

## **Eduvate Conference – University of Pretoria**

**June 2008**

### **Opening address:**

**Professor Anthony Melck, Advisor to the Principal, University of Pretoria**

Ladies and gentleman

I would like to join the previous speaker by extending a warm welcome to all of you to this university. The institution that was to become the University of Pretoria was founded 100 years ago as the Transvaal University College (TUCS). Therefore this is a very special year, which is made more so by having special events, such as this conference, on the campus during this period.

I would like to extend a special welcome to delegates that have come from afar, especially the plenary speakers from abroad, Dr Tony Bates and Prof Diana Laurillard who will be introduced to you fully at the appropriate times.

The conference is about teaching and learning, assessment and enhancing teaching through using technology. As such, it is fitting to reflect on what the University's current Strategic Plan says about teaching.

In the Strategic Plan, it is stated (and I quote): “We aim to optimize the way we teach .... by, (inter alia)

- Developing and using a flexible learning model, supported by appropriate technology, that allows students, within limits, to indicate the language and modes of delivery by and ways of interacting with the University that best suit their particular circumstances and needs, and
- Providing appropriate academic student support, including learning materials and academic information services, tutoring and mentoring ...”

The Plan continues with the following: “The University of Pretoria is committed to the scholarship of teaching, recognising that the act of teaching involves more than the transmission of facts or the transfer of knowledge. Teaching, in this conception, involves a deep intellectual engagement between university teachers and students, between students and curriculum, and between textual authority and student learning. The scholarship of teaching means moving beyond formal instruction, or the use of technologies, to setting a climate ... in which established knowledge is engaged, critical questioning is encouraged, and new knowledge forms are discovered and appreciated. (In addition) the scholarship of teaching is advanced through the incorporation of modern innovations in technology ...

“The scholarship of teaching recognises the diversity of learning styles, experiences and backgrounds represented within the student body, and responds in ways that accommodate such variation. It is understood that not all students respond equally well to the same kinds of teaching ...”

“As far as feasible, we intend ensuring that students are supported academically in a variety of ways. They should have quality learning materials at their disposal to allow them to discover results for themselves, to work at their own speed, and to compare different views. Secondly, excellent academic information services are fundamental for creating a resource-rich environment for learning ... Thirdly, academic student support includes the judicious and effective use of tutoring and mentoring as a means of giving personalized attention to students.”

What do these extracts from the Strategic Plan mean? Perhaps they are best explained by considering what used to be thought of as opposite delivery modes, viz. contact teaching and distance education.

Nowadays, educationists argue that delivery modes should be seen as options on a continuum rather than as discrete and separate alternatives. In fact, the modern concept of distance education specifically includes the provision of contact and interaction opportunities between teacher and learner; delivery based solely on paper materials without this kind of interaction is termed ‘correspondence education’ and viewed as inferior. Equally, modern residential teaching invariably includes resource-rich independent work by students, similar to that used in distance education. The result is that the main distinguishing feature between delivery options is the degree to which teaching and learning can occur asynchronously. Traditional residential delivery occurs synchronously, whereas in correspondence education, all delivery is asynchronous.

To emphasise the point: the essential elements of good modern distance education are seen as excellent learning materials developed by course teams of academics, instructional designers, language and graphic specialists (to ensure that academic content, pedagogic, didactic, linguistic and production considerations are all taken into consideration), complemented by good student support (i.e. both academic interaction through assignments, tutorials, e-mail, the internet, etc. as well as logistical and administrative support). The advent of information technologies has added new dimensions of distance education as defined here, but has not changed the principles or diminished these essential elements. But, good contact teaching uses the same component.

It is possible to position oneself at any point on the continuum between traditional residential contact education and correspondence education mentioned above, and indeed to give students the choice of doing these themselves. This is the essence of ‘flexible learning’ that allows students to choose the combination of delivery modes that suits their own circumstances best.

Any position on the continuum other than exclusively verbal delivery requires educational resources in addition to staff. These are predominantly texts, which could be paper, CD, or internet based, but also includes audio-visual materials. As exclusively verbal delivery is a medieval practice, modern education should always – to a greater degree – be ‘resource-rich’. Furthermore, all the resource categories just mentioned allow interaction between learners and teachers. However, as this vital aspect does not take place automatically, not even during exclusively verbal delivery, it should be included specifically in the design of learning materials and learning environments.

Returning to the University's Strategic Plan, I believe that what is said in the Plan is that optimal delivery is likely to be multi-modal, where lectures are combined with resource-rich, technology-based academic support. Such combinations allow students the flexibility of some asynchronous study, paper and electronic access to learning resources, technology-assisted student support, face-to-face interaction with lectures and access to the cultural wealth of the University during students' on-campus periods. This, ladies and gentleman, is likely to be optimal basis for tuition in a dynamic and progressive institution such as ours and is what is advocated in our Strategic Plan.

We have not yet attained these goals in all our programmes and I would be interested to learn whether, after your discussions during this conference, you still believe the goals are correct. In addition, how can technology be harnessed to achieve them more effectively.

I thank you