



POLYTECHNIC OF NAMIBIA

WELCOMING REMARKS

BY

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ON

THE OCCASION OF THE eLEARNING AFRICA PRE-CONFERENCE
WORKSHOP

ON

25 MAY 2013

09:00

SAFARI HOTEL

WINDHOEK

Director of Ceremonies

Distinguished Participants from the Various Parts of Africa

Esteemed Invited Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is indeed a pleasure and honour to welcome you all to the **eLearning Africa pre-conference workshop**, which is a prelude to the **eLearning Africa Conference** scheduled for next week.

The aim of this workshop and thus the conference is to discuss the use of technology to support education in ways that will expedite teaching and learning systems and provide easy access to information. The future of learning in Africa and the sustainability of the growing African economies are dependent on robust education and skills development, and technology will play a more central role in the future. Therefore, we need systems that develop life skills, and facilitate the holistic development of each member of society.

We are constantly faced with the immense challenge of ensuring that the education we provide prepares our graduates not just for our respective countries, but for the continent and world at large. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) play a major role in the way we gather, assimilate and use information to create knowledge. ICTs have become the backbone of modern economies, which have new skills requirements. Graduates need to be able to network and collaborate, communicate effectively and critically evaluate options to successfully compete on a global scale. Technology is changing so rapidly that we have to ask ourselves *“how do we prepare our graduates for tomorrow?”*

My task today is to welcome you and set the tone for the conference. Technology is all the more important in education. For example, mobile phones, Open Educational Resources (OERs) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are dominating the educational landscape. We also have various multi-media tools like glogster for promoting high-order thinking skills, digital mapping for brainstorming, blogs and wikis for collaborative learning and ePortfolios for assessments.

Innovation in eLearning is being enabled and driven along three main developments, i.e. i) mobility, ii) ubiquitousness (cloud), as well as iii) social communities and participation (crowdsourcing). Along with the growth in open platforms, social media, communities and crowdsourcing technologies, mobile devices enable new approaches to learning, teaching and skills development through mobile learning apps, learning in social communities and even educational games promoting learner motivation and improving learner performance. We have moved away from a world of stand-alone computers stationed on your desk, to a smart phone or a computer in the palm of your hand, which means you are connected 24/7. We can access content on demand and learn from anywhere at any time. Social media has been able to connect people in ways that were never thought possible before. Collaboration and networking skills are crucial to be successful today, and these are exciting times for all of us.

In 2002, MIT Open Courseware released its first set of 50 courses, to which the Polytechnic became a subscriber. During that same year, the term OER was defined by the forum organised by UNESCO on the impact of the Open Courseware for Higher Education in developing countries, and the Polytechnic is proud to have been a launching platform for developing and launching OERs.

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) has also heavily invested in the creation, adaptation and use of OERs. OERs and MOOCs are seen as tools to increase access to education, while saving on costs and improving quality. The Stanford MOOC on Artificial Intelligence attracted more than 160 000 students from every country except North Korea. It is important to note that 23 000 students completed the course! OERs and MOOCs are breaking down barriers and moving “education from the hands of the elitists” to “education for the masses” thereby levelling the playing field. Mobile phones do really allow students to take control of their learning.

Professor Jonathan Anderson shares his five predictions of the future with us as follows: i) the digitising of human knowledge, ii) cloud computing, iii) social networking, iv) touch screen technology, and v) the convergence of mobile and PC technologies.

Africa has high mobile penetration but low Internet connectivity and some predict that in five years time, most sub-Saharan Africans will have SmartPhones. Africa is seen to be an increasingly lucrative market promising that “the company that builds the first world smartphone for a developing world network bets the next billion users”. Surely new technologies have created a world without borders and opened up a new world for teaching and learning.

While the technology is available to impact education in a way that will transform African economies to knowledge-based economies, Africa is facing challenges; these are lack of computers, lack of access to electricity, poor connectivity, poor maintenance of ICT infrastructure and computers, lack of ICT policies, lack of computer-literate teachers and educational personnel and expensive bandwidths.

Another problem is that current e- and mLearning development mostly takes place in the developed world and therefore hardly acknowledges an African epistemology and pedagogy. Thus, to promote a sustainable and knowledge-based society we argue that local epistemologies and pedagogies have to be incorporated into e- and mLearning technology design.

It is for all these reasons why workshops and conferences of this nature are crucial. These types of platforms allow Africans to collaborate and network and find African solutions to African problems, or to apply international solutions to African problems. Some of the questions that this workshop and conference will need to answer are: How do we prepare our educators for the future? How do we prepare our students to be successful in a future that requires them to compete on a global scale? How can we bring down costs. How can new forms of learning and teaching co-exist with traditional frameworks, traditional methods of learning and teaching, and traditional forms of assessment?

One African solution to an African problem is the Text-to-Speech (TTS) application which is a localised early-learning reading tool for the Android tablet called Native Voice. This application was developed by Ian Mutamiri and his colleagues at the University of Zimbabwe to help Zimbabwean children learn the Shona language. He is also one of the keynote speakers in this year's eLearning Africa conference and we welcome him warmly too.

It has been long argued that children need to be taught in their mother tongue to be successful in formal education and engage better with learning materials.

The Native Voice project will set in motion the education of thousands of children in rural areas with limited access to both early-learning materials and personnel qualified to deploy these tools. The importance of ICT in multi-lingualism is starting to become a reality. Wikipedia has launched services in several African languages. In Namibia, over the past years, we have successfully co-designed a local knowledge management system with elders from a village to facilitate inter-generational knowledge transfer.

We usually look at the use of ICT in teaching and learning and how to train the next generation of educators to use ICT effectively in the classroom. Although there are many ICT adoption studies and integration in teaching and learning across curriculum and pedagogical innovation, many are not sustainable. This is because transformative uses of ICT are intrinsically disruptive: they require changes in roles, practices, power relationships with different levels of the institutional hierarchy. Sustainable change management in transition is of utmost importance regarding the successful implementation of eLearning in Africa. The question that we need to address is how innovation in Africa is shaping the continent's learning landscape.

This implies that transformation requires a steep learning curve for all stakeholders beyond the growth of their own individual intellectual capacity, taking the African tradition, culture and educational background into consideration. Profound experiences in complex change management projects in multicultural contexts in Europe and Africa demonstrate the necessity to enhance the collective intelligence and strengthen the abilities for change in African communities involving government, academia, industry and society.

I urge you today to collaborate, share ideas and experiences through which we can jointly harness the potential of technologies for education. I have attempted to set the tone for our deliberations and with so many words, I declare this workshop officially open.

I thank you