Is Assessment of Student Learning in ODeL the Silver Bullet for Reforming African Higher Education?

Issue at-hand

The introduction of ODeL into the teaching and learning processes within African higher education is rapidly expanding but it has come with major challenges to curriculum development, pedagogical approaches, lecturer and instructor training, assessment of learning outcomes and research. However, the capacity of universities to monitor and evaluate/ assess the impact of ODeL on the teaching and learning environments and outcomes is weak. Key among the challenges facing institutions are: (i) lack of effective and reliable Monitoring (M&E) systems, (ii) weak culture of assessment of student learning and (iii) lack of periodic training and retraining of new and experienced lecturers and instructors in innovative pedagogy.

It has now been established that teaching in an ODeL context is complex as it requires multiple pedagogical approaches such as designing/developing content and self-learning course materials for students, conducting online tutorials and short and periodic face-to-face sessions, and fostering virtual and/or face-to-face collaborative learning among students. These pedagogical approaches require different learning assessment techniques; they include the continuous and formative evaluation of the students' home environment, the periodic face-to-face sessions and the online environments to see how they affect the learning process. This demonstrates that monitoring and evaluating how ODeL is making a difference in the quality of education is an interactive process between lecturers and students. Hence, the need for them to become reflective actors of their teaching and learning.

Policy Recommendation: Introduction of ODeL assessment techniques and culture as a means for reforming the training of lecturers and instructors for effective learning and success in conventional and open universities

ODeL is no panacea for quality education. It requires serious preparation on the part of lecturers and instructors to turn it into an effective tool for helping students acquire knowledge and skills. A growing body of literature on how best to use ODeL for success in universities is now emerging to help universities reform their institutional set up and the training of their teaching staff by showcasing promising practices around the world. **One entry point for reforming the teaching and learning processes is through students' assessment**. Indeed, rethinking assessment in the context of ODel requires a major paradigm shift in the philosophy and practices of conventional assessment. Using the case of India where a reform of the examination system was introduced, Chaudhary and Dey (2013) indicated that this prompted a shift from "*content-based testing to problem-solving and competency-based assessment, examination of shorter duration, flexible time limit, open book examination; self-assessment, peer assessment and feedback, maintaining a daily diary, emphasis on continuous evaluation and use of ICT*". Furthermore, the reform also suggested an array of assessment tools which include "*observation, assignments, projects, portfolio, e-portfolio, checklist, rating scale, anecdotal records, etc.*"

In other words, this paradigm shift entails introducing structural changes in the way assessment and certification are conducted within institutions and a culture that focuses more on students' performance in terms of competencies and skills than their grades. It therefore calls for a new type of lecturer or instructor who is concerned with enhancing the learning capacities of her/his students as the latter are expected to "learn to self-learn" using materials available to them. It is also about making the teaching and learning processes more effective, relevant and outcome-oriented. This reorientation of instructional culture makes the lecturer a reflective actor of her/his own teaching. She or he needs to constantly interrogate the effectiveness of her/his teaching methodologies and strategies and be more involved with her/his students' learning experiences by involving them in the assessment process.

Recommendations

Operating such a major paradigm shift in any institutional setting is a long and arduous process. However, African universities that have embarked on integrating ODeL into the teaching and learning environments have little choice but to reform themselves both structurally and culturally.

AVU has been working with an increasing number of universities to set up ODeL centers fully equipped to roll out open and distance learning opportunities but the extent to which a major reform agenda has been put in place to create conducive conditions for success such as reforming assessment and certification systems, lecturer and instructor training (professional development), monitoring and evaluation is still not clear. Therefore, the following recommendations are made towards African higher education institutions:

- In case this has not be done, putting in place a reform agenda that includes rethinking students' assessment and certification systems in collaboration with regional, sub-regional and national quality assurance and qualifications frameworks (NQAs and NQFs).

- Setting up or integrating into a robust M&E system both ODeL formative and summative approaches to assessment of students' learning.

- Developing a professional development plan for lecturers and instructors with a heavy emphasis on new teaching and assessment techniques in ODeL and institutionalize refresher courses at the beginning of academic years.

- Create induction or training portfolios for new students using ODeL to make them better learners and assessors of their own learning.

References

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