

eLearning Africa 2012 - Observations from two BSU participants

eLearning Africa 2012 (eLA) is the 7th conference of its kind. This year it was held in Cotonou, Benin 23-25 May. 1,400 participants from mainly Africa, Europe, North America and some from Asia participated in a number of presentations, demonstration sessions, discussion sessions and social arrangements during the three days.

The overall theme was E-learning and Sustainability. Sustainability is referred to in various ways. E-learning initiatives or projects should obviously be able to deliver certain technical goals, like presenting knowledge in new ways / on new platforms, assisting teachers or change agents, or to provide access in new places and improving the students' learning. In order to do so there is a need to consider the institutional setup: who will run, support, maintain, disseminate the implementation over a long time span, and how the competences and capacity at both the individual and institutional level is established and developed. Also the economical side needs to be considered, since the running costs need to be covered by e.g. the government or the students. Finally there are also considerations regarding keeping the resource use at low levels.

The conference tried to touch on some of these aspects by presenting a number of actual experiences with implementing e-learning in Africa. E.g. using mobile technology for e-learning is very prevalent trend at eLA because the mobile network is far more developed than regular telephone network and fiber-optic broadband. Consequently the mobile phone is utilized for both academic discussions as well as a tool to access educational resources in an increasing in scale.

Henrik Bregnhøj and Søren Larsen from University of Copenhagen participated in the conference representing the Danish part of the Danida supported Building Stronger University Program (BSU). The Human Health Platform of BSU include some pilot activities on e-learning in Zanzibar and Ghana, and e-learning is expected to get more volume in the second phase of BSU. At the conference we had the opportunity to network closely with Omar Saleh and Masha Gharib Bilal from our collaborating universities in Zanzibar. Of particular interest for us was the examples we saw of using low-bandwidth and offline/online technologies, as connection limitations and power cuts are generally an issue in Zanzibar and in Africa. We also got familiar with many examples of repositories of Open Educational Resources (OER), where educational institutions share e-learning resources and open source tools on a free basis which is a great advantage since development is cost-intensive in both time and money. Finally we got in touch with many possible collaborating partners in Africa, United States and Europe. An example of an interesting partner might be the African Virtual University which is a growing collaboration between more than 20 universities across Africa. The 8th eLearning Africa conference in 2013 will be held in Namibia.

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