**What’s good for the goose is good for the gander: AVU’s ICT Masterplan and its implications for Africa**

**Issue at-hand**

The promise of ODeL and ICTs’ capacity to effectively and efficiently address the educational challenges facing Africa in terms of access to quality and relevant education could remain wishful thinking if the integration of these two innovative tools into educational processes is not subject to the formulation of conducive policies and systematic planning of their introduction in education systems. The African Virtual University, the premier Pan-African institution in ODeL provision and an enabler organization for many tertiary education institutions on the continent, has developed an ICT Master Plan covering the period 2014-2019 to chart how ICTs can be used in ODeL methodologies and approaches to not only meet its own organizational developmental needs to deliver its mission but also to guide African countries in creating conducive eco-systems for maximizing the impact of information and communication technologies on educational processes and outcomes.

The AVU’s ICT Master Plan focuses on 7 development areas: (i) the formulation of good governance structure and policies; (ii) the provision of ICT infrastructure and services that meet the AVU current and future business needs (iii) the delivery of high-quality and cost effective ICT infrastructure and services; (iv) the fostering of innovation, best practices, and value for AVU in the use of ICT in teaching, learning, and research across Africa; (v) enforcement of confidence and the security of AVU information; (vi) the openness of access to the AVU infrastructures and services for AVU staff and partners; and (vii) the operation of an end-user centered ICT service model. The figure below depicts the vision; the pillars and foundation that underpin the AVU’s Master Plan can be adapted at both national and institutional levels for governments and universities.
Policy implications of AVU’s ICT Master Plan for its partner institutions and African countries in general

The AVU ICT Master Plan should inspire its partner institutions and African countries to develop institutional and national ICT master plans of their own. Such plans are necessary if Africa is to unleash the potential of ICTs and ODeL for rapid gains in educational development. ICTs and ODeL have demonstrated that Africa could leapfrog stages of systems development if relevant ICT integration policies and strategies are in place. A full-fledged embrace of technologies and ODeL could bring about the paradigm shift needed to transform education and training systems so that they move towards holistic approaches that support sustainable economic and social development in Africa. However, the following challenges have been identified at national and institutional levels in African universities:

At the national level

Chief among the gaps that prevent the full use of the potential of ICTs is still the lack of national ICT policy frameworks in education. AVU has also observed that although many countries have benefited from its projects and from other efforts in ODeL, Africa is still facing unprecedented unmet demand in this area.

In terms of infrastructure, the issue of bandwidth and reliable energy sources (fossil and renewable) is still a big impediment to the optimal use of ICTs in education and other key sectors of the economy and social life.

At the institutional level in universities

The lack of policy and strategic frameworks and infrastructure for deploying the full potential of ICTS is also found within universities. Toro and Joshi (2012) observed that “information infrastructure of African Higher Education is poorly developed and unevenly
distributed. The major challenges faced are lack of awareness and mindset, lack of top-level commitment for the progress in ICT integration, a systematic method of ICT implementation, cost of bandwidth and efficient utilization of ICT (p.21)

The AVU has arrived at the same conclusion by noting that many ODeL programs have not been delivered in most African higher education institutions due to lack of manpower and financial resources. The lack of ODeL and/or ICT competence in education is still critical even for institutions belonging to the AVU network and the following challenges have been identified: (i) lack of sufficient competent manpower for project management to address increasing demand in project activities; (ii) lack of adapted governance structures and tools; and (iii) many policies are outdated as they do not take into account new developments (approaches and technologies) in ICT and Education.

The challenge of bandwidth and energy affects universities even more due to the heavy use of ICTs to meet educational goals. As a result, there is an increasing number of initiatives that have sprung to address the issue both at the sub-regional and national levels. For the Eastern and Southern Africa sub-regions, the UbuntuNet Alliance which was launched in 2005 seeks to (i) develop and improve the interconnectivity between Research and Education Networking (REN) participants in Africa and their connectivity with research and education networks worldwide and with the Internet generally; (ii) develop the knowledge and skills of ICT practitioners in these institutions; and (iii) Provide related auxiliary services to Research and Education Networking (REN) participants. Its counterpart in West and Central Africa is the West and Central African Research and Education Network (WACREN) and the vision driving both of these associations of national REN in the three sub-regions is the development of the capacity to secure high speed and affordable Internet connectivity for the African research and education community.

Recommendations

The key recommendation for both national governments and the leadership in higher education is the development of national strategic ICT policies and plans such as the AVU’s ICT Master Plan 2014-2019. But more specifically, governments should:

• Resolutely engage in developing ICT and energy infrastructure in partnership with the private sector. With regard to bandwidth, sub-regional schemes whereby a group of countries get together to pool their resources and purchase broad bandwidth through the submarine cables running around the continent guarantees the affordability of high speed internet.

• Integrate ICT within governance and administrative system (e-governance) as this would signal a major paradigm shift towards efficiency and effectiveness that might trickle down to education and other social sectors such as health.
For universities, they should:

- Request AVU’s support for the formulation and implementation of their own ICT Master Plans.
- Join, encourage and support initiatives such as the UbuntuNet Alliance and WACREN to enhance research and education.

References

For additional reading on ICT integration in the education systems, the following publications can be of use.

For Higher Education


https://www.ubuntunet.net/home

WACREN (http://wacren.net/en/content/about-us)

National RENs (MAREN (Malawi), MoRENet, (Mozambique), KENET (Kenya), RwEdNet (Rwanda) and TENET (South Africa)).


For Primary and secondary education


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