The challenge of opening up education in Rwanda

Institution & Institutional Context

The University of Rwanda was established in 2013 from a combination of all public higher education institution in Rwanda. The University theoretically hosts the School of Open and Distance Learning which has not yet started operating.

Keywords and OEP themes

Student voice; Accreditation of informal & non-formal learning; socioeconomic inclusion in higher education.

What is the case study about?

The school of Open and Distance Learning originated from a concept paper that was produced in late 2011. The concept paper was originally for an open university that would help expand higher education to the majority of secondary education graduates who qualify and wish to attend higher education in Rwanda but are not serviced by the traditional higher education system. The concept paper was produced with an agenda to cut down the cost of higher education to make it more accessible to learners who are unable to secure student loan which was increasingly becoming inaccessible due to decrease of funds for public higher education. However, due to the process of merging public higher education institutions into one university, a Task Force on the project was assigned to develop the College of Open and Distance Learning. Then, the project was integrated in the University of Rwanda as a school under the College of Education. The project needs pioneers of open and distance learning for its implementation.

What is the issue or need you are addressing?

The main issue is higher education which is becoming increasingly inaccessible to underprivileged learners in Rwanda: the majority of secondary education graduates. All public higher education institutions were merged into one university mainly because funds for higher education had decreased enormously. Parallel to the reduction of funds for higher education institutions, funds for student loans were also slashed. In 2014/2015, more than 11500 students were admitted at the University of Rwanda (the only public higher education in Rwanda) on merit basis. However, most of them were denied student loans. Due to this issue, more than 42 percent of these students who were admitted on merit basis were unable to register and pursue higher education.

Open Educational Practices needed in Rwanda are the ones that move beyond links to collection of open educational resources in institutional repositories to course programmes that create higher education opportunities for underprivileged learners. Recognition of open learning accomplishment is necessary to catalyse open learning practices based on openly licensed resources. It is also worth shifting more attention to the development of self-determined/independent open learning practices to deal with resource scarcity in this under-resourced setting.

Why is it important?

The issue is important because without dealing with it, education will continue to be an exclusive privilege for the tiny minority privileged in this under-resourced country. Equally, the learning quality will continue to be affected, especially for those learners who are selected for student loan because the living allowances delay several months.

The learning strategy

Independent use of openly licensed content in own learning, decision making on own learning, learning without waiting for comfortable learning conditions (improving learning conditions via effort invested in learning rather than waiting for comfortable conditions to start learning), setting learning goals, planning own learning process, focusing, managing and controlling own learning, prioritising, awareness of competencies needed and continuing assessment of own learning progress against those competencies can help learners make a significant progress in their socio-economic and educational transformation.

Teaching strategy

Effective teaching strategies needed to deal with the particular issues in Rwanda are the ones that clearly define competencies expected from graduates, recognise and support self-determined open learning practices towards the development of those competencies. Such strategies empower learners as key agents in their own educational transformation and would assist in catalysing open learning practices and assessing learners' competence development via those practices. Of course, these strategies may vary across fields of study, but all of them would share the aspect of learner-led demand basis rather than imposing lectures to learners.

How was the initiative implemented?

What we simply did was develop the School of Open and Distance Learning. This development occurred in a period of about nine months. The project is not piloted yet and therefore it is not yet implemented. It has simply been integrated in the University of Rwanda under the College of Education, but the school exists more

theoretically than practically. A network of pioneers in open and distance learning is emerging in an effort to move the project from its current dormant status-quo to the implementation phase.

Outcomes

The open distance learning project has been completed and a report was submitted to the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education transferred the project to the University of Rwanda for implementation of the project. The University of Rwanda has not implemented the project yet, but once the project is implemented, it may help expand higher education opportunities to learners who qualify and wish to attend higher education, but have not been included in the traditional higher education system. In a period of 8 years, the project is expected to help provide higher education to more than the number of learners in the current Rwandan public higher education combined.

Issues & challenges

The main challenge was putting the project in the hands of people who had no experience nor training in open and distance education. Such people take the project to maintain related benefits (monthly allowances related to leadership positions) but their bureaucrats and hierarchical leadership style inhibit collaboration with academics who are trained in open, distance and eLearning. Often times, those who are not trained and have no experience in open, distance and eLearning, but are appointed to lead related initiatives, tend to see academics who are trained in the areas as a threat rather than asset, and an avoidance attitude has been observed.

Insights and Recommendations for National and/or Institutional Development

The uptake of open resources and open courses is likely to depend on creation of value to all involved and developing related initiatives for a purpose. Just shifting financial burden to one category of stakeholders (often teachers, especially when it comes to open access publishing) will not help. Equally, a collection of open educational resources in institutional repositories without moving on using those resources to open up education to people in need is more likely to detract different stakeholders from engaging in OER and open courses initiatives. Sometimes, institutions just engage in such a collection of resources in repositories for the sake of collecting funds even if the quality of the resources is poor and the resources are not used in a way that contribute to addressing real educational issues. Such practices contribute to the rejection of open educational resources and open courses rather than contributing to their adoption. Often times, poor quality is advanced for the rejection of open educational resources and open courses, and the issue of quality occurs in OER and open courses may occur in initiatives that were implemented with an agenda to help institutions or academics get funds rather that solving a real educational issue. Sometimes, resources are collected without caring about quality with an agenda to present figures/statistic in application for funds. Recommendations for national and institutional development would be to pay particular attention to the social and transformative impact the resources and open courses will have on people in need for education. It is this transformative impact that justifies the investment of funds on related initiatives. National policies can address the issue of financial resources invested on open education initiatives that do not significantly contribute to address real educational problems societies are facing.