The African Virtual University Project

Making ideals a reality: Curtin’s African Virtual University Experience

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The African Virtual University/Université Virtuelle Africaine
Bridging the digital divide while building capacity for Africa’s development
AVU’s Past

- The AVU was established in 1997 as a World Bank project to increase access to Higher Education across Africa by harnessing the power of ICTs.
- Originally based in Washington the AVU is now an independent, intergovernmental, pan African organization with Headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya with an expanding Network of Partner Institutions across Africa.
AVU and Curtin

- Curtin, in partnership with the AVU delivers Business Studies degree and diploma programs to AVU Partner Institutions: Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania.

- **Goal**: increase access to quality higher education across Africa.

- **Purpose**: strengthen capacity of the AVU and its Partner Institutions to facilitate the development and delivery of degree and diploma programs.

AVU has over 30 partner institutions across 17 African countries.
Curtin’s Role

- The Curtin Business School (CBS) - Perth – BBA providers.
- Curtin’s Vocational Training and Education Centre (VTEC) - Kalgoorlie – Diploma providers.
- The Project involves a partnership between Curtin's Learning Support Network (LSN), CBS and VTEC. The LSN is coordinating and managing all aspects of the Project.
• To facilitate pedagogically viable outcomes, learning materials are contextualised to ensure students are not disadvantaged by language and cultural barriers.

• A website has been developed to facilitate skills transfer and mentoring between Curtin, the AVU and the Partner Institutions.

• An instructional design & contextualisation plan was formulated for the development of the BBA and Diploma learning materials to enable multi-modal delivery.
Challenges

• Each country must address the challenge of transferring learning materials and technologies from one cultural context to another to meet learners’ needs (Warschauer, 2003).

• Online learning materials developed from affluent Western nations usually reflect Western cultural assumptions.

• Cultural differences may be further compounded by the abstract nature of online communication.

• Interactivity improves learning outcomes, slow delivery increases frustration.
The instructional design process addressed the AVU’s multi-modal delivery issues including:

- cultural sensitivities,
- English language abilities,
- technical facilities,
- participating students’ learning styles,
- available financial and human resources
- unreliability of online connectivity,
- inaccessibility to online learning resources,
- unreliability of live satellite broadcasts,
- inability of AVU students to purchase textbooks, and
- Increased role of AVU facilitators.
Learning materials and textbooks

- The BBA requires students to purchase textbooks. Textbooks in the Sub-Saharan African region are expensive. Solutions:
  - Low cost readers and additional online resources (e.g., Curtin Library’s eReserve).
  - Weekly video recordings of lecturers discussing particular concepts.
  - A book drive held at Curtin for students to donate second-hand books to the AVU.
  - Reduced reliance on textbooks.
Connectivity

• Online connectivity failures presented a significant technical limitations. Solutions:
  – Backup copies of the WebCT units uploaded onto local servers.
  – Utilise faster WebCT server in New York.
  – Develop materials for multi-modal delivery, including WebCT, CD-ROM, and print.
  – Utilise enhancing media for online learning, including interactive illustrations, online quizzes, illustrated case studies, etc.
Satellite Broadcasts

• Unreliable 2-way satellite broadcasts.

Solutions:

– Mail videotaped lectures to each of the learning centres – constitutes a significant pedagogical shift in the design and delivery of the Business Studies program to the AVU.

– Employ other technologies, e.g., ‘Interwise’ which allows for bi-directional delivery of audio streams along with presentation materials over low level bandwidths.
Role of Facilitators

• Facilitators were required to adopt traditional tutoring strategies. Solutions:
  – Clarify expected roles and workloads of the AVU facilitators’ role.
  – Review the instructional design plan so that teaching strategies reflect AVU’s expectations of the facilitators’ roles.
Strategies - Contextualisation

• Definition: Adapting learning materials and assessments to include Australian, international and local African contexts “to bridge the divide between globally and locally relevant education” (Ziguras, 2000). Specifically:
  – African students’ learning experiences are not disadvantaged,
  – the curriculum is sensitive to the social, political and religious environments, and
  – there is balance between Australian, international and African perspectives.
This adaptation was achieved through liaison with VTEC (Diploma), CBS (BBA) and LSN. A contextualisation process was developed – endorsed by the Joint Curriculum Contextualisation and Quality Committee (JACCQC) with representatives from Curtin, the AVU and African partner universities. The process has three stages:

1. Pre-course preparation
2. Feedback from African facilitators / students
3. Final revision
1) Pre-course preparation

• A literature review provided basis for a checklist focusing on issues in: unit content, teaching and learning, assessment, instructional design, skills transfer, language, and gender.

• Localise content and promote a sensitive, appropriate, multi-cultural learning experience, and lessen negative learning experiences.
1) Pre-course preparation (cont’d)

• Suggested teaching strategies:
  – Shift perspectives from Australian to African;
  – Localize content, e.g., problem solving, etc.;
  – Provide comparative explanations;
  – Provide clear guidelines for Australian writing;
  – Remove insensitive elements, e.g., culturally, politically, religious, etc.;
  – Remove colloquialisms and jargon;
  – Provide a glossary of terms; and
  – Develop case studies for the African context.
2) Feedback from facilitators and students in Africa

- Units were modified units based on contextualisation feedback.
- Feedback from facilitators was informal.
- Students completed an online feedback survey identifying areas that were working well and areas that needed improvement.
- The contextualisation checklist was revised according to this feedback.
3) Final version

- Flexibility approach to contextualisation.
- Some of the main challenges:
  - Limited knowledge of African students’ context.
  - Feedback restricted by technical problems.
  - Finding balance between Australian, international and local perspectives.
  - Some units are readily adaptable for transnational education, others are not.
  - Inconsistency with contextualisation strategies implementation.
A way forward

• Contextualisation is iterative / collaborative.
• We are building on our experiences so far by developing contextualisation standards.
• Main strategies is the development of case studies specifically for the African context, providing opportunities for students to reflect on the knowledge in their own countries, and draw on comparisons with Australian and international situations.
Strategies – Skills transfer and support

Providing staff support for online learning

• Curtin is committed to supporting staff in Africa to learn how to develop their own learning materials.
• Providing academics in Africa to develop the capacity to produce online learning materials to reverse years of overseas cultural domination.
• Lack of knowledge on how best to support staff needs stems from a variety of causes:
  – electronic communication difficulties
  – distance & travel costs preclude frequent visits
  – limited contact between Curtin & partner institutions.
• This project aims to use action research.
Providing student support in online learning

• Curtin is committed to supporting students to make the best use of learning resources provided.

• Curtin is committed to providing student-centred constructivist learning experiences. Four kinds of support (Roman & Mogashoa, 2002) is needed:
  – Learning provided in context.
  – Engagement with content.
  – Development of learning skills.
  – Motivation and nurturing.
Strategies – Skills transfer and support

• Providing contextual learning and engagement with content has led to providing case studies that links student experiences and stimulates students to reflect upon ethical, emotional and cognitive issues arising from the content.

• Developing learning skills involves providing resources on teaching and learning issues. Resources have been provided to students through the student induction process, and creation of a student support website.

• Motivation and nurturing is too difficult to provide at a distance, and has not been addressed.
• Strategies are continuing to be developed through visits by Curtin staff to Partner Institutions and student questionnaires.

• Students completed an online questionnaire which examined the effectiveness of their learning experiences.

• A preliminary analysis of the questionnaire responses revealed a number of strengths and weaknesses of the program.
CD-ROM learning materials were accessible and understood by most students.
The learning materials were well designed to facilitate effective learning.
Access to online learning resources was helpful.
Most students were satisfied with facilitators’ support for explaining the content and activities.
Many students found the learning materials and learning activities to be interesting and relevant.
Students enjoyed collaborating and sharing ideas.
Computer and Internet skills improved.
Evaluation - Concerns

- Learning materials were often not available on time.
- Access difficulties to textbooks and computers.
- Unreliable connectivity. Needed print materials.
- Poor Internet access prevented students submitting assignments on time.
- Students learning styles and needs were not met.
- Dissatisfaction with the learning environment, e.g., low quality furniture, noisy classrooms.
- Students required more time to complete units.
- Learning materials did not relate to prior knowledge.
- Difficulties with showing the lecturers’ videos.
Evaluation – Lessons learned

• Continue developing an understanding of the Sub-Saharan African context for delivering education.
• Continue to accommodate AVU students’ learning needs through appropriate learning strategies.
• Provide opportunities for students and facilitators to adapt to multi-modal distance education.
• Allow students to work at their own pace and for assignment submission flexibility.
• Delivery of learning materials adopt a “just-in-time” model for accommodating students’ learning needs.
• Remove dependence upon textbooks.
Conclusion

• The development of the AVU Business Studies Project employs processes that address unique complexities and challenges not normally found within ICT-based higher education programs.

• While strategies were employed to deal with these challenges, there are still lessons being learned as the program progresses.

• The partners continue to communicate, plan and develop strategies for addressing these challenges for establishing a model of best practice for achieving the ideals.
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