

The African Universities' Research Approaches (AURA) Programme

Learning Insights

AURA Project Coordinator & Participant Blogs
19 November, 2015 to 23 September, 2016

Funded by:



1 The African Universities' Research Approaches (AURA) programme

AURA was an action research programme aimed at strengthening the individual and institutional capacities in up to nine African institutions. The programme aimed to improve research and teaching practices and processes, and to build competencies that will enable institutions to be better placed to produce the next generation of African Scholars. The overarching vision of AURA is to reduce poverty through investments in people-centred innovations in universities that will foster economic prosperity and democratic and responsive governance. These continent-wide goals were expressed at the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) African Economic Conference in 2014.

AURA brought together the collective knowledge of researchers and educators based in the global South and North to co-create a context-specific educational framework that would enable academics with heavy teaching workloads to undertake research and enhance the research capacity of their students. In doing so, the programme aimed to respond to the need for locally generated research knowledge by skilled researchers (and graduates); and to support academics to nurture effective research and information capabilities in research-led teaching and learning environments.

AURA was funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID). The programme started in November 2014 and ran until March 2018. It is a learning partnership led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK, in partnership with the Information Training and Outreach Centre for Africa (ITOCA), South Africa and Loughborough University, UK.



Role of the researcher, Dr Mark Hepworth.

R1 Strathmore University, 2015.
Photo: Siobhan Duvigneau, IDS.

The AURA programme focused on the following deliverables in Year One:

Three research capacity courses:

- **Research 1 (R1)** September to November 2015: adopted a blended learning approach, where a practical/experiential face-to-face intervention is sandwiched between two theoretical online interventions. R1 focused on holistic (citizen-led, participatory) approaches as well as highly analytical approaches to research (researcher-led). R1 also introduced concepts such as wicked and tame research questions and explored the benefits of adopting qualitative as well as quantitative approaches.
- **Research 2 (R2)** February to March 2016: adopted the same blended learning approach as R1. R2 focused on researcher-led and analytical approaches to research and on the practical implementation of these approaches. R2 also supported participants to develop research questions and proposals and explored responding to 'live' research calls (as individuals and as a group).
- The first part of **Research 4 (R4)** February to March 2016: introduced staff and students (graduates, undergraduates and post-graduates) to informal professional writing skills (i.e. blogging) and on building their skills and confidence in writing blogs and publishing them on the *AURA Google Plus site*
 - <https://plus.google.com/u/0/communities/105659513973894994778>

Two teaching and learning courses:

- **Teaching 1 (T1)** March 2016: adopted a face-to-face training approach and focused on building confidence and knowledge in different learning theories, and approaches to assessment for and of learning.
- A pilot unit of **Teaching 3 (T3)** was run at the Global Knowledge Exchange Network (GKEN) Conference at Jimma University in December 2015. This taster session focused on collaborative/cooperative learning principles.
- The full intervention of **Teaching 3 (T3)** was run in March 2016 at Jimma University. T3 is a practical course focused on applying learning theories to the design of technology enhanced learning environments.
- T1 and T3 were run as a two-day 'orientation' event at Strathmore University in July, 2016. The event was attended by three of the partner institutions (i.e. Kenyatta, MUHAS and Strathmore Universities).

Open Educational Resources (OERs):

- setting up AURA’S collection of online learning resources on **IDS Open Docs:**
 - IDS Open Docs: <http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/123456789/8992>
- Videos, podcasts, presentations and regular blogs and video blogs along with an e-newsletter including: AURA’s regular blog and a dedicated AURA Channel on YouTube:
 - **AURA Blogger:** <http://auraprogramme.blogspot.co.uk>
 - **AURA Channel on YouTube** www.youtube.com/channel/UCtQv5xR9ZqtvXfaHvNPJYNQ

Further details about the AURA programme can be found on the Institute of Development Studies website: <http://www.ids.ac.uk/project/african-universities-research-approaches-aura-capacity-development-programme>.

Year One Learning Partners

AURA’s learning partners in Year One were: **Strathmore University, Kenya; Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS), Tanzania; Kenyatta University, Kenya;** and **Jimma University, Ethiopia.**

These partners were selected because of their strengths in research or for having a proven track record in applying innovative teaching curricula (or both). Each institution is a Phase 1 Partner on the programme. A definition of the different roles of the Phase 1 Partners is included in the Glossary.

In Year One, the learning partners were given specific aspects of the **Research, Teaching and Assessment (RTA) framework** to focus on. During this year, these partners have worked with AURA to co-design and develop a context-specific capacity development programme (as indicated below) focused in the following areas (or strands of work):

Research courses (Research Courses: 1, 2, and 4)	Teaching courses (Teaching courses: 1 and 3)	Diagnostic instruments for assessing research and teaching capabilities
Muhimbili University of Allied Sciences (MUHAS) ; Strathmore University	Jimma University; Strathmore University	Kenyatta University

Learning Insights – Project Co-ordinators and Participant Blogs

The AURA programme was managed locally by project coordinators whose remit was to act as a bridge between the ALIRT teams in partner institution, the AURA project consortium and other partner institutions. Each partner institution opted to share the project coordination role between two senior staff with the influence and authority to integrate and sustain the AURA core concepts and approaches. This arrangement also ensured that there was sufficient redundancy and continuity throughout the programme activities to retain an institutional memory should one of the coordinators relinquish their role. As the Project Coordinators provided a critical and central role to governing and implementing the programme, they were tasked with capturing their learning insights at regular intervals in a reflective blog format. The insights of our learning participants were also incorporated after key programme activities, such as the **Research 4 course: 'Research communications in social media'** and the **final AURA learning events: 'Teaching and learning assessment' Workshop, and the Strategic Operational Planning Event.**

These reflective blogs have become a rich source of data for capturing learning as it arises in the programme, and also evidences our assumptions about what is working and how best to tackle challenges and find solutions. Moreover, capturing learning in this way has had several affordances for the programme: by strengthening the reflective writing skills of project coordinators and learners, reinforcing the significance of regular reflections; capturing learning directly from programme recipients; enabling us to better comprehend their context concerns and challenges; and ensuring that learning has not been lost.

An aggregate of these blogs has been provided in this publication to support the sharing of learning insights. The original blog posts are available on the AURA blog site:

<http://auraprogramme.blogspot.co.uk/>

Glossary of Terms

Term	Definition
ALIRT team	ALIRT is an acronym for: A cademic department, L ibrary, I CT Services, R esearch unit, and T eaching support. This is the strategic governance/working group in each Partner Institution (PI) that is tasked with integrating AURA concepts and practices into the culture and curricula at each institution. This group will support the curriculum enrichment process and cascade training within the institution.
Partner Institution (PI)	Up to nine African institutions participating in the AURA Programme comprising Phase 1 Partners, Phase 2 Partners and Educational Technology Partners.
Phase 1 Partner	This option is for institutions who want to play a central role in the design and delivery of the AURA Programme approaches.
Project Coordinator (PC)	Project Coordinators coordinate and manage AURA activities within each Partner Institution (PI) and act as the day-to-day coordinators of the programme working with senior management, academic departments and coordinating ALIRT team meetings.
Research, Teaching and Assessment (RTA) framework	This will comprise the courses, OERs and videos and other AURA outputs and will be developed throughout the programme as a major output in 2018.
R1, R2 and R4	Research courses being rolled out as part of the AURA Programme.
T1 and T3	Teaching courses being rolled out as part of the AURA Programme.

Learning Insights

AURA Project Coordinator & Participant Blogs

Thursday, 19 November 2015

Challenges of monitoring and evaluating: attributing causality



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In popular culture the laboratory is a place with largely negative connotations: the word conjures up images of beakers, test tubes and white coats. Yet, as a social scientist I look upon it with a slight sense of envy. This is because the laboratory represents a degree of experimental control rarely possible in the social sciences. As a monitoring and evaluation specialist on the African Universities Research

(AURA) programme, however, ours is a study of human behaviour in its natural surroundings. These natural surroundings happen to be diverse: the first year of the programme focuses on multiple stakeholders at several universities spread across Eastern Africa. This familiar terrain of bureaucracy and institutional politics ensures our focus is far removed from the controlled environment of the laboratory. My argument is that the further your research moves from the laboratory the harder it becomes to exercise control, and therefore the harder it becomes to attribute causal relations between variables. This is a problem given the prevalence of linearity assuming quantitative indicators in donor reporting, particularly in logframes. So, given this degree of complexity in programmes such as AURA, it's sensible to adopt mixed methods approaches. This is the first in a series of blogs I will be writing to make this case using examples from my experiences as an evaluator on the AURA programme.

Measuring short-term impact and long-term value

AURA is a capacity development programme aimed at shaping behavioural change. This will be achieved, in part, through the AURA suite of capacity development courses. One of the challenges of the evaluation effort lies in showing that these courses have been effective. This is done at different levels for different attributes. So let's first consider an example in which the objective is to measure improvements in the research skills of our workshop participants. Firstly, this requires a benchmark, something to compare progress against. So, before participating in any sort of workshop, the participant takes a combination of test and self-assessment questions that give us an idea of their current skills set. The scores on these questions are then compared to scores obtained from a similar exercise immediately after the workshop. The difference between them is what we report in our logframe; this is the increase in skills measured, and typically it is expressed as a percentage. How well this method works depends on how sophisticated the test questions are and also how well it's supported by data obtained from other, typically qualitative, methods. At its best this builds a strong case for attributing an increase in skills to the intervention. But this snapshot covers only a short space of time: the immediate pre and post intervention periods. Yet, the real value of the AURA programme will depend on how these skills develop over a longer time period and what's done with them. This will determine the impact the programme has had; and for good reason this is increasingly what donors are focusing on.

Correlation does not equal causation

Let's carry on with our example. Our participants, having completed their workshop go back into their

everyday lives at their respective institutions. The easiest and perhaps least rewarding evaluation exercise might be to repeat the same test given to them previously, but taken several months after the workshop to determine whether they've sustained their skill set. However, we are now into less secure territory as far as causality goes. What made the first assessment so useful is the very thing that hinders this one: the lapse of time. Earlier we could more confidently attribute the increase in skills to our intervention, because the testing was done immediately before and after it. Now, however, several months have passed and each of our participants have done different things in that time, some of these activities might have advanced these skills further, while others might have hindered them. So even if we have another snapshot of the participants skill set, several months down the line, how do we know whether any shifts are because or in spite of our intervention? Even if we found an upward surge in our participants skill set, how can attribution be safe given the possibility of so many other variables? Perhaps we could correlate the rise of skills with the amount of post-workshop interaction we have had with the participant. This is the point at which I hear the voice of my statistics tutor who reinforced over and over in his class: that correlation does not equal causation. Anyone who's studied the social sciences has their favourite examples of two independent patterns that are strongly correlated, and my favourite come from military intelligence analyst Tyler Vigen, in his book *Spurious Correlations*. Here we learn that the per capita consumption of mozzarella cheese is strongly correlated with the number of doctorates awarded in civil engineering; and that the greater the consumption of sour cream the more motorcycle riders killed in non-collision transport accidents. It makes you wonder: are the patterns I'm finding between our interventions and a participants long term progress just as spurious as these examples.

Towards a mixed methods approach

This needs to be investigated further. The evaluator has a choice to make at this point, to either move towards or away from the laboratory. The move towards is taken by the econometrician, only this time it is a figurative laboratory, and instead of using actual instruments of control we use numerical values in a regression analysis. A regression analysis is a tool used to investigate the relationship between different variables, which in our case might be a relationship between high performance on one of our courses and, say, an increase in earnings. However, there are several other factors that might explain an increase in earnings that are independent of the AURA programme, such as the participant's prior levels of education, income differentials between different geographical locations and different sectors of the economy. The aim of the regression equation is to zone in on the relationship between the variables in which we are interested while controlling for those that we are not. This approach, however, relies on being able to ascribe numerical values to your control variables. This is not always possible. To use our example further: what if the difference in earnings is due not to what we've hypothesised or tried to control for, but rather simply down to the participant having the right family connections? It's less clear how we can place numerical values on things like patronage, and knowing this and conceding the point allows us move away from the laboratory and embrace a mixed methods approach.



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Thursday, 26 November 2015

Critically Reflecting in Practice



Photo source: Google images

Introduction

In this blog post I consider what critical reflection in learning practice entails and how it can foster learning, why it is useful and how it can be applied. Finally I explore its meaning in my own practice as learning practitioner.

What is critical reflection?

Critical reflection enables a learner to analyse what has been learned and how learning fosters self-development. It is in light of these two analysis aspects that an importance is placed on

critical reflection in professional development of teaching practices. Cranton (1996) defines critical reflection as the “process by which adult learners engage in and identify the assumptions governing their actions, locate the historical and cultural origins of the assumptions, question the meaning of the assumptions, and develop alternative ways of acting”. Brookfield (1995) adds that part of the critical reflective process is to challenge the dominant social, political, cultural, or professional ways of acting. Through the process of critical reflection, adult learners come to interpret and create new meaning and actions from their experiences and are able to create a learning strategy for life-long learning.

How can it be fostered in the classroom?

Brookfield (1988) identified 4 activities central to becoming critically reflective: Assumption analysis describes the activity a learner engages in to bring to awareness beliefs, values, cultural practices, and social structures regulating behaviour and to assess their impact on daily activities. Assumptions structure our way of seeing reality, govern our behaviour, and describe how relationships should be ordered. Contextual awareness is achieved when adult learners come to realise that their assumptions are socially and personally created in a specific historical and cultural context. Imaginative speculation provides an opportunity for learners to challenge prevailing ways of knowing and acting by imagining alternative ways of thinking about phenomena Cranton (1996). The outcome of assumption analysis, contextual awareness, and imaginative speculation is the fourth activity referred to as Reflective scepticism the questioning of any universal truth claims or unexamined patterns of interaction. In other words, critical reflection enables us to locate ourselves within a broader social context; to understand our values, beliefs, and biases and to assess our learning so that our learning informs our practice.

Good reasons for incorporating reflection into your own practice

The value of reflecting on practice recognises the importance of taking action on the basis of assumptions that are unexamined. Critical reflection is one particular aspect of the larger process of reflection. To understand critical reflection properly we need first to know something about the reflective process in general. Brookfield (1995) highlights that critical reflection is important as, “It helps us take informed actions that are based on assumptions that have been carefully and critically investigated. It helps us develop a rationale for practice not only grounds our actions, but also our sense of who we are as educators in an examined reality. It rounds us emotionally when we neglect to clarify and question our assumptions, and when we fail to research our students, we have the sense that the world is governed by chaos. It increases democratic trust through learning whether independence of thought is really valued, or whether everything depends on pleasing the teacher.

They learn either that success depends on beating someone to the prize using whatever advantage they can, or on working collectively".

How can critical reflection be applied?

The **African Universities Research Approaches (AURA) programme**, fosters shared learning across partner institutions. Participants on a learning programme are encouraged to reflect, ask questions and draw on concepts that can help to understand learning in their own practice. Participants are introduced to an experiential learning model developed by Kolb, 1984, to identify, investigate, reflect on and report on a learning dimension of their work. The ORID questioning process which is based on the Kolb's experiential learning cycle allows participants to apply simple steps that supports their thinking in a critically reflective manner. The steps / framework outlined can assist the reflective writing process.

- (Analysing) Analyse how it made you feel? "I feel..."
- (Evaluating) What did you conclude from this experience? "I concluded..."
- (Creating) What will you do differently now? "I will do... in the future".

Through describing a critical incident arising from the practice learning environment the participant is able to make sense of what has been shared. During an AURA learning intervention, learners engage in a reflective practice within group and facilitated online discussions pre- and post- the face-to-face intervention and encouraged to continue reflective writing when away from the learning environment. Reflective writing enables learners to pursue the critical reflections on a deeper level and confront the challenge of explaining their research ideas. During the online and face-to-face interventions reflections underpinned their understanding of theory and course content and to link experience and knowledge.

Why is critical reflection important to an educator?

Critical reflection blends learning through experience with theoretical and technical learning to form new knowledge constructions and new behaviours or insights. Reflection is necessary to develop the skills to become lifelong learners. Through my observer role and own view point I feel I am in a good position to develop a learning strategy from my viewpoint / identity as a learning practitioner. Through the AURA programme I am able to observe a case study of my own 'critical incident'. This may not always be the case. If tackling a learning dimension in which I have little experience, more research would need to be done, for example finding out about others experience as a learner / and or learning practitioner in relation to the learning dimension in similar contexts. My own approach as a learning practitioner are informed in part by experience (self or others) and in part by the relevant and prevailing theoretical and distinct conceptual perspectives.

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Thursday, 26 November 2015

AURA developing a framework for strengthening a research culture

The African Universities' Research Approaches (AURA) programme completed its first research capacity intervention, earlier this year in Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam working with African universities to enable faculty to do more research and develop researchers of the future.



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How the study of people's information behaviour informs the programme

The AURA programme's strategy draws on the study of people's information behaviour. In particular the assumption that information behaviour is intrinsically related to how we navigate and at the same time co-construct our experience. This shared experience, although open to interpretation, is reflected in our thoughts and informed and communicated through our actions including speech, writing, the

creation and use of images, and with an array of technologies. The 'experience' that is the focus of the AURA programme is our learning experience, in particular that learning experience associated with conducting an inquiry into a particular topic or problem, i.e. conducting research and becoming informed.

As a consequence the project draws on theories of people's information behaviour that explores and documents the factors that influence and drive information behaviour, some generic some context specific. The sub-domain, information literacy, i.e. concentrating on the cognitive, emotional and

behavioural capabilities relating to being informed; where people identify their information needs and appreciate and effectively utilise their socio-technical environment that can enable them to become informed or may be used to manage or communicate their 'research' i.e. the product of 'finding out' and learning.

Drawing on current approaches within higher education and research

The AURA programme also draws on a knowledge of current approaches to become informed within, on the whole, higher education and research environments. These include an overview of the ontological, epistemological orientations and approaches that are taken. These include the broad ontological distinction between Cartesian and non-Cartesian and broad epistemological viewpoints within the post positivism or interpretivist paradigms such as social constructivism or critical realism or phenomenology.

Furthermore the distinction between citizen-led, highly participative or researcher-led forms of research (which are associated with distinct epistemological orientations) are highlighted.

The theoretical is however grounded in relation to the practice of conducting research and the process of developing research questions that will lead to funding from donors and research sponsors as well as getting published in respected publications plus ensuring that research is communicated effectively and has impact. Hence, mapping the researchers' network and identifying stakeholders (other academics, policy makers, publishers, international organisations etc.) and also mapping the knowledge, information and data landscape is seen as fundamental. The academic's research is therefore seen as integral to the wider socio-economic-technological context. Thus the research has to be contextualised and justified in terms of potential impact on society as well as to be clear about the academic contribution the research makes. In fact successful research is likely to stem from this contextualisation process. Without this contextualisation process, research is less likely to succeed or be seen to contribute.

Using pedagogical theory and practice to enable learners to engage with interventions

Another key component of the AURA programme is pedagogy. Pedagogy is the theory and practice of enabling learning and education. It is therefore intrinsic in that it enables us to implement interventions that are based on strong pedagogic theory and will enable learners to engage with the subject i.e. research and how to go about research. The current teaching of research, although there are examples of excellent practice, in many cases the learners do not engage and benefit little from research methods courses. Plus they tend to be patchy in their coverage. In the past the teaching of research has tended to take a teacher-centred approach rather than participative and experiential. It also tends to have taken on board to a limited extent recent developments, for example, the importance placed on participative research or the blurring between quantitative and qualitative data or the increased emphasis on holistic/systemic approaches in addition to the more traditional analytical approaches. These changes are related to an increased appreciation of the complexity of many problems that we face and that need to be tackled from a multi-disciplinary, mixed methodological perspective.


Furthermore drawing on current knowledge about pedagogy enables the modelling of methods and techniques that can be applied in the universities and the learning stemming from AURA to be cascaded and institutionalised. It also enables current practices to be adopted such as reflective practice or the use of social media or blended learning which draws on different modalities of delivery and learning.

Concluding reflections

Strengthening research capacity within an institution is however challenging. There are organisational factors that impinge on the project. These include their: history, culture, goals, organisation and infrastructure. One key challenge is the large numbers of students and the shortage of staff. A host of

different players operate in this context: faculty/researchers, students, the research office, the library, continuing professional development, the graduate school, deputy vice chancellors of research and teaching, the ICT providers. Each play a role and have an interest in certain aspects of the 'problem' i.e. strengthening the research culture and the capacity to do research. As a consequence AURA has involved representatives from these groups in each African university. They form the core group of partners and co-developers.

This blog post was originally shared by Professor Mark Hepworth on LinkedIn.

	<p>Dr Mark Hepworth is Professor in People's Information Behaviour, at the Centre for Information Management at Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK. He champions access to information for underrepresented groups in society, is passionate about research philosophy and methodology and about strengthening people's capacity to conduct research in educational, workplace and community based contexts. He specialises in participative, qualitative research.</p>
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Read more at Mark Hepworth's Blog and on Twitter: [@kampalamark](#).

Wednesday, 23 December 2015

"Many cooks may not spoil the broth but may enhance it": A multidisciplinary approach to education



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Adopting and modifying the best practices of teaching and learning may be the key to fostering innovation in teaching and learning. The concept of borrowing innovative experiential and interactive teaching and learning methods from unrelated disciplines may be a novel strategy to ensure that graduates acquire the competencies they require.

This novel approach was this year's Global Knowledge Exchange Network (GKEN) 5th Conference

theme. The conference created a platform for professionals from a multitude of unrelated disciplines to learn and share experiences of best practices of teaching and learning that foster development of competencies in graduates. Educators got the opportunity to learn from each other's discipline in such a way that it facilitated the establishment of collaborative multi-disciplinary networks and groups dedicated to enhance teaching across unrelated disciplines.

As educators, we view this approach as an inevitable extension of the global trend of fostering collaborative multidisciplinary research from seemingly unrelated disciplines. As educators we have

forgotten that good research comes from acquiring good research skills. Adopting the GKEN model will not only increase the number of educational methods available to us, but also the opportunity to develop better educational methods through interdisciplinary collaboration.

In our view that is the future of educational innovation, in ensuring we have the best teaching methods to impart the professional competencies required.



Professor Lwoga holds a PhD in information studies from the University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. She teaches and supervises both undergraduate and postgraduate students. She has facilitated a number of workshops and short courses. She has published widely and has presented over 30 research papers in both international and local conferences. Professor Lwoga currently coordinates the African Universities' Research Approaches (AURA) programme at Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS), Tanzania, together with an additional four projects working with international partners in Sweden, South Africa and USA.



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Wednesday, 23 December 2015

The Potential of the ALIRT Team in Facilitating Strategic Value of the AURA Programme

What happens when detailed plans for bringing together different actors within an institution, included in the design stage, do not initially work at the point of operationalisation? This was a challenge we encountered early on in the AURA programme with the setting up of representation from the Academic, Library, ICT, Research, and Teaching (ALIRT) team.

ALIRT team concept

The concept of the ALIRT team was a strategy to bring on board the academia and the service departments of IT and the Library in order to drive a common agenda. Often in capacity building programmes, the roles of the service departments, especially IT and the Library, is relegated to a mere service and do not play a role in conceptual and strategic aspects of programmes. The ALIRT concept is a novelty that has a huge potential in reversing this relegation and improving results of the AURA programme at institutional level.

The implementation of the AURA programme, from the point of application, has progressed through an institutional assessment, diagnostics and, most recently, face-to-face training. The ALIRT team was already conceptualized in the programme design, however, at the point of application, we had not yet had a chance to build these relationships internally.

Assessment with the ALIRT team

In preparation for the institutional assessment, the Strathmore Team organized members of the ALIRT team as the core group that would work with the AURA team on the institutional assessment. The application papers for the AURA programme included the structure.

We started to prepare for the assessment with the ALIRT team who were eager to contribute and fully engaged at this point – the assessment drew on their expertise and utilized their time well. The institutional assessment report presents evidence that all members of the ALIRT team were able to contribute effectively to the design of interventions that address the maladies that continue to depress research outputs.

Once we had become an AURA partner, however, the situation drew more from the resources available from the PCs rather than the ALIRT team who then became somewhat disengaged. The activities at this point included developing the diagnostics and the face-to-face events.

Concluding reflections

The ALIRT team could have been more functional if we had been able to apply the concept of co-creation which is fundamental in the implementation of the AURA Programme – this would have provided an opportunity to re-assess the meaningful engagement of the ALIRT team in the process.

However, when the programme kicked off, the role of the ALIRT as a team, and of some members, became blurred and this led the ALIRT team to become dysfunctional. Attempts to revive the ALIRT team failed at this point. It is important, therefore, to rethink the roles and the engagement of the ALIRT team in the programme. Maybe raising their role to a strategic level and having face to face interactions between the different implementing institutions could be one proposal.

The thinking behind the ALIRT team in the design and implementation method of AURA was great but when it came to putting it in practice, the idea posed a number of challenges for internal engagement. Unfortunately, we missed an opportunity in not being able to open the space to critically explore the value of the ALIRT team as the programme evolved at this point. Also, as the AURA programme has developed, there has not been much demand for an ALIRT team at Strathmore. However, this may not be the end of the ALIRT team as there could well be new opportunities to review and redefine the ALIRT team role as the programme develops.

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Wednesday, 6 January 2016

Harnessing the Power of Social Networks

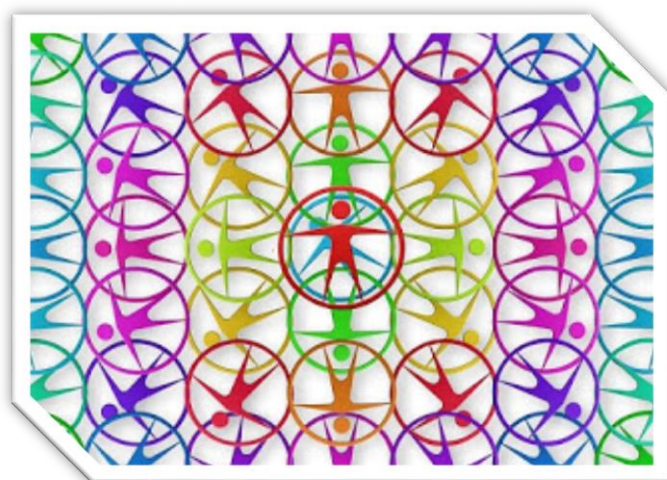


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In professional settings, personal and professional connections flourish from the myriad of everyday interactions between persons. These networks often present opportunities for knowledge sharing, that when tapped into and harnessed may significantly influence personal or institutional growth. This has certainly been the case for us at **Strathmore University** when it came to the **African Universities' Research Approaches (AURA)** programme.

Responding to the AURA call for applications

We are the institutional leads from the university Research Office and Academic and Student Affairs office for the AURA programme. We received news concerning the AURA call for applications from our personal contacts in one of the public universities who had directly received documentation on this call. The pressure to submit a competitive application within the short timeframe available to our team, demanded drawing upon internal professional allies in order to meet the quality as well as the tight deadline for the call. Our team made an effort to contact the consortium to clarify submission deadlines and the feedback encouraged us to prioritize submitting to the call. So from the start of the process, the connections and networks we were able to draw on were key to Strathmore becoming a Phase 1 partner for the AURA programme. The major contributing factors were the source of information from the external networks and the fact that we were able to draw from internal support.

Conclusion

Networking opportunities present a potential for personal and social growth through information sharing. However, the availability of such information from these networks is in itself not sufficient to convert potential opportunities into real programmes of work. The role of internal relationships and capacity is crucial too. This experience demonstrates why practitioners, researchers, and faculty members are wise to maintain good working relationships and active participation in external networks.

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Tuesday, 19 January 2016

Teaching and Learning: Which way to go in Africa?

Teaching and Learning in Africa: Is there a connection with poverty eradication?

There has been a silent revolution in teaching and learning methods over recent years throughout the world. While the more developed countries have been quicker to adopt new methods and new technologies in teaching and learning, from apprenticeship to digital methods, it has been more of a roller-coaster experience for other parts of the world. Large populations in the developing world,

particularly in Africa, for example, continue to invest and to use traditional teaching methodologies that are passive and do not permit unhindered critical thinking so are likely to miss out on new methods and new technologies in teaching and learning.

While this is, perhaps, common knowledge, the many problems that afflict the developing world have never really been extensively interrogated, or possible recommendations to redirect donor or partner resources into efforts that would promote these new learning methodologies. New knowledge may then translate into an ability to address common maladies, like poverty and disease, in a cheaper and a more sustainable manner.

GKEN4AFRICA 5th International Multidisciplinary Conference and Workshop, Addis Ababa, December 2015

The recent Global Knowledge Exchange Network (GKEN) workshop held in the Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in December 2015 had a stimulating theme that interrogated knowledge and innovation. A multidisciplinary galaxy of academics from around the world, who are originally African, gave a good exposition of issues which through new methods of learning and research may drive a paradigm shift in this continent.

The African Universities' Research Approaches (AURA) programme, through a rigorous scientific process, is determined to explore these new possibilities of enhancing teaching and learning and increasing capacity in research.

These are definitely the game changers in our New Africa. Watch this space!

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Wednesday, 10 February 2016

Managing Internal Bureaucracy to Facilitate Project Inception

Strathmore University, like all corporate entities, is structured in a manner to facilitate the achievement of its objectives. Usually, and over time, institutions develop a culture informed by experience and new knowledge. In the case of external engagements, the partnerships in Strathmore University have grown rapidly and this growth has come with new management procedures and regulations both to govern and to ensure value addition. These procedures can sometimes slow down project conceptualisation and inception.

In the case of the African Universities' Research Approaches (AURA) programme, this process was further complicated because the programme has a design that is co-creative, hence aspects of programme design are left open to be developed in collaboration with participating partners. This more open approach in the programme design made it challenging to sell as an idea to university management, and potential beneficiaries, who were not so familiar with a co-creative approach. This led them to perceive the co-creative approach as 'lack of clarity' in the design at the onset which was likely to pose a greater risk.

Establishing internal collaboration

The first step in taking the AURA collaboration forward internally was to establish, in June 2015, a bridge by having the Strathmore Learning Teaching Services Department (LTS) and the Research Office as the key drivers of the programme.

LTS has a mandate on faculty development and this was a key pillar in the AURA application process. The Research Office has a mandate on research management and therefore plays a key role in contributing to the achievement of the strategic goals of the University in the area of Research. The AURA programme provided an opportunity to establish an internal collaborative venture between the two departments and, in effect, to situate the programme at the confluence of teaching and research objectives.

The concept of the ALIRT team is a collaborative one, bringing on board the academia as well as critical service departments of the Library and IT. This collaborative platform between Strathmore project coordinators and the ALIRT team added credibility to the inception efforts for implementing the AURA programme. The visit by the AURA team for the institutional assessment also provided an opportunity for advocacy with the high level university management team.

Conclusion

The university management and the participants in the AURA programme developed high expectations from a collaboration that has the prospect to break new grounds in teaching and research at Strathmore. The potential benefits of the AURA programme are reflected in these internal collaborations as well as through cordial external engagement with the consortium partners for the programme.

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Wednesday, 10 February 2016

Experience in Enlisting Participants

The findings of the AURA background study in southern African universities, "Building Research Capacity: Enabling Critical Thinking Through Information Literacy in Higher Education in Africa" (Hepworth, Mark; Duvigneau, S. IDS. 2012), documented the realities of a burdened faculty with heavy teaching loads and little practical time to undertake any research activities. The findings of the study are applicable at Strathmore University, especially in bringing staff into the African Universities' Research Approaches (AURA) programme, as it can be difficult to get commitments from staff who already feel over-burdened. As the project coordinators (PCs) for AURA at Strathmore, we had two options for enlisting participants: a formal process and a targeted approach.

Formal process: pros and cons

In the formal process, the management direct the faculty to participate in the programme and are required to brief the appointing authority on their progress. The advantage of the formal process is that the recruitment of participants is simplified and there are usually a good number of participants in the specific programme. However, the downside of this formal approach is that it does not tap into the intrinsic motivation of the participants, hence the personal commitment of the participants may be lacking. Occasionally, the organizers of the programme events may have to keep appealing to authority for participant mobilisation.

Targeted approach: pros and cons

In the targeted approach, faculty are offered the opportunity to participate in the programme on their own volition. This is done by arranging open fora where faculty are inducted into the programme and those interested then sign up. The advantage of this approach is that those who sign up are usually self-motivated and are more intensively engaged in the project. The downside is that the number of participants may be lower than anticipated.

Targeted approach at Strathmore

We opted for the targeted approach having carefully considered the deep level of commitment in time and involvement from the faculty demanded by the AURA programme.

The targeted approach requires a continuous level of personal engagement with the individual faculty to retain enthusiasm among the participants and to grow the number of participants to a critical level. Personal engagement implies: managing the different levels challenges that create barriers to effective participation of busy faculty. For example, scheduling events properly, effective time management, clear actionable communications amongst other factors. In effect, as the PCs for the AURA programme at Strathmore, this targeted approach required both of us to take on the role of champions of AURA to encourage and foster the personal engagement and enthusiasm of faculty and to enlist participants. For us, this approach was the better of the two options as it meant free to respond to the programme needs as required without involving an authority unnecessarily.

Lessons learned

The lessons from the Strathmore approach to enlisting participants as outlined above highlights the benefit of the role of champions who can keep the interests of participants alive without necessarily appealing to an authority. The role of champions is a critical role because it is a key way of engaging individuals' interest once an intervention has passed in the on-going programme and for building a critical mass of support within an institution.

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Wednesday, 10 February 2016

When E-learning is Not Like a Duck to Water



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The advancements of information and communication technologies have enhanced teaching and learning practices across the globe including Africa. Through the African Universities' Research Approaches (AURA) programme, Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS) is also now using these technologies to deliver its teaching and research intervention training programmes to

faculty members and students. However, the main question remains whether MUHAS researchers and students are prepared to fully embrace these technologies to enhance their teaching and learning and research practices amidst the multiple challenges they face?

Research One (R1) Learning Intervention

Through the AURA programme from September to October 2015, MUHAS rolled out AURA's Research One (R1) learning intervention. This involved a pre-online session, a face to face session and a post-online session. Research One (R1) was followed by an online regional event on the "Future of research in the 21st Century" organized from 2-4th November 2015.

A high participant attrition rate was observed during the online training sessions mainly because participants were instructed to join the training individually in their offices. Most participants did not

know how to use the e-learning platform due to lack of skills and also due to their mind-set towards online e-learning systems.

This observation may not be so surprising as many African universities, including MUHAS, face a number of challenges related to use of e-learning platforms including: frequent power outages, the lack of the online learning culture, the mind-set of teacher-centred (versus student-centred) on the part of many of the senior faculty, as well as lack of ICT skills, unreliable internet services and many other challenges.

The low level of attendance of participants to the online training sessions at MUHAS calls for a need to build the capacity of faculty members and to cultivate a culture of online learning within our institutions. However, as short term measure, this experience forced the MUHAS project coordinators and ALIRT teams to find a temporary solution to avert this situation. This short term measure included facilitating the online learning sessions collectively in a single room until participants were comfortable with attending online training individually in their offices.

This solution however had cost implications in that MUHAS would need to have some equipment to conduct online learning to researchers collectively - headphones with speakers for each participant, - in order for them to fully participate in the AURA programme online activities.

Conclusion

The key lesson learnt from this experience is that before one adopts new technologies and strategies, you will need to prepare and assess end users in terms of their competence or attitudes. Mitigate these deficiencies early on to ensure achievement of project objectives.



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Wednesday, 10 February 2016

Early Experiences in Engagements around the AURA Programme

Strathmore University, a member of the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU), accepted an invitation to participate in their Structured Training for African Researchers (STARS) programme. This took place in August 2015 when Strathmore was already in advanced engagements with the Consortium to implement AURA programme.

Structured Training for African Researchers (STARS) programme

The STARS project is an online professional skills course implemented collaboratively with African universities to develop and refine professional development for academic staff early in their careers. The project aims to institutionalize and embed early career support and build the skills and confidence of early career academics. The resources in the programme are collaboratively developed and are openly licensed under a creative commons license so that universities can adapt and embed the material within their own professional development offerings.

The programme was designed in a three year cycle. The first year involved the design of online content for training early career researchers. The second year involved piloting the online course in twelve universities. The third year involved implementation of the course with additional universities. This is the point at which Strathmore joined into the programme.

Similarities and differences between STARS and AURA programmes

The major similarities are that both programmes are focused on research capacity building among a more or less similar target group. The key differences are that STARS is already at an advanced stage of implementation while the African Universities' Research Approaches (AURA) programme is still in its first year. The key distinction in design and outcome between the two programmes is evident in the implementation.

At the point of recruitment, faculty were presented with details concerning the objectives and the implementation format of the two programmes. It appeared that the majority of the young scholars and early career researchers opted into the STARS programme, partly due to the perception that the amount of commitment was shorter and less intense than the AURA. However, early feedback shows that those in the AURA are making significant and demonstrable transformation in their research undertakings.

This experience highlights the importance of taking a strategic institutional view and developing a strong implementing capacity when taking on board similar programmes to avoid failure or collapse. This experience provides an opportunity to learn and to better scrutinize future engagements against institutional capacity and goals

Engaging in both AURA and STARS provided Strathmore with an opportunity to explore how to position both programmes in the context of institutional goals. We also had an opportunity to provide staff with a choice to enroll in either programme. The model of co-creation in the AURA Programme required creativity on the part of the champions in order to persuade staff to sign up for AURA especially because the STARS programme presented a perception of lighter work load commitment as compared to the AURA programme.

Final reflections

Whilst it may appear that competition between the two programmes could pose challenges in maximising the benefits, this was not the view we took at Strathmore. Since there is an intended end in both programmes to empower the institutions involved to deliver and implement internally driven and sustainable capacity building programmes that will bring research outputs to a new level, having the two programmes provides our institution with an opportunity to complement the lessons learned from both programmes. Furthermore, Strathmore has taken an active step to harmonise the benefits by concentrating the programme management under a collaborative approach between the Research and Teaching departments to avoid scattering and duplicating efforts. This would be a key recommendation for other institutions that when an institution is involved in two programmes that are addressing similar areas, or include synergies, then it is very important that the programme management is shared collaboratively between departments in order to avoid a silo mentality, to ensure that the programmes complement each other, and to prevent duplication.

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Wednesday, 17 February 2016

The Benefit of Flexibility in Keeping the AURA Programme Vibrant

There are two levels at which flexibility has contributed to making the African Universities' Research Approaches(AURA) programme become vibrant: the level of participants' engagement; and the level of institutional collaboration - and this vibrancy has developed in spite of a number of challenges encountered in the initial programme conception as experienced at Strathmore University (which we have written about in a previous blog post).

Participants' engagement

Participants who have showed an interest in this programme have been encouraged to retain their interest, and engagement, in the activities through flexible arrangements. For example, as Project Coordinators (PCs) for AURA, we negotiated new deadlines for completing the diagnostics, and made sure that polite reminders to participants went out regularly.

The management of email communication has also been a key challenge, and an important point of learning for us as programme coordinators. A significant number of participants suffered from email overload and started to drop out of the programme on account of repetitive communication from different contacts in the programme. As PCs, we took a proactive approach to ensure that the issues experienced with email overload were communicated within the programme, and we then agreed a communication strategy which was more appropriate to the needs arising within our institution. This is now working adequately for us.

Institutional collaboration

At the level of institutional collaboration, the true spirit of co-creation around content, and the authenticity in which inputs from implementing institutions are accepted, has helped to build trust within the partnership – an essential part of the process. This is demonstrated by the on-going consultation between us as Project Coordinators (PCs), and champions, for the AURA programme at Strathmore University and the lead contacts within the AURA consortium and this on-going consultation makes it much easier to resolve issues and maintain momentum within the programme.

Lessons learned

The benefit drawn from these experiences is that it is critical to be sensitive to the varying needs and interests of participants and try to accommodate this in programme implementation and management. This can mean changing procedures so that these meet institutional needs, or negotiating a deadline where this is necessary.

The AURA programme is developing good flexibility to accommodate a participant-centred approach in meeting challenges as they arise. It is this approach that enables us as PCs to maintain momentum for the programme internally. This approach also supports programme responsiveness at both the AURA consortium level and institutionally at Strathmore University.

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Wednesday, 17 February 2016

Experiences Beyond the Aura Programme's Research One (R1) Learning Intervention

The implementation of the AURA programme at Strathmore has become a reality. By September, 2015, the participants had already engaged in various online activities such as: the diagnostic and pre-online learning session undertaken in preparation for face to face learning (The face to face learning took place at Strathmore from 30 September to 2nd October 2015.) What follows are reflections on the approaches, processes and methodologies encountered in the learning interventions.

Blended learning approaches

The implementation of the AURA programme has involved a blended learning approach complementing face to face interactions with online experience. The main benefit of this blended learning approach is that the participants have the possibility of internalizing, and practicing, specific skills from the interactions between themselves and the facilitators. Non-mediated human interaction has a special element that cannot be bridged effectively by technology hence combining face to face with the online learning. This approach could be one of the key factors contributing to the effectiveness of the AURA programme in transforming participants' research practices.

Benefits of a diagnostic process to customize content

In the process of the face to face delivery, it emerged that there was a difficulty in maintaining the consistent participation by senior researchers, who were of the opinion that the sessions did not address their specific capacity building concerns but were more focused on the needs of young scholars.

An attempt had been made to ensure that the content would appeal to a mixed audience, but it was difficult in practice to achieve this objective without a deliberate content re-design prior to running the intervention. This highlights the benefit of the diagnostic process in customizing content and demonstrates that poor participation in this process may have contributed to the problem of the undifferentiated content arising in the first place.

Using an experiential learning facilitation methodology

The experiential learning facilitation methodology that was employed by the AURA team is the enduring strength of the face to face intervention. This methodology is learner-centred and successfully engaged the faculty, who themselves are teachers in their own disciplines and can be

highly critical of traditional teacher-centred approaches. The assessment of learning at the end each day, using the reflective journal, is a best practice tool that helped participants internalize and document their personal learning. The R1 face to face learning is a valuable precursor to, and has raised expectations for, the forthcoming teaching intervention which will be rolled out in 2016.

The other appealing, and motivating, aspect of the AURA programme learning interventions is the practical assistance the participants received through detailed feedback on their assignments from enthusiastic professors in the AURA network. An opportunity presented by the GKEN4Africa 5th International Multidisciplinary Conference 2015 for two participants from Strathmore to showcase their “work in progress” – this opportunity has further fueled the excitement of other participants.

Future considerations

Looking to the future, it is anticipated that individualised attention to the participants will be critical in achieving the anticipated programme results, such as publications. This is a strong learning point that Strathmore University would like to carry into its internal capacity building programmes for teaching and research.

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Sunday, 28 February 2016

Participants’ Reflections after the AURA Programme’s Research One (R1) Learning Intervention

There has been an increasing stream of feedback since October 2015 that indicates the potential benefits of AURA programme impacting individual participants at different levels. What follows is a short summary of the key moments.

Application of critical skills in information literacy

One of these concerns application of critical skills in information literacy. One participant, a young scholar, began reading more widely on the topic of her PhD concept note and made an effort to contact the author of a paper she felt contained content that was core to the concepts of her research. She received positive feedback from the author and was motivated to keep working on the paper and has since gone on to present a poster at the GKEN4Africa 5th International Multidisciplinary Conference 2015.

Opening up research opportunities to undergraduate students

The other area is the effort to open up research opportunities to undergraduate students, especially using approaches that impact society. One of the participants has demonstrated how the learning obtained in the AURA programme’s R1 face to face learning intervention has encouraged him to involve his students in research activities that have an impact in their communities. One of the student teams went on to present a poster on this initiative at an internal research event at Strathmore.

These developments indicate the potential impact of the AURA intervention in promoting research amongst Strathmore students. Therefore, it is becoming clearer how learning interventions can be beneficial in supporting young scholars in fostering confidence, in developing skills to develop their work and to take up opportunities to communicate about this both internally and externally.

Application of critical thinking skills

Another area is the application of critical thinking skills. One of the participants has been conceptualising a difficult research topic concerning the need for research outputs to contribute to the

transformation of the society. In the local setting, most research findings remain on the shelves as scholarly outputs that do not influence policy or practice in the industry or within the communities. The participant benefited from the R1 learning intervention and became more confident that the chosen topic was researchable and could be actualised, especially following detailed feedback from scholars in the AURA network. It will be interesting to see how this student's work progresses.

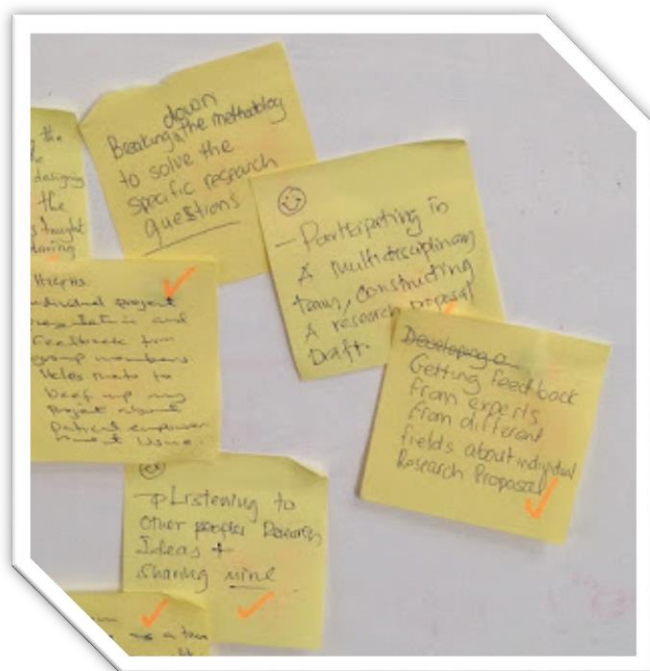
Concluding remarks

These developments indicate the potential impact of the AURA intervention in promoting research amongst Strathmore students. Therefore, it is becoming clearer how learning interventions can be beneficial in supporting young scholars in fostering confidence, in developing skills to develop their work and to take up opportunities to communicate about this both internally and externally.

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Wednesday, 20 April 2016

Fostering Competencies in Research through Project-based Learning



R2 Highpoints
Photo: Emma Greengrass/IDS.

The **Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS)**, through the AURA programme, recently conducted the Research 2 (R2) workshop focusing on strengthening the capacity of conducting research among MUHAS academic staff. The R2 workshop was conducted over a six week period from February to March 2016. It adopted project based learning approaches and blended learning approaches which included pre-online, face to face, and post-online learning activities. The teaching modality was participatory, and focused on independent learning, learning from instructors, and peer to peer learning and assessment. Some of the topics were completely new to participants (i.e. social network analysis, mixed methods) while other topics were

familiar to faculty, such as topics on comparative and surveys research designs. Given their medical science backgrounds, MUHAS faculty members were not aware of some of the social research methods offered and were able to learn and appreciate these through R2. They also learnt and appreciated the application of qualitative research approaches, and how they can combine both qualitative and quantitative research approaches in their practice.

Participants were also able to refine their individual research methodology, and gained practical knowledge on how to apply mixed research methods, especially sequential mixed methods. This kind

of training was very important and also timely given the fact that MUHAS is currently implementing competency based curricular. Furthermore, participants were able to develop a group proposal, which was multidisciplinary in nature, to compete for funding. Through the group work, participants appreciated the fact that they were able to learn from their colleagues and to share what they knew regarding the topic they were working on. Participants were also able to expand their network of researchers to work with, through the task that of writing proposals as a multidisciplinary group.

In conclusion, the R2 workshop enabled participants to acquire useful skills on how to develop competitive proposals for grant application, various study designs, and to learn the advantages of working in multidisciplinary research groups. Participants also appreciated the teaching methodology and it is expected that they will adopt this modality into their teaching, especially the use of project based learning.



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Thursday, 21 April 2016

The E-learning Landscape of Jimma University



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Ethiopia is going through rapid economic development at a time when technological changes are influencing many aspects of human life, including higher education institutions. This context of rapid technological change in the world, and economic development in Ethiopia, means higher education institutions in this country need to carefully examine their educational practices with a technological lens. This context of rapid technological change is compounded by other challenges, such as the ever increasing population of learners

from a variety of backgrounds, with diverse needs, motivations, abilities, and learning preferences, who are coming forward now and are eager to participate in a 21st century education. There is, as a result, an increasing demand for more responsive and flexible courses, and the drive to use information communication technology (ICT) in teaching is becoming a necessity for our universities – many of them ill equipped to respond to this demand and drive.

Following this, information communication technology (ICT) is becoming more vigorous and easier to use; and it increasingly permeates many academic activities in universities. According to Pirani and as early as 2004, "The use of technology in education, commonly defined as e-learning, has become a standard component in many courses. Technology applications...are also replacing some classroom sessions with virtual sessions or fully replacing classroom courses with online courses." (Pirani, 2004).

Cognizant of the importance of technology in improving educational quality and access, many universities in developed and developing countries have been trying to implement e-learning. Likewise, Jimma University (JU) has been trying to implement e-learning for about ten years. In spite of the huge investment made by the university on expanding ICT infrastructures, we have yet to see real progress in the university as to the use of technology in teaching and learning.

Four years ago a few staff members took training on e-learning but no one has yet started using the e-learning Moodle infrastructure of JU. Just a few interested staff members are currently applying e-learning in the university. The majority of those staff members who took the e-learning training have since left the university due to a variety of reasons. Efforts made in this regard are clearly not satisfactory... The university has offered training to academic staff members, developed the e-learning Moodle and put in place some institutional arrangements for the introduction and implementation of e-learning. However, the re-organization of contents and change on mode of delivery of courses during the modularization process seems to be one of the major factors that has led the university management not to push the colleges to move further forward in this regard.

Other major limitations with regard to the sustained implementation of e-learning in Jimma University include the following:

- Poor follow up and support from the university's leadership (department, college and corporate level);
 - An absence of incentive mechanisms for academic staff members who are champions of e-learning;
 - An absence of awareness raising and capacity building trainings; and
 - The malfunctioning of e-learning offices.
- Major challenges to the sustained implementation of e-learning in Jimma University include the following:
- Interruption of electricity and internet connections;
 - intolerable student-computer ratio;
 - deficiencies in e-learning knowledge and skill on the part of teachers and students;
 - centralization of ICT related privileges; and
 - a confusing structure of e-learning at the university level.

Based on these findings, the university has been developing an e-learning strategy for the coming three years. There is strong belief that the university will get invaluable inputs from the African Universities Research Approaches (AURA) partnership universities to help us with this challenging situation. We hope that the AURA partner institutions will share their experiences around what they have done and are doing in their respective institutions to develop technology- enhanced teaching and learning. This will strengthen blended distance learning programs like JU's Health Economics Masters program.

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Thursday, 28 April 2016

Applying learning theories to online learning: Reflections on the T3 intervention at Jimma University, March 2016

Through the African Universities' Research Approaches (AURA) programme, Jimma University (JU) recently offered the T3 intervention, one of a series of interventions designed to build the capacity of universities in Sub-Saharan Africa.

T3, which took place at JU from 21st to 22nd March 2016, is a practical course focusing on how learning theories can be applied to an online learning environment. The training was designed to enable instructors from the various colleges of JU to:

- plan and organize online learning effectively on Moodle – JU's existing platform;
- apply pedagogical implementations to learning technologies such as Moodle;
- assess learners using learning technologies.

Generally, T3 introduced a growing world of technology that may help to facilitate learning and teaching by making learning and teaching easier and more engaging, as well as cost-effective. Information technologies are one of a number of revolutions which are transforming lives in the 21st century and having an impact on countries like Ethiopia. Consequently, education and training needs to be reinforced with technology if we are to benefit from the opportunities offered through the digital revolution. If the instructors at JU are committed to applying T3, then the training will impact positively on the teaching and learning process in Jimma University.

Online learning: technologies, pedagogical processes, and benefits

The mentors of T3 covered a range of technologies applicable to online learning, including Moodle, which was discussed and demonstrated extensively. According to the demonstrations and theoretical discussions on pedagogical processes, Moodle can be used to create courses for online learning with the use of various kinds of teaching methods and theories. It is possible to apply social constructive, and any other theories suitable for the course content, to online learning as well as face to face learning. Moreover, various learning materials (such as videos, podcasts, texts, documents, portable document formats, PowerPoints etc.) can be easily embedded in the course page created in the Moodle. It is also possible to incorporate chat and discussion forums in the learning page we create in Moodle – these can also help us to apply social constructive theories (encouraging the trainees to be more independent in the learning process, to share the knowledge they have gained, and to benefit from opportunities for greater online socialization with each other around their learning). Moodle also enables us to assess the trainees online.

The task set by the training facilitators at the end of the training, (to create a technology oriented course on Moodle), and feedback after rating this, made us competent enough to translate the skills developed by the intervention into concrete action because the task was designed so that we would have to apply what we had just learnt by putting it into practice on JU's Moodle platform.

In addition, other learning technologies (such as Google Hangouts, Google Plus, Skype for Business, Second life, Facebook, Twitter, email threads etc.) were discussed and demonstrated in terms of how these could be used for online learning by facilitators.

The T3 training was facilitated by educators from various universities in Africa and highly skilled pedagogy experts from UK. Their experience on online learning was another highlight of the T3 intervention - in addition to delivering the training, they also shared their experiences on online learning in the context of their institutions. Hearing about their experiences was an additional motivation for the trainees to use technology for learning. The facilitators also promised to continue to provide support remotely.

T3 key points of learning:

The training intervention has yielded two key changes to my ways of teaching and learning:

1. First, I had not believed that you could use social constructive theory for teaching online as online learning has little space for interaction between the educator and trainees – or so I perceived before T3. After the training, I could see that interaction between the educator and the trainees online is definitely possible. Therefore, I learned that we can make online teaching and learning interactive and share our knowledge among trainees online as well as offline. According to the new skills I have gained, the educator not only transfers knowledge but also learns from the learners too because, when online learning is created with the application of social constructive theory, the learners are encouraged to be more independent in the learning process and to share what they have acquired with both their fellow learners and also with the educator.
2. Second, what I learnt from T3 is that pedagogy matters more than technology in online learning. Before we start designing online learning we have to select appropriate pedagogical theories to deliver the course effectively. Then, we can develop an appropriate online learning page. “Pedagogy before technology” was the interesting motto of our mentor – to remind us what is important.

Now capacitated by T1 (the precursor to T3 – T1 focused more on the pedagogical theories and T3 on applying these to online learning), T3 and the remote assistance of our mentors, I am getting ready to revolutionize my way of teaching and learning in a way which benefits both the trainees and the institution I am working for. Furthermore, some of the departments in our college have also created opportunities to apply T3 so there is more to come from Jimma University.

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Thursday, 15 September 2016

The Impact of Stepping Up the Quantity and Quality of E-learning to Address Challenges of Human Resources for Health (HRH) in Kenya

Human Resources for Health (HRH): Can technology be the magic bullet in LMIC?

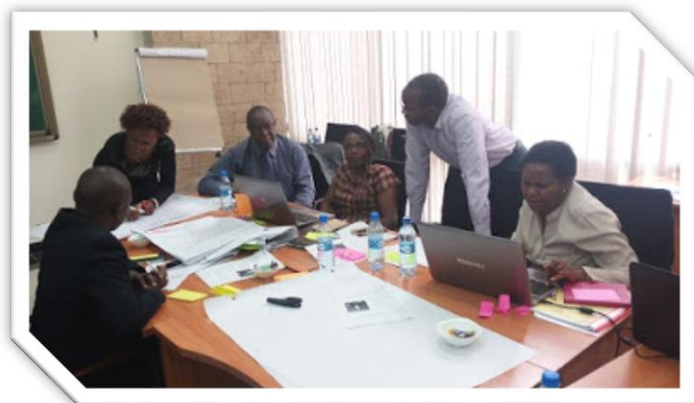


Photo credit: Titus Muhu Kahiga, Kenyatta University, 2016.

The Human Resources for Health (HRH) challenges continue to pose a major headache to governments in many LMIC (lower middle-income countries) in Africa. Many traditional models (like increasing the number of medical schools) have been tested but face serious quality of training gaps. Some successes have been recorded with a symbiotic relationship of north and south, and

south and south, collaborations but this has not gone far enough. The WHO recommended ratios of doctor to patients continue to be unachievable in spite of deadlines by many governments in sub-Saharan Africa making periodic commitments. This is aggravated by emigration of health workers to developed countries where conditions of work and remunerations are superior. Within country, the distribution of available health workers is uneven and is not based on specific local health needs but on economic and social considerations. The ultimate consequence of this are poor health indicators. Can there be a solution to this state of affairs?

The IDS Learning Event at Strathmore University (25th to 28th July 2016)

The African Universities' Research Approaches (AURA) Programme was mooted on the premise of bringing expertise and experience from around the globe to co-create a context specific educational framework and support locally generated research knowledge and its dissemination. In view of human resources for health challenges, approaches to mitigate this based on innovation then becomes a relevant area that demands deep reflection and concern. We can only thereafter 'talk research' once we have personnel with basic knowledge who then can be taught to become skilled researchers.

Many universities in Kenya have e-learning programmes mainly in liberal arts and basic sciences. In health professional education there has been a palpable resistance to e-learning by traditionalists (although some acceptance of it has occurred partly by nursing professionals). This is not unexpected given that most of the trainers are products of old systems and practices. A strong legal and policy infrastructure to support e-learning is also lacking. However, where e-learning has been accepted, it has basically been interpreted as loading PowerPoint presentations on the institutional LMIS (Learning Management Information System). The interactivity aspect, the objective assessment need and the need for an examination to be a benchmark of evidence of learning, are clear gaps. We have had lots of conversations about the use of technology and many faculty members accept that it can make teaching an easier experience. Of course, instructional strategies differ from one institution to another one but all have one convergence: that ultimately, individuals will need to be fully trained to manage patients.

Drawing on the work of the AURA Programme, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) convened a learning event at Strathmore University in July 2016. This provided an opportunity to start questioning the quality of material, and the e-support, being given to the students taking these modules. The need for training the trainer on e-support facilitation became apparent. While the need to have many health workers is welcome, we also need to start a robust system of increasing the capacity of quality facilitators skilled in delivering e-learning. I was certainly encouraged by the sensitization given by the two consultants at the learning event. It made me wonder if big funders who are interested in health professional education would be interested in the approaches.

A critical mass of facilitators skilled in delivering e-learning would then need to be trained and appropriately exposed so that they can train other health workers. I propose that this be piloted in one university and be done as a collaborative effort with regulatory bodies, in order to have their buy-in. Many curriculums in health disciplines have pre-clinical phases where subjects like physiology,

biochemistry, and anatomy can be taught very effectively on an e-platform. These subjects do not have our trendy language (like 'evidence base') and are basically static. They can be taught in one 'command zone', as it were, and broadcast to thousands of medical, nursing, pharmacy and other allied health professionals, in one go. This can create a lot of time that can be utilised for face-to-face interactions. Certainly technology would not train, or assess, the psychomotor aspects of health professional learning, however it can have a valuable place in other areas.

The learning event at Strathmore University also reflected on the difficult terrain of assessment. As we increase numbers it becomes a necessity to devise objective methods of confirming that learning has taken place. It is now accepted that competency based learning is the future of learning, and how to best use technologies to assess the same, needs serious interrogation.

Conclusion

Investments in infrastructure to support e-learning are already going on in many LMIC, and are being supported by funders. The investment in e-support capacity development, and the need to build a cohort of expert facilitators on e-learning, is of utmost need and urgency. This could well be the answer to addressing the human resource capacity needs in health in sub-Saharan Africa. I urge the funding community to consider paying attention to this gap, much as they continue to give infrastructural support. The learning event at Strathmore University was an 'eye opener' in terms of exploring and exposing this need. This will be of particular use in health related disciplines where the numbers and the quality of health workers fall far short of global recommendations.



Dr Kahiga is a pharmacologist currently working as member of faculty at **Kenyatta University**, a public funded university in Kenya. He also serves as principle investigator (PI) in many donor funded projects including NIH and USAID. He has a special interest in health professional education and in the past has served as master trainer in a CDC/PEPFAR funded project called PACE. At Kenyatta University, he is currently the Head of the Ethics Review Board. In the past, Dr Kahiga has served in the National Drug Regulatory Board and in the Pharmaceutical Society of Kenya, rising to the position of National Vice President. In his free time he serves as a volunteer pharmacist in a community based setting in the central part of Kenya.

Wednesday, 21 September 2016

Fostering competencies in interactive online teaching and learning assessment

About seven faculty members from the Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS), attended a two day workshop on teaching and learning assessment at Strathmore University from 25th to 26th July 2016. This workshop was immediately followed by another workshop on strategic planning from 27th to 28th July, 2016. The workshops were organized by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and drew on the work of the African Universities' Research Approaches (AURA) programme.

Both workshops were very useful to participants because participants were exposed to various issues related to e-learning, including: learning assessment approaches, how to use technology for assessment, technology based learning and pedagogical theories that could be applied in a

technology-based environment. Furthermore, participants were taught about how to operationalize what they learnt when they go back to their institutions by developing Operational Strategic Plans.

The teaching modality throughout the two workshops was participatory, and focused on peer to peer learning and assessment as well as on learning from instructors. Participants appreciated the fact that they were able to learn from their colleagues and to share what they knew regarding the topic that they were working on. They were enabled to expand their network of researchers to work with, due to the task that they were given to write up in groups.

Most of the topics were completely new to participants (i.e. learning analytics, learning theories. Given their medical science background, MUHAS faculty members were therefore able to learn and appreciate many of the topics taught and of which they had not had opportunities to explore prior to the workshop. They also learnt, and appreciated, the technology-based assessment methods which were completely new to them. This kind of training was very important, and timely, given the fact that MUHAS is implementing competency based curricular by using blended learning approaches.

Participants were also able to develop operational plans which they will be able to implement when they go back to their institutions with what they had learnt throughout the workshop. Through the development of operational plans, participants expect that they should be able to cascade what they have learnt back into their institutions. Despite the fact that a learning management system (LMS) has been implemented at MUHAS for over four years now, its' uptake has been very low. Through developing an operational plan, it is expected that academic staff at MUHAS will be able to adopt interactive teaching methods and engage students in the e-learning platform more readily.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the teaching and learning assessment workshop enabled participants to acquire skills on learning assessment approaches, how to use technology for assessment, technology based learning and pedagogical theories that could be applied in a technology-based environment. Participants also learnt about how to strategically operationalize technology-based learning in their institutions. Participants appreciated the teaching methodology and it is expected that they will adopt this modality into their teaching, especially the use of blended learning approaches.



Professor Lwoga holds a PhD in information studies from the University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. She teaches and supervises both undergraduate and postgraduate students. She has facilitated a number of workshops and short courses. She has published widely and has presented over 30 research papers in both international and local conferences. Professor Lwoga currently coordinates the African Universities' Research Approaches (AURA) programme at Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS), Tanzania, together with an additional four projects working with international partners in Sweden, South Africa and USA.



Dr. Doreen Mloka is a Medical Microbiologist/Molecular biologist. She is a Medical Education Fellow and the Director of Continuing Education and Professional Development at Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS), Tanzania.

Wednesday, 21 September 2016

Pedagogy before technology?



Picture credit: Mr. Tadele Mulat/Jimma University, Ethiopia

Introduction

To implement online learning, we need a technology platform. However, without the knowledge of pedagogy, implementing e-learning is like being on a ship on the ocean without a captain. Pedagogy is key for implementing all learning including online learning. Pedagogy is a profession, or science of

teaching, that is concerned with the study of, and practice of, how best to teach. It is a tool for managing teaching content in a specific manner.

Technology plays an important and pervasive role in modern education, business and everyday living. It is associated with an efficient modern society and economic health. The use of digital technology for improving the delivery of education has enormous potential to raise standards and increase employability. It also requires a change in teaching style, a change in learning approaches, and a change in access to information.

Online learning is a way of teaching modalities to learners who do not need to physically attend classes on campus. As it is a system of learning using the internet, online learning means students can attend the classes without being limited by time, distance and geographical constraints. This is an opportunity to provide online learning to learners who may find it difficult to come to campus for a variety of reasons and so providing online learning can be a way to ensure your courses are more effectively designed and taken up by your target audience.

For this reason the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), drawing on the work of the African Universities' Research Approaches (AURA) programme, coordinated a two day workshop at Strathmore University, Kenya on "Developing a strategic plan to operationalize investments in strengthening research and teaching" (July 27 & 28, 2016). The workshop was attended by Jimma University, Ethiopia; Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS), Tanzania; and Kenyatta University and Strathmore University, both in Kenya. An important aim of the workshop was to focus on strategies for implementing e-learning for research and teaching.

Producing an operational plan: a starting point for online learning

On the first day, our training focused on what the operational plan means and how it looks in terms of the main content that needs to be included. This topic was presented by Jagdeep Shokar, IDS.

The content that should be included in an operational plan include:

- An executive summary (what the plan aims to achieve, why this is important and how it will go about achieving this)

- The lead person (i.e. the individual who will lead the overall activities of the project)
- Background or content
- Outcome and output,
- Resources
- Risks and challenges.

As, at Jimma, we have not had many opportunities to think about our operational plans in this way before, it was useful to go over these basic steps. Since we are keen to address the challenges of developing e-learning at Jimma, writing an operational plan that will include strategies for implementing our e-learning was a useful starting point.

Blended learning can be a useful approach (using a mix of online and face-to-face)

It was interesting to hear Professor Gilbert Kokwano, from Strathmore University Business School, highlight the importance of online access even if the connectivity is not perfect. He believes that using a blended learning approach is better than just face-to-face learning and would be a good approach for education, in particular in an African context. He also emphasized that multidisciplinary or geographical variations, of learners coming together in one place (online or face-to-face) enables individuals to learn through others' experiences. After the presentation we had the opportunity to reflect on how we relate to each institution on online learning. What was significant here was there were different experiences, and contexts, expressed in the group which allowed us to appreciate that we are not alone in the challenges we face at Jimma.

Open Access

Professor Martin Weller's film on "Digital scholarship and openness in Higher Education" made us excited. Weller explores how digital network technology and open access movements are very vital for sharing resources. In terms of promoting your research to a wider audience, open access can be more vital for reaching out than academic publishing channels as open access are available to the public and academic journals can be costly.

Weller adds that the quality of online learning can be as good as face-to-face learning, provided that it is designed appropriately for an online environment. In sharing his insights - like the impact of new technologies, open education and learning environments - Weller has given us some ideas and approaches that we can take back and apply within our institutions. For me these are inspiring ideas because one of the areas we want to develop at Jimma is our online learning. The concept of applying a pedagogical approach to enriching our e-learning strategy and plans for the future is a good place to start.

Getting support is key to developing online learning

Irene Maweu, e/merge Africa, talked about "E/merge Africa: unleashing the power of networks in Africa". E/merge Africa is a free membership group created in Africa in order to share online support, IT support, course delivery, facilitating webinar etc. Since she is an expert in human capacity development and communication, especially in e-learning, course design and content development, she had some valuable information for us (e/merge Africa could be a way that we can get some support for our plans to develop our online learning).

Esther Gacicio, Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), specializes in instructional designer and content development as well as e-learning facilitation has talked about "Moving teachers competencies in curriculum delivery to the 21 first century". KICD's objective is to give training for the Kenyan elementary and high school teachers on how they can develop curriculum and implement on their activities of teaching and learning processes in the entire nation (Kenya). Ethiopia does not yet have an institution like KICD looking at this area – there is a clear need for an institution like this in my

country – although the Ministry of Education has played such roles at different times for different universities, high schools and for elementary teachers.

Luis Arnaldo Ordonez Vela spoke about “building collaboration interdisciplinary groups with the support of technology tools and social media”. His current research interests focus on the determinants of participation in society and the impact of digital technologies, specifically, the role of information in decision-making mechanisms in the Latin American environment and mobilization of knowledge between universities and Latin American society. His presentation was more on how we can share and transfer knowledge through social media, libraries, culture, ICCT etc. He also shares how collaborative research is very important for the development of any country. This is an interesting perspective for me because in Ethiopia, there is a need for a more inclusive, interdisciplinary approach and developing our technology tools, and fostering usage, would be a valuable step in progressing our country to being an efficient modern society enjoying better economic health. In Jimma, we have started working with an interdisciplinary approach and can really see the benefits; however, good access to the internet remains a serious challenge which, until it is overcome, prevents us from being in a position to take up the challenge of sharing and transferring knowledge in this way.

Preparing our operational plans

We also had the opportunity, during the two-day workshop, to prepare operational plans for each institution which we did in groups with support from the presenters and facilitators. Through the process, our guide reiterated that pedagogy, ICT and content experts are very vital in order to implement successful online learning. After the discussion, and once work on operational plans had concluded, one presenter selected from each group presented the plan that had been worked on. At the end of each group presentation there were several questions and discussions in order to shape the operational plan of each institution. I found it a useful process to work on an operational plan for Jimma as a group as it allowed our group to discuss our context in detail, in particular the challenges we face in delivering online learning, and to work through our concerns with support from the facilitators and experts.

Exploring teaching styles

On the second day, we looked at different teaching styles which was facilitated by Siobhan Duvigneau, IDS, and utilized a number of quizzes on teaching styles which are available online (through Google). We have got a lot of experiences from the sites that we visited, and we tried to answer the quizzes to the best of our knowledge. The focus of Siobhan’s agenda was: exploring how to improve teaching and learning experiences, behaviours and skills. She is passionate about approaches that foster critical thinkers, independent and self-directed learners who are confident networks, problem-solvers and knowledge co-creators.

Teaching methods are general principles, or pedagogy, used for classroom instruction. There are different teaching styles in the world. Each country or university has its own teaching styles depending on the curriculum they have. For me, a student-centered approach is very important. It is a teaching method that focuses on student investigation and hands-on learning. In this method the instructor role is facilitating, providing guidance and supporting of students through the learning process, so that students play an active and participatory role in their own learning process. So, this is very important for Ethiopia/Jimma University in order to create skillful students to have their own jobs rather than seeking from the government.

The next presenter was Dr. Philipp Grunewald. He asked us to reflect on yesterday’s work (operational planning) on how was that useful to me and to my university? According to Philipp, when we are involved in teaching and research, we can contribute knowledge to the community and to the entire nation. This indicates that better teaching, and better teachers, will be created. He gave a strong emphasis on knowledge and skill. As a teacher we have to teach students to gain more skill than knowledge. To increase employability, we need to focus on active learning rather than passive

learning; train students to be job makers rather than job seekers. In that context, Dr Grunewald is inquiring how creative commons and open source software can support social systems (organizations, corporations, enterprises, social movements, etc.)

In order to alleviate problems in Ethiopia, students who have graduated from the universities should become involved in the private sector and look at creating jobs for themselves rather than seeking work from the government. So, the universities strategy, when they teach students, should focus on skill rather than knowledge. If students are mature in skill, they might have a possibility to create jobs rather than seeking them from the government. I think this is the good idea that I got from the workshop.

Conclusion

Do you believe that pedagogy comes before technology? I am still reflecting on this question as a result of all that I experienced in the two day workshop and it seems to me that pedagogy is quite key for designing online courses, and that e-learning (or a blend of face-to-face and e-learning) could provide opportunities in an African context which will really progress our education and research agendas. However, it was also beneficial to look in detail at developing an operational plan that includes strategies for online learning as this is what an institution really needs in order to support teaching and research.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank the host organizer (Strathmore University, Kenya) and also the sponsor organization IDS and the AURA project team members.

Mr. Tadele Mulat, ICT Team Leader, Jimma University Library System

Friday, 23 September 2016

From marketing boredom to a marketing academic

How the IDS Learning Events' training transformed teaching for me.



Picture credit: Geralt/Pixabay. CC0 Public Domain.

Introduction

Teaching was something that I got into accidentally. For very many years my major career goal was to be a high flying, marketing executive in a large multinational firm. I loved marketing, still do. In my opinion, it is the perfect blend of psychology and business strategy, two subject areas that I find fascinating.

The marketing executive

However, three months into my first employment (which was in a marketing firm) I realized that boredom had become my constant companion. Yes, I was pursuing my passion. And yes, every day was different from the next because of the different clients and projects we were handling. But I was quite simply bored. It took me awhile to place my finger on the reason for my boredom, but I eventually did. I was bored out of my mind because I was barely learning anything new at my place of employment.

The moment I came to that realization, I started actively looking for a masters' degree programme and, approximately six months later, I got the opportunity to join one of the best Business Masters' programmes in Africa with the opportunity to offer tutorials, and two years later, to lecture in a university. It has been four years of teaching, so far, and I have loved every single minute of it.

Teaching is the boiling down of hard concepts to small simple morsels of information that can easily be understood. This process provides a unique opportunity of perpetual learning, that I especially enjoy.

The IDS Learning Event

One of the things, however, that has become very apparent is that teaching is a science that also needs to be taught. I have a very robust academic background in Marketing and Business Science, but I am mostly self-taught in the art and science of teaching. So when the opportunity to attend the IDS Learning Event on teaching and assessment practices was presented, I latched on with both hands and I was not disappointed.

I learnt quite a lot on the various pedagogies that can be used to teach. The training also touched on how we can work Information Technology into learning and assessment to make it more interactive.

At the end of the training, two things became very clear to me. One, I needed to apply the pedagogies I had learnt as soon as possible. And two, there was still so much to learn concerning the science and art of teaching.

The step forward

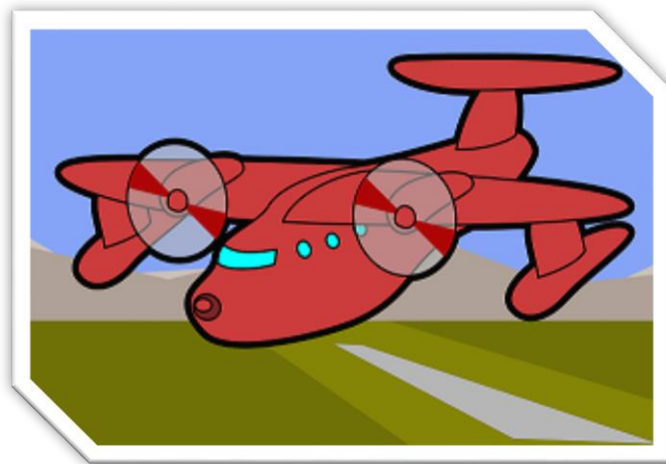
Approximately three weeks after the training, I started teaching a new cohort of students. I made a point of attempting to try out the new pedagogies of learning that I had learnt in the training. I also made a point of incorporating Information Technology (through our institutions e-learning) in learning and assessment. One of the continuous assessments that was given to this group of students was uploaded on a platform I created on e-learning. The students were then instructed to engage each other on this platform as they interrogated the work that each student uploaded and to provide constructive criticism. The exercise is still ongoing but is proving to be quite successful so far. The classroom has become livelier with the use of the various pedagogies. Students are more participative and learning is spilling over and taking place even outside the classroom hours. All these changes were brought about by a two day training. I am excited, as I contemplate the magnitude of change that will take place once I become a highly trained educationist.

Lucy Nguti is a Doctoral Fellow at Strathmore School of Management and Commerce. She teaches marketing on the undergraduate program offered by university.

Friday, 23 September 2016

Education should focus on converting knowledge into life skills

It is the process and not a goal.



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As defined in the Cambridge Dictionary, Knowledge looks at a practical or theoretical understanding of a specific subject. In this day and age, where technology has simplified information dissemination, the distance between ignorance and knowledge has radically been reduced. Students may not have to sit in a classroom to know when airplanes started flying. The Internet has got very comprehensive literature on this including videos, audio, images and text. And all this content is available at no cost.

In a second stage, little beyond a mere understanding of a specific subject, learning, is defined by Karban, R. (2015) as the act of acquiring new, or modifying and reinforcing existing, knowledge. At this stage the learner will need to convert acquired knowledge to fit into a context in the environment they live in. The learner will modify and reinforce existing, knowledge and see it adopted in his or her context. We probably all spend 70% of our driving lessons on a free and quiet road without any traffic or complex obstacles on our way, and 30% on a relatively jammed road. Yet, in reality, 70% of our rides will be in down-town on a jammed road, and only 30% in the countryside. From this illustration, knowledge in terms of understanding how a vehicle moves is not enough. The learner needs to adjust the leaning process to a new environment.

In the third and final stage, we talk about life skills. Howland, J.L. (2013), infers that given key resources like time, energy, or both; learning should lead to carrying out a task with pre-determined results. Along the same lines, in an education that aims at facilitating acquisition of values, well-being, and habits, life skills are the ultimate tools that learners should acquire. Although, the nature and definition of life skills may differ across cultures and beliefs, Weisen et al. (1997) provides a list of crucial skills:

- Problem Solving
- Decision making
- Creative thinking
- Critical thinking
- Effective communication
- Interpersonal relation skills
- Self-awareness
- Empathy

In summary, life skills are the abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life.

Conclusion

A quick analysis of the three stages infers that knowledge, unless applied in given skills, may not be of any significant value. A fundamental objective of our daily activities is to solve problems. Problems are at the heart of what many people do at work every day. Education today should focus on converting knowledge into life skills and so impact the learners' day to day activity. And given that life circumstances are not always similar, this should be looked at as a process and not a goal.

Benjamin Mundama, Strathmore University, Kenya.

Friday, 23 September 2016

Networking opportunities and discussions on lecturing and teaching

My experience of the IDS Learning Event which took place at Strathmore University in July 2016.

I am very thankful for having had the opportunity to be part of the IDS Learning Event that was held at the Strathmore Business School in July 2016. Through the workshop, I was able to network with lecturers from Kenyatta University (Kenya), Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS) (Tanzania) and Jimma University (Ethiopia) as well as the facilitators from UK.

The workshop opened with an ice breaker introduction session where we all had to introduce ourselves and the institutions we had come from. The participation in the group was the most amazing part - I sat with the Strathmore team and had a discussion about ways lectures could be improved and the teaching methods in their classes so that students do not get bored, or left behind, and the reasons why students choose to come to Strathmore University, and the reasons why students do not attend class, and why students fail.

Before this discussion, I was thinking that teaching was an easy job where lecturers just come to class to give students the course outline and the contents. Then the lecturers discussed the approach they use to interact with the students in order to improve in the class. At Strathmore, IT is the most important aspect of teaching (e.g. the e-learning system and PowerPoint slides). I got a better understanding about the process it takes before we students receive this content.

Raj Patel is an ACCA student studying at Strathmore University

Friday, 23 September 2016

Learning is not a spectator sport

Many thanks for the opportunity to be part of the IDS Learning Event. Through it I was able to network and learn quite a bit both from the facilitators present and the lecturers from other institutions of learning who were participating in the workshop.



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Previously, I was of the opinion that teaching was a routine job: lecturers were given a course outline and handed content to teach. They then had to pass on the same to students mostly through class lectures. I was familiar, to a small extent, with this. Being at Strathmore University where use of IT (power-point slides and the e-learning system) in teaching is highly embraced and encouraged, I was really interested in knowing which other ways IT could be used in teaching and understanding the

process that goes on at the back-end before students receive content to chew on.

During the first session, an important revelation dawned on me: Learning is not a spectator sport. Genuine learning is active and not passive. Students do not learn much just by sitting in class listening to teachers, memorizing prepackaged assignments, and spitting out answers no matter how diligent they are at doing that so as I previously presumed. What a rude shock! I had relied upon the bare minimum stated above for almost the whole of my life. It was evident thenceforth that I was barely scratching the surface of just how much I could internalize and grasp. I learned that when students are actively involved in their learning, they learn more than when they are passive recipients of instruction. You can imagine that I resolved to participate in class more. Then came the resultant problem: how would I be able to participate constructively in class?

Integration of IT in learning through especially use of dashboards on e-learning sites would be the answer to the problem that dogged me. I found out that through expression of opinions and reading what other students posted on the dashboards, it was possible to refine my thinking and to harness more knowledge from my fellow students than I had previously been doing.

I also came to the realization that, other than just passing on information required by the course outline, lecturers passed on their “industry experience” when teaching. This was an important aspect of the whole learning experience as information was widely available on the internet and anyone could access it, however such experiences gave classroom students an edge over others.

The most important “pickups” for me were the learning theories available to lecturers. I had always thought of learning as a one-directional tool, not knowing that there were several different approaches that taught specific skills. I often wondered what the point of group work assignment was, for example, especially as in some cases one person ended up doing the assignment for everyone else and submitting. (I must say I am guilty of doing this too, as previously the emphasis for me was on the marks available rather than the skills such an assignment was required to confer on me.) However, after learning about behavioral, cognitive and connectivism theories, I now get why different lecturers choose to use a specific techniques or combine several.

Interacting with lecturers from other institutions really made me appreciate Strathmore University even more and the facilities it has availed for student learning. Comparatively speaking Strathmore is a bit

ahead of the other institutions. I resolved this had to reflect in my understanding of the coursework and to reflect on the nature of skills I would have at the end of the course. The same is important, especially in light of the current IT-skewed society that we live in.

In conclusion, I had a good time at the conference. The lessons I picked up firsthand will remain etched in my memory for eternity.

Michael Omugah is an undergraduate student studying Bachelor of Commerce at Strathmore University

Friday, 23 September 2016

Blend of learning theories and practise

Impressions from the IDS Learning Event which took place at Strathmore University in July 2016

Theory versus Practice

It was a vivid reminder of how learning theories simply laid out (such as constructivism, behavioural and cognitive) can be used in a practical sense in the classroom environment to enhance teaching and learning. It was contended that most students are “passive learners” operating at the surface level. This, it was said, has a lot to do with the teaching style.

It is based on this premise that activity-based learning should be encouraged, and measured by use of continuous feedback (avoid long lectures).

It is clear that if the content is too simple, then this leads the learner to boredom but if the content is too complex, then the learner switches off. This is what is expressed as the zone of proximal development.

Use of technology

Technology is mainly used in a restricted manner, handing in assignments and retrieving notes. The use of technology can be enhanced by identifying variables in the teaching and learning environment that can be used to measure learning activities, and if used effectively, can also predict performance and provide clues to points of intervention to facilitate set learning outcomes. I see this as an appeal to the “affective domain” in teaching, where the term “appreciate” (or favourable feeling toward) the outcome also becomes an objective in itself.

Impact on overall administration

The administrators in general are interested in variables such as retention and pass rates. Factors affecting these variables include personal factors, in this regard, Strathmore University appears to do much more than other peer universities through the mentorship programme. This is not the case with the experience from other universities, especially those with high enrolment numbers and a largely online offering of their academic programmes.

Are we doing enough to encapsulate the above?

In the blended learning project at SBS, for instance, a unit such as Strategic Management (offered by Dr. Fred Ogola) was offered as a blended (online as well as face-to-face sessions) as opposed to his other classes which were purely face-to-face. The difference this time was the use of impactful short video sessions (max. 7 minutes, with enhancements by use of technology), a pause to allow reflection

followed with a request to the students to answer some questions (activity); then the next session proceeds, following a similar pattern. This type of approach was well received even with fellow faculty members and is now the prototype of how a blended session 'should look like'.

What was the success factor?

The faculty was primed and given an opportunity to script his class, precise and to the point. The take away is that a session of 10 minutes would be equivalent to a 45 minute, or more, session in class. The session is controlled, students are able to interact with the content at a self-directed pace (containing the student within the proximal zone of development) and if need be, the student can rewind. At the end of the session, every student is "carried along" in the class. This is an enhancement to the teaching and learning environment. This is evidence of learning theory put into practise in an innovative way.

The above model has also been done with Geoffrey Injeni, by his own words 'this is wonderful'.

Currently, faculty with the MBA for Executives are being lined up to pursue this approach.



David Shikuku is a consultant at Strathmore University and the technical lead in the Blended Learning Project. He has 20 years work experience spanning many areas including: accounts, logistics and warehousing, sales and marketing, project management and is currently completing his MBA (UoN). David Shikuku holds a B.Ed (Maths) UoN, Diploma in Information Technology (IMIS), Agronomy (Yara). He has an affinity towards operational excellence helping deliver on overall strategic objectives.

Friday, 23 September 2016

There is no level at which taking in knowledge is enough

Impressions from the IDS Learning Event which took place at Strathmore University in July 2016



Picture credit: Pixapopz/Pixabay. CC0 Public Domain.

I must say, when I knew the programme was aimed at the lecturers, I really tried to think of how it would help me in any way. Initially I knew that to become a lecturer you must have gone through some type of study, and on completion, become a lecturer, but what I did not know is that even when you become a lecturer, you normally still undergo

training here and there to become better at it, and also to learn more!

In the workshops that took place over four days, there were four universities that were participating namely: Kenyatta University (Kenya), Jimma University (Ethiopia), Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences/MUHAS, (Tanzania) and Strathmore University (also Kenya). I was shocked that people who have studied to PHD level would sit down and listen to what someone else had to say. Due to ignorance, I thought that once you have a doctorate degree then 'you know it all' but it turns

out that no-one knows everything. This got me into great surprise about how the people there were so eager to know and learn more as though they knew nothing.

During the sessions, we (the student volunteers) were encouraged to join in the different groups and to participate. I was an active participant in the first group and since, we were mixed, I learnt quite a lot from it. Some of the things I learnt were that we, as students, have different levels of understanding and ways of taking in knowledge hence it's the work of the lecturer to make sure that each and everyone understands and to make sure that students are moving at the same pace.

During the first workshop I also learnt that in order to make a lecture interactive, we ought to engage the students in discussions and group work so that they can also share some of their ideas and not get bored.

In the last two sessions, groups were mainly categorized into respective universities and the main topic of discussion was e-learning, the need to implement it, and how to maintain it. (By e-learning I mean using the internet to teach, for example, people who are not in Kenya or Nairobi and want to enroll in Strathmore, e-learning means they are able to do so and can learn from wherever they are through the internet.) I saw the need to be part of a different university so as to learn more about the education system in the respective country, and how their university functions. I was honored to be part of MUHAS located in Tanzania. It came to my understanding that their level of education is not as advanced as the one in Strathmore University. For instance, in Strathmore it is almost obvious that all lectures use the e-learning platform to either post slides, share videos or give assignments while, at MUHAS, the number of lectures using the platform are around two in every department and some departments do not use it at all. This made me appreciate what Strathmore does for us as students and the different opportunities offered by Strathmore and not to take it for granted.

During my free time (that is during meals and breaks) I managed to interact with different lecturers and they were very surprised at how the university functions, and they loved the hospitality of the university in general, the structures of the university and how disciplined the students are. I can proudly say that I do not take lecturers for granted anymore and I now understand why they do what they do and have learnt to appreciate their good work. Just as they were eager to learn more, despite their high level of education, I am also eager to learn more and have learnt that there is no level at which taking in knowledge is enough.

Finally, I would like to give thanks to the organizers of the workshop for giving me the opportunity to be part of the workshop and to also be part of the great experience.

Linda Nzavi is an undergraduate student at Strathmore University. She is studying for the Bachelor of Business Information technology.

Friday, 23 September 2016

How learning, teaching and research are changing around the world

A personal reflection on our impact on others

It is interesting how, as an institution, we teach and create content for learners; the African Universities' Research Approaches (AURA) programme has helped us to reflect back on our impact: the impact of the learning journey of others. Even after so many years of practice, there is always a new way that we could improve and optimize the time offered us by the learners. It is time to re-examine ourselves, our teaching styles, our approach to research, and how these impact on others; the learners. As a provider of edu-technology; I ask myself, how can I demystify the technology, so as to make it accessible to the faculty in a very simple yet profound way?

Therefore, to be in a room with people who have been there before and who can speak to both the faculty and the likes of me was a real honour and the only down side being the number of people who needed to be there!

There is a sense of self-discovery; a sense of continuous improvement, even just from the sharing of the challenges that lie before us. Those challenges that are new, and those that are not so new, yet the solutions, the approach to the solutions, are varied. This speaks to the diversity that was in the room. This offered different perspectives - the public versus the private, and all of that.

Dealing with new learning environment for adult learners

Yet in all these years of experience, there is yet so much that is new, so much yet unknown and so much yet to learn. This field of education is expanding, and opening up in new ways in different contexts. The presentation on connectedness was a good case in point since it was on what Adult Learners bring to the learning environment, and experience to the table, and how the role of faculty can be as facilitator; not the sage in the room.

In short even, what may appear to have been settled in terms of learning theories have been sufficiently challenged with the newly emerging learning environment - where the people you teach may be more knowledgeable about aspects of the knowledge domain.

Hence the need to facilitate, concretise and formalise knowledge, and to encourage its utilisation as a skill. Encourage learners to learn from each other using social learning and to become a community of learners from remote locations.

Students learn how to take more responsibility for their learning and the teachers; how to prepare material for an independent learner and how to keep the learner engaged even in your absence. Teachers require skills to manage an online community and on how to measure the quality of their delivery as well as new ways to assess the learning outcomes.

Increasing role of technology in education

In terms of the role of technology, and the opportunity and challenges it affords, and how best to navigate the thin line between success and failure. Another important point in how to deal with the shortened feedback loop that has many more touch points. The notes and curriculum that has worked well in the past may require major modification when offered for a technology mediated learning.

It was good to learn there are several attempts to structure the online delivery in the form of a framework. Admittedly this is still a changing process and going forward, opens a new avenue for research work.

All in all we are living in interesting times and we need to be more purposeful and proactive.

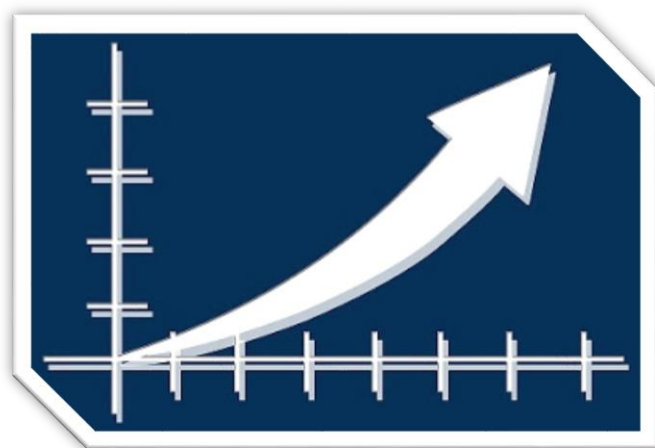


Julius Bwibo, B.COM (1st class, UON), Msc Information Systems (UON), MBA (Strathmore), MAPE (Strathmore), DBA Candidate (UON)

I have worked in the IT industry for over 21 years, I also have experience as a teacher, as a founding faculty member for the IDPM (now the IMIS certification) in Strathmore in 1992. Now I am involved in development: the end to end eLearning offered in Strathmore University, including consulting on how a proposed school of digital learning could be structured. I have travelled and consulted widely in Africa. I am currently working on my Doctoral Thesis having completed Degrees in formal education, business, IT and philosophy.

Friday, 23 September 2016

The continuous learning curve of an academic-cum-manager



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Introduction

I joined the university after a ten year teaching position in a private primary and secondary school in Nairobi armed with a bachelors from a local university in education.

A Kenyan undergraduate degree in education comprises of foundational

courses in education. The courses cover: philosophy, history, sociology, psychology, and communication of education. In my personal reflections over the years I have seen how disconnected the courses were managed (and possibly still being managed to date). This disconnectedness continues to be the main issue that any dedicated teacher has to learn after studies.

IDS Learning Event

The learning event came at a time that I had been struggling to engage technology in my teaching. The theories that had been covered in the undergraduate course were not aligned with the teaching environment. For a teacher, I felt it was a case of "dive in and swim by self". To complicate the issue further, my role as an academic and manager requires appraising faculty on pedagogy. My walk into the learning event was therefore one filled with great expectation on my ever-expanding horizon in teaching.

The event facilitation, and the general presentation of work arising from the African Universities' Research Approaches (AURA) programme, brought out my disconnected undergraduate experience. My personal discovery was how teachers of the theories were also bent on one theory - the behaviourist approach. Secondly it opened my eyes to the reality of how my present faculty is also behaviourist in teaching and in use of technology. Thirdly, that arising out of the learning is my personal struggle to teach using the connectedness of social constructivist approaches. These three learnings are shaping my outlook as the academic manager that I am.

The learning curve

Ever since my undergraduate education, I have held a curious mind on what it is to be a better teacher. This curiosity has made me examine the foundational courses deeply to unravel their value. The "three learnings" I have picked from the learning event are part of the curious academic's journey into education.

The "three learnings" that I got from this event have awakened my desire to change in the following areas.

1. My teaching (which I do on part time basis since my employment is a managerial one). The little teaching I do, I have placed my emphasis on becoming more of a connectivist or constructivist teacher. This I have found to be a journey that I will have to undertake for a while.
2. My role as a manager in a learning institution has to move away from the behaviourist model and adopt some connectivist outlook to solving work related issues. This is important especially where I manage meetings and academics are involved.
3. I have appreciated the value of time in the learning process. Learning how foundational concepts of theories after many years of practise means other academics might be going through the same. It is therefore important to give faculty time to experience teaching and see the value of growth in the profession.

Conclusion

Professional growth requires a mind that is in constant search of learning. The accidental meeting with AURA has opened my horizons to teaching and research that I have not covered in my undergraduate and post graduate education. The learning event, and the entire AURA programme, has been like a volcanic activity in my growth as a professional. It has provided me with several eureka moments that has given my learning curve a new direction.

Stephen Ng'ang'a is trained teacher with a post graduate degree in education management. He works as an Academic Manager at Strathmore University. In his role he is in charge of the teaching and learning processes of the university. He is extensively involved in the student experience from admission to graduation. This student experience requires the development of faculty capable of delivery. The role of faculty development is what has been his contribution to this programme.

Friday, 23 September 2016

Final reflections on the African Universities' Research Approaches (AURA) Programme

What do you feel were the strengths of the AURA programme?

At the onset of the African Universities' Research Approaches (AURA) programme, Strathmore University administration was intent on getting a proof of concept on the most effective approach to nurture a critical mass of dynamic research-engaged faculty and students, and what approaches could inculcate a rich research culture that is responsive to the society. In general, the AURA programme did not last long enough for the University to draw on the lessons. However, the AURA programme created the momentum needed to refresh the University's approach to interventions to improve teaching and research excellence among the staff.

In terms of practical implementation, the novelty of the AURA programme and what was unique included:

- **Co-creation model:** The overall design and implementation framework of the programme has elements and flexibilities that give room for the meaningful input from Strathmore. For example, the curriculum and design of the course is shared in advance for input by the Strathmore team. Our suggestions are taken seriously and acted upon. We are consulted frequently and think together on evolving aspects of the programme.
- **Experiential model of facilitation:** This has worked very well with the young scholars. They were effectively engaged meaningfully throughout the delivery of face to face interventions.
- **Research Informed Implementation:** It has been very helpful to have access to the data from the participants and to try and use these feedbacks in real time to guide programme

implementation. This practice is also reflected in the design of the course and is very highly appreciated by the participants.

- **Creative Commons License:** This is a great way to promote free access to resources generated during the implementation. It is a great boost to the programme.
- **Strengthened individual research capacities of the staff participants.** These include positive results from participating in scholarly conferences, progress in the individual academic research projects by the participants and even in less tangible outputs such as refreshment of theoretical grasp of research methodologies (in AURA Research #1-2 [R1] and [R2] interventions).
- **Strengthened individual research capacities of the Project Coordinators:** The demands of the programme, particularly the publishing of reflective blog articles was a great opportunity to improve the skills among the PCs.

How do you feel the AURA programme could have been improved?

1. **Deliberately focus on an outcome driven implementation:** The benefits of the programme in refreshing the skill sets of the participants in teaching excellence and research capacity was great. However, it would have been more productive to design the programme purposely to achieve, in a progressive manner, tangible results in teaching and research, for example journal publications, etc. this requires reflection and an extensive multi-level design.
2. **Deliberately involve students as participants:** Our experience in the involvement of undergraduate students in the Writer's podium under the AURA Research Course 4 [R4] was very positive.
3. **The consortium should have comprised at least one university from the South.** The role of ITOCA complicated the decision-making processes. In our opinion, it did not bring what we expected it to do. Maybe a leading university on the topic of the project would have been a better option.
4. **Leveraging in on functional linkages:** The programme should pursue the possibility of leveraging in more resources from other partners to increase the effectiveness of interventions. For example mentoring of participants could get a shot in the arm from AuthorAID. Participants could also benefit from a competitive small grants programme, or travel grants from other sources, open to young scholars and students.
5. **Deliberately focus on continuity:** The programme will come to an end. Although institutionalisation efforts may achieve a certain measure, largely there could be missed opportunities if the programme does not deliberately work on exploring other platforms to continue engaging even on a higher plane to keep the tide and momentum high. This, for example, includes actively exploring more grant opportunities to leverage on the winning aspects of achievement and take them to a new level.
6. **Create more opportunities for participants from implementing institutions to learn from one another:** it could probably help to explore the possibility of having participants from the implementing institutions to attend some sessions together. It is critical to explore outcome driven learning opportunities for ALIRT team members from implementing partner institutions from the consortium institutions in specific areas. Explore opportunities for interactions between young scholars in the consortium institutions and implementing institutions could improve growth in personal trajectories of the participants.
7. **Publish and disseminate results of this AURA intervention to wider audiences:** There should be a deliberate design in the second year to broadly disseminate outcomes, including to the audiences in the implementing institutions.

What would you like to see from future programmes in this area of work?

The general technical design of the programme is very well thought out. The model at the consortium level accommodates a north-south partnership to deliver the programme. The implementing partners are a mix of public and private academic institutions, at the moment concentrated in eastern Africa. This design has impacted on the programme delivery as follows: administrative and financial management was governed by unclear procedures and demands. This made the life of PCs very

frustrating in compliance. Better communication on this would have been helpful in managing expectations on both sides of the engagement.

Stephen Ng'ang'a and **Cavin Opiyo** are based at Strathmore University Business School, Strathmore University, Kenya.

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