

Policy Brief

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Building Capacities for E-learning Implementation A Strategy for African Universities



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RUFORUM POLICY BRIEF

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Executive Summary

In 2010 the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) was awarded a research grant by the Association of African Universities under the Mobilizing Regional Capacities Initiative program. The research focused on the development of electronic teaching content for two regional postgraduate programs taught at Egerton University in Kenya and University of Malawi (Bunda College of Agriculture). The AAU funded research built on previous RUFORUM efforts of building capacities for e-learning and supporting the development of e-learning resources. It became evident that there was a need for a systematic approach to the implementation of e-learning by universities - the natural starting point being that of developing appropriate policies and strategies.

The benefits of e-learning to educational institutions are indisputable and they include: increased learning flexibility, potential for improved interaction between the learner and the facilitator, increased quality assurance through peer reviewing of teaching content and ease of updating electronic teaching content – among several other benefits. African Universities are under immense pressure to harness the opportunities from the emerging information and communication technology (ICT) tools in order to improve teaching, learning and research activities through the adoption of e-learning. Africa is emerging from being a “dark” continent through the increased number of sub-marine fibre internet cables, increased access to mobile phones and a general increase in the number of African internet users.

Introduction

There are a number of definitions for e-learning (electronic learning). Wagner et al (2008, page 26) cite Industry Canada’s definition for e-learning to include “the use of the Internet, intranets/extranets, audio and videotape, satellite broadcast, interactive TV, and CD-ROM, not only for content delivery, but also for interaction among participants”. In recent years mobile technologies, social networking and advanced learning management systems, tools and gadgets have begun playing a greater role in the delivery of learning.

Some African Universities have been experimenting with e-learning for a number of years – Kenyatta University in Kenya and Africa University in Zimbabwe are recognized as e-learning centers of excellence within the RUFORUM Network. In 2009, RUFORUM carried out an ICT Situation Analysis in 25 member universities and found that 26% of the universities had e-learning strategies in place. In 2011 a follow up survey on e-learning capability was carried out and 45% of the universities reported having e-learning policies, 35% had e-learning strategies and 30% were actually implementing their e-learning strategies. A number of the universities were found to be implementing e-learning with no strategy or policy in place.

Critique of Policy Options

The need for policies and strategies to support e-learning implementation arises because e-learning is a relatively new phenomenon to the majority of African Universities and academic faculty. Investments are required both in terms of finances, training skills and time for planning. The nature and level of the training required needs to be evaluated by each university. Linking the training to actual deliverables and implementation of e-learning also poses challenges. In order for training to be effective it must be aligned to the training needs, it must allow time for implementing what has been learned and there must be opportunities for refreshing the knowledge previously gained.

A modular approach to e-learning training is ideal because it enables various levels of entry into a training programme. Support from top university management becomes very critical to the overall success of e-learning implementation. It is important to recognize that adoption of innovations such as e-learning is largely a social process that requires excellent planning and change management. Therefore managing the motivational impediments to the adoption of e-learning including inadequate infrastructure, technical support and recognition of staff’s efforts becomes top priority.

There is a temptation to focus too much attention on the technological aspects of e-learning

Many institutions have not adequately thought through the question of why they want to do e-learning. The fundamental rationale for e-learning needs to be queried and established.

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Key Policy Recommendations

1. African Universities that are considering a systematic approach of implementing e-learning must set up E-learning Policies and E-learning Strategies because this a critical starting point. The process of developing policies and strategies facilitates deep reflection on the rationale for e-learning while carefully considering the associated expectations and noting the myths and assumptions that normally cloud e-learning initiatives. This is also an opportunity to engage all the key stakeholders within an institution and firm up on the commitment of resources required for e-learning.
2. A modular approach to E-Skills Training must guide the e-learning training strategy. Academic faculty and students are normally at differing stages in terms of e-learning capabilities. Therefore BASIC, INTERMEDIATE and ADVANCED e-skills training must be considered – followed by immediate application of the concepts that have been learnt.

About the Project

The project purpose was to improve the delivery methods for selected RUFORUM supported post-graduate programmes by building staff capacity to develop e-learning content and by encouraging the electronic sharing of research outputs .

Acknowledgment

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As e-learning matures as an industry and a research stream, the focus is shifting from developing infrastructures and delivering information on-line to improving learning and performance.



The Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) is a 19 year old net-work of 29 universities in 17 African Countries. RU-FORUM sees ICT effectively used and integrated into the operations of the member universities .

The Association of African Universities (AAU) is forum for consultation, exchange of information and cooperation among institutions of Higher Education in Africa

