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Seminar Report

“Supporting Open, Distance and eLearning in African Universities”



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Background

eLearning Africa was the 1st International Conference on ICT for Development, Education and Training, to be held on the continent. It was therefore important that the AVU featured prominently on the Agenda. Hosted by the Government of Ethiopia, the conference was sponsored by Intelsat, Nokia and Microsoft amongst others, with African participation being supported by SPIDER, the African Development Bank and the Ford, Carnegie, Rockefeller, MacArthur, Hewlett and Mellon Foundations.

The ODeL Initiative perceived the Conference to be a unique opportunity to share with African practitioners and international stakeholders the new AVU OER Architecture and accordingly, was the first to sign up to host a pre-conference seminar. This is in keeping with the AVU Strategic Objective 4, which seeks to “*Establish a Research & Innovation Facility to act as a focal point for the generation, organisation and dissemination of relevant knowledge, information and data relating to ODeL in Africa.*”

The seminar goals were as follows:

- 1) To facilitate rigorous discussions on the following issues and provoke feedback for input into the AVU OER Architecture, ACEP implementation and Bandwidth Initiative:
 - a. Capacity Enhancement for supporting ODeL Program Development, Delivery and Management;
 - b. Open Educational Resources and the AVU OER Architecture;
 - c. Bandwidth Consortia to reduce connectivity costs in support of ODeL Programs.
- 2) To summarise and present the key points raised in each discussion
- 3) To generate participant feedback on the seminar via seminar assessment forms

Although over 100 persons had pre-registered to attend the Conference, many of those subsequently contacted by the ODeL Initiative indicated that they would not be attending. In the case of African participants, this was mainly due to an inability to raise the funds required to attend the conference. In all, forty-five (45) participants attended the AVU seminar, representing four (4) continents and eighteen (18) countries.



Seminar Format

Each participant was provided with an AVU folder containing background papers on the presentations. In addition, discussion questions were provided to provoke a dialogue between participants and presenters. Hard copies of the presentations were also provided.

An agenda had been prepared to cater (in terms of time) for the large numbers expected. Given the more manageable size of the group, it was considered appropriate to reduce the time allocated for both presentations and for participant feedback. The new timings were proposed to participants who were happy with the change. It was explained to participants that the AVU would be presenting its activities, achievements and challenges with regard to each of the seminar themes, and requesting their feedback as stakeholders and practitioners who may have experienced similar issues, or may wish to table related issues that the AVU may not have considered.

It was emphasised that this seminar was a two-way process and that the AVU hoped to learn from the accumulated experience around the table as well as to share its own knowledge. Accordingly, whilst thematic presentations were made by Peter Bateman and Sandra Aluoch, Catherine Ngugi summarised and re-presented the findings from each plenary discussion which followed the presentations. This format was greatly appreciated by the participants, several of whom noted that it allowed them to leave the seminar space with a very clear idea of what they had heard and of how they had responded to it.

Session 1 – Open Educational Resources in support of ODEL Programs

Peter Bateman presented an overview of the AVU OER Architecture, explaining how it fitted with the AVU's paradigm shift and new program offering. A definition of OERs was presented, suggesting that "knowledge and education are for the 'common good' and are not 'owned'." The use of Learning Objects was demonstrated and presentation concluded with an explanation of the various OER initiatives ongoing at the AVU. Participants were invited to use or disregard the suggested questions and the statements, queries and responses made in this plenary were noted for presentation.

The presentation generated a lot of discussion, particularly around the area of quality control of OERs and how externally created OERs might be "owned" by African practitioners. It was noted that UNESCO has developed a collection of OERs which it would be pleased to share with the AVU and with all the seminar participants.

The AVU MIT-OCW pilot project also provoked great interest, particularly as regarded the preparation methodology prior to introduction of OERs into African universities participating in the pilot. Participants wished to know the main lesson the AVU had learned from this pilot. It



was explained to them that for future AVU programs, the AVU would know ensure that the authoring will be done by **African academics** in such a way as to meet teaching and learning needs of their own programs in an **iterative process** such that materials can be edited. The need for a longer training period than that during the pilot was also emphasized, hence the ACEP which was to be presented in the following session.

Participants questioned the relevance of MIT materials to African users and the AVU agreed that in fact, the AVU Market survey has shown that Teacher Education, Computer Science, Business Studies, Health and Public Administration are the key areas in which access to quality programs should be increased. The AVU reiterated that it was on the basis of this survey that the AVU had embarked on its new program offering.

A community approach to the development of materials proved of great interest to participants and the AVU explained in some detail the Consortia approach and its cyclical review process to ensure quality at every stage. It was stressed that there other models for community development of materials, e.g. FLOSS and that the AVU remains interested in learning more from other experiences. It was reiterated that the AVU strategy for promoting the participation in OER materials development is the ACEP – a holistic approach to ODeL program development which encompasses issues raised pertaining to training and quality assurance.

In response to the presentation itself, participants asked the following question:

Is there a possibility that the AVU emphasis is too much on supply and not enough focus on demand?

The AVU responded that materials currently under development are based on demand that cannot be met within the residential programs in African universities. Further, the AVU approach is guided by the 'Learning Architecture' which encompasses a variety of development and delivery modes for ODeL programs and therefore moves away from a technology driven model to the use of a blended approach for distance education. It was emphasized that whereas the AVU will not determine the model adopted by African universities, it will ensure that the training is aimed at a spectrum of materials development and delivery possibilities and will consequently range from print-based to satellite broadcasting so as to cater for those "under a tree", those with ubiquitous ICT infrastructures (including connectivity) and all those in between.

In conclusion, the Plenary shared various experiences with regard to Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) and other sorts of licensing, e.g. Creative Commons. A participant from Virginia, USA, explained that her major challenge has been gaining top-level university commitment to ensuring materials are "open" whilst simultaneously ensuring that professors are duly accredited in the same way in which they would be for "regular" publications. The University of Nairobi had faced a similar challenge and addressed it by implementing a framework within which professors develop materials which are recognized for promotion purposes. The professor is then paid for the IPR which devolves to the University. It was noted



that the Association of African Universities (AAU) had launched a project for the Digitalization of Theses and Dissertations which had caused concern amongst academics. The AAU had responded to these concerns by developing a Copyright Manual which is now available upon request. A participant from the University of Mauritius suggested that “Senior management is not clear of the competitive advantage for the organisation once they “open” their resources.” He argued that it is important therefore to focus on explicit collaboration which builds into the development process the value added through by re-authoring / contextualization. Finally, a participant from UNESCO described their Sustainability Model wherein an open-source materials development process is complemented by the use of commercial publishers who re-channel the accruing royalties into subsequent materials development and review processes.

Session 2 – Capacity Enhancement for supporting ODeL Program development, delivery and management:

This was an intensive session in which the complexities of the AVU Capacity Enhancement Program (ACEP) were presented. The need for ODeL program development and delivery to be considered as a support to, rather than being in competition with residential Programs within an environment of scarce human and material resources was, it was explained, the impetus behind the ACEP. The presentation covered how the ACEP would be implemented and its key training components. The advantage of staging a pilot project was explained as were the immediate benefits of the ACEP, such as the Toolkits, Cascade Training and Quality Assurance mechanisms. The possibilities and limitations of Bonding Contracts for ACEP participants were also highlighted. Finally, an illustration of the new ODeL Centres, the hub for program development, was presented.

Participants expressed reservations regarding the cascade training model and expressed doubts that this model would be able to maintain quality. It was conceded that quality maintenance would indeed be dependant on the quality of the initial training and indeed, on resources available to subsequent trainers.

A particularly perspicacious participant wished to know if the ACEP Materials were “Open”. It was confirmed that this would be the AVU’s intention for participating universities. It was then suggested that the ACEP **process** would be worthy of a series of Case Studies for tailoring of OERs for use in Africa. Such an intervention would indeed be a unique addition to existing knowledge in this field and the RIF will be investigating this idea further.

The ODeL Centre Deployment raised some controversy as participants were not clear if this AVU intervention actually comprised a means of technology mediated learning or were simply centres for Distance Learning? It was confirmed that the Centres are a focus point for the



development and delivery of distance education in those institutions where such facilities do not exist. The Centres would be used for the professional training of faculty and for whatever educational purposes the universities see fit. It is *not* anticipated that the Centres would be used to teach students.

More information on the research basis of the AVU approach was requested given that various pedagogical and technical models exist, each of which bring with them inherent cultural values stemming from the context in which they were created. The AVU reiterated that its training design is cognizant of need for quality teaching and learning methodology suitable to the environments pertaining within its Partner Institutions, customization is built into the materials development process. It was stressed that the participating universities will be given the tools to choose how to deploy their new skills. Based on his own experience in Mozambique, one participant recapitulated the need to ensure that teaching and learning tools are ideologically located within the cultural context in which they are to be used.

It was suggested that increasing access to tertiary education in Africa might be viewed as a double-edged sword: on the one hand, unemployment could result from the lack of recognition by potential employers of ODeL based qualifications; on the other hand, such qualifications might increase Africa's "brain-drain" as qualified Africans sought adequate remuneration and life-styles beyond the continent. The AVU acknowledged that its network of Partner Institutions is aware that distance learning and eLearning programs are currently not well recognized by employers. Accordingly, PIs participating in the development of ODeL programs are made cognizant of the need to establish equity between their distance and residential programs within the governance structure of the universities and at a national policy level. One way of achieving this is to ensure that the heads of those departments or colleges which develop and deliver ODeL programs will be on equal footing within the University governance structures to the heads of those departments or colleges which host residential programs.

The AVU also noted with respect to the "brain-drain", that without a critical mass of intellectual capital within a country, a class of people able to influence the perception and reality of the quality of life within their countries cannot come to exist. Indeed, as suggested by the participant who had raised this point— himself an African living in the Diaspora – increased access to tertiary education may indeed be viewed as a Catch 22. This participant informed the Plenary that his organisation, *Wireless Africa*, had compiled a store of information on this subject, which is available upon request.



Session 3 - Bandwidth Consortia to reduce connectivity costs in support of ODeL Programs:

Sandra Aluoch presented the rationale for the AVU's leadership of various bandwidth initiatives. Explicit links were drawn between the challenges faced by African institutions of tertiary education in accessing dedicated and cost-effective connectivity and the minimal use by those same institutions of electronic educational resources. Reference was made to the AVU-commissioned African Tertiary Institutions Connectivity Survey (ATICS) an AVU initiative aimed at gathering data aimed at enhancing connectivity in Africa's tertiary sector, this first bandwidth consortium provided the AVU the necessary experience to manage on behalf of the Partnership for Higher Education the Bandwidth Consortium. The presentation took participants through the research which led to the "VSAT Solution" and the sort of national regulatory framework necessary to make this solution a viable one. Benefits for AVU Partner Institutions and all other Bandwidth Consortium members accrue in terms of dedicated bandwidth at a cost and volume that meets the institution's budgetary and connectivity needs. Finally, participants were given an overview of the future cost trends for those who bulk-buy bandwidth via consortia, the challenges yet to be overcome and the criteria for membership of the Bandwidth Consortium.

Struck by the elevated costs of bandwidth in Africa, participants residing in the rest of the world shared their own costs for private internet connectivity in their homes. At a price of USD 6.00 per month, one participant receives 1 mbps, which is remarkable in comparison to the US\$2500 per month charged for the same connectivity than in Africa. Asked to comment on the differential costings in Africa, a representative from a satellite provider drew the connection between bulk purchase and costs; he argued that as more Africans and more African institutions get "connected", so will the prices of connectivity fall.

With regard to the AVU / Partnership for Higher Education connectivity strategy, participants wished to know what would be done in countries where governments prohibited the use of VSAT. The AVU confirmed that problems experienced in getting VSAT licenses (e.g. in Ethiopia and Zimbabwe) can only be addressed through high level government intervention, a time-consuming process which has nonetheless borne fruit. It was noted that in other cases, even where the government policy framework is supportive, there may be restrictions regarding suppliers, as is the case in Madagascar.

With regard to joining the Bandwidth Consortium it was explained that whereas membership was originally restricted to universities sponsored by the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa, membership is now open to public educational institutions and Research Networks that must be registered as non-profit organizations. In the same vein, a participant wished to know the relationship between the AAU (and its members) and the AVU (and its PIs). Noting that the AVU is an IGO and therefore a formal associate member of the AAU, the AVU



confirmed that the AAU is a member of the Partnership and the AVU is working with them to extend the Consortium prices and access to those reached by the AAU.

Information was sought regarding whether the AVU Bandwidth Initiative supported member institutions in acquiring software licenses? It was noted that the AVU has purchased a central license for *WebCT* and at around 10% of the cost of purchasing their own licenses, has provided sub-licenses to those AVU PIs involved in the current program delivery. A similar arrangement exists with *Interwise* and a previous arrangement (now ended) had been negotiated with Microsoft. The underlying principle of all these arrangements is economies of scale / bulk purchase – the same principle which underlies the Bandwidth Initiative.

An experience from Senegal was shared with the Plenary, whereby Distance Learning Centres are experiencing problems with their connectivity (GDLN Network). A formal request for Partnership was made and the AVU confirmed that it is in discussion about how the two entities might work together given that GDLN is making use of high-end interactive technologies, whilst the AVU is working to provide affordable dedicated bandwidth.

The AVU was questioned on the process of producing multi-media for a low bandwidth environment. It was noted that the AVU specifies download time to all its developers, with a benchmark of 28K (dial-up modem speed). If materials do not conform to this standard, then they must be re-designed. Further, the AVU is exploring the development of rich multi-media versions for on-campus and/or broadband users where appropriate.

The “open” versus “commercial” question made a return with the AVU being asked to justify its use of WebCT rather than an Open Source Learning Management System? The AVU noted that many of its PIs might never before have undertaken the process of developing and delivering programs online and if their first experience was to be a positive one, then the AVU would need to ensure strong support systems / communities – readily available with a commercial LMS but not necessarily present in the case of FLOSS. The AVU clarified that its long-term wish is to support FLOSS development and use within its network of PIs and accordingly all AVU materials are being designed for interoperability across systems. One of the AVU’s major materials development partners, the Open University of the UK, is using an Open Source LMS called **Moodle** and this is of extreme interest to the AVU.

In conclusion, it was noted that the AVU Bandwidth Initiative has sparked a ripple effect of improved connectivity across the continent. Participants were urged to join the Consortium and benefit from the returns!



Participant Feedback

The Conference Organisers provided a Workshop / seminar Evaluation Form, which the AVU was requested to share with participants. This form was used instead of the usual AVU Seminar Evaluation Form, in order not to overburden participants with form-filling. Of the 45 participants, only 26 completed and returned the Seminar Evaluation Form. Specific results are appended.

Overall, respondents rated the AVU ODeL Seminar on the top end of the scale with fifteen respondents rating the seminar as “Good” and eleven respondents rating it as “Very Good.” Respondents also ranked the seminar with regard to content, presentation and management. Two thirds of the respondents found the seminar **content** “Good”, whilst the same number found the **presentation** “Very Good”. In terms of **usefulness**, just under two thirds of the respondents judged the seminar “Good”. On no criteria was the seminar judged “poor”

Criteria	Very Good	Good	Sufficient	Poor
Content	9	15	2	-
Presentation	15	10	1	-
Management	13	11	2	-
Usefulness	9	14	3	-
Overall Evaluation	11	15	-	-

Twenty-five of twenty-six respondents were agreed that the description of the event was matched their expectations. General comments indicated extreme satisfaction, e.g. “Wonderful experience and knowledge-sharing platform...” and “Improved my knowledge! And also a lot of explanations on development of my country – Mozambique – in eLearning!” Respondents had generally appreciated the seminar style, with one remarking, “I did expect there to be more discussion on the concept in general and not necessarily an overview of the AVU’s projects. However they do seem to be trying to cover all the bases – very ambitious – which is positive.” and also, “Most useful. I found the questions raised after the presentations raising issues that AVU does not have answers to, instead of just expressing your strategies.”

Respondents also made the following recommendations:

1. “...Are there any plans to actively learn from the experiences of other ‘virtual university’ projects such as the UK eUniversity?”
2. “...I would suggest following up on a business development basis with these institutions...”



3. "Need more information on technology available to address bandwidth savings issue."
4. "...We urge all the papers to be made available on the website of the organisation..."
5. "Could have appreciated more information on the politics governing bandwidth resulting in such wide disparities of cost."
6. "Most was on plans. Would like to have seen some concrete outcomes."
7. "Good description and presentation on ACEP / AVU activities"
8. "...good with adequate presentations and useful content. I will just like more content on how to help universities that have just started building ODeL capacity."

The final section of the seminar evaluation form pertains to recommendations for future eLearning Africa pre-conference events. Of relevance to the AVU were various requests for practical examples and interventions. These included a request for more **technology partners** to participate in future sessions on bandwidth. The desire for practical examples was further manifested by a request to hear an assessment of the **value** (perceived and real) of OERs for those in Africa who had actually used them. In the same vein was a request for a session on the outcomes of the AVU OER Architecture implementation and of the ACEP.

Finally, the question of **financial sustainability** of eLearning programs generated interest, with specific requests for the presentation of a successful ODeL model case analysis and study from Africa and / or a comparative analysis of the AVU model and unsuccessful models such as the UK eUniversity.



Appendix 1 – Comments from Respondents

Question 7:

Participants were requested to provide general comments on the AVU ODeL Seminar. They provided the following responses:

1. "I would like to receive PPT presentations, above all...Sandra's"
2. "Keep it up!"
3. "A very interesting overview with interesting comments arising from the floor. Are there any plans to actively learn from the experiences of other 'virtual university' projects such as the UK eUniversity?"
4. "It was designed to give us an understanding. I would suggest following up on a business development basis with these institutions. Good job. What is the action and take-away? Good explanation but unclear about the call to action."
5. "Most useful. I found the questions raised after the presentations raising issues that AVU does not have answers on, instead of just expressing your strategies."
6. "Good presentations"
7. "Need more information on technology available to address bandwidth savings issue."
8. "The time given for each session was so small and it was as if all the plans of the presenters was not met. But useful and interesting seminar session."
9. "Wonderful experience and knowledge-sharing platform in this international conference. We urge all the papers to be made available on the website of the organisation before this conference ends for sustainability purposes."
10. "Could have appreciated more information on the politics governing bandwidth resulting in such wide disparities of cost."
11. "Informative. Helpful, open discussions."
12. "I did expect there to be more discussion on the concept in general and not necessarily an overview of the AVU's projects. However they do seem to be trying to cover all the bases – very ambitious – which is positive."
13. "Was looking for more of a debate / discussion of critical issues rather than



an AVU overview. The first presentation was good – perhaps reflective of audience energy.”

14. “Most was on plans. Would like to have seen some concrete outcomes.”

15. “Good description and presentation on ACEP / AVU activities”

16. “...good with adequate presentations and useful content. I will just like more content on how to help universities that have just started building ODeL capacity.”

17. “...quite informative and educative enough, drawing a lot of participation from the delegates”

18. “Improved my knowledge!” And also a lot of explanations on development of my country – Mozambique – in eLearning!”



Appendix 1 – Participant List

Participant Details

	TITLE	FIRST NAME	LAST NAME	INSTITUTION	COUNTRY	ADDRESS	EMAIL
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AVU ODeL Seminar Participants by Country

