

Investigating the Role of MOOCs in the African Educational and Development Objectives

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According to Makhtar Diop, the World Bank Vice-President for Africa, African higher education is a priority because it holds the potential for Africa's transformation. "We are convinced that by transforming higher education in Africa, we will be able to compete easily with the rest of the world in areas where usually we are not seen as strong competitors," (<http://www.newvision.co.ug/news/644758-university-education-the-new-world-bank-darling.html>).

Also at the recent higher education conference in the Gabonese capital Libreville, organized by the Association of African Universities (AAU), Andreas Blom, the World Bank Lead Economist for Africa Education told the press that Africa was in a very dynamic phase of its development characterized by booming economic growth with many companies coming up as well as the discovery of mineral wealth including oil and gas. So higher education holds the key to the transformation of the African continent. She observed " .. higher education has a greater role to play in supporting this dynamism. There is now need in the labour market for higher education skills. For instance, the highest number of employees in the gas and extractive industries are expatriates but that should not be the case"(<http://www.newvision.co.ug/news/644758-university-education-the-new-world-bank-darling.html>).

But African higher education has never had a light of day in any boardroom and conference room where education policies are made. According to Mamdani (2011), the first colonial universities were built, as training workshops, calling them technical or business colleges, to help reduce the labor costs incurred by the colonial masters of shipping Europeans to Africa to do mere clerical jobs. Even these, again according to Mamdani (2011), were few and far between: Makerere in East Africa, Ibadan and Legon in West Africa, and these were for meeting colonial needs, while avoiding the Indian disease in Africa -- that is, the development of an educated middle class, a group most likely to carry the virus of nationalism.

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Upon independence, most of these workshops were turned into national universities, but with no clear role in national development. These national universities were catering for children of the new African political elites. Through the seventies and eighties, most African universities were still without development agendas and were still doing business as usual. Meanwhile, governments strapped with lack of money saw no need of putting more scarce resources into big white elephants. By mid-eighties, even the UN and IMF were calling for a limit on funding African universities. In fact most of these universities are very recent with many less than 50 years in business except a few.

Today's African higher institutions are facing problems that are hindering research that include (Kizza, IJCIR, Special Issue Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 6-10):

- Heavy teaching responsibilities leading to - little time for research
- Reluctance of the state to finance research
- Low pay - so would be researchers are often reluctant to use part of their salary for research, leading to a preference of consultancies to improve their salaries
- Low and decreasing numbers of senior professors
- Deterioration in the general education standards
- Mushrooming universities

With Africa economies growing across the continent, together with developing mobile technology, the wind of change has unexpectedly started blowing across the continent following the rapid developments in digital technologies in the last twenty years. This coupled with the new African quest for technological acquisition driven mostly by an unprecedented indigenous interest in technological development and the numerous and sometimes ambitious initiatives by NGOs, the donor community and African governments themselves who have made comparatively huge investments in human capital development, have all created an environment where, for the first time in the history of Africa, Africans are running abreast with the rest of the world in the development of some technological milestones that, in due time, are likely to compete favorably on the global stage with other technologies from across the globe.

The long awaited African technological dawn may be in sight. African leading universities and institutions, responding to this unprecedented exuberance and interest in ICTs by young people, have set themselves on a quest to be the ICT incubators and jump start ICT education and research and build ICT capacity to help in the construction of the badly needed infrastructure makeover and induce other sectors of the African technological landscape to pick up pace in the race. To understand the trajectory of these unprecedented and rapid technological transformations, one has to witness the exuberance among the African youth about technology. Schools, workshops and small entrepreneurs are mushrooming across Africa as knowledge centers, incubators and drawing pads for technological initiatives that will propel the continent to greater heights than ever before. The technological revolution is sweeping Africa and bringing new fortunes.

Within this new positive environment, African higher education is re-awakening. This is the very environment where massive open online courses (MOOCs) educational model can play a very positive role. We are aware of the many problems facing MOOCs education delivery but we believe that for Africa the benefits will outweigh the negatives and we believe that Africa will greatly benefit from the technology and the model.

Our aim and focus, therefore in this research endeavor is to start a discussion and find answers to the following questions:

- (i) Best ways to introduce MOOCs in Africa beyond the current African Universities, the African Virtual University, and online degree programs beamed to Africa like those from India.
- (ii) With limited online access and limited broadband access, what would be the best way for many African students to benefit from the MOOCs educational model.

- (iii) With an increasing penetration of mobile devices across the continent, what would be the best ways of using them to access MOOCs?
- (iv) Finally and probably more important, who will be the MOOCs content creators and where will there come from?

There are of course many other issues worth investigating and many others will pop up as we do the research and the discussion develops.

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