

Prof. Dr. Juergen-Matthias Seeler

Management Center Innsbruck – The Entrepreneurial School

Universitaetsstrasse 15

6020 Innsbruck / Austria

Transformation of the African University Sector – The Potential of ELearning in Tertiary Education

ELearning (or online education) is a promising tool to improve access of learners to University education in Africa, enhance professional careers of young Africans, and contribute to better academic and financial quality of African Universities. The presentation will use experiences from a number of cases in African and European higher learning institutions and how to best adapt ELearning strategies to cultural and infrastructural contexts in African countries. It will also present latest research results in collaborative learning in online education. On the basis of these insights, an agenda for the establishment of successful online degree courses at University level will be outlined.

The lack of well-qualified University graduates is one of the many obstacles to development and economic growth in sub-Saharan countries (Mpinganjira, M. 2011, Nafukho, F. M. 2013, UNESCO, 2009). Local tertiary institutions oftentimes struggle to provide for educational quality. Financial and professional resources are scarce, and facilitation approaches frequently do not match the requirements of potential students. At the same time, higher learning is rather expensive for young Africans (Lwoga, E. 2012). In the absence of sufficient scholarship systems, potential students frequently rely on own income generation, or financial support from their families.

In more practical terms, facilitation strategies must be adapted to address the problems in regard to University program access in the African context. One of the most promising, yet also most challenging new developments is probably online/eLearning (Eke 2010). It bears potential to make higher education more easily accessible, less costly, and better internationally connected (Nafukho, Muyia, 2013).

The advantages of online/eLearning, such as cost reduction, more flexibility, and distant access to programs, suggest that developing countries can benefit considerably in terms of University graduate output. However, there are a number of obstacles that also need to be taken into account (Michael 2012). One of the most important issues is frequently described as transactional distance (Moore, M. G. 2007). It is one of the key disadvantages of distance learning approaches. Transactional distance describes the disconnectedness between teachers and students in educational situations. It refers to the question how personal interaction among teachers and learners can be reasonably provided to assure sufficient student supervision. Important issues in this regard e.g. mutual feedback among students and teachers, collaborative learning among students, student encouragement, personal discussion between teachers and students, and guidance in learning processes. Many higher learning institutions aim at countering the challenge of transactional distance in that they employ blended learning strategies (Fearon, Starr, McLaughlin 2011, Fearon, Starr, McLaughlin 2012). Blended learning actually means the mix of traditional classroom lectures, and synchronous (online) and asynchronous (offline) teaching. The merits of blended learning are obvious: personal teacher-learner interaction is regularly included in the programs, thus countering the disadvantages of pure online/eLearning programs. With online and classroom lectures, podcasts, discussion boards, and guided forums, blended learning offers a range of different facilitation modes. It assists in narrowing the transactional distance. It also helps minimizing student drop out; a phenomenon that is evident in many University programs, and in particular as far as distance education is concerned (Pierrakeas et. al. 2004).

Developing a strategy for online education at University level for African countries must consider cultural contexts as well as infrastructural circumstances. A number of examples from professional practice in different Elearning set-ups will help understand how to best respond to such preconditions.

In summary, the presentation will not claim that online education is a replacement of traditional University education. However, in that online programs complement current approaches, they will help addressing the most relevant obstacles of the African higher education sector, namely accessibility, quality and financial sustainability.

8. References

- Eke, H., 2010, "The perspective of e-learning and libraries in Africa: challenges and opportunities", *Library Review*, Vol. 59 Iss. 4 pp. 274 – 290.
- Fearon, C., Starr, S., McLaughlin, H., 2011, "Value of blended learning in university and the workplace: some experiences of university students", *Industrial and Commercial Training*, Vol. 43 Iss. 7 pp. 446 – 450.
- Fearon, C., Starr, S., McLaughlin, H. 2012, "Blended learning in higher education (HE): conceptualising key strategic issues within a business school", *Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal*, Vol. 26 Iss. 2 pp. 19 – 22.
- Lwoga, E. 2012, "Making learning and Web 2.0 technologies work for higher learning institutions in Africa", *Campus-Wide Information Systems*, Vol. 29 Iss. 2 pp. 90 – 107.
- Michael, K., 2012, "Virtual classroom: reflections of online learning", *Campus-Wide Information Systems*, Vol. 29 Iss. 3 pp. 156 – 165.
- Moore, M.G., 2007, "The Theory of Transactional Distance", in Moore, M. G. (Ed.), 2007, *The Handbook of Distance Education*. Second Edition. Mahwah, N.J. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. pp. 89–108.
- Mpinganjira, M., 2011, "Retaining Africa's talent: the role of Africa's higher education", *International Journal of Emerging Markets*, Vol. 6 Iss 2 pp. 168 – 179, UNESCO (2009), *Comparing Education Statistics across the World*. Global Education Digest, UNESCO Institute of Statistics, Montreal
- Nafukho, F. M., Muyia, M. H., 2013, "The World Bank's Africa Virtual University Project: a revisit", *European Journal of Training and Development*, Vol. 37 Iss. 7 pp. 646 – 661.
- Pierrakeas, C. et. al., 2004, "A Comparative Study of Dropout Rates and Causes for Two Different Distance Education Courses", viewed 11.11.2013, <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/183/265>.
- UNESCO (2009), *Comparing Education Statistics across the World*. Global Education Digest, UNESCO Institute of Statistics, Montreal

Short Bio of the Author:

Dr. Jürgen-Matthias Seeler is Professor and Head of Department and Study at Management Center Innsbruck (MCI), Austria. He manages MCI's first academic Blended-Learning-Program "Bachelor Business Administration Online", which was launched in 2014. Currently, his team is developing a consecutive Master's program which will also be based on eLearning strategies. Previously, he was working as consultant in Malawi and Rwanda (Africa) for 5 years. In Malawi, he was assigned to introduce anti-corruption activities and measures into private and public sector organizations. In Rwanda, he was advisor to the Rwanda Association of Local Government Authorities and in charge of developing the Masters Degree Studies in "Local Government Studies" (today hosted by University of Rwanda). He is also owner-manager of a company in the housing industry in Heidelberg, Germany, which he founded in 1994. Dr. Seeler's areas of specialization are Business Ethics and International Management. Furthermore, he has vast experiences in academic online-education in general and with mature learners in particular. He holds a doctorate from Charles Sturt University in Australia and the professional degree "Certified Fraud Examiner" by the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners (ACFE), USA.