The second focus is on student development as described and contained in the Framework for Student Academic Retention and Success. Thus whilst we acknowledge that teaching and learning is, in fact, the first factor mentioned in the Internal Success Model (p.3) also mentioned is a "clearly differentiated student value proposition": what is it?

1. Equity of access
2. Sense of belonging
3. Empowering and supportive student experience
4. Seamless learning and teaching experience
5. Aligned programme offerings
6. Active, responsive and caring citizens.

When considered from the perspective of student development these aspects are in congruence with developments we see the world over in which the development of the learner, holistically, not only in terms of performance, but also support, is taking place (Aubrey and Riley, 2018) One needs only to consider the campaign under erstwhile President Bush, *No Child Left Behind*, or the British initiative *Every Child Matters* (2003) so see the political as well as educational shift in our landscape. Of course it is possible for one to trace within these developments the impact that education theory has made on the profession as well as education practice.

The influence of figures such as Maslow and Rogers (1969) continues to be define how we think of student-centred learning and increasingly the student-centred classroom, in which the emphasis has shifted from content-focussed teaching to the teaching of search, evaluation, synthesis and critical skills whereby content comes to be identified and self-direction emerges as the key feature of the curriculum. For example, considering Roger's criticism of rote learning and meaningless memorisation, or the emphasis on openness to experience, and experiential freedom, and then the links between his theory, critical theorists Paulo Freire and self-directed learning experts like Lucy Guglielmino, for example, become evident.

Ideas concerning experiential learning, self-direction and determination are of course not new even if they have in the recent decade been reinvented. A.S. Neill (1966) coined the term the self-regulating child in the 1960s and it is his influence on modern education discourse that we see in the NWU Teaching-Learning Strategy, concerning the holistic development of the learner in which the intellectual, emotional and psychic aspects of development come to be articulated as part of the in-class and outside-class student experience. For Neill, freedom did not mean licence, but rather a form of self-awareness and respect for self and expert. Higher education discourse is awash with terms like the democratisation of learning and the democratisation of the classroom, and the inclusion of student experience and voice. Yet, our institutions remain profoundly

traditional and those places like Summerhill, the school that Neill founded, continue to be regarded as admired singularities, rather than examples to be followed.

These aspects of education experience speak to the second and third dimensions of the Student Value Proposition: a sense of belonging and empowering and supportive student experience. Student support and students experiencing the University as a place of belonging, similarly demonstrate the extent to which the University is mindful in its Strategy and policy formulation of the changing roles and characteristics of higher education institutions. South Africa as we know is still a post-Apartheid state insomuch as it must still recognise and deal with our histories of race and language exclusion. The awareness of the implications that exclusivity has for the learning success and experience of the student, is precisely what motivated another theorist, Basil Bernstein to write powerfully on the relationship between language and the curriculum, a matter which is currently receiving the attention of the NWU Senate and community. Bernstein was concerned with the recurrence of disadvantage in the classroom and considered universities and schools as active purveyors of education advantage and disadvantage (Aubrey and Riley, 2018, 62). What is so valuable in reading Bernstein's work as means for how we as NWU describe student success as well as transformation, is that he was able to show how, despite students possessing the same levels of intelligence, factors like language and class affected access to educational opportunity and success within the formal education system. Bernstein's (1975) focus on language as a form of capital and the construction of the curriculum and pedagogic practice has challenged universities across the world so ask: Given that we are dedicated to the public and the common good, how is it that so many of our students, particularly those from second language and disadvantaged groups, continue to not succeed? Are our conceptualisations of student success premised on powerful assumptions as regards language competence, class background and race? It is from the work of Bernstein (2000) that we trace in the Student Value Proposition, the educational rights he described as being critical to student success: enhancement, inclusion and participation.

Rogers, Neill and Bernstein are but three theorists whose understanding of student success and student experience included powerful notions of inclusion, social justice not simply as add-ons to frameworks or strategies to attain good academic results, but critical to pedagogic approaches necessary to enhance success for the student and in so doing provide a basis for the claim to excellence by the University.

### **Concluding remarks**

We look forward to the NWU Teaching and Learning Conference in 2018 as a means of reflecting on our commitment student academic development, its relationship to the holistic development of students and our understanding of student success and how we achieve this in terms of pedagogies that are inclusive, participatory, collaborative and cooperative and which lead to the expression of self-direction in the curriculum in terms of design as well as delivery.

**Thank you.**

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