



UNITED NATIONS  
UNIVERSITY

UNU-ViE

Vice Rectorate in Europe

## Innovative Capacity Development through eLearning with a Special focus on Africa

# Key outcomes of our strategic UNU e-learning workshop - Bonn, 26-27 November 2008

## Introduction

This week in Bonn UNU brought together 33 UNU experts and leading external stakeholders including educational experts from East, West and Southern Africa to explore the role of e-learning at UNU and ways to respond to the need for UNU to focus more on the African region. An initial vision for maximizing access to and quality of learning through the application of technology mediated tools and processes was developed and participants shared their current work to surface organizational strengths and gaps. African colleagues contributed to the discussion and provided valuable insights to test UNUs assumptions and match its strengths to the needs of its stakeholders. A summary of their recommendations can be found below.

Three key messages emerged from this meeting:

- There is a need to broaden our definition of e-learning. This results from the realization that changing technologies, and the processes used with technologies, can be a catalyst for deeper learning, a higher quality of and increased access to learning. This can also improve internal and external communication and collaboration.
- E-learning is not simply a UNU project or stream, but a tool for advancing research and teaching in service of the UN goals. We should examine how it can support our work in all we do and apply it thoughtfully and well. This means building our own understanding of and capacity to apply e-learning.
- UNU has planted seeds of innovation in the recent past with successful e-learning projects. Now we need to share the fruits of those seeds by looking at scaling of those seeds across UNU while continuing to nurture innovation and development of ideas that respond to local contexts.

In this summary of our workshop, we will explore each of these points. The visual digital artifacts will be shared on a UNU web page to make the meeting outputs transparent and accessible to others.

## What is e-learning (or the "E-Stuff Manifesto")

When the term e-learning is used, many assume this means the provision of a course using electronic tools. Though courses are definitely an important dimension of e-learning, it can not be restricted to it. E-learning is the application of electronic tools in the support of any kind of learning, from formal to informal, from personal to group to network. E-learning is not the just the technology, but how we use the technology. It is the intersection of technology, process and people in the service of learning, any where, any time, and any place (Examples of this can be found in the Annex 1 below). The group re-expressed this idea as "e-stuff" to move beyond the limited course-focused definition.

A broader vision emerges from this definition that touches on two aspects important to UNU. (See the forthcoming full report for the expanded vision documentation.)

1. **Access.** E-learning is a critical tool for providing access to learning in developing countries where institutional capacity cannot meet the demand for classroom based instruction and where new modes of learning are needed to address specific needs that arise in regions such as risk management, or in response to a rapidly changing situation or context (climate change, food security, governance). This reflects that learning needs in developing countries span across the continuum of formal, degree granting offerings to application of learning in the field, to professional networking for ongoing learning and advancement.

2. **New Ways of Working.** While e-learning can support specific things such as the provision of courses for training or degree programs, it can also support networks of learning across domains and regions,

internal collaboration and ways to support work across time and distance. This is important not only because learning itself spans across local, national and global borders, but the intention of the UN is to work in a more sustainable manner requires the addition of new ways of learning and working which reduce the dependence on fossil fuel driven travel. It enables UNU to support both deep, institution based work, and work across the various parts of UNU. E-learning allows a strong "network" effect that weaves both across and within UNU units. This is critical both for the application of UNU research and expertise, and for the provision of educational services to the world. It reflects making both content and delivery visible, available and useful. Otherwise UNU risks being segmented and reducing its value to the world.

## **Strategic Application of E-learning at UNU**

As part of the Bonn gathering, the group spent half a day and chose three of the elements of the UNU draft strategic plan and one cross-cutting issue. They brainstormed and articulated how e-learning could support those elements. The group started to explore how e-learning can help weave across the main areas of the plan and because of time constraint was invited to select and focus on three areas. The group however underlined that all aspects of the strategic plan could benefit from the support e-processes, in fact suggest some common threads across the plan, especially when it comes to building capacity to use e-learning tools and methods for any UNU goal.

### **1. Twinning**

E-learning was seen as a central element for the goal of twinning and suggested that it be included from the start of this initiative. E-learning can support the following:

- **Level participation between institutions.** Northern institutions may have more resources for face-to-face interaction and access to greater resources on their physical campuses. E-learning makes this available transparently to both parties. Staff from both institutions can communicate horizontally at every level, learn with and from each other and communicate on an ongoing basis, which can help attenuate impact of power and resource differentials and move more towards mutual participation and excellence in education.
- **Transparency.** The self-documenting nature of e-learning protocols (discussion records, file repositories, etc.) support visibility of all work products for everyone involved. This increased transparency requires initial negotiation processes.
- **Working together at a distance.** Collaboration tools enable both staff and learners at twin institutions to learn and work together beyond rare and costly F2F meetings.
- **Quality.** Through joint work, twinned institutions can share existing quality standards and develop joint quality goals and ways to measure those goals. Online tools can help support more in-depth assessment and sharing of local contexts, removing an emphasis on the developed nation partner's perspective. Twin partner institutions can develop sharable models and processes to create and assess quality. Using collaborative processes and tools can support UNU's effort to further define quality, standards and ways to assess quality.
- **Planning for twinning.** Simple development and use of a shared database identifying existing "twin" relationships and ongoing negotiations can help both individual twinning initiatives and UNU as a whole to build from existing successes and avoid previous pitfalls.

### **2. Access to Education**

E-learning is a key tool for making learning available to all. E-learning tools and methods allow UNU to:

- **Create, reuse, and contextualize content** (locally and globally). This affords scalability and meeting of local needs. More variety building on a strong base that can be adapted both in terms of content and delivery modes. There are so many areas of knowledge that all of them can not be addressed by UNU. We need to prioritize where we can really make the most impact. The Open Course Ware initiative which showcases the training and educational programs implemented by UNU (joint collaboration between UNU-MERIT, UNU-INWEH, UNU-IIST, Online Media Studio) has been acknowledged as a successful first step in this direction.
- **Provide flexibility in education delivery modes and processes.** For example, learning and content delivery can happen online, via CD-ROMs and print. It offers flexibility in pedagogy, meeting academic and individual learning needs. It can encompass both individual learning and socially constructed learning.
- **Prioritize learning.** E-learning can make learning transparent and visible, affording ways to build support for learning by officials and community members. When learning opportunities and options are more visible, communities and nations can begin to define more precisely what they need through identification of needs and support to meet the needs.

- **Improve the field and expand the vision of learning in development.** With the wider reach and transparency of e-learning tools and methods, UNU can think beyond the idea of classroom or workshop based education to a bigger view that includes training, informal learning and exchange of knowledge where it is needed. For example, how do we build capacity during the classroom/workshop for learners to continue to learn after the classroom/workshop by connecting to professional networks, continuing to grow and share their knowledge as it is applied to the needs of developing countries?
- **Multiplying effect.** How can students/learners benefiting from UNU programs teach others who have not yet had access to the formal learning and multiply the investment in formal learning and build local ownership? One learner in a formal program can be the seed for development of local content, process and capacity once that initial investment is deployed in a country.

### **3. Strengthening Knowledge Sharing & Dissemination**

E-learning tools and methods have application to other core functions of UNU, particularly with knowledge sharing and dissemination and internal and external collaboration. Three key values are open, collaborative and attention to targets and impacts.

- **Open access.** Free access to journals and resource publications online.
- **Modular.** Dissemination of content in blocks that facilitates easy adaptation and reuse.
- **One stop shop.** A single entry point for searching and accessing all UNU content, research papers, potentially expanded to all of the UN.
- **Policy.** Open educational resources and revised IP policies. To support open, reusable content UNU can provide leadership that recognizes the key role of open courseware and open educational resources. This may require a rethinking of UNU's IP policy.
- **Collaboration across UNU.** Foster communication and collaboration between UNU units to both foster innovation scale the application of UNU research and methods.
- **Develop virtual capacity building unit.** Help UNU units and partners increase their skills for implementing e-learning and the application of e-learning tools and methods more widely for collaboration and communication.
- **Customizing knowledge outputs to target groups.** To spread the work of UNU, some of it must be customized with attention to who are priority targets.
- **Accessibility.** Bringing content where UNU's true audiences are.
- **Assessing value.** More explicit evaluation of impact and sharing of that information – both successes and failures
- **Motivate.** Understand and support conditions that support collaboration, assessment, sharing and dissemination.

### **4. Application across the goals**

While the group took three items as examples, there was a strong recognition that there are applications of e-learning tools and methods that can support ANY and all of the items, as well as some threads that might be woven across all of the goals. They might be seen as core values and practices across the organization that help UNU make the most of its work.

- **Knowing what each other is doing.** Using online tools to continuously share both finished work and work in progress.
- **Knowing how these parts fit into the larger whole** of the mission, vision and goals of UNU. Sharing of initial goals and plans online with explicit identification of how a project both meets local unit and/or stakeholder needs and the potential contribution to the larger UNU vision.
- **Tools and practices to support these actions.** UNU as a whole needs to consider how to build staff capacity and the required tools and IT resources so people can focus on using them to do their work, not struggle with the acquisition and initial adoption of the tools.
- **Leadership to encourage and incentivize** both local innovation and broader UNU collaboration facilitated by e-learning tools and methods.
- **Provide a high level line of sight** to the whole that recognizes the strength and uniqueness of the parts.
- **Application of what is learned in the parts across the whole.** So build on individual unit innovation in wider application across units where applicable.

## Further Documentation

The full meeting report is currently under preparation. It will include meeting outputs, description of process (for application in future meetings as appropriate) and digital artifacts capturing the graphic recording and photos of this event.

### ANNEX 1 - Examples of e-learning in Application

- **Course delivery** - familiar to most, e-learning allows the delivery of content and support of teaching pedagogy at a distance and with flexibility over time. Examples include shared delivery of courses between partner institutions, creation of locally adapted courses based on broader shared core material, and a key aspect for twinning. E-learning can also support the concept of "blended learning" which includes the application of technology to classroom teaching, or mixing online and offline opportunities. Video, audio, still images can now support texts and allow broader and more diverse use of key content.
- **Supporting ongoing communities of practice** - creating connections for ongoing learning for practitioners in specific domains, which bridges from formal learning to learning while working and applying learning to the field. E-learning provides platforms and processes for this ongoing engagement and learning.
- **Just in time learning** - access to content that is either directly applicable or adaptable/translatable to local contexts reduces duplication of effort and speeds time from development to application through e-repositories, e-authoring tools and strong pedagogical practices. This can include both planned and "just in time" training in the field.
- **Access to expertise.** Access to key UNU/ partner knowledge- e-learning can provide visibility of and access to the think tank aspects of UNU and its resident experts, and access to external experts in partner organizations and countries by UNU staff, building both a stronger exchange and a richer set of resources.
- **Partner collaboration** - to fully take advantage of partnerships at a distance, e-learning tools and processes can enable ongoing collaboration that does not stop "after the face to face meeting." From synchronous communication tools (Skype, instant messengers, mobile telephony tools) to asynchronous content creation and sharing tools (blogs, wikis and discussion forums) there is barrier to daily collaboration.
- **Online events.** E-learning tools can enable online conferences, meetings and learning events to expand the power of learning and working together. Early work by UNU with video conferencing is an example.
- **Content provision.** UNU develops significant learning content. E-learning tools support the distribution of this content (i.e. open access journals, open courseware materials, etc.) and the application and use of those materials. Interactive tools allow users to provide feedback to evaluate and improve that content and help customize it to local contexts rapidly and then making the new content immediately visible and available. This speeds the time from innovation to application.

### ANNEX 2 – Suggestions for UNU from the invited group of African experts

The workshop used the input from five colleagues from Africa as a way to test the assumptions and priorities discussed. The following suggestions emerged as the group discussed the relevance of UNU's work for their work in African universities.

- Partner with local institutions or where needed, support the creation of open universities, particularly to build capacity as many African countries face a large bulge in student populations.
- Help establish quality standards and ways to assess those standards, with the neutral reputation of the UN
- Draw on existing expertise within UNU and from the field. Share experiences across institutions to give a line of sight to what others are accomplishing. Promote the circulation of learning. For example, draw on what the RCE's have done on sustainable development and spread the learning.
- Take the lead in content expertise in key areas such as environmental security. Make it modifiable.
- Develop and spread innovation in e-learning and create a platform for this work.
- Nurture networks of professionals working on learning issues both through offline and online strategies.
- UNU must learn about the range of strategies appropriate in different contexts and then engage deeply to get a serious understanding. Local capacity must be build to make it sustainable.