Online learning in universities – A missed opportunity?

Florence Mayega Nakayiwa 16 April 2020

When Uganda announced a partial lockdown and the closing of schools and learning institutions due to COVID-19, avid promoters of information and communications technology (ICT), virtual and online-based learning saw it as a golden opportunity that would change the practice of online learning in higher education.

The concept of online or blended learning has been on the higher education agenda for close to two decades. There have been varying interventions from a range of sources: bilateral and multilateral agencies and US foundations.

At the national level, the Ministry of ICT and National Guidance through the National Information Technology Authority of Uganda has implemented the National Data Transmission Backbone Infrastructure and e-Government Infrastructure Project. This was an effort to connect all major towns within the country to an optical fibre cable-based network.

Infrastructure

Elaborate infrastructure was put in place that extended to the establishment and roll-out of video conferencing and Voice over Internet Protocol in government ministries, the laying of 1,590 km of optical fibre cable across the country to build the National Data Transmission Backbone, and a state-of-the-art Network Operations Centre to monitor and administer the entire national backbone infrastructure.

At the higher education sector level, several investments have been made to promote ICT and online learning, not only in universities but across the entire spectrum of higher education institutions.

For example, 5% of 75 units (equivalent to US$100 million) of account in the recently concluded African Development Bank's Support for Higher Education, Science and Technology Project was dedicated to ICT.

This covered both the soft and hard components, and captured issues such as the last mile and the fibre optic cables required to link public institutions not already on the national backbone. Other components included procurement of ICT materials – computers and other accessories – as well as capacity for online programmes.

Digital vision

This is against the backdrop of earlier investments in several of the public universities, not to mention the national commitment to a digital vision for Uganda which would see the country create a positive social and economic impact through technology-based empowerment.

An opportunity to test the new ICT capacity presented itself at the time of the abrupt closure of schools and universities as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. After all, the same measures were adopted in China where the virus started and have been implemented in both developed and developing countries alike.

It was time to test whether the national ICT capacity could be translated into a learning aide in higher education. Champions of online and blended learning had an opportunity to prove that they too could provide a solution to the learning impasse presented by the university closures, more so since most university students are considered to be among the higher socio-economic quartiles in their home areas, both urban and rural, with evidence showing increased mobile phone coverage.

How then is it that most universities did not put in place measures to offer online learning and those that attempted to do so were **deterred by government** from either completing the process or drawing lessons from the process for themselves and other players?

Key issues

There are four key issues for universities, policy-makers and the students to ponder. It is apparent that although it is a necessary condition, the development of ICT infrastructure has not been sufficient for the development of online learning in Uganda and perhaps in several African universities.

Beyond national investment in infrastructure there has to be a deliberate and concerted effort to change the mindset and capacities of both the providers and users of online learning as a mode of learning.

1. *Staff capacity development and attitudes towards online learning.* The focus of several staff development initiatives in Uganda has been towards advanced degrees at masters and doctoral levels. Few have policies to promote as a mandatory requirement the enhancement of pedagogical practice and continuing teacher/lecturer education that enables them to match especially the dynamic changes in ICT and learning. Moreover, several think that as a terminal degree, the PhD also embodies an academic capacity and potential for delivering courses in their area of specialisation.

2. *Fear of the unknown and inequity in access to ICT resources.* The reason fronted by the state for stopping the universities that attempted to offer online learning was **limited and inequitable access to ICT resources**. Despite the substantial investment in ICT infrastructure and increase in mobile phone coverage, ICT has not been appreciated as an alternative mode to facilitate higher education learning. Thus, the socio-economic background and access to ICT resources remains a hindrance to online or virtual learning in

higher education. Uganda has a huge urban-rural gap in internet use. Only 9% of Ugandans living in rural areas have access to the internet and about 30% of urban area dwellers are using it.

3. *The generation gap and attitude to using ICT.* While all youths and learners have adopted mobile telephony as a way of life, with several using it to promote communication, entrepreneurship and other day-to-day operations, the institutions themselves have not embraced mobile telephony as an alternative learning aide.

4. *Autonomy and academic freedom of universities in Uganda.* The Universities and other Tertiary Institutions Act 2001 as amended was intended to establish and develop a system governing institutions of higher education, while respecting the autonomy and academic freedom of the institutions, and widen the accessibility of high quality institutions to students wishing to pursue higher education. The act states that the minister may issue directives of a policy nature to all institutions of higher education, whether public or private. But where is the distinction between policy and the limitations to autonomy and academic freedom? Does the potential to continue with online learning when a university is closed constitute a policy that government has the prerogative to alter?

We can conclude that the adoption of ICT in learning, curriculum review and in the delivery of higher education programmes in Uganda is still a long way off, or maybe this is the time to reflect on how it can be mainstreamed in the offering of degree programmes? Its potential for increasing access to higher education cannot be over-emphasised, and the opportunity to utilise resources that are accessible to most youths should not be easily overlooked.

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