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Strategies to increase the uptake of OERs in Sub-Saharan Africa

Issue at-hand

Institutions of higher learning in Africa have been spending considerable amounts of resources to procure, install and maintain various information and communication technology (ICT) equipment and systems to complement face-to-face delivery. Despite these massive investments to procure and manage various educational technologies, little attention has been paid to development of course content for students. The majority of existing content is text based course hand-outs which lack multimedia to make them more interactive. As a result, many higher education institutions have continued to rely on printed resources which are expensive and difficult to share with a wider group of learners. As the cost of text books and other educational resources from commercial companies continue to rise, institutions normally tend to use outdated books, old course content or poorly designed learning resources. The use of such resources has implications on the quality of graduates. The recent emergence of Open Educational Resources (OERs) is described as one of the main solutions to this problem.

OERs are freely and openly available digitized learning resources that can be adapted, modified and re-used for teaching, learning and research. They can help higher education institutions acquire quality learning resources at minimal cost. Today, the African Virtual University (AVU) is a major player in the development of OERs in Africa. The AVU has an eLearning network of about 53 partner institutions in 30 countries and helps institutions in member counties adopt open, distance and eLearning (ODeL). Established in 1997 with funding from the World Bank (and currently supported by the African Development Bank), the AVU aims to increase access to quality higher education and training through the use of ICT with minimal cost, particularly within African countries. Under the AVU-OER, there are modules developed for science subjects, ICT basic skills, ICT integration, mathematics and education professional courses.

Those modules can be accessed in printed booklets for face to face sessions, Cd/DVDs for offline learning, in learning management systems (LMS) for online learning and in OERs. Further, the AVU is a content advisor for several institutions; it serves as a catalyst for ICT investments by assisting these institutions to upgrade to high speed internet connection, deliver distance education programs and develop web-based African education communication for sharing information.

However, empirical evidence available suggests that despite the free availability of thousands of OERs such the AVU OERs, their uptake and reuse in many higher education institutions in sub-Saharan countries remains very low. Focusing on higher education in Tanzania, Joel Mtebe and Roope Raisamo sought to investigate the reasons behind this low uptake and reuse of OERs in Africa in a study whose findings they presented at the 2013 1st International Conference of the African Virtual University.

Recommendations

The following recommendations can be made with a view to increasing the uptake of OERs and also tackles the challenges that hinder instructors in Africa from adopting and using them:

- OER developers should improve the user-friendliness of OER repositories in order to attract more instructors to adopt and use them;
- Institutions should create awareness about which educational materials are shared in the public domain, and which rights are reserved by the institution or the author;
- Instructors should be encouraged to evaluate the quality of OER materials based on the same strategies they use to determine the quality of other internet resources;
- Institutional policies should aim to facilitate instructors to create and share OER (these could include: intellectual property rights, material development, human resource policy guidelines, copyright, ICT, and quality assurance polices);
- Higher education institutions that do not have the expertise to develop OER enabled policies should seek assistance from organizations/institutions such as the African Virtual University to help them review and develop policies that enable friendly adoption and usage of OERs;
- Provide internet connection for easy access to OERs. Where this is not possible, provide access to OERs through other means e.g. download and share OER material with learners in printed form.

Implications

Mtebe and Raisamo contend that research on uptake and usage of OERs in higher education in Africa has the following implications:

- It will help those who are involved in OER implementation find strategies that will maximize the adoption and usage of OER in teaching and learning;

- It will help improve the quality of existing courses or develop new ones through adaptation, modification, and reuse of thousands of course content freely available in the public domain;
- Can reduce social inequalities by complementing existing blended learning courses offered by several institutions in higher education;

Conclusion

Research indicates that the majority of instructors is aware of the existence of OERs such as the AVU OERs and is willing to share their course notes freely via the internet. However, there is need for higher education institutions in Africa to find more suitable strategies for increasing the uptake of OERs so as to maximize their sharing, adoption and usage in teaching and learning.

Reference

Paper presented at the 2013 1st International Conference of the AVU, Nairobi, Kenya, under the session on Open Educational Resources (OER) Integration.
Title: Challenges and Instructors' Intention to Adopt and Use Open Educational Resources in Higher Education in Tanzania
Presenters: Joel S. Mtebe (University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania) & Roope Raisamo (University of Tampere, Finland)

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