

The Future Direction of Virtual Universities: A Perspective from the African Virtual University

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Good afternoon, everyone. I would like to thank Dick for inviting me here. I'm very happy to be here. And I think that this is a great forum. I was very happy, actually, when he invited me. Because I can read from my notes on February 20th. I was flying from Schiphol to Montreal, and I start reflecting on the future of virtual universities. And I start writing a piece. So when you invited me to talk about it, I was very happy. So let me just introduce the African Virtual University quickly before we move forward.

I will speak briefly about who we are, what we do, our activities, and focus on the future direction for virtual universities. I will also spend some time to talk about the challenges of access of e-learning in Africa in order for you to understand where I'm going. So AVU is a Pan-African intergovernmental organization. Our charter has been signed by 17 countries and we operate in 30 countries.

We work across language divide, in Francophone, Anglophone, and in English speaking countries. Through the 15 years of existence, AVU trained about 43,000 students. Our headquarters are in Nairobi, Kenya, and we have a regional office in Dakar, Senegal. Our presence in Africa, covers most parts of Africa, although we need to go more in North Africa and in the southern part. But you can see we are in Francophone sites, Anglophone sites, and Lusophone site. So it's a huge organization. But we have a very small office running it from Nairobi and Dakar, Senegal.

Let me just give you a bit of a background of what is happening in Africa in terms of higher education. Africa is now on the pedestal to become the next growth frontier. However, only 6% of school leavers in sub-Saharan Africa enter a tertiary institution. That's a huge problem. And we know that, at least, it takes 12% to 15% of the workforce that need to attend tertiary education in order to sustain economic development. You can see the gap for yourself. We have a huge problem in terms of higher education.

What makes this not easy is that the universities are currently full, and the demand is high. We believe that distance education and e-learning could help. However, this requires appropriate policies and funding, planning and execution, innovation, quality control, research and development, and a vast sensitization campaign.

That's basically what my organization, African Virtual University, is doing across the continent. The challenges of e-learning in Africa are: limited access of connectivity, high cost of connectivity, power disruption, access to computers and other devices, lack of national and institutional policies, lack of human resources, perception that distance education might not offer the same quality as a face-to-face education. But we do have opportunities, and I think that that's what we need to capitalize on.

Access to Internet is getting better and better every day. We set up fiber optics penetration. There is also a huge movement into using alternative sources of policy, and the emergence of mobile technology is an asset. In Africa, basically everyone has a mobile phone. Everyone knows how to operate and use a mobile phone. I think that if we do sound research and development in that way, you can unlock the potential of e-learning. Other good news is that e-learning is growing in Africa. It's a lucrative business. We were told that in 2011, it was a business worth \$250 million, and the projection by 2016, that would be multiplied two fold.

So I think something is happening there in terms of distance and e-learning. At AVU, we do a lot to address these kinds of challenges. We do a lot of development programs in terms of setting up and upgrading e-learning centers, training of trainers, content development. We are huge in content development. I'll talk about it later. Open education resources, research and development, developing professional courses, professional networks, communities of practice, gender mainstreaming, quality assurance, evaluation, and benchmarking.

This is an example of a distance e-learning center that we have installed in Mozambique in order to cope with the problem of power and Internet. These are hubs that function 24 hours a day. They could help faculty to work easily, and also some students can go there from time-to-time to access. There is a power generator to make sure that we have electricity 24 hours a day. So when I'm asked to talk about the future of e-learning or the future of virtual universities, I think it would be a very different picture from what you can think of here in the United States.

I would like now to talk about a development model. I think everything is in there. So we come up with this. First of all, I would like to just say from my own opinion, transferring higher education from the United States to Africa wouldn't work, or from any part of the world. Because we have our own realities. In any part of the world, when you develop any content, you have some kind of a basis you are developing from – philosophy, context, culture. How would you think that we can just put it somewhere in there, and people will take it, and that will make sense. I think that is a problem.

So what we are focusing rather in doing at AVU is to work with universities in different areas: policy and conceptualization, capacity enhancement, curriculum design development, content development, content review, quality assurance, accreditation, and program delivery. Basically, whatever you want, you can do within your faculty. We do

that with many universities in many countries, together, in order to build a capacity in terms of distance e-learning. Then we develop the content in different formats to feed our own purpose, and this is online, just like what you have in here. We also use offline devices like DVDs and print. Because not everyone can access the Internet all the time. So you have to use whatever you have at random moments.

In terms of delivery, we have online delivery mode, face-to-face, and blended modes. And the next two boxes are very important. Because these programs that are developed in here will be used by the consortium. Actually right now, we have 38 universities part of our consortium in 27 countries, in degrees, diplomas, and certificates. And we do use e-learning centers, which are classrooms, to support the study. This is basically what we are doing. And when I was asked to talk about the future, I'm thinking of, how can we see this model 10 and 20 years from now? What is going to happen to this model? I will come back to that later.

Open educational resources is one of the best things that I think happened to us. We have some 219 courses that we have online that have been accessed in 201 countries. And we've received three awards in 2001, 2002, and 2003. And I'm saying, the content is developed from Africa, first of all. And they're being using in 201 countries. But this, I think, will inform also what I think the future of universities would be. Currently, we are implementing an important project. It's about \$21 million, funded by the African Development Bank. And what we are doing precisely is to use the model I just showed, the AVU consortium program model, to develop programs, OERs, and to make it available to a large number. And we are always focused on increasing the enrollment in higher education.

For our future projects, I think innovation and integration of technology through R&D is one of the areas virtual universities must focus in the future. What we are talking about now – MOOCS – maybe two years down the line, we'll have something else. But I think what is really important for an online university, a virtual university, is its capacity to adapt and observe. And I always give an example of a blender to my colleagues. If you have a blender, what does it need? Whatever you have could go in the blender. It could be a banana and strawberry, it doesn't matter. I think that a virtual university must have this capacity. We are not providing our own degrees, and our government's members are asking us to look into this. Because they think that we have enough experience in Africa to be able to help. This is one of the projects we are doing. And we are currently doing the feasibility study.

I was really fascinated by the debate this morning about the massive open online resources. It was very, very interesting. But as I was sitting in there, I was thinking, how this can help in Africa? We do not just talk because we want to talk. We have problems., and we need to face and solve these problems. So we've been thinking a lot about this. And we are conducting a feasibility study. We don't want to jump into this. Because it's

huge. And whatever you are doing in the United States might apply, or not, in Africa. So we really want to know what we are doing.

These are our first observations. The MOOC concept is very, very appealing. It's great. If you can enroll thousands of students, that's like a dream. Something we always want to do. But I liked Tony Bates' presentation this morning when he was talking about spending, I don't know, maybe 30% of the highest cost of developing a MOOC would go to the video. But in Africa, you don't have enough bandwidth to download the videos. So why should we do that? Focusing on courses and not on programs. And that's a problem. Because what we need in Africa is not massive enrollment problems. We need massive enrollment not in courses, but in programs.

I've been dreaming about this concept of MOOCs, massive online programs with low bandwidth platform accreditation in all countries' members, and high completion rate. That would be one of the future I see for MOOCs in Africa and at AVU. And if I come back to this slide, where would MOOCs fit into in here? We don't see MOOCs as a separate program. We would see it as something that would fit in within content production. And be part of our entire system, not only focusing on courses, but focusing on programs. And we could find MOOCs could be one of these in here. And in degree and certificate programs, we may have courses that are MOOCs. And we will have to look at how they should be accredited. The other thing that I think is very, very important, I know someone talked about it this morning, is to adapt OER content to web-based format, full instruction path with peer interactions, instead of focusing only on videos. This is another direction I think that will be important in the context of Africa.

Now, in terms of future direction for virtual universities. I believe that what we are tasked to think 20 years ahead. In 2008, there was a debate. I was asked to talk about the future of e-learning in 2020. So that was 2008. And the question was, what would be the most important topic in 2020? And there was an audience like this. And they had some devices to vote. And I said, content. I didn't win. But I think I'm still right. Because what is happening after that? We have seen the OER, now we are talking about a massive open educational resources. I believe that talking about the future of education depends mostly on the contents.

But we also need to look at globalization. I think that, like I said, one of the future roles of universities is to provide leadership in emerging technologies and innovation practices through research and development. That will be a key factor of survival. If you don't do it, you disappear, from my perspective. Provide massive, relevant, and affordable accredited education and non-formal education. Because in the future, in 10 years from now, 20 years from now, I believe that even in Africa, we will not have this problem of access in terms of Internet or in terms of power, but what we need is the capacity of a university to provide massive education.

The MOOCs could be, if they are utilized the way we know now, probably mostly utilized in the non-formal education. Something that is very, very important in Africa is that people really like their certification. Everything they do, they would like to have a certification. Even workshop, they'll ask for a certificate at the end of the workshop. So education is seen as a means to progress in your job. When we talk about MOOCs, we need to think about this in the African context. I think the universities, especially in the African context, must provide attractive and flexible services. We know that the learners themselves are changing.

I just can't see my son – who is now turning 16, and he is always on his cell phone, iPad, texting – we are together, but he's not there, actually. I cannot see him sitting in a classroom and with a professor lecturing him. It's happening now. It's not working. I think that we need to adapt to the new learners, how they are. Universities have to provide attractive and flexible services, capitalize on collaboration and internationalization. I'll come back to this soon. Globally, I think that the future of virtual universities is bright if they can stay in the competition.

Because what I'm thinking is that a virtual university in 10, 20 years from now would be providing education not within a region, but beyond boundaries. What I was writing in February about the future of online universities was perhaps there will be a time where we'll have a big crisis, just like in the airline industry. I don't know when that will be coming. But at universities, we feel like we are safe. We do what we want. We don't care more or less about the need of the learners, most of the time. We have our own way of seeing things. And that may change.

I think that one thing that could be very important for the universities is to focus on sharing resources, open resources, sharing infrastructure to operate beyond borders, cultures, and languages. We might be inspired by the airline alliance, like the Sky Team and Star Alliance. They share their planes. They share their infrastructure. But they are competing, technically. I believe that if we believe that this kind of alliance can work, it means that a virtual university in the United States can collaborate with one in Africa, and collaborate in Asia, so that they can increase access to whatever they are doing. And they will not be able to do that by themselves. I think that the AVU consortium program model that I showed could be futuristic. I would like to thank you for your attention.