



African Virtual University  
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## AVU POLICY BRIEF

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Research & Practice in Open, Distance & eLearning

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### A Trojan Horse in the midst of African Universities: Using ODeL to Promote Continuous Professional Development among Faculty

#### Issue at-hand

The introduction of an innovation is always a great opportunity for reform in any institution. More often than not it brings about a paradigm shift and by so doing it leads leaders, managers and field actors to interrogate their long-held assumptions vis-à-vis their own knowledge and practices. Even the most change-resistant actors do give in overtime as change becomes inevitable. This is what is currently happening within African universities with the introduction of Open and Distance eLearning (ODeL). As an innovation, ODeL is having a profound effect on traditional teaching and learning practices in African universities.

Ezati and Mugimu (2010) conducted a case study on Continuous Professional Development (CPD) at Makerere University in Uganda which revealed the level of conservatism of some of the faculty. Their findings pointed out that some faculty members *“felt that training on teaching and student learning was not important.... At the beginning of the training, they felt that they already knew what to do”* as they believed that they were sufficiently knowledgeable. However, when the training began one of the faculty confessed that *“On the first day I thought we were knowledgeable but after the training I discovered I was lacking important skills to deliver my subject matter to the students effectively.”* In their findings, the authors underscored the following areas where training on teaching techniques is needed: **eLearning**, teachers’ ethics and code of conduct in teaching, research supervision skills, and student support. They concluded by a general observation on African universities where professional development for faculty is seriously lacking unlike at other levels of education. According to them, this explains

the “feeling among university staff that professional development courses designed by their university are not important to them”.

### ***Policy Recommendation: Using ODeL to institutionalize CPD in African Universities***

The potential of ODeL in changing the teaching and learning outcomes at the university level for the better has been widely documented in other regions of the world but very little empirical information exists for Africa. However, this is now changing as illustrated by research work being carried out in African universities where ODeL has been introduced for some years and tangible benefits are being documented. In a study contributed to the 3rd International Conference of the AVU in July 2016 entitled *Faculty Perception on the Trainings in Open, Distance and e-Learning Instructional Materials Development: The Case of University of Nairobi, Kenya*, Misiko and Odumbe (2016) reached the conclusion *that trainings on [ODeL] material development not only help the faculty to develop quality distance learning materials but also enable them to use the skills and knowledge gained through the training to publish papers and books and gain good academic writing skills.*

ODeL was introduced in the teaching and learning environment of the University of Nairobi (UoN) in 2005 through the setting up of a Centre for Open and Distance Learning which came with a mandate to complement and expand all the existing face-to face programs being offered across all the departments. A major consequence of this decision is that faculty in all departments had to receive training in ODeL teaching and learning material development in order to improve their pedagogical skills and content knowledge.

The research consisted of (i) investigating faculty perceptions on the training they underwent on instructional material development for open, distance and eLearning that are carried out by the university and (ii) assessing how the training has improved their teaching and material development skills. It focused on a sample 310 faculty that were purposively drawn from science-based departments that have embraced open, distance and eLearning as a mode of delivery. The rationale for selecting these departments was based on earlier research showing that these presented stiff challenges for ODeL approaches (Kulasekara et al. (2011).

In terms of findings, and pertaining to the perception of the training they had received, the questionnaire administered revealed that there was an overwhelming appreciation of the training provided as it included: (i) adequate time for demonstrations and hands-on activities (90%), (ii) clear and relevant training content (85%), (iii) good pace of the training (80%), (iv) provision of time for sharing, participation and discussion (80%), (v) and having their expectations of the training being met (80%).

With respect to the assessment on how the training improved their teaching and material development skills, the following was revealed: (i) 92% of the faculty strongly agreed that the training in material development made their lecturing easier; (ii) 91% strongly agreed that it has enabled them to restructure the way they deliver the content; (iii) 90% said that they are better prepared for their classes all the time; (iv) 85% indicated that they were able to update their content as a result of the training; (v) 82% strongly agreed that the training enabled them to teach face-to-face classes better; (vi) 79 % strongly agreed that the training helped them to know if they had achieved the outcomes set in their lectures; (vii) 76% strongly agreed that that they have used the knowledge gained through the training to write and publish papers and books in their various disciplines; and (viii) 75% strongly agreed that they gained good academic writing skills.

The only aspect of the training which received a less resounding appreciation is the duration of the training.

### ***Recommendations***

This study clearly shows how the introduction of ODeL has led to the development of CPD in an African university setting where resistance to learning new pedagogy and upgrading one's knowledge is very often the norm as demonstrated in the Ugandan case. In the latter, what provided the impetus for introducing CPD was survival in a cash-strapped environment as government significantly cut down the budget allocated to the universities and leaving them to compete among themselves to attract tuition-paying students on the basis of the quality of their programs and faculty.

The key recommendation therefore is that:

- Universities where CPD has not been generalized/institutionalized across the board should use the opportunity provided by the introduction of ODeL to design training models similar in features as the one used by UoN. It seems that its features (adequate time for demonstrations and hands-on activities, clear and relevant content, good pace, provision of time for sharing, participation and discussion) have been instrumental in getting the buy-in of the faculty as they felt that they have become more effective lecturers.
- University leadership needs to consult with faculty before defining the duration and timing of the training/CPD. In both the Makerere and UoN cases, this aspect has appeared to be problematic due to the fact that faculty have busy schedules both professionally (research, attending conferences, etc.) and personally (vacation and family).

## References

Ezati, Betty Akullu and Mugimu, Christopher B.2010. Possibilities and Challenges of providing Continuous Professional Development in Pedagogy for Higher Education Staff in Africa: A case of Makerere University. *Comparative & International Higher Education 2 (2010)*

Misiko, Wafula Charles and Odumbe, Jeckoniah O.2016. *Faculty Perception on the Trainings in Open, Distance and e-Learning Instructional Materials Development: The Case of University of Nairobi, Kenya*

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