

CIO EAST AFRICA – Nairobi, Kenya, June 2, 2010

Source: <http://bit.ly/9katYh>

Mobile Phones Set to Replace Desktops in Classrooms

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Delegates gathering at the recently concluded eLearning in Lusaka Zambia debated whether African students will use mobile phones or desktop computers in classrooms. The continent has moved several stages from traditional telecommunications development and now statistics show a third of the people are now mobile phones subscribers. Some delegates argued that the existence of millions of mobile phones means it may no longer be cost effective to use scarce resources to install laptops and desktop computers in schools.

Despite some huge investments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in most African states, the millions of mobile telephones now in private hands may provide the best gateway to learning for students. Comparisons for availability of the two found that the number of people owning and using mobile phones was higher than access to internet or computers.

Research also showed that in a rural set up, a farmer was likely to use a mobile phone for communication compared to computers. This also applied to drivers and conductors at a bus stations. This shows that M-learning (Mobile learning), which has been defined as learning that takes place at anytime in any place using a mobile, was proving to be cheaper and more accessible compared to the laptops. However the process requires formulation of policies and integrating them into the curriculum.

In his presentation at the eLearning conference titled, Learning with Appropriate Technology: Pc labs or Mobile phones, John Tracker, the Director of Learning Lab UK said a mobile technology in a rural set up will be more applicable than a classroom set up with computer technology, which is considered to have great challenges. He noted that since mobile technology has a good personal ownership, there is easy access to learning and content sharing by the students, even at the community level.

Statistics by International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in 2007 show that out of every 100 users, only 5.54 percent use Internet while 28.49 percent are mobile subscribers.

“This means we have a good number using mobile phones compared to Internet or computer users. M-learning facilitates learning than the computers”, said Paul Muyinda, an academician at the Makerere University.

In his paper, *A model for Mobile Learning: Adoption and Implementation in Africa*, Muyinda quotes a research he did in Uganda that showed 98 percent of students in higher learning institutions owned mobile phones. However, we have limited understanding of how to convert them into learning tools,” he said. The Academician said that M-learning gives

support especially to distant learners.

"Some students come from rural areas where there are no computers and even electricity to power them but have access to mobile phones, which makes their communication easier."

He however cautions that M-learning should not be used as a standalone but be supplemented by computers. M-learning is however not understood in Africa because it is embryonic. There is limited or no understanding about its successful adoption and implementation. However, Muyinda says it is quickly being embraced as a distance learning student support system in some universities in Africa. Some Universities have taken the initiative and implemented mobile learning. At the University of Zambia (UNZA), assignments are sent via text to students undertaking specific subjects.

"This has ensured no student missing assignments as was in the past and it is very cost effective," says Director at the Centre for Information Communication, UNZA, Collins Chinyama.

Muyinda noted that mobile phones have in the past been underutilized, just by calling and sending messages adding that there is need to enhance positive changes by looking at what activities can best be used in mobile learning. He said future research will include increased use of mobile learning, performance, satisfaction and content analysis.

M-learning has been proposed as a theoretical subject, awaiting validation.