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Education in Africa

Developing Continuing Education in Africa

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This book is a significant contribution to the field of education in Africa. It provides a comprehensive guide to developing and implementing effective continuing education programs in Africa.

"Until the day dawn and the dew covers your head..."
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KEYNOTE ADDRESS
by
Prof. Henry Thairu

Abstract:
Continuing Education in Africa holds the key to the much needed human capacity development that will enable African countries develop and realize the envisaged dream of industrialization and improved economies for the countries. As more countries embrace Information and communication technology in their daily activities, the education sector worldwide has embraced this technology with a bid to reaching out to more students. Institutions of higher learning continue to develop more learner-friendly programmes to enable more people access higher education. It is now common to hear terms such as Virtual Universities, E-learning Programmes, Borderless Universities and Open Learning, which are all modern methods of providing continuing education.
As with all new ideas there are challenges that arise in the implementation of these programmes. These challenges should however not be a deterrent to other institutions but rather act as a guide towards successful implementation of similar programmes in their institution.

INTRODUCTION
The American Heritage Dictionary describes Continuing Education as

1. An instructional program that brings participants up to date in a particular area of knowledge or skills.
2. Instructional courses designed especially for part-time adult students.

Continuing education courses, programs or organized learning experiences, as they are sometimes referred to, are usually taken after a degree/diploma or certificate is obtained to enhance personal or professional goals.

Why the need for Continuing education programs?:
Different industries demand different skills from their staff and consequently the need to draw up tailor made courses that equip their workforce with the necessary tools to serve their clients adequately in specific capacities. For individuals to remain competitive in the job market it is essential that they continually improve their existing job skills.
In addition, the structure of our education system is such that most entry-level jobs do not place high demands on staff joining in these levels. However, as the person progresses in their career they realize that to adequately meet the daily challenges that their jobs provide, additional skills are necessary.
The desire to improve on their existing skills then meets several hurdles. Family commitments and time constraints are the major hurdles that are faced by the mature learner. The financial aspect then comes up and at this point the prospective learner may opt to give up on his need for additional training. Continuing Education offers various solutions to this hurdle by

- allowing an individual to pursue areas of professional or personal interest or to enhance one’s professional qualifications in an increasingly competitive and rapidly changing labour market;
- offering a broad spectrum of courses - many of which are focused on areas of industry not traditionally served by the academic community.

Continuing education is structured in such a way that it allows for a flexible learning environment thus reliving much of the pressure faced by learners. This therefore encourages more people to improve their technical skills, which provides for improved technical knowledge and largely, improved working environments.

HISTORY OF CONTINUING EDUCATION

Continuing Education has been in existence for as long as man has existed. Without continuing education the so-called civilization would never have occurred. The need for self-improvement has always pushed man to be better than the next man and hence the rapid expansion of continuing education as we know it today.

In Africa, the concept has been in existence for a long time though in an unconventional manner. Skills were taught and learnt through apprenticeship. The person would then be sent out to practice his trade until such a time when he desired to improve his skills. He would then go back to the apprentice to learn additional skills and in this way was able to provide superior services.

Benjamin Franklin was a great advocate of self-improvement in the 18th Century a reason that must have accounted for his diverse talent. He had less than two years of formal education but this did not deter him from improving himself. He always sought ways of learning something new and in 1727, he formed the Junto, which was meant to give him and other like-minded people an opportunity to discuss and explore intellectual topics. Their topics of discussion were used to develop their business and assist others in their community. Benjamin Franklin continued with his quest for self-improvement late into his life. (date?)¹ His great achievements are an inspiration to those that desire to seek continuing education but fact various challenges. America has grown in leaps and bounds largely due to this phenomenon. This ideology of self-improvement forms the basis of
continuing education.

Over the last century, continuing education has impacted greatly on the growth of companies and consequently the economic growth of countries. The Asian Tigers have proved that the only viable way for a country to develop is to equip its human resource with the best available knowledge, which will in turn be pooled back into the country. Human capacity is the greatest investment a country can make for its citizenry. The growth in these countries over the last century is adequate proof of this. With this insight, African countries need to divert their attention towards constantly improving the skills of their workforce to assist in the rapid development of our continent. Africa faces serious challenges because of brain drain to more developed countries. One way of stemming this would be to put in place policies that provide for continuing education in the workplace without compromising on the workers' liberties. This will ensure that the employees feel valued and therefore reducing the need to leave.

The demands of the 21st century in the corporate world for a multi skilled workforce have created a need for educational institutions to provide continuing education. Africa is quickly catching on to this trend with many universities and colleges introducing various courses to help students keep up with the changing dynamics of the work environment. Evening classes, distance learning programmes, e-learning, on site trainings are some of the delivery methods that are quickly catching on in the society.

Understandably, Africa is lagging behind in the field of continuing education and policy makers in the education sector need to put emphasis on expansion of this mode of learning. For instance the first Open University in the UK opened its doors to students in January 1971 with a handful of students. By 1980 the enrolment to this University had risen to 70,000. In 1998 Open University conferred a degree on its 200,000th graduand. This was a remarkable achievement for a programme that had received criticism in the initial days of its implementation. Open University attributes its success largely to the support of employers who have continued to enroll their staff in the University and to innovative teaching methods.²

The Open University Malaysia is a relatively new entrant to this sector having been opened in 2001. The university has excelled in its provision of continuing education both locally and internationally. The growth of the university is attributed to its diverse and innovative methods of teaching and also the support of employers.³
In both of these examples of institutions that have embraced continuing education we note that their success is pegged on the same issues; innovative teaching methods and employers. This is an area worth noting as we encourage institutions to provide programmes for open learning.

E-learning is fast gaining acceptance as the future of higher learning and continuing education. Demand for higher education continues to rise faster than infrastructure can be added to existing facilities. This has continued to pose a challenge to institutions of higher learning as the demand for places in these institutions far outnumbers the available spaces. This problem can best be addressed by introducing e-learning as an alternative method of teaching. This would ensure that more persons are able to access programmes of their choice without putting any pressure on the existing facilities in the institutions. The flexibility of this type of programme would also attract people who would otherwise not have time to attend conventional classes due to business or family constraints.

Distance Learning Education has over the years, been a popular mode of learning though it has been limited in the number of courses that use this system of learning. As the world continues to grow so do the career demands change. There is need for institutions to incorporate more courses into this learning programme in order to meet the growing demands for continuing education.

As the world becomes a global village so too should the education sector. According to a research conducted by UNESCO on The Virtual University it was noted that the use of ICT would increase flexibility and extend provision of higher education in both developed and developing countries. The research further advocates for borderless education, which would allow for people to pursue education at Institutions of higher learning anywhere in the world without the hassles that involve one being an international student. For successful implementation of this system ICT has to be well spread out countrywide, the education sector would have to market the new forms of delivery and consultations with the state with regards to any regulations that might be in place.

Several countries are well ahead on this venture with many having set up Virtual Universities. Some successful models include Athabasca University, Canada, which was started in 1970. It started out as an Open University before moving into provision of online courses. Other institutions that
have been successful include; University of Maryland, USA, University of Liverpool, Phoenix University and UNITAR in Malaysia amongst others. Of importance to note is that this kind of learning is more likely to be affected by globalization than the standard methods of learning.

In Africa, Kenyatta University in a bid to extend its educational offer added a “Virtual Unit”. It was among six other African Countries that joined the African Virtual University. The Unit has however encountered various challenges in the implementation of this program including management challenges associated with operating a special unit under operating policies and procedures of a traditional university. Other challenges they face(d) include limited telecommunication infrastructure.

CONCLUSION
Education as a whole faces many challenges in Africa but most of them can be overcome by institutions providing opportunities for continuing education. Creating an enabling environment for learners wishing to pursue this mode of study is key to expanding Continuing education in Africa.

How then can institutions effectively implement this new sector in their already existing programs. As noted above, infrastructure may prove to be the turning point for successful implementation of programmes. On their own individual universities may be unable to fully implement these programs. It may therefore be prudent for institutions to come together and create programmes that would complement each other. This has been tried by Université Virtuelle en Pays de la Loire (UVPL) which is a consortium of five universities coming together for provision of continuing education. The co-operation of the consortium has resulted improved quality of content, better knowledge and skills transfer and acceleration of product content development. With the limitations that abound in Africa this might be the way to go if our Institutions are to successfully embrace the challenges of continuing education programmes.

Employers too, have a role in supporting employees who seek to improve themselves since they too stand to gain from this. It is evident that the growth of this sector cannot be achieved by any singular group taking charge of the process. The Education sector and the employers need to develop suitable programs that are cater to the ever growing demands of the corporate world. The employers should in turn provide an enabling environment to the employees to pursue these courses. Institutions should also develop in-house training programs in consultation with employers that are tailor made
for specific industries.

Successful implementation of this programme will no doubt come at a cost but the returns far outweigh any initial setbacks that may be experienced. African countries should create a suitable environment for students from other African countries to easily access continuing education facilities in their countries. This will ensure that students have a variety of courses and study options to choose from. Diversity in the education sector can only serve to improve not only the quality of the education but also improve on the workforce that is available in the job market.

Institutions also need to encourage their academic staff to interact with their peers to share ideas and to assist in research work for development and improvement of courses. Institutions that have successfully implemented continuing education in their curriculum should be willing to assist upcoming institutions set up similar programmes. Academicians are encouraged to carry out research and publish their findings on various aspects of continuing education and in this way provide adequate information to assist in the development of this programme.

There is no record of any idea that has ever been implemented which was not faced with challenges. Continuing education is no different but we are fortunate that it has already been implemented in other areas with much success. We are privileged to have had our path already cleared for us. We stand to gain by borrowing from what they have learnt on their path to realizing the successful institutions they now have. We can avoid some of the pitfalls they may have faced in their implementation stages and by so doing our institutions can produce better programmes that are suited for our environment.

We all need to get aboard the Continuing Education flight and deliver our continent to the next generation with competitive skills and knowledge.

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