

Chapter 33

Mobile Open–Access Revolutionizing Learning Among University Students in Kenya: The Role of the Smartphone

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ABSTRACT

Today's knowledge-based economy requires that nations equip their citizens with appropriate skills, and a demand for university education has continued to soar. In much of Sub-Saharan Africa, however, the rapid increase in university enrollments has not been matched with an expansion of the relevant infrastructure, resulting in among other things, overcrowded classrooms and inadequate libraries. On the other hand, there has been a robust growth in the sector of technology globally. This chapter examines the rapid expansion of university education in Kenya and its implications on quality, as well as possible contributions of the Smartphone to learning. Challenges aside, the author concludes that the Smartphone could be exploited to supplement learning as it enables the student to access academic and research materials from credible sources that are either on free-access or subscribed-for through their home university libraries. Samples from forty-nine responses from university students are included in the chapter.

INTRODUCTION

That every person has a right to acquire education to the highest possible level is well endorsed by Article 26 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights on Education, which states that:

everyone has the right to education ... Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

While this right might seem obvious in the developed parts of the world, many people in the developing world still struggle to achieve it. This chapter explores the challenges that face many young people in accessing university education in Kenya and examines the role of the mobile open access facility in responding positively to this challenge. Specifically, the use of the smartphone as a mobile device to access learning materials by university students is examined.

A small-scale survey sent out to an email network of students in two public universities was conducted to inform the author's views in the chapter (see survey questions in Appendix). The survey sought to find out

1. Students' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of their libraries in providing learning materials in general
2. Students' use of a smartphone to access their academic materials. In addition to these survey-based data, interview data provided by one librarian at a public Kenyan university provided context for the study findings and discussion

Forty-nine responses were received to provide the data for this chapter. The responses, while few, are representative of the larger university student population. The responses were considered important because they represented student views and experiences, which could further inform future policies regarding education in the country.

The newly inaugurated Kenyan government (as of 2013) has as one of its main objectives transforming education in the country. Government officials have promised to digitalize education starting from the primary school, an initiative which the government is in the process of implementing. The survey carried out for this chapter could therefore be useful to the government as it makes key decisions regarding the place and nature of technology in the Kenyan education system. In particular, the findings could be useful when considering key decisions regarding the use of mobile technology for learning in higher education contexts as most students in both public and private universities own a type of a smartphone.

BACKGROUND

Today, more than ever before, nations across the world have acknowledged the need for a strong higher education system as a prerequisite for national development. Scholars on African development have not been left behind in addressing this matter. Most have stated that African countries must provide higher education that is responsive to the demands of the 21st century (Nyang'au, 2014, Teferra and Altbach, 2004). Teferra and Altbach (2004, p. 21) for instance stated that:

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