

A higher education launch pad – poster narrative

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Abstract

Concern about throughput at higher education institutions, the declining academic standards of school leavers and the distance education dropout rate in South Africa gave rise to the idea of a launch pad for higher education to replace current bridging and foundation programmes, to which a stigma is often attached.

The resulting poster depicts the curriculum as a rocket, ready for departure from a launch pad. The launch pad represents the period during which the school leaver (or the learner who enters higher education later in life) is prepared for success in higher education. It serves a diagnostic purpose and to equip individuals with the necessary life and study skills, as well as cross-field outcomes. During this period learners are oriented with regard to possible career and qualification options, and prepared for responsible citizenship.

The curriculum (rocket) comprises three important components: the fundamental, core and elective. The rocket is driven by three engines representing life and workplace needs, the needs of learners and the various disciplines or fields of study. The learner is the 'afonaut', who, throughout

her/his journey through higher education, is in contact by means of high-tech communication devices with the enabling (control) centre (the higher education institution). The enabling centre provides specialist support services such as tutoring, peer support and counselling. The afonaut is also in contact with other afonauts (fellow learners), space-station staff and satellites (lecturers, specialist services and people who have already achieved their qualifications). The rising trajectory of the rocket represents increasing self-sufficiency and also the complexity of more advanced study. Thus equipped for success, the afonaut travels to brave new worlds.

The context

The Institute of Curriculum and Learning Development (ICLD) at Unisa made use of future search methodology during their strategic planning session held on 6 to 8 February 2007. Future search is an interactive [1] planning process that begins with the gathering together of representatives of a particular system [2]. It is important that a cross-section [3] of all those concerned with what needs to be planned engage in the future search process. About 20 of the more than 60 participants in the session were not in fact members of ICLD, but had been invited to the session because they formed part of the system served by ICLD: the ICLD staff were thus joined by representatives of the five colleges at Unisa, professional support functionaries, the dean of students, members of the student representative council and management. The diversity of stakeholders broadens perspectives and allows a more comprehensive view [4]. The future search process is self-managing, which makes collaboration possible right from the beginning, without participants necessarily knowing one another. The session was facilitated by two members of the Future Search Network, John Goss [5] and Dr Aria Merkestein [6].

The future search methodology was developed by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, and its goal is to establish common ground and focus on the future [7]. Finding common ground is essential before a breakthrough can be achieved, and by focusing on the future, one devotes less energy to current problems. Ideally, a future search session is conducted over a period of three days (with two nights during which one assimilates what was achieved during the day).

Day 1 starts off by focusing on the past. Time lines of personal milestones, global events and the future search topic (in this case the teaching and learning environment) are drawn and



Figure 1: Three timelines pasted horizontally

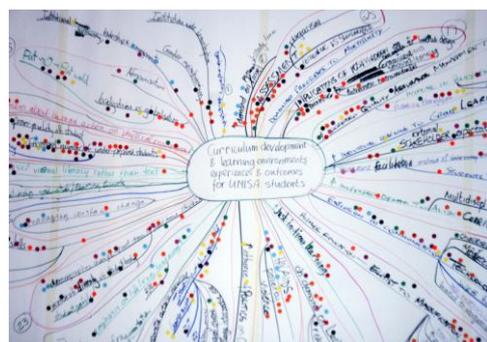


Figure 2: Mind map of trends

and pasted (see Figure 1 for an example). The group then creates a mind map (see Figure 2) of trends affecting the topic. Day 2 begins with descriptions of what stakeholder groups are currently doing, as well as what they hope to do in future. Stakeholder groups report on achievements and regrets [8] with regard to

their respective contributions to the selected aspect or topic. The afternoon is devoted to creating a future scenario, eight years hence (The participants attending the ICLD planning session were asked to visualise the teaching and learning environment in 2015 — see Figure 3 for an example of an ‘artwork’.) The common ground is then established. On day



Figure 3: The afronaut launch pad artwork

3 the common ground is confirmed through dialogue. The process is concluded by volunteers signing up to implement action plans.

The metaphor of the rocket and launch pad

Brainstorming of the above task by a group of ICLD strategic planning session participants resulted in concern about the throughput of higher education institutions, the declining academic standards of school leavers and the dropout rate in distance education in South Africa emerging as the most significant theme. The idea of a rocket and a launch pad was proposed as metaphor for the identified solution.

A poster was designed to illustrate the concept. The launch pad represents a period serving to prepare both school leavers and those who enter higher education later in life for success, and replacing current bridging and foundation programmes, to which a stigma is often attached. It would serve a diagnostic function, and nurturing, determination, passion and discipline would play a major role. However, systems would be forgiving and encouraging. Self-knowledge would be an important focus, and care would be taken to equip individuals with cross-field outcomes. During this period new entrants to higher education would gain life and study skills, be oriented with regard to possible career and qualification options, and be prepared for responsible citizenship.

As depicted on the poster, the student launch pad is situated in the reality of commerce, industry and government. The knowledge and skills requirements of the world of work would obviously be very important, as would awareness of pollution and other threats to the natural environment. The launch pad is situated against a backdrop of industrialisation, urbanisation and poverty. Also depicted are elements of nature (trees, plants, birds and insects) threatened by industrial and economic development.

The rocket represents the curriculum, which comprises three important parts, namely the fundamental, core and elective components. The multiple engines, which drive the rocket (curriculum), represent life and workplace needs, the needs of learners and the various disciplines or fields of study. The learner is the 'afonaut' – an African astronaut. Not only is the afonaut thoroughly prepared, but is also in contact throughout her/his journey through higher education with the enabling (control) centre, representative of the higher education institution. The enabling centre provides a multitude of specialist support services (such as tutoring, peer support and counselling) to the afonaut, as and when required. The afonaut is further in contact with other afonauts (fellow learners), space-station staff and satellites (lecturers, specialist services and those who have already successfully made the higher education journey). The upward trajectory of the rocket through the levels of the atmosphere represents increasing levels of self-sufficiency and also the complexity of more advanced study. Equipped for success, the afonaut travels to brave new worlds.

The poster elements

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| Foreground: Left | Domestic housing — suburbs and shacks People |
| Foreground: Middle | Launch pad <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Preparation for tertiary study ○ Orientation to study/career options ○ Expanding of the whole person |
| Foreground: Centre | Rocket – three engines and three parts [<i>Rocket as curriculum</i>] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Three engines: Work/life needs, learner needs and disciplines/fields ○ Three parts: Fundamental, core and elective ○ The afonaut(s) [<i>student(s) of the African university</i>] are in the elective part |

- They are connected by appropriate high-tech communication devices with the 'enabling' centre.

| | | |
|-------------|--------|---|
| Foreground: | Right | Natural environment — trees, birds, plants |
| Foreground: | Top | Satellite [<i>Specialists and support services</i>] and other spaceships: Tutors, lecturers and other learners further along the path or fellow 'space travellers' all interconnected |
| Background: | Bottom | Commerce (city) and industry (pollution) |
| Background: | Middle | The clouds in the immediate atmosphere represents [<i>communication obstructions and other challenges</i>] |
| Background: | Top | The various layers (different shades) of the atmosphere represent the increased complexity and learner autonomy as the rocket travels towards brave new worlds |

References

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