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Sustaining ODeL in African Universities: A Balancing Act

Issue at-hand

As an educational approach to increasing access to learning opportunities of good quality, Open Distance and eLearning (ODeL) has become very popular the world over. This popularity is underpinned by the assumption that it is a cost-effective method as it saves money by the fact that it does not require the construction of conventional educational infrastructure while at the same time reaching a much greater number of learners irrespective of their spatial locations and time. However, the sustainability of ODeL programs is a complex undertaking and this is all the more important in Africa as most of the programs are started with seed monies, mostly grants, from donors and/or governments and which by definition have expiration dates following the logic of donor or government-driven projects and programs.

Indeed, investing in ODeL as a developmental tool in education does not come cheap. At the initial stages of implementation, ODeL comes with very high fixed, variable and recurrent costs. While some of the fixed costs incurred during the implementation phase can be amortized overtime, the variable and recurrent costs can be very taxing on the sustainability of ODeL programs in the long run. Indeed, ODeL programs, due to their popularity, do expand over time in terms of enrollment and with the expansion comes the need to hire more teaching staff to tutor students as well as develop more course materials and monitor and assess the learning of an ever-increasing body of students. Furthermore, there is the need to upgrade and maintain the IT equipment in a fast-changing technological world to ensure that instructors and students have access to state-of-the-art teaching and learning technologies and platforms. Therefore, the question is: how do universities, or any learning institution for that matter, generate income to sustain their ODeL programs?

Policy Recommendation: Managing growth and mastering program costs while at the same time devising cost recovery strategies

To understand how sustainability can be achieved in ODeL, it is important to identify some of the key cost drivers and then analyze how they can be mitigated and/or turned around creatively to produce value that can be reinvested. This process includes cost recovery strategies.

In general, and according to León (2001), the sustainability of any program rests on four pillars: *(i) strategic and financial planning; (ii) income diversification ;(iii) sound administration and finance; and (iv) own income generation*. With regard to ODeL programs, Hanover Research (2011), a US-global research and analytics firm, states that “*established distance education programs must find ways to maintain stability, create a return on investment, and scale for growth*”.

Meyer, Bruwelheide, and Poulin (2007) have identified 10 principles that determine the sustainability of online programs:

Principle #1: Know your market to determine the feasibility of a given program, expected enrollment levels, and how to make the program more appealing.

Principle #2: Know your costs to improve efficiencies through scalability, technology, and labor changes.

Principle #3: Determine a price to make decisions regarding what levels of enrollment are needed and to what extent other revenue sources are required.

Principle #4: Negotiate with the institution to determine revenue, the percentage of royalty payments, indirect cost recovery, and distribution of revenue to faculty, the program, the departments, and others.

Principle #5: Observe good financial management rules.

Principle #6: Develop and implement marketing plan to reach the target audience.

Principle #7: Have a web identity to provide extensive information about the program

Principle #8: Identify and develop good faculty, including adjunct faculty.

Principle #9: Improve retention to address the high drop-out rates of ODeL.

Principle #10: Improve courses or programs by making continuous assessment of student learning a priority.

As an illustration of how financial sustainability can be achieved, AVU’s current Business Plan (2014-2019), describes how to carry out effective source of funding diversification:

- Investing effectively in strategic priorities.

- Putting in place appropriate governance and risk management structures and operate a regime of value for money across all of the institution's activities.
- Ensuring relevance of programs and deliver to the plurality and diversity of the African continent.
- Maintaining relevance and reach (accessibility) to the labor market and learners.
- Managing effectively the human resources (faculty).
- Enhancing public engagement by working towards serving not only one's direct stakeholders but also the general public by making them better understand one's role in African development.

In terms of cost recovery, the following strategies devised by AVU can be mentioned:

- Open Educational Resources (OERs) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) can be used as communication and advocacy tools.
- ODeL centers or other equipment inside the university can be used to generate income.
- Tapping into the Alumni network to generate income and recruit additional students.
- Diversify source of income (consultancies, events, corporate donations, etc.).
- Partnerships is value generation.

A few examples of cost recovery

With regard to the use of OERs and MOOCs to recover costs, it is clear that a creative use of relevant open resources and courses can attract many people to sign up for ODeL programs that suit their skill and competency needs and thereby provide a source of income through the fees paid by the students. Marketing of OERs and MOOCs is therefore very important and investment in advertising is worth the while as it may bring some return on the investment made.

With respect to the use of IT equipment for recovering costs, an institution can rent out its facilities to individuals or organizations that can't afford to build ODeL centers even if they are heavy users of ICT-mediated services such as video conferencing, database hosting, etc. AVU's Partner Institutions and their ODeL centers, for instance, could recover the costs of some of their IT equipment through this strategy.

Alumni are an important investment for their alma mater; and like any investment they can yield return. For instance, they can be great sources for free advertisement of an institution's ODeL programs as they can spread the word through their networks. In some cases, a few successful and wealthy among the graduates can sponsor programs by donating money to their alma mater. However, the latter should have a tracking mechanism of its graduates and a strategy to engage them for support. American universities have developed effective strategies for reaching out to their graduates for financial support and advertisement.

Recommendations

As indicated above, there are general principles of sustainability that universities should adopt and adapt to their ODeL programs. In so doing, universities should learn from both promising and problematic practices. The references mentioned below could be useful sources of information on sustainability.

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