Mbarara University of Science and Technology

Draft eLearning Policy

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Contents

List of Abbreviations

e-Learning   Electronic Learning

e-Resources   Electronic Resources

ICT   Information and Communications Technology

MUST   Mbarara University of Science and Technology

1.0 Introduction

This E-learning Policy takes into consideration the urgency to effectively enhance the teacher to student teaching and learning experience, through the improvement of management and support of e-learning, by providing the opportunity to utilize the flexibility, accessibility and ubiquitous nature of educational environment that focuses on the needs of both the teacher and learner. E-Learning in the context of MUST is - "learning facilitated and supported through the use of information and communication technologies". This is abroad definition that entails use of all sorts of technologies to support learning through, for example, provision of e-resources and also on-line student engagement through interactive learning activities. It must be noted that MUST supports the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) for learning as one way of improving its education. Today, there is great emphasis of students centered learning and not the teacher centered learning. This form of learning can easily be realized through the numerous technologies. Therefore, a need for a policy on streamlining the use of technologies for learning is inevitable.

This policy focuses on how quality education can be enhanced and attained through the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT). Further, it takes account of government's ICT policy which seeks to fully integrate use of ICT throughout the education sector as one way of attainment of the millennium goals.

With the shift in the learning paradigm, many institutional faculties are trying to cope with the competition for student enrollment and retention. Faculties are also realizing an increasingly competitive environment with changing student expectations. The current students are living in a world that is surrounded by a technological environment that requires them to utilize ICT in all sectors of their lives. E-learning has the potential to enhance the teachers' and students' overall teaching and learning experience through improving accessibility, flexibility, delivery and assessment. E-learning increases opportunities for personalized learning, fostering self-directed and independent learning; ubiquitous access to information and services; improved communication between staff and students and effective management of teaching and learning. Research has also indicated that e-learning has the potential of influencing the recruitment and retention of students and increase the institutional revenues through the provision of distance learning.

1.1 Policy Objectives

a) To incorporate e-learning in MUST's teaching, research and learning activities so that its role is clear and apparent to staff and learners at all levels.

b) To guarantee that the e-learning infrastructure within MUST meets the needs of teachers and learners and that it is well maintained so that e-learning technologies and techniques run smoothly.

c) To provide adequate and appropriate support, facilitation and reward for staff involved in using e-learning technologies (content development, training). This will encourage teaching innovation and ensure the successful implementation and dissemination of e-learning at all levels.

d) To ensure that staff and students have appropriate access to electronic teaching and learning

tools and materials, including materials stored locally and those held elsewhere.

e) To capitalize on the potential offered by e-learning to support a wider student experience, MUST's outreach activities, distance learning and lifelong learning.

2.0 Guiding principles for the Implementation of the Policy

Principle 1: The university management shall champion the implementation of e-learning in all MUST programs as a gradual process and with full support in terms of policy and financial aspects.

Principle 2: The university shall ensure that e-learning growth is in line with the strategic aims of MUST in respect to teaching and learning.

Principle 3: Recognition of the fact that there is enormous diversification in teaching practices which can be enhanced differently.

Principle 4: The learning technology availability must not be the driving force for the implementation of e-learning but the students' learning and pedagogical needs should be the major influencing factors. E-Learning must be utilized to enhance other teaching and learning approaches such as lectures, labs, seminars and therefore should be linked with learning, course delivery and assessment objectives.

Principle 5: Utilization of e-learning technologies in the attainment of an active, conducive, interesting, independent and ubiquitous environment for learners that enhances teaching and research.

Principle 6: The return on investments in e-Learning, like all forms of teaching, should be taken into account.

Principle 7: The university ensures that students taking eLearning courses are formally assessed in a way that is aimed at improving learning.

Principle 8: MUST should formalize the coordination of e-learning activities so that the policy is implemented effectively and efficiently.

3.0 Implementation

3.1 eLearning as a tool to support Teaching, Learning and Research

3.1.1   MUST shall support the implementation and integration of proven technologies through the provision of centralized technical and pedagogic services.

3.1.2   The university shall encourage a more strategic approach to the development and implementation of e-learning at departmental levels as an integral part of Teaching and Learning plans.

3.1.3   MUST shall establish mechanisms for the effective adoption, testing and evaluation of e-learning tools and techniques at the university.

3.2 eLearning Infrastructure

3.2.1   The university shall ensure the adequate supply and maintenance of the technical infrastructure including teaching, research and learning technologies (software and hardware) and appropriate technical support.

3.2.2   **The university shall ensure the maintenance of** appropriate infrastructure to enable reliable and effective access to online courseware and other web resources ubiquitously.

3.2.3   MUST shall develop an appropriate Managed Learning Environment which will ensure that students and teachers are presented with an effective and authoritative system for learning and teaching. This system has to be developed in line with the proven pedagogical instructional design concepts selected by MUST. The system should also be Open Source to allow easy sustainability.

3.2.4   The university shall willfully supply, maintain and support appropriate and sufficient physical infrastructure (i.e. classroom, computer laboratories and learning spaces) to support access to e-learning which meet staff and student needs and expectations.

3.3 Support for eLearning

3.3.1   MUST shall provide central support for e-learning through staff training and development, e-learning coordination under MUST Computing Services and the establishment of a digital library by strengthening and supporting their resources and function.

3.3.2   The overall responsibility for the development and coordination of e-learning at MUST will rest with the MUST Computing Services, Academic Registrar's Office and the University Library. This should provide consistency and focus in the development of e-learning plus stimulating and driving such developments.

3.3.3   The eLearning coordination function will include advice and support concentrating on the

pedagogical issues of e-learning as well as technical support in running and maintaining e-learning tools.

3.3.4   The eLearning coordination function will work closely together with the academic staff in order to stimulate, drive and support the pedagogical use of e-learning within subject disciplines as well as to disseminate good practice.

3.3.5   The eLearning coordination function shall support staff to develop appropriate skills in e-learning that will cover both pedagogical and technical aspects. Evaluation of the training needs and training program redesign shall be continuous.

3.3.6   The university shall make available adequate time to academic staff and recognize the staff workload associated with e-learning developments and online teaching.

3.3.7   The university shall ensure that adequate recognition is given to academic staff for e-learning development work through the promotion process and other forms of reward such as financial incentives for content developers.

3.3.8   The university shall support students to use e-learning facilities and to develop appropriate e-learning skills as an additional study skill and ensure that there is orientation to e-learning for all new incoming students during the orientation week.

3.3.9   The university shall encourage and help staff to engage in the evaluation and pedagogical research in e-learning.

3.3.10 The university shall encourage collaboration with other communities for the purpose of further learning.

3.3.11 The university shall ensure that e-learning developments are taken into account in the University's Copyright and Intellectual Property Rights policies.

3.4 eLearning to support student experience, outreach activities and distance/lifelong learning

3.4.1   The university shall consider the role that e-learning could play in the supporting of broader community outreach programs.

3.4.2   The university shall develop a role for e-learning in the recruitment of students and the marketing of the academic programs in an appropriate and sustainable way.

3.4.3   The university shall consider the role of e-learning in providing individual feedback and targeted support to students in support of MUST's endeavors to improve on the retention rates.

3.4.4   The university shall support the development of e-learning to enhance opportunities for lifelong learning in Uganda.

4.0 Implementation and Evaluation

The responsibility for the development of this Policy rests with the eLearning Coordination function comprising representation from the MUST Computing Services, Academic Registrar's Office and the University Library and shall report to the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic Affairs).

4.0.1   The eLearning Coordination function shall coordinate Policy-related activities by bringing together key members of MUST, including those responsible for resource allocation within the University strategies.

4.0.2   The eLearning Coordination function shall recommend target outcomes for the next academic year such as having all degree and diploma courses having an e-learning component.

4.0.3   The eLearning Coordination function shall coordinate e-learning trainings for all existing and incoming students within MUST.

4.0.4   The University shall make sure that guide materials effective for e-learning and the use of e-tools are made available for embedding in curricula where relevant to the students. There will be reviews of student e-learning experiences to identify further support materials and services that should be developed for students. As part of a process of regular review, student feedback will be gathered on the learning platform to inform development.

4.0.5   The eLearning Coordination function shall monitor and review progress made against target outcomes at least every quarter.

4.0.6   The eLearning Coordination function shall plan training workshops for the academic staff within MUST and recognize the most appropriate pedagogical skills necessary for effective teaching and learning.

4.0.7   The eLearning Coordination function shall introduce mechanisms to enable teaching staff embed e-learning within the curriculum. These mechanisms include: The provision of templates and examples of good practice in e-learning and Release from teaching or other duties to allow time to develop e-learning.

4.0.8   The eLearning Coordination function shall advise departmental committees, management and other stake holders of resource requirements for implementing the e-Learning Policy.

5.0 Relationship with other University strategies and initiatives

Whilst pedagogical issues will drive e-learning, the creation of an electronic environment for teaching and learning will influence and be influenced by other University strategies (e.g. Teaching and Learning, Research Policy, Teaching and Learning Facilities, Teacher to Student Ratio, Provision of ICT Skills for all, Partnership with Private Sector, Collaboration). As the implementation of this policy will have funding implications, it needs to be developed in relation with other University strategies and developments. Furthermore, in the context of the University's limited resources such as low bandwidth, the University will need to increase its ICT budget to specifically cater for a more dedicated bandwidth meant for e-learning programs. However, MUST should consider the financial implications of investing in e-learning and whether it is worth for return on investment due to the risks that are involved.

The risks that maybe involved include: failure to maintain or improve teaching quality; failure to provide the range, structure and support of courses that meet expectations and needs of students; failure to recruit home/international students to planned levels; significant poor publicity or loss of reputation.

However, in an increasingly competitive environment with higher student enrollment, expectations and increased demand for flexibility in access and delivery, the long term costs of not investing might be greater.

6.0 Action Plan

It is apparent that some staff members with in the University are already implementing e-learning and there are currently excellent examples of the use of e-learning. However, in order to completely rollout e-learning across the entire University, there is need to undertake its implementation in clear key phases. These include:

6.1 Phase1–Exploratory and Consultancy Phase

   i. Launch the E-Learning Policy.
  ii. Enhance existing eLearning platform (including training support and evaluation).
 iii. Establish an eLearning Coordination function with in the University to oversee all activities related with the implementation of e-learning.
 iv. Explore advances in e-learning methods and tools through case studies.
  v. Explore opportunities for integrating e-learning in at least three degree and diploma courses for each department across the University.
 vi. Explore at least two content authoring techniques and have them adopted across MUST.
vii. Report on impact of rolling out the E-Learning Policy and E-learning platform.

6.2 Phase 2 – Embedding Phase

 i. Enhance learning to support tools and templates from phase1.
 ii. Seek to embed new e-learning working practices within the entire University degree and diploma courses.
 iii. Seek to produce one new distance learning course, as a pilot of training from a distance.
 iv. Embed e-assessment in at least three degree and diploma courses across the entire University.
 v. Introduce training and support activity to raise the base level of e-learning provision across all courses.

6.3 Phase 3 – Main Streaming of Enhancements

 i. Introduce policies to encourage and support mainstream e-learning provision.
 ii. Mainstream use of e-assessment as a formative and summative evaluation instrument across all degree and diploma courses within the University.
 iii. Review and update e-learning policies to support mainstream use of e-learning.

7. Conclusion

Having stipulated out what should be done by MUST in order to effectively implement e-learning across the University, it is clearly apparent that resources and time have to be committed by both staff and students. The policy is just a guide on how e-learning should be streamlined across the entire University. Establishing an eLearning Coordination function is essential for effective implementation and monitoring of the policy. The eLearning Coordination function will report quarterly to MUST management on the progress of the implementation of the e-learning policy. As the e-Learning Policy develops over the next few years, it is anticipated that the vision and the aims of this policy will change to suit the available circumstances.