Mainstreaming gender in AVU programs

Issue at-hand

In its first ten years, none of the academic programs or administrative practices of the African Virtual University (AVU) focused on gender as a separate issue. Nonetheless, the AVU was relatively successful in attracting female students and did have some policies that were gender sensitive. While some aspects of gender mainstreaming were already part of the AVU’s programs with some individual staff members, of both sexes, being knowledgeable about and supportive of gender issues, it was necessary to develop a more systematic incorporation of gender mainstreaming. Under the terms of a grant from the African Development Bank (AfDB) for 2005-2008, the AVU was mandated to systematically mainstream gender into its operations and programs. The AVU therefore developed a gender policy for mainstreaming gender into its activities (AVU 2008).

What is Gender Mainstreaming?

In the last couple of decades, most international agencies have adopted gender action plans and gender mainstreaming mechanisms. The United Nations took a leading role and has spearheaded a number of processes and instruments toward gender mainstreaming. For example, three important milestones include the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (1979), the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and the Millennium Declaration and Development Goals (2000). The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), one of the early donors of the AVU and a leader in the area of gender equality, defines gender mainstreaming as:

Gender mainstreaming is a strategy to assess the implications for both men and women, of any planned actions, policies or programs in all areas and at all levels. This approach
recognizes the need to take social and economic differences between men and women into account to ensure that proposed policies and programs have intended and fair results for women and men, boys and girls. (CIDA, Mainstreaming of a Gender Perspective 2006).

Policy recommendations and guidelines

The AVU developed a gender mainstreaming policy to support the implementation of its programs at its partner universities. Strategies touch on aspects of course design, support for instructors and learners, scholarships and running of the open, distance and eLearning (ODEL) centers located at the partner institutions.

A. Design of AVU Courses

i) Ensure ODeL math or science curricula use examples and pedagogical approaches that are attractive to women. This should include use of gender sensitive language (e.g. students are not referred to exclusively as “he,” girls or women are shown as successfully dealing with problems, etc.)

ii) Ensure that all courses, including technical ones like computer science and math, use examples that are relevant to both men and women (i.e. when mathematics is related to social issues, it may become more interesting for women).

iii) Develop tailored programs or training packages for women, aimed at helping them to overcome any math or science deficiencies.

B. Support to Instructors

i) Identify and train both male and female course facilitators in basic gender analysis concepts.

ii) Provide basic information about gender stereotyping for lecturers who will teach AVU courses.

iii) Provide lecturers with a checklist that identifies potential problems and solutions (e.g. what to do if women do not participate actively in discussions; how to make their courses interesting to women by giving more socially relevant examples, etc.)

C. Fellowships and Bursaries

The AVU gender policy led to the creation and management of a Scholarship Fund for female students.

i) Ensure that all existing scholarship programs are equally accessible to men and women.

ii) Create scholarship fund for deserving female students who are studying in the sciences.
iii) Create a separate scholarship fund for “mature” female students, i.e. women over the age of 30 who want to pursue degree studies through the AVU programs.

D. Organization and Management of ODeL Centres

The delivery of AVU programs at the partner universities is usually coordinated through the ODeL Centers. These strategies are specific to the centers:

i) Ensure ODeL centres are welcoming to female students and include female help staff.
ii) Ensure female students get equal access to the facilities.
iii) Ensure women are part of the Centre governance structure (e.g. Centre Director, Centre Manager, and Systems Administrator).
iv) Ensure human resource approaches in the Centre are gender sensitive and sexual harassment policies are developed and enforced.
v) Ensure female experts are included among the pool of local facilitators. (If none are immediately available, then promising women should be selected for training as facilitators and financing aside expressly for this purpose).
vi) Ensure ODeL workshops use gender sensitive approaches for materials development, delivery and technology, and governance management and financing of programs.
vii) Ensure data on the admission and performance of male and female students is collected, disaggregated and fed back into program planning.

Conclusion

Distance education has been identified as a particularly important way for reaching out to female learners who are sometimes constrained by cultural and economic conditions such as their role as mothers and caregivers. They have also tended to be underrepresented in fields dominated by men such as science and technology. Gender mainstreaming can go a long way in expanding access through distance education. Institutions should work with a gender mainstreaming expert to ensure that gender policies are in place, and should periodically review their gender mainstreaming policies to make sure these are inclusive and supportive of both genders as they navigate their way through the education system.

References

