E-learning takes root in Uganda

By Owen Waqabaza

When Stella Nakayenga wanted to do a master's degree, lack of time was an issue.

As an employee of a leading corporate company in Kampala, Nakayenga could not spare time for her studies despite having a regular eight-to-five job.

"My job is quite demanding, I therefore, had to abandon a course, I had embarked on," she says.

Two years ago, Nakayenga learnt about an e-learning programme from a friend. That marked a turning point for her.

"When I did a thorough search, I realized that many universities in Uganda where offering online programmes. My dream course was also available online. I immediately enrolled and now I am comfortably working while studying," she says.

Nakayenga is just one of many Ugandans who have embraced e-learning to upgrade their education.

What is e-learning?

E-Learning is the utilisation of electronic technologies to access educational curriculum outside a traditional classroom. In most cases, it refers to a course, programme or degree delivered completely or partly online.

"It is interactive and one can also communicate with their teachers, professors or other students in your class. Sometimes it is delivered live, where you can "electronically" raise your hand and interact in real time and sometimes it is a lecture that has been pre-recorded," says Abigail Salome Inapat, the E-learning administrator at Makerere University's Institute of Open Distance and E-learning.

According to Inapat, there is always a teacher or professor interacting/communicating with student and guiding their participation, assignments and tests.

Some courses are purely online while others are blended, in that 80% of the course content is delivered online while 20% is face-to-face.

Evolution of e-learning

Long before the Internet was launched, distance courses were being offered to provide students with education on subjects or skills.

"Distance education can be traced back to as early as the 18th century. Its evolution and progression over the last 300 years has been dependent on the innovations in communications technology of the time," says Dr. Jessica Norah Aguti, an associate professor at Makerere University's Institute of Open, Distance and e-learning.

According to Aguti, distance education has over the years been delivered through correspondence and the use of parcel post, to radio, then to television and finally to online education.

"Distance education was common in the late 1800s, but its rapid growth began in the late 1990s with the advance of the online technical revolution."

Why e-learning?

According to Inapat, an online course is flexible. "I am doing an online master's programme, but I have never left my office. I am working at the same time studying and I believe that is where the potential for online education stands," Inapat says.

She says many students are working and do not have time, adding that it is from this work that they get the money to pay for the course. The course, therefore, enables them to work while attending to their learning tasks and activities online.

Resty Mwogeza, a distance learning expert, says e-learning is here to stay. According to Mwogeza, as computer ownership grows across the globe, e-learning is becoming increasingly viable and accessible.

"With the immense improvement of mobile networks in the past few years and the increase in telecommuting, taking all the awesome features of e-learning on the road is a reality with smartphones and other portable devices. Technologies such as social media are also transforming education constantly," she says.

The future of e-learning

"The internet is the future," says Aguti.

Challenges

Inapat cites the challenge of skills and knowledge gap for both the students and the lecturers.

According to Inapat, students need to be prepared for this type of learning because it is different from what they have known before and the same applies to the lecturers.

"They ought to be supported to understand the environment they are getting into, to prepare and skill them, so that when they get into the process, there are fewer challenges," she says.

Gladys Bwoch, an e-learning training co-ordinator, says there is also the challenge of unstable internet connection. Some of our catchment areas are affected by war, for example Somalia or Libya and this may affect the Internet in the area, which affects our students' flow of study," Bwoch says.

The completion rate is also not enticing due to separation.

"Because they study on their own, the course requires a lot of discipline. Online courses are also time consuming, especially if the student is to learn and understand all the concepts well," Bwoch says.

Still, distance learning is still a new phenomenon and appreciation is still low. "People still think of the distance learning of the yesteryears which was inconveniencing, but with sensitisation, people are slowly beginning to appreciate the programme," she says.