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Striving for Quality and Relevance in Higher Education within a MOOCS' Era

Issue at-hand

Education is undergoing a great revolution. Old paradigms in teaching and learning processes are giving way to new ones. However, the effectiveness of the latter in improving the quality of learning and delivery is still to be fully proven. Innovation adoption, as we know, hinges on the perceived strength of its effectiveness over or vis-à-vis the old ways of doing things. MOOCS have been heralded as the democratization of access to good teaching materials and programs. In Africa, and as Joel Mtebe (2016) put it: *“The recent rise of MOOCs is seen as a signal of radical change coming to education and researchers believe that MOOCs can provide affordable education to the majority needy students in sub-Saharan Africa”*. However, this assertion is far from the truth as it would require more work and understanding to realize the promise of MOOCS as an affordable opportunity for African students to access quality and relevant education. Furthermore, Africa is still a minor player in the use of MOOCS as only 2% of the registrants to one of the most popular MOOCS (courser) are from Africa compared with 43% from USA, 26% from Asia, and 17% from Europe (UNESCO, 2013).

Policy Recommendation

In his paper entitled “Blending face-to-face postgraduate courses delivery with MOOCS in a sub-Saharan African University: Students’ experience and perceptions” presented at the 2016 3rd International Conference of African Virtual University held in Nairobi, Kenya on 6th -8th July 2016, Mtebe (2016) argued that it would take new understanding and work from instructors in sub-

Saharan Africa to be able to use various innovative pedagogical approaches to adopt MOOCs in a bid to widen access to and improve quality of education.

Mtebe argues that it is necessary to blend face-to-face postgraduate courses delivery with MOOCs in order to achieve quality results in teaching and learning.

He distinguishes two types of MOOCs: connectivist MOOCs (cMOOCs) which are based on the pedagogical principles of connectivism theory of learning with networks developed informally and formal MOOCs (xMOOCs). The cMOOCs lend themselves to creativity, autonomy, and social networked learning and depend on student to student interaction. On the other hand, Formal MOOCs, known as xMOOCs, consist of digitization of traditional lectures in form of short video sequences, short quizzes, and tests while using behavioristic teaching approach. The xMOOCs rely primarily on information transmission, computer marked assignments and peer assessment (Bates, 2012). There is no interaction between students with instructors (Wulf et al., 2014).

Mtebe argues that xMOOCs are much closer to the teaching styles found in most African universities and therefore are relatively easy to integrate in lectures. He further contends that xMOOCs are more effective if integrated into face-to-face delivery and not as standalone courses. He cites many scholars (Holotescu, Grosseck, Cretu, & Antoanela, 2014) who support his stance as the blending of the two approaches holds the promise of being the most efficient learning approach as it takes the best of both delivery modes.

However, he cautions that the “blended approach” is not a panacea. It requires more work if one wants to optimize student engagement, satisfaction, and ultimately improving students’ learning outcome. To further bolster his main argument, Mtebe provided the findings of a study carried at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM). The study consisted of redesigning a traditional face-to-face postgraduate courses delivery by blending them with MOOC content in order to see their effectiveness through students’ experience and perceptions.

The design consisted of blending Human Computer Interaction (HCI) and Research Methodology courses with similar courses in Coursera platform from University of California, San Diego USA and University of Amsterdam respectively.

14 students in academic year 2014/2015 took the HCI Course and 22 other students took the Research Methodology course the following academic year (2015/2016) at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM). According to Mtebe, the findings from this study could provide a new understanding of how instructors in sub-Saharan Africa could use various innovative pedagogical approaches to integrate MOOCs into face-to-face delivery in a bid to widen access to and improve the quality of education.

Findings

- *Students found videos from Coursera as useful and helped them to better understand the concepts that were explained in the classroom during face-to-face delivery.*
- *Students went further to suggest similar videos to be added in all topics of the course in future. The finding corroborates with similar studies that were conducted in Africa. For instance, Aboshady et al. (2015) found that students showed positive experience towards MOOCs in a study conducted to 2,700 undergraduate medical students in Egypt.*
- *Language has been a barrier to many MOOCs users from sub-Saharan Africa. the majority of MOOCs are in English and not all users in sub-Saharan Africa are competent in English to the level of taking up these courses. However, in this particular case language was not found to be a barrier to understanding the courses. The majority of students indicated that language used in the two MOOCs courses was understandable. A possible explanation of this finding could be due to the fact that these two courses were offered to postgraduate students. Many postgraduate students have studied many courses in English and they have interacted with foreigners before so they can easily understand accent of English from other countries.*
- *Low Internet bandwidth continues to hinder the adoption of MOOCs in sub-Saharan Africa (Escher et al., 2014; Liyanagunawardena et al., 2013; Warugaba et al., 2016). MOOCs content is delivered in video format, and therefore, they require reliable and good Internet connection (Chen, 2014; Michael Trucano, 2013). To overcome this challenge, some students decided to download video using the Internet from the University so that they could watch them at home. However, this was only possible for HCI course as the Research Methodology students were not able to download the MOOCs videos.*

Recommendations

- As recommended by Mtebe, this study at UDSM should be replicated and findings disseminated across Africa;
- Lecturers and instructors need to undergo systematic training in the use of MOOCs and other ICTS to improve their teaching skills. Currently it is left to the desire of faculty to upgrade their skills or not. It should be made mandatory for promotion and students' evaluation of lecturers should be introduced.
- Africa needs to invest in broadening Internet Bandwidth. Most of the projects envisaged such as submarine cable backbone projects and fiber optic projects in the East African Submarine Cable System, SEACOM, and the East African Marine System

need to be implemented so as to increase Internet speed up to 155mbps.

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