

African / European capacity building network for eLearning quality – Next Steps?

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How can we all pull together to implement quality eLearning solutions in the African context?

How can we share and learn about quality management techniques **for** eLearning, and achieving wider quality improvements **through** eLearning?

Quality is not only about the setting and meeting of external standards and criteria. It's also about managing the series of proactive steps needed to establish eLearning provision, and how all role players can work together to produce a quality result which achieves educational goals.

At the first eLearning Africa conference in Addis Ababa in 2006, there was a pre-conference workshop on Quality for eLearning, jointly organised by UNESCO and the European Foundation for Quality in eLearning (EFQUEL). Following this workshop was a four week virtual discussion aimed at exchanging ideas and building co-operation between African and European stakeholders.

The various discussions were characterised by the fact that Africa is facing parallel challenges in introducing quality assurance mechanisms on the one hand and eLearning on the other, and that while globally the 'quality' discourse and the 'eLearning' discourse are topical, they are frequently not discussed together. This is partly because of the number of different role players involved: as Prof John Stephenson in the UK expressed it, 'the complexity and cost of setting up new eLearning systems requires the active involvement and agreement of six very different key professionals: the teacher, the supplier of software systems, the institutional manager (budget holder), the designer, the technician and, of course, the learner. Each has a different set of expertise, priorities and concerns. Each speaks a separate professional language making it very difficult to achieve consensus' (Stephenson, 2005). This picture is painted before one introduces quality management into the equation with its own professional language and varying interpretations of that language.

The topics in the discussion concluded with the question 'How do you see the future for quality development and assurance for eLearning in Africa? Several ideas were suggested and discussed, amongst them the idea of an African / European capacity building network for eLearning quality. It should be noted that there is significant goodwill between stakeholders both in Africa and Europe to create such a network.

This session describes the planned conception of such a network. Its focus would be on building understanding, providing information and sharing case studies, to ensure that individual people, providers and all different stakeholders are empowered to speak a common language; and become sufficiently 'eLearning literate' and 'quality literate' to implement high quality learner centered educational practice. This focus is on internal improvement and capacity building rather than being involved in any type of regulatory or external quality assurance activity.

Seven questions

There are a series of seven questions for potential stakeholders to consider in establishing a quality network for eLearning:

1. **Achieving consensus** - do sufficient people, institutions, and other stakeholders in Africa think that it would be a worthwhile venture? An alternative to seeking full consensus would be for a very small group to try to establish something, offering support

on a 'micro' or 'prototype' basis. Then people could see what they might be getting from it, and buy in or not. The famous quote is from the film Field of Dreams - "If you build it, they will come".

2. What should the **scope** of the network be? Given the number of different types of role players, there are several interlinking areas of professional expertise involved (see diagram). Many networks are already being established in the various professional areas. How would the proposed network complement the activities of these other endeavours, including the new AfriQAN quality assurance network, established in 2007 to promote collaboration and linkages among the external quality assurance agencies within the African continent?

[Insert graphics file here]

3. What should the **vision, mission and proposed deliverables** of the network be?
4. **Physical location** - where should the base for such a network be established? Since it could be predominately a virtual organisation, the physical base may be linked to funding sources and also the personnel involved.
5. Should the network adopt a formal **organisational model**, like a Company Limited by Guarantee, with formal roles assigned to key individuals, or could it be a very small team requiring one or two co-ordinators, and others being 'co-opted in' as required?
6. **Funding** - how would funding be established? What type of funding would the network require?
7. Would we gain added value from doing a **structured gap analysis** on the state of eLearning provision in Africa, who is doing what, how they are doing it, what challenges barriers they are facing, and where they would like to get to; integrating this into national concerns and conclusions for the whole of Africa? We already have some excellent viewpoints and studies, painting a vivid picture of the challenges which are being faced, the nature of the gaps which exist and the initiatives that are attempting to breach them.

The consensus in the discussion was therefore the idea of promoting communities of practice and supporting existing initiatives, rather than competing with them. UNESCO expressed a view that 'a small group seems appropriate to moderate and feed into such communities, co-ordinating multiple actors and existing institutions, with a view to reinforcing them and providing capacity-building'.

A prototype website

The author has begun to design a website which may provide a prototype for the process to begin. The site will be just as much about using eLearning to learn about quality management, as about quality management techniques within eLearning. The vision of the site is to provide a collection of resources, knowledge and insight into the challenges of implementing pro-active quality improvement initiatives in the African context. It will aim to use eLearning tools and techniques to empower individuals and groups to take responsibility for their own internal quality management practices. The emphasis will be on sharing experiences, reflections and practical stories on how to achieve real quality improvements in people based environments - such as service businesses, education and training.

Ultimately the aim of the site will be to achieve the following:

- demystify the terminology and concepts related to quality management, systems and process thinking

- promote sharing and relationship building between individuals in Africa and elsewhere on quality issues recognising the unique contribution that the African context may make
- demonstrate the application of effective eLearning techniques to learning about quality management and the application of some quality management techniques to eLearning
- promote cross-fertilisation of ideas and insights on quality issues between commercial and educational contexts
- illustrate the initial possibilities of providing resources and capacity building in a 'by Africa for Africa' approach without requiring extensive donor funding.

The session will conclude by seeking views and feedback on the next steps forward.

References and Contacts

Stephenson, J (2005). Definitions of indicators of quality on the application of ICT to University Teaching. Available from: <http://www.johnstephenson.net/jsdownloads.htm>. Accessed 21 March 2008.

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The author's prototype website can be viewed at www.lesleyboyd.com.