

THE E-LEARNING INITIATIVE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MAURITIUS: SCENARIOS OF THE FUTURE



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ABSTRACT

This article looks at the evolution of e-learning at the University of Mauritius from a practitioner's perspective. The main approach is action research and the main methods used are experiential reporting, desk studies, and practice-based evaluation. It critically assesses the extent to which the objectives have been achieved and the transformational impact that innovative practices have brought to the educational system of the University. This research also examines to what extent the policies of the university have promoted or hindered the progress of e-learning as an alternative to or complementary with the existing educational system at the University. Furthermore the research focuses on the innovative alternative futures framework, using the techniques of horizon scanning and signalling to analyse the different future scenarios with respect to the e-learning initiative at the University. The main observation is that e-learning practices at this University have come a long way since 2001. Access to education and to the university has broadened and e-learning has become an accepted practice among the learning community and in the system of the University. However on the policy side, the reaction has been timid and there is a lack of decision making to make e-learning a mainstream pedagogy as well as transform the university into a real dual-mode institution. This had the effect of e-learning remaining on the periphery of the system being treated in a logic of permanent beta experimentation. The analysis and findings of this research however demonstrates that this endeavour is ready to be scaled up from an experimental shell to a national open-learning model in line with the

establishment of an Open-University in Mauritius.

INTRODUCTION

The University of Mauritius has a long history of more than 40 years since it was established in 1965. The concept of distance education emerged in the 1990s and the Centre for Distance Learning was established in 1993. The impetus came from the need to adopt a new teaching, and learning approach in certain modules, due to the inadequacy of the conventional method to fulfil the expectations of both "the students and the Faculty members".

In this endeavour, the University of Mauritius was supported financially, and also in terms of expertise (through the Laurentian University, Canada), by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). Furthermore, a report in the early 90s by Sir John Daniel made the recommendation that the "University of Mauritius has the opportunity to rapidly expand its curriculum rapidly by the use of distance learning courses".

In 2001, to catch the eLearning bandwagon, the VCILT was created in bid to modernize the distance education concept by fully utilizing the possibilities offered by IT-enabled networked systems and the Internet. The Virtual Centre for Innovative Learning Technologies is an initiative in its tenth year of existence. Such a project of an unprecedented innovative nature in a traditional university brings a significant amount of disruption in the overall system. The effects and impacts of such disruption (often referred to as constructive disruption or disruptive innovation) is very difficult to measure over a short span of time as the process does not reach maturity levels in such short

moments. Such initiatives started as experimental projects and it is never clear when they have matured into operational and quasi-permanent processes in the institution.

In 2004, the Lifelong Learning Cluster (LLC) was setup as an initiative of the VCILT. The LLC regroups three centres namely the VCILT, the CDL (now known as the Centre for Professional Development and Lifelong Learning) and the CITS (Centre for Information Technology and Systems). The Lifelong Learning Cluster (LLC) was created with the objective to pool resources from these three Centres (human infrastructure and financial) to technologically design programmes of studies and identify and supervise research projects in the ICT and Lifelong Learning. The LLC became the focal point for satisfying the existing and emerging needs of non-conventional learners. To summarise the concept, the LLC emerged as a *virtual* faculty which was empowered to mount and run its own courses and enrol students on its taught and research programmes, without compromising on the individual autonomy of the centres. Since its inception in 2004, the University has witnessed exponential increase in the enrolment of students on the so-called *non-conventional* programmes that regroups traditional distance education programmes and online programmes. Since 2004, the VCILT emerged to become the teaching, research and development arm of the Lifelong Learning Cluster, the CITS as the ICT infrastructure arm and the CDL as an essentially administrative arm of the cluster.

The research questions that will be addressed in this paper are as follows:

- What are the policy issues that contribute to the success or hindrance of such initiatives in a traditional university?
- How can the existing maturity achieved by the VCILT model be scaled up on a national level to promote open education?

THE RESEARCH APPROACH

According to Wikipedia, action research is a "*reflective process of progressive problem solving led by individuals working with others in teams or as part of a community of practice to improve the way they address issues and solve problems*". Action research is basically research that leads to action that uses a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action (Lewin, 1946). Figure 1 illustrates a simple model of the cyclical nature of the typical action research process adapted from the work of MacIsaac (1995).

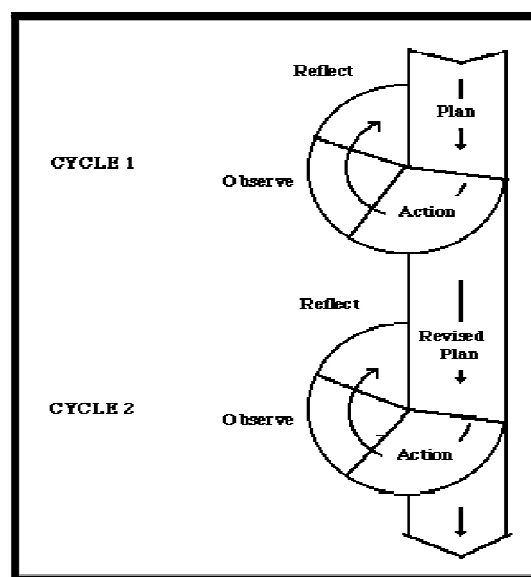


Fig 1: Action Research Cycles

- What is the overall impact of innovative learning technologies on the educational system of the University with respect to the existing teaching and learning framework?

Three main research methods have been used in the process

- Desk Research Study
- Expert Observation and Critical Reflection
- Futures thinking and the alternative futures Framework

THE ALTERNATIVE FUTURES FRAMEWORK

An alternative future is a framework for thinking about the future. Futurist Jim Dator first began talking about alternative futures when he catalogued thousands of images from film, literature, art, news, and elsewhere that in one way or another represented the future. What he found is that we imagine the future in one of four possible ways. These futures are the alternative futures: growth, constraint, collapse, and transformation¹. Signalling and horizon scanning allows us to create images and stories of the future that are grounded in the logic and intuition of the present. Because the future does not yet exist we cannot predict it, but we can build logical, intuitive, and internally consistent stories of possible futures.

Concept	Definition
Alternative Futures	First talked about by Futurist Jim Dator, the alternative futures are growth, constraint, collapse and transformation. They are scenarios we use to think about the spectrum of possible futures. They help us think about the future implications of decisions we make today.
Forecast	A forecast is a singular version of the future. A forecast is not a prediction, but a highly plausible future backed with signals and trends, both qualitative and quantitative.
Horizon Scanning	Horizon scanning is the exercise of continuously gathering and understanding signals in order to have a constant read on what shifts are coming up on the horizon.
Scenarios	Scenarios demonstrate a spectrum of possible futures within the same theme. Scenarios are frequently connected to one forecast. We may forecast that the proportion of youth in Kenya is on the rise, a set of scenarios will then explain the multitude of possible effects this will have on Kenya.
Signal	A signal is any event, innovation, disruption or local pattern that points to a larger shift on the horizon. Individually, signals may appear to be minor fluctuations. But taken together, they can form the heart of significant new trends.

Table 1: illustrates the definitions of essential futures concept (GeSCI 2011)¹

¹ Module 3 of the African Leadership in ICT course by GeSCI – <http://elearning.gesci.org>

The reason we want to do this is to ensure that whatever new policy we design is going to be resilient and affective in the face of what may seem as unexpected changes to our landscape. The table 1 above illustrates the definitions used in the elaboration of the alternative futures framework with respect to the e-learning initiative of the University.

To apply the futures thinking methodology and the alternative futures framework to the e-learning initiative, we start with four main questions that are relevant. We then move to a horizon scanning and signalling for the future of the e-learning initiative within the University and with respect to the external environment. We will then elaborate on alternative futures with respect to scenarios related to growth, constraint, collapse and transformation of the initiative.

The four key questions for the e-learning initiative

The four key questions outlined here, have been discussed in previous chapters and they are used in this chapter as the basis for the futures thinking, identification of the signals and elaboration of alternative futures and scenarios.

What are the key priorities of the e-learning initiative for the next 10 years?

The first priority is to maintain the alignment with the strategic directions of the University. This means to increase access and intake and to promote lifelong learning at the University. The second priority is to keep the momentum in terms of research and development that can lead to outputs with continuous impacts on the educational system of the University. The third priority is to become self-sustaining and maintain the financial sustainability of the initiative. In short the key priority of the initiative is to survive either within the University system or the national educational framework.

How do the latest policies at National and University level support or hinder the e-learning initiative?

The Government is promoting access to tertiary education with the aim of having one graduate per family. This type of policy is favourable for the e-learning initiative as more and more people including mature learners will favour the flexible online mode of education. On the other hand with the aim to set the Open University of Mauritius in operation, the e-learning initiative might be called upon to restrict its operations to being a research and development unit and a service centre to the University. In that case with more and more funding being cut from the University's budget this might have a negative impact on the initiative. The University is facing constraints of space and the need to adhere to Government's vision. As such the University has the policy to take more and more students and given that the space variable is fixed, the University might promote the initiative to support its policy of opening access and increasing intake.

What internal factors will affect the future of the initiative in the university?

The lack of stable University senior management means that the initiative might be subject to unstable and constantly changing policies as well as subject to the prejudices if any of new management people. The initiative has so far relied on its own competencies and human resource to run courses, and it might keep on suffering from the lack of involvement of diverse faculty members for a number of reasons. Financial constraints on the University might become the key argument to halt such initiatives as the improvement of teaching and learning is not yet a practical priority of the University despite being a conceptual priority.

What external factors will affect the initiative in the University?

The initiative has found in *in-service* teacher training (continuous professional development) a solid justification for its existence with an interesting potential to positively impact on the quality of national education system in the long run. With the Mauritius Institute of Education being in the pipeline to become a degree awarding institution and being the sole institution officially mandated for teacher training, the e-learning initiative might soon find itself restricted to engage into innovative teacher training courses for which it is an established pioneer. The Open University of Mauritius if operational will take another established component of the e-learning initiative that is online distance education programmes. On the other hand, Government might decide, although quite unlikely, to tap on the 10-year experience and expertise of the e-learning initiative to leapfrog the Open University Project.

Identifying the signals

In this section we identify the main signals through the horizon scanning activity which has been carried out through the four key questions as highlighted above.

Strategic Directions of the University of Mauritius (5 signals)

Signal 1: Opening Access

Description

Increasing student access forms part of the Strategic Direction 2 (Knowledge Diffusion) of the University of Mauritius. The Government sees the tertiary gross enrolment rate of Mauritius to be relatively low compared to developing countries in Asia for instance. The University thus 'endeavours to explore various avenues to increase student access and provide quality education to benefit the largest number of students possible including underserved and

lifelong learners while maintaining affordability'. To achieve this objective, the University has established a set of strategic steps and the promotion and provision of innovative and multiple modes of delivery are one of them.

Implications (Growth, Constraint, Collapse and Transformation)

Increasing access has a few implications with respect to growth. This means that a basic entry criterion has to be reviewed and room for mature candidates and recognition of prior learning should exist. This will mean a start in the transformation of the educational model and there is then a need to further strengthen the e-learning initiative. Catering for mature people means the need to capitalise on emerging technologies for learning to provide them with the flexibility they need to cope with the social and professional obligations.

Delaying the establishment of a formal framework and policy for recognition of prior learning may establish constraints on the growth of the initiative which in the long run might lead to its collapse. The lack of an established formal learning support framework might also lead to high drop-outs; which in turn can cause disinterest and lack of belief from major stakeholders towards the initiative.

To increase access through the initiative also implies the development of a sound business model. On one hand the aim of increasing access is also to increase fairness towards the underserved and on the other hand, increasing access implies increased cost and the need for more funding or reliance on external funding source such as introduction of tuition fees amongst others.

Signal 2: Increased Intake

Description

Increased intake has often been confused with opening access by many within the

university itself. While increasing intake clearly means increasing the number of students, increasing access might not necessarily mean same although increasing access can in a way contribute towards increasing intake. Increasing access basically means opening the doors of the University to people who would otherwise not be able to join the University for further studies. The University is under constant and recurrent pressure from Government to increase intake every year but the University has not really been able to expand physically in terms of space. In the institution's strategic plan mention has been made of the decentralisation of the University's activities through the establishment of remote University antennas. This has not yet been implemented.

Implications (Growth, Constraint, Collapse and Transformation)

The fact that the university is currently unable to expand physically and that this is also a costly initiative, and on the other hand with a policy of increasing intake, (distance) e-learning becomes a sine qua non condition and a strategic approach for achieving the University's objective without the need to overcrowd the campus. This will facilitate an obvious growth for the initiative. On the other hand, opening the University for late hours might solve to some extent the problem of space constraint and that of an overcrowded campus, but this has cost and safety issues and other implications related to conditions of service of employed staff.

Furthermore, the lack of a clear policy for the University to further develop e-programmes might not have the expected effect with respect to the e-learning initiative which will inevitably lead to collapse given that in the long run the University will not find it viable to keep investing in the centre. The UoM Enterprise, a private entity created under the University of Mauritius Trust can be a boost for countering the possible collapse

of the initiative as innovative fee-paying e-programmes can be mounted and delivered under that private entity and the profit generated can be re-injected in the further development of the University and to promote the initiative itself.

Signal 3: Research and Development

Description

Strategic Direction 1 of the University is on Knowledge Creation. Knowledge creation inevitably occurs through research and development activities. The first goal of the Knowledge Creation Strategy is to re-dynamize pure and applied research at the University. The University wishes to sustain funding for research demonstrable outputs and to reward and recognise outstanding research performances. The promotion of research and development activities has become a national priority and the Government has voted a budgetary provision of 100M rupees for the promotion of research in the country.

Implications (Growth, Constraint, Collapse and Transformation)

Access to research funding for projects related to innovative learning technologies will be beneficial for short to medium term sustainability of the initiative and will assist to its expansion. The ability to transform research and development activities into 'consumable products' both within the University (achieving the strategic objectives) and to the outside world and global community through consultancies will generate funds and maintain the initiative and the University at the cutting edge of learning technologies that will assist the University in its endeavour to become a world-class quality education provider.

Research findings with respect to the integration of ICT in the educational system can be beneficial for the initiative to strengthen its position although the risk for inconclusive experiments might

bring the University authorities to rethink about the initiative. The e-learning initiative having set a strong educational technology research base can prove to be beneficial for its transformation into a highly specialised research centre that will disseminate its findings to the academic community for the enhancement of teaching and learning. The implications for this as being the core activity that the initiative will focus on can result in collapse if continuous external funding cannot be regularly secured.

Signal 4: Quality Teaching and Learning

Description

Goal number 5 (Fostering innovative e-learning systems) of the Strategic Direction 2 (Knowledge Diffusion) stipulates that *"Universities all over the world are under pressure to integrate technologies in their teaching and learning, in response to the urgent need to reduce delivery costs, increase access, improve the quality of learning materials and ensure relevance to meet the requirements of the new breed of learners of the 21st century in terms of independence, autonomy, flexibility and development of critical and reflective thinking."* (UoM 2006)

While many universities have focused on the importance of research and development activities, more and more institutions are also realising that quality of teaching and especially the quality of the learning experience of their students cannot be compromised for the sake of research activities. As a consequence a number of international institutions have either centres for teaching and learning enhancement, or centres for ICT in education or educational technologies. However quality of teaching and learning is a non-tangible and not easily measurable indicator and the return on investment (ROI) is not necessarily seen in terms of revenue and income generated.

Implications (Growth, Constraint, Collapse and Transformation)

From the strategic plan, it is clear that the University has made the official commitment to support the improvement of teaching and learning through the use of modern information and communication technologies. However, as the needs of the digital native learner have evolved, the educational systems have remained the same overall. Using ICT as a tool to enhance teaching and learning implies a need to review traditional quality assurance systems and feedback mechanisms which are obsolete in the knowledge age. While a new educational ecosystem will be missing there is the risk of the initiative not expanding as needed and therefore the transformation of the existing systems will not take place. This also implies that more and more academics have to be concerned with the e-learning initiative and the paradox is that it is mainly research that is rewarded in the university and often teaching recognition is sidelined in promotions exercises.

Signal 5: Budgetary elements

Description

Over the past five years the University has seen its financial grant from the Government on the decline while its budget has kept increasing. The University has been and is still being subject to Government pressure to increase intake in line with the policy of one graduate per family, and on the other hand the financial support is diminishing while the undergraduate education remains free, meaning that the University cannot claim tuition fees from its full time students. Furthermore, more students mean more programmes, more lecturers and part-timers and therefore increased expenses on staff salary. From a purely administrative perspective, the aim is to cut down first on cost centres that are centres that consume money rather than generate funds.

Implications (Growth, Constraint, Collapse and Transformation)

Sustainable funding for the initiative is the key for its survival and constant growth within the University. The e-learning initiative has matured into an academic unit which offers fee-paying courses. So far the initiative has been able to prove itself as an income generating 'cost' centre. This is a positive type of paradox and if this type of trend can promote the growth of the initiative. However, it has also relied a lot on external sources of funding which are not recurrently guaranteed. If the initiative is unable to maintain the same level of financial sustainability then it can easily be dismantled and attached as an academic unit under one difficulty. This will definitely collapse the e-learning initiative and confines it to being a classical University unit serving a subject area which in reality does not have a big demand on the Mauritian market as such. On the other hand, budget constraints can also transform the e-learning initiative into an established university policy which is implicit in the education system. If the initiative manages to reduce the need for physical space, achieve economies of scale and increase intake and income then it will transform the whole teaching and learning landscape of national tertiary education.

University Policies, Structure and Management (3 Signals)

Signal 1: The Reorganisation of the University

Description

The University of Mauritius is undergoing a reorganisation both in terms of its structure and in terms of its senior management. In the past three years, the University has had one Vice Chancellor (VC) leaving office earlier than planned, one acting VC for 18 months, one VC for 2 years and one acting VC for 5 months. The University has recently in June 2012 appointed another VC for a period of three years. Given this lack of stability at

the level of senior management, there is often uncertainty as different vice-chancellors might have different perspectives and prejudices of the situation. On the other hand, the University has approved the principle of merging of the Centre for Professional Development and Lifelong Learning (CPDL) and the VCILT into the Centre for Educational Technology and Lifelong Learning.

Implications (Growth, Constraint, Collapse and Transformation)

The merging of the two centres can help in strengthening the position of the university as a dual mode institution. However the merging of the two centres will weaken the concept of the lifelong learning cluster which will no longer exist as the centre will have a new academic board. This can lead to the new centre being exposed to more difficulties in getting the support of faculties as the newly composed academic board will no longer contain academic representatives of faculties but they will instead be co-opted as and when needed. This will be a constraint as many initiatives can experience issues at the level of higher committees. Furthermore there can be a collapse of the initiative as the centre will resemble more and more an academic department deprived of a parent faculty. The trend will be that more and more voices will express the opinion that the centre be attached to a faculty and in turn will enter the classical system of the university. There will be little room for the promotion of innovation and creativity as faculties are governed in a highly structured manner and strictly following rules and regulations.

Signal 2: The Second Cycle Quality Audit

Description

The University of Mauritius had its first external quality audit in 2005 and the second cycle quality audit took place in 2012. The second quality audit laid emphasis on follow-up made on the

recommendations from the first cycle quality audit report (UoM 2012).

The panel considered the progress made since 2005, in the light of the previous recommendations of the first cycle audit, and took cognizance of new elements such as the international recognition received by the e-learning initiative and other progress in the field of educational technology. The report of the panel is still awaited and this will definitely be important for the e-learning initiative and with respect to the operationalisation of the proposed merging of the VCILT and the CPDL and for the future of the Lifelong Learning Cluster.

Implications (Growth, Constraint, Collapse and Transformation)

The second cycle quality audit report will be instrumental to whether the merging of the two centres will move forward. However, in the light of the reorganisation of the University, the two centres are supposed to merge. This is quite of a paradox given that the merging discussions were initiated following the first audit report, is being kept in abeyance pending the reorganisation of the university and finally a second quality audit report is highly awaited with respect to their recommendations of the necessity of a merger. This will mainly affect the growth of the initiative given the uncertainty that exists.

Signal 3: ODL policy

Description

The University of Mauritius has no clear open and distance learning policy. However, from its strategic plans, it is clear that ODL is an important item of its agenda for expansion in terms of access and intake. A committee that was instituted by the then vice-chancellor in 2008 came with a first comprehensive document which was never approved nor adopted.

Implications (Growth, Constraint, Collapse and Transformation)

The ODL policy will be instrumental in the transformation of the University of Mauritius as a dual-mode institution and is the foundation to help the university achieve its strategic objectives of expansion in the knowledge age. It will allow growth of the student population and the university's reach to foreign students who can study on flexible basis. However, the growing level of competition both locally and globally might impose constraints and lead to collapse if the fees are not competitive, and if a high-quality service is not offered.

Signal 4: The Open University of Mauritius

Description

In between the year 2000 to 2005, the concepts of open learning and technology-enhanced learning were on the political agenda of the government. At the same time during the 2000-2005 periods, the government came up with the idea of an open-learning institute which would be fundamentally absorbing the Mauritius College of the Air. The idea later evolved into that of an Open University in 2005 but it never came into operation, until a revamped bill was presented in 2010 in Parliament. The Open University of Mauritius will focus on distance education modalities, with particular emphasis on e-learning as its front-end diffusion model.

Implications (Growth, Constraint, Collapse and Transformation)

The Open University of Mauritius was seen and perceived by many at the University of Mauritius as the main threat for its DEOL (Distance Education Online Learning) initiatives. This meant that with the open university, the Government might have imposed on the University of Mauritius to discontinue open and distance education from its system and that would have lead to a complete collapse of ten years research and

development activities. On the other hand, the Open University concept seems a logical scaling up of the e-learning initiative of the University of Mauritius from an experimental level into a full-fledged institution. The Open University can therefore fully tap on the acquired expertise and experience of the University of Mauritius for a quick and efficient operationalisation of the Open University.

DESCRIPTION OF POSSIBLE FUTURE SCENARIOS FOR THE E-LEARNING INITIATIVE

From the horizon scanning and signalling activity and taking into consideration the evolution of policies at the University and at the National level, there can be four future scenarios for the e-learning initiative. Each scenario will have its advantages, disadvantages and implications. These are discussed further below.

Status-quo

The status-quo situation means that the e-learning initiative keeps on functioning in its present state as an academic research and development unit within an optimistic perspective that it will keep on getting students on its courses, especially the fee-paying ones and its academics will continue to research and development in the field of educational technology. This is fine given that the centre is also involved in international consultancies that generate funds to the University. However, senior management of the University must be convinced that the current scenario is the best for the centre and for the University. Another implication is that the objectives, mission and vision of the centre need to be reviewed to reflect on the state of the art in terms of its work. While its activities and line of action has changed, the mission statements have remained the same. The status-quo contains the risk of the highly sensible question of attaching the centre to a faculty to be raised in a near possible future. The counter-argument so far for this has been

that the activity of the centre is multi-disciplinary and as such the centre cannot be technically attached to a particular faculty.

An Applied Research Centre in Educational Technology and Online Education

The second scenario looks at a more academic approach to the problem. Given the evolution of the centre in the past ten years, it seems that it would be logical to separate the establishment of lifelong learning and distance education mode of deliveries to the research and development aspects of new technologies for lifelong learning and distance education modalities. While those two elements would be complementary, they would logically be separated as one is related to knowledge discovery and creation, and the other one operates at knowledge application and dissemination level. The implications for this would be a decision on the funding model for this approach given that the direct returns on investments in the research and development activities of the centre would be linked to the success of the delivery and administrative arm of the distance education initiative of the university. Clear key performance indicators will be necessary and the research and development projects that the unit will engage into will have to be well-structured and aligned to the strategic directions of the University. The role of academics in the centre will be mainly to do research and prototyping of technologies and then to disseminate the outcomes to feed in the online distance education courses. Such a centre therefore would not be able to exist in isolation. This means that there will be a need to reinforce the 'distance' online programmes as these will be the major means of funding for the initiative. Rumble (1999) stresses that distance education, including e-education, has to make a business case to justify investment, whether or not it is commercialised. He does acknowledge the many other justifications for its

introduction and use: cost is only one factor in the equation. On the other hand the centre might also concentrate most of its research to improve on-campus and classroom teaching but the funding and business model is not clear in such situations and it will mainly have to rely on specific funding of projects which may be risky in terms of ensuring the sustainability of the centre. Furthermore, although this is an item on the strategic agenda of the University, there has been a lack of concrete initiatives to really impose this aspect as a priority at the University.

The UoM as a fully established Dual-Mode Institution

The ideal scenario within the University is to realise the objective set in 1993 when the Centre for Distance Learning was created. The objective was to make the University of Mauritius a dual-mode institution. The University of Mauritius has created the lifelong learning cluster to strengthen the element of the dual-mode institution. In distance education terminologies, traditional universities that want to engage into ODL can either become mixed-mode institutions or dual-mode institutions.

Mixed-mode institutions are those in which ODL is an integral part of their existing teaching and learning framework while dual mode institutions are those that have a separate entity within the University running full courses using ODL (Kanwar and Daniel 2010). Over the years, the University of Mauritius has been behaving partly as a mixed-mode institution and to some extent with the lifelong learning cluster as a dual-mode institution. The model described above should, if established, develop the University to a dual-mode institution in the future. This will be the main performance indicator of a Centre for Applied Research in the field of Education Technology and Online Learning. To operate as a full dual mode institution the lifelong learning cluster should be reinforced and reviewed within

its own specificities with respect to lifelong and flexible learning using open and online learning methodologies. The lifelong learning cluster will have three main components namely the applied research unit for education technology and online learning, the lifelong learning administration unit, and the technology management unit. The lifelong learning cluster will need to work within the core set of rules and regulations for the University but will also have its sets of specific rules and regulations to allow for flexible and open learning modalities to co-exist within the system. The Lifelong Learning Cluster should also be empowered with powers to decide on programmes that the University should offer on distance e-learning modes within a pre-defined framework and in consultation with the Pro-Vice Chancellors and Deans of Faculties most probably. The Lifelong Learning Cluster should operate ideally in a top-down approach where decisions related to online programmes should be made at a high-level committee and then implemented, managed and delivered under the cluster.

Scaling up to be a National Open Learning Initiative

While distance education refers to the methodology by which the learners are reached, open learning refers to the philosophy underlining open entry and access to learning opportunities (Kanwar & Daniel 2010). Kanwar and Daniel (2010) further argue that opening up learning without introducing some elements of distance education is not always possible and introducing distance education inevitably opens up learning in new ways for many people. The Government has the vision of one graduate per family, and opening access to tertiary education is the key to achieving this vision. The University of Mauritius has an excellent opportunity to scale up its distance e-learning initiatives at the national level into a national open learning endeavour. However, given that the Open University of Mauritius bill (OUM 2010) has already

been approved by parliament, there is a need to find a way to either convince Government that the University of Mauritius holds the key to making the Open University a successful endeavour.

While scaling up the e-learning initiative of the University of Mauritius as the main driver of the Open University seems to be the ideal scenario for the e-learning initiative, it can also strengthen the image of the University as one that engages into research and development activities of national priorities and interests. One such example would be that an experimental e-learning project, started at an embryonic level ten years ago has matured to drive a national open education initiative.

CONCLUSION

The University of Mauritius has accumulated extensive experience on the four main components that will form the foundation of an open university. These are the technological infrastructure and systems, the policies for open and online education, online pedagogies and courseware design, and online distance learner profiling and support.

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International Journal of Science and Applied Information Technology (IJSAIT), Vol.2 , No.2, Pages : 38-49 (2013)

Special Issue of ICET4E 2013 - Held during 11-12 March, 2013 in Hotel Crowne Plaza, Dubai

9780080448947, 10.1016/B978-0-08-044894-7.00866-6.

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