Lessons learned while implementing the Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth

Integrating eLearning: Key Challenges for Higher Education Governance

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Transcript

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for inviting me to address you on the topic of eLearning. Just what is eLearning? Is it a course that is entirely online? Can it use cell phones, the technology that reportedly half the world’s population actually use? Can eLearning still include print, that old technology that some think has now left us? And have we managed to grapple with how to integrate face-to-face or ‘contact session’ so that they do not devolve into old-fashioned lectures?

It was difficult narrowing down what I would present to you. There are any number of other very important issues and many lessons we learned while implementing the Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth. I decided to focus on these four areas:

• Open Educational Resources
• Access to Research
• Copyright, and
• Software choices

So, I will start with Open Educational Resources

VUSSC is a global initiative. It stretches across 32 of the smallest countries around the globe. Although I come from Africa and relate most strongly with the region, what I highlight is what we advise around the world.

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To give some point of reference, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology describes its OCW as “. . . publicly available materials that are either a part of or a complete course usually from a higher-education institution such as a university or college.”

And the Open University of the United Kingdom describe their OER as “. . . publicly available resources that may be used for educational purposes.”

Why would an institution not want to participate in the OER movement? If you can receive existing learning materials that are free of charge, you can have teams customise them in less time than it would take to create them from scratch. Why would you as senior managers not try it?

Why would academics not want to work smarter and produce more output with less input? There are collections of materials and resources that can help to fast track materials development. Why would development agencies consider funding learning content development from scratch any more?

COL has provided search tools to help your staff find existing course materials as a starting point. There will not be enough to compile entire programmes without still having to having to research and write materials, but it could accelerate the process by months.

In performing the assembly of OER, institutions sometimes use specialised tools, some are ‘free’ and some proprietary. Before settling on any new tools, think about the kinds of materials that will be sourced and what you need to deliver to learners. Typically, materials are:

- Word processor documents
- Web pages
- Audio files (podcasts)
- Video files (YouTube)
- Pictures (Flickr)

Often, working with these materials does not require such sophisticated tools or uniquely skills teams.

Is there a key to success? Yes – it’s the old ‘keep it simple, stupid!” concept.

The more complex the tools, the more likely it is they will break, the lecturers will be frustrated, the learners will not get through their exams and you will end up complaining to your consultants!

One simple tool for print materials that can be delivered via the Internet is the COL ID Template.

And when your IT staff keep asking for money for new servers, ask them if they are taking advantage of “the cloud”. These are services offered via the Internet that are often low cost and sometimes free of charge.

Let’s move on to Access to research.

Why is it that we insist on staff and learners publishing in journals that we ourselves cannot afford to buy?
There are over 4,000 free journals, many of which have peer review processes – but we continue to have listed publications in which to publish that prevent us from being able to legally distribute copies of the articles to distance education learners?

This list on 4 slides gives some indication of the journals, and institutions backing free journals.

If you want to find open access journals, COL’s Information Resources Centre page has links to all the ones we can find. So, why do we like to discriminate against ourselves and others?

Let us touch on the publications from our own institutions. If you go to Google or Bing and search for the research work published by YOUR institution – will you find it? If not, why?

I don’t understand why Africa’s research is so secret; that we don’t want anyone to access it. I understand in many cases, the papers are logged in the institution’s library and nothing lands up on the Internet. The simple reality of this is that people think that Africa does not produce much research and so it needs to be done for African institutions. What is needed now, is for our institutions to publish ALL research on the Internet!

If you need a repository in which to publish research work and don’t want to break the budget, try a service like Scribd. The US Government seems to think it is suitable as a communication tool for its white papers.

Copyright is an area that managers frequently shy away from and I can assure you, you cannot afford to do that. You need to make a few decisions about copyright in your institution.

I will not worry too much about the ownership of the materials staff create because my understanding is that most African institutions already have policies making works created by staff the property of the institution.

I will briefly touch on the main options here to highlight where attention is needed:

Firstly, I refer you to COL’s webpage on copyright were we provide information on the topic. When dealing with copyright in your institution, you need to find a local attorney who knows both the national copyright laws and Creative Commons. I cannot give legal advice; I can only indicate where you need to look.

These are the main copyright options to look out for:

• (C) All rights reserved
• Creative Commons:
  o Attribution
  o Share-Alike
  o No Derivatives
  o Non-Commercial
This option needs very little introduction. It says you can buy and read the work. You may not copy it, or share it with learners, or do much else with it without paying additional fees to the publisher. All rights reserved materials are of no use when working with OER and cannot be shared over the Internet, not even in a closed online classroom with registered learners. And not even duplicated and sent via the postal system without paying additional fees.

Creative Commons is a non-profit organisation based in the USA. They write copyright contracts that we can use free of charge. These contracts tell others what they CAN do with our works. If you want to do anything more with the work that the owner has specified, you can always write to the person (or company) and ask them permission to do what you want.

You need to be aware of 4 basic restrictions in Creative Commons contracts.

The BY restriction, which is ‘by attribution’ or ‘with attribution’ requires the user of the material to attribute the original author when producing a new version based on the original one.

The SA restriction means “share alike” and asks that if you create a derivative work, that you share this new version with others in much the same way as you received the version with which you started.

The NC or “non commercial” restriction has been the most contentious but it seems the meanings are now becoming clearer. Materials marked with NC can be adapted, reused and shared. You can recover costs but may not ‘profit’ from the materials. On this one, you need to consult a lawyer to check for your national interpretations.

The ND restriction means “no derivatives” – you can use the material as-is, you may share the materials as you like, but not change them.

For OER, a whole range of licenses is possible. The only one in this list that is not feasible is the old ‘all rights reserved’.

One area to watch still is the use of graphics from the Internet. Because an image is on the Internet does NOT mean your teams can use it in course development. Each original website needs to be checked and the terms of the copyright honoured.

A pragmatic starting point for choosing institutional licenses might be these:

- Creative Commons for papers & speeches
- Creative Commons for research works
- All rights research for publishers that make profits

The area of software choices cannot simply be delegated to the IT department. As with many decisions, informed senior management input is needed to make sound institutional decisions.

Different computer programs create different formats. Converting between formats is feasible, but the more sophisticated documents will change formatting and frustrate course development teams. You need to choose one office suite for the development process. Likewise, there is a range of operating systems that could be used.
Both operating systems and office suites are being constantly upgraded and whereas these were very
different in past years, they are getting closer to each other. In 2010, the formats used will be more
convertible or transferrable than ever before.

In the meanwhile, think about what programme suites your institution uses now – what is most popular.
Make institutional decisions that are pragmatic and not based on ideology.

Use the software most people in the development teams are comfortable with and when the job has been
completed, convert to a range of other formats.

I have covered in brief, just four of the areas in which choices must be made. These are management
choices. And there are more than these, but I selected these to highlight today.

Just in the area in which I have spoken, I would like to suggest these questions:

• When creating materials, can we source good base materials? If not, why?
• When publishing papers, can we use open access journals? If not, why?
• When research is generated, can we publish this on the Internet? If not, why?
• When publishing any learning materials or research, can we use a Creative Commons license? If not,
  why?
• When releasing materials, can we publish in multiple formats so that most people can access them? If
  not, why?

And I really have to ask the question: “Is Africa really open for business in its universities?” I think it is,
but I cannot find much evidence of it on the Internet, which is where the world looks.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak with you.