Partnerships as a strategy to enhance eLearning in African universities

Issue at-hand

The apparent poor record of African universities and centers of higher education in aiding national development can be partly attributed to the myriad challenges they have faced in the past. For instance, many have been forced to finance their budget deficits due to disengagement of the state. With a view to improving academic capacity in Africa, what can be done to mitigate this problem? Integration of technology in education is increasingly viewed by stakeholders in the continent as a plausible strategy. Conventional and non-conventional educational forms have found the use of information technology very effective in widening and enhancing educational provision through eLearning, especially in higher education. As a result, the need to expand and enhance eLearning has increased with several institutions and organizations investing in online teaching.

eLearning provides the framework to integrate technology in the methods of learning and delivery of education to create a continuous learning platform. Besides, it has the advantages of having a wider coverage. However, many institutions in Africa still face several challenges in installing and enhancing their programs through computer-mediated learning or eLearning since this mode of instruction requires heavy resource investment in information technology. To overcome this hurdle, some African countries have begun to pursue opportunities for collaboration as can be seen in the rise in partnerships with donor agencies. Such partnerships generally provide opportunity for mobilizing the necessary financial resources for developing and supporting eLearning platforms and infrastructure. These collaborations have resulted in the transformation of production, utilization and creation of knowledge.
Some capacity building agencies have adopted this partnership model and have since begun to offer assistance to African educational institutions as part of their outreach capacity building initiatives. The African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) is one such institution that seeks to strengthen capacity of many institutions of higher learning in Africa. ACBF support has specifically targeted the technological environment as a means to position African institutions of higher learning in the global technological sphere. In a paper presented by Franklin Mutahakana and Hardson Kwandayi at the 2013 1st International Conference of the African Virtual University, the two researchers used the partnership model between ACBF and Africa University (in Zimbabwe) to showcase how donor agencies and institutions of higher learning can partner/collaborate to strengthen institutional capacity for effective eLearning in Africa.

Recommendations

Using the partnership model between ACBF and Africa University as an example, Mutahakana and Kwandayi make several recommendations for promoting similar partnerships intended to enhance the capacity of African institutions of higher learning in eLearning:

- Countries should have strategic partnerships between themselves to save on infrastructure and expensive retooling;
- African universities, education centers and leaders of education should partner with local communities and also find more effective ways to work with the private sector to bridge the world of learning and doing;
- Educators should constantly embrace change, drive for discovery and be aware of collaborating opportunities;
- Governments and donor agencies should strive to support universities with a view to strengthening their capacity in eLearning.

Implications

Promotion of institutional partnerships in Africa similar to the one between ACBF and Africa University could:

- Strengthen the capacity of African universities to deliver sustainable eLearning programs;
- Enhance institutional development of partner institutions by way of providing ICT equipment, equipping the libraries with physical books and e-books materials and journals and retooling of faculty through training programs;
- Make it possible for institutions to gather capital for developing e-learning programs much more quickly;
- Generate resourcefulness in implementing e-learning through different experiences of partners by leveraging complementary skills and strengths which may be in limited supply within a single institution.
Conclusion

Partnerships can offer an effective tool for expanding and strengthening eLearning capacity in higher education in Africa—to enable institutions meet the critical need for increasing access, improving quality and lowering the cost of education. This can make it possible for institutions of higher education fully exploit their potential as key players in the provision of education and national development.

Reference

Paper presented at the 2013 1st International Conference of the AVU, Nairobi, Kenya, under the session on Infrastructure & Capacity.

Title: Strengthening Institutional Capacity for Effective e-learning through partnership: An Illustration from Public Sector Management Training

Presenters: Franklin Mutahakana (African Capacity Building Foundation, ACBF, Zimbabwe) & Hardson Kwandayi (Africa University, Zimbabwe)

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