

Virtual Discussion on Quality for e-Learning in Africa June - July 2006

At the recent E-Learning Africa conference in Addis Ababa, there was a pre-conference workshop on Quality for e-Learning, jointly organised by UNESCO and the European Foundation for Quality in e-Learning (EFQUEL). Following this workshop there has been a four week virtual discussion, with the aim of providing a forum for the exchange of experiences and concepts in order to facilitate a network of experts and practitioners in the emerging fields of African e-Learning and quality development and assurance in e-Learning; a network between African and European stakeholders. The topics in the discussion have concluded with the question 'How do you see the future for quality development and assurance for e-Learning in Africa?'

Several ideas have been suggested and discussed, amongst them the idea of an African Institute/Association/Foundation/network for e-Learning, maybe an association or branch of EFQUEL, or maybe an independent 'by Africa for Africa' network with a cooperative link into the various European organisations now being networked and co-ordinated by EFQUEL. It should be noted that there is significant goodwill between stakeholders both in Africa and Europe to create such a network.

The various discussions have been characterised by the fact that Africa is facing parallel challenges in introducing quality assurance mechanisms on the one hand and e-Learning on the other, and that while globally the 'quality' discourse and the 'e-Learning' 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 expressed it, 'the complexity and cost of setting up new e-Learning 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.

Therefore the overall aim of the network would be to focus on capacity building and skills development to ensure that people, providers and all different stakeholders are empowered to speak a common language; and become sufficiently 'e-Learning literate' and 'quality literate' to implement high quality learner centered educational practice.

There are several questions which have been raised:

1. **Achieving consensus** - do sufficient people, institutions, and regulatory bodies in Africa think that it would be a worthwhile venture? The other approach 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". Some consensus has already been achieved within the virtual discussion, and also from the participants of 'e/merge 2006', an online conference which has just been hosted by the University of Cape Town in South Africa. It seems that individuals will recognise the positive benefits that online networks can bring in being able to work collaboratively, disseminate information, share ideas and experiences, and learn from others.

2. What should the **scope** of the network be - e-Learning in general or quality management issues in e-Learning? Looking at the European experience, it seems that a community of practice for e-Learning, with quality activities being integral to its aim, would be the most sensible and efficient option.

3. What should the **focus, vision, mission and proposed deliverables** of the network be: the idea is to establish a community of practice, to share experiences and knowledge on the steps needed to establish effective e-Learning provision, the essential critical success factors required, problems and challenges faced, solutions and reflections on practice etc etc. This focus is on the improvement and capacity building side rather than being involved in any type of regulatory or external quality assurance activity. The latter should be the responsibility of national external quality assurance agencies and any cross border regulatory agencies that might be established. It is not envisaged that the network would attempt to provide or endorse any educational programmes itself, but rather to offer or co-ordinate capacity building initiatives for existing and new providers.

4. **Physical location** - where should the base for such a network be established? Since it could be predominately a virtual organisation, the physical base would be linked to funding sources and also the personnel involved in establishing the new entity. The e/merge conference management platform has proven particularly successful because of its ability to share presentations, live workshops and threaded discussions to create a real feeling of community between individuals. Something like this could possibly be utilised on an ongoing basis. Should the network be based at a University or elsewhere?

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? I'm sure that there are many more lessons that we could learn from Europe and also other areas on this topic; also related to funding below. Should the network be an affiliate / branch of EFQUEL, or be independent with co-operative links?

6. **Funding** - how would we establish funding? What type of funding would the network require? Could we adopt an idea of seed funding to establish something that 'makes a start' so that individuals could appreciate what might be on offer? Could we consider public / private partnerships, and link lessons with e-Learning and quality management in business and commerce with those in HE (there certainly are some joint lessons)?

7. Would we gain added value from doing a **structured gap analysis** on the state of e-Learning 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 view has been expressed from the Chief Executive of one of the founding organisations of EFQUEL is that 'Africa doesn't have to repeat mechanically the same mistakes we committed in Europe, focusing the distribution of pre-digested (quality) contents, ignoring the link with organisational learning and knowledge management, treating the learners as mere consumers of (quality) learning objects tested with (quality) multiple choice questions'; indeed one of the key threads of the discussion has been emphasising the centrality of the learner.

5. Existing Initiatives

The consensus in the discussion is therefore the idea of promoting communities of practice and supporting existing initiatives and institutions, rather than competing with them. The UNESCO view is 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'.

Examples of some of the initiatives that have been identified (in no particular order):

1. The UbuntuNet Alliance, with a vision of delivering very high speed connectivity between African Universities and Research Institutions in sub-Saharan Africa
2. UNESCO-BREDA, Regional Office in Dakar
3. UNESCO-Harare and its Virtual Institute for Higher Education
4. IICBA – UNESCO's International Institute for Capacity-Building in Addis Ababa
5. The African Virtual University (AVU)
6. The newly launched Pan-African E-network Project, a joint initiative between the Indian government and African Union (AU)
7. The activities and networks of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL)
8. The Global Distance Education Network (GDNet)
9. South African Institute of Distance Education (SAIDE)
10. The GDLN Network: The member countries are: Ethiopia, Ghana, Tanzania, Benin, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, Mauritania, and Uganda. Kenya, Mozambique and Nigeria are soon to join the network.
11. AVOIR (African Virtual Open Initiatives and Resources). AVOIR is a collaboration project between various universities to create a core of Free Software developers who are able, through software development activities, to create educational and business opportunities that contribute to development on the continent.
12. Subject specific initiatives eg AMREF, the African Medical and Research Foundation, has an e-Learning nursing programme from UNISA.

Stamenka Uvalic-Trumbic, Chief of Section in UNESCO's Higher Education Division, would also like to remind us of the on-going international initiatives for the revitalisation of higher education through the U.K. Commission for Africa, and the revival of the Partnership for Higher Education for Africa by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, with his plea for partnerships: 'All of us -- the Partnership, UNESCO and other UN agencies, and university networks and associations — must work together to support Governments and higher education institutions in Africa. The United Nations system is fully committed to doing its part'.

With thanks and best wishes

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