

A VISION FOR DIGITAL HIGHER EDUCATION IN KENYA

By Eileen Kennedy

Context

A year and a half since the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the global shift to online teaching and learning, PASGR and UCL Knowledge Lab brought together leaders of digital higher education across Kenya in a series of online convenings to reflect on whether the emergency remote teaching created in response to the pandemic was the kind of digital higher education that Kenya wants for the future.



The aims of the convenings were to:

- *share experiences and interrogate assumptions and beliefs about digital higher education;*
- *collaboratively create a vision and actionable plan for digital higher education aligned with their university's mission and values.*

Issues

Pressing issues discussed at the beginning of the convenings included the inadequacy of faculty digital skills, lack of digital infrastructure, lack of attention to pedagogies for equity, the need for inclusion and accessibility, resistance to change among faculty and students, and the need to increase stakeholder involvement. It emerged from discussions that there was a widely held belief that a policy framework to support digital HE was needed.

Methodology

The project applied the 'Utafiti Sera' approach; an innovative participatory methodology pioneered by PASGR, to engage stakeholders in an evidence-led process of deliberation to dig beyond the surface of digitalisation and collaboratively construct a collective vision of digital higher education. We held 3 online convenings during May and June 2021 attended by 59 stakeholders from Higher Education Institutions across Kenya, as well as Kenyan HE policy makers.

Key findings

These findings are based on the outputs from the three online convenings. During the convenings, we invited participants to share their thoughts through interactive and collaborative activities. Participants crafted their collective vision for Digital Higher Education in Kenya by presenting and negotiating perspectives.

1. Support for a national framework for Digital HE

Participants argued that there was need for a national framework for Digital HE in Kenya that would revisit existing standards and create new ones to guide institutions to use digital learning. There was strong support for mapping Kenya for infrastructure needs and developing inclusivity policies and partnerships for affordable, reliable, accessible and sustainable power and connectivity. Participants proposed that the National Framework should include:

- ♦ Reassessment of existing standards and regulations for ODeL and include:
- ♦ Standardisation of ICT infrastructure, quality, and assessment
- ♦ Support for inclusion and equity, and creation of an accessibility policy e.g. ensuring that those with special needs and disabilities have access to adaptive technologies as needed
- ♦ Fees guidelines
- ♦ Increase accessibility of student resources through digitizing libraries, rejuvenating traditional libraries, and opening access to online repositories
- ♦ Facilitation of shared resources between HEIs, including courses, and enable students to access content from other universities
- ♦ Map Kenya for infrastructure needs to support student access to power, digital devices, and data bundles

“A university that produces graduates who can transform humanity

2. Identification of priority areas for developing Digital HE in Kenya

Participants identified seven priority areas for developing Digital HE in Kenya, and policy actions that could deliver on these priorities:

- i. Rethinking pedagogy: synchronous/asynchronous interactive teaching
- ii. Continuous staff development: needs analysis; planning, monitoring & evaluation
- iii. Rethinking planning: generating data for leading cost-efficient, quality digital HE
- iv. Designing inclusive learning: embedded within a strategic plan
- v. Taking a learner-centred approach: underpinned by peer and tutor interaction
- vi. Evaluating, monitoring online learning: developing quality indicators
- vii. Collaboration and partnership: mapping stakeholders and public/private partners

“with the right planning and resources, it may even be a better approach towards provision of education

3. Support for an enabling policy environment for Digital Higher Education

Participants worked in groups to develop key policy actions required for the 7 priorities to be realized. The presence of key policy actors in Higher education i.e. State Department for University Education and Research, Vice-chancellors Forum and the Commission for University Education, strengthened the discussions by illuminating ongoing policy work in the higher education sector. This helped policy actions proposed by participants to align with the existing policy environment in Kenya to create synergy and avoid duplication. The policy actions submitted by participants focused on several themes including a request for the ministry to mandate institutions to use digital learning, build capacity to align activity across Kenya, and support students to learn in an interactive way e.g. by linking to existing initiatives such as The Kenya Education Network (KenNet). The standardisation of ICT infrastructure for digital education and the creation of an accessibility policy were also supported by participants.

4. Support for policy for partnership and collaboration

During the convenings, participants shared their visions for digital higher education in Kenya, which included breaking out of silos and engaging in cross-sector collaboration. The opportunity for sharing and collaboration between HE providers was highly valued by participants and considered key to implementing the vision for digital HE.

Participants asked for policy support for an umbrella organisation to be established to bring together digital education leaders and sustain the community of practice that had formed in the Utafiti Sera House during the three convenings. Moreover, collaboration between government, institutions, and corporate partners were seen to have benefits, for example for:

- i. Supporting local innovations in digital content and technologies, rather than those developed by and for external markets
- ii. South-South resources and partnerships across the continent. Rather than seeking or relying on outside interlocutors to lead these processes, Kenya should identify regional partners.

- iii. Content sharing supported by the adoption of common content and technical formats
- iv. interfaculty learning cooperative, consisting of digital champions to take forward the discussion originating in the convenings within each university
- v. An interuniversity learning community to support collaboration and content sharing led by the Commission for University Education that includes non-state actors from NGOs and other organizations that work in education and the private sector
- vi. Collaborative research on sustaining a digital higher education
- vii. Provision of internet and energy for affordable, reliable access to online teaching and learning through public-private partnerships with technology companies and collaboration between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Communication

“ I met many people engaged in online learning and have been very encouraged by working with them even outside the convening



5. Need to monitor and sustain progress towards the Vision for Digital Higher Education

Participants proposed that a monitoring and evaluation approach should be embedded within the national framework that adopted measures to determine quality from both educator and learner perspectives, including the extent to which graduates were capable of critical thought, self-regulation and social transformation. Working in groups, participants were facilitated to respond to the question around how they would know that their vision for the digital university in Kenya has been realized when. Themes emerged as indicators of success are summarized below:

- i. Pedagogy, particularly around interactivity and making connections with other students and/or teachers. Key here is the decentralization of learning to students so that students engage in knowledge creation. Connected to this are innovative assessment tools. This illuminates the importance of having measures for success around whether learning is interactive, or whether it is simply delivering content to students.
- ii. Quality. The importance of determining whether the higher education offered is of high or good quality. Measures of quality from the perspective of educators and learners, and cost effectiveness are critical. It will be important to ensure that a culture of honesty, innovation, creativity, and originality is nurtured.
- iii. Technologies used for teaching and learning enable interactivity and accessibility.
- iv. Student attributes: enabling students to be critical learners, and whether they can drive their own learning forward by transforming themselves.
- v. Inclusivity: Ensuring respect and inclusion for different cultures and voices whereby students have a voice regardless of where they are from.
- vi. Safety: A safe environment free from technology exploitation of technology.
- vii. Value for money: This means that there is a balance between investment and quality, looking for opportunities where cost effectiveness and high quality to intersect.

“ content without transformation of human character is meaningless

Findings	Recommendations
Support for a national framework for Digital HE	Create and implement a national framework for inclusive, learner-centred digital higher education
Identification of priority areas for developing Digital HE in Kenya	<p>The national framework for Digital HE should be based on the 7 priority areas of 1) rethinking pedagogy 2) continuous staff development 3) rethinking planning 4) designing inclusive learning 5) taking a learner-centred approach 6) evaluating and monitoring online learning and 7) collaboration and partnership.</p> <p>Policy alignment with the priorities should be tracked at both national and institutional level and revisited regularly to ensure continuous relevance (e.g. bi-annually).</p>
Support for an enabling policy environment for Digital Higher Education	Government policy should support institutions to build capacity in digital education and align approaches across Kenya.
Support for policy for Partnership and Collaboration	<p>Funding and support should encourage partnership between and within government departments, HE institutions and the private sector.</p> <p>Funding and support should be directed towards sustaining the community of practice that had formed in the Utafiti Sera House.</p>
Need to monitor and sustain progress towards the Vision for Digital Higher Education in Kenya	An ‘umbrella’ monitoring group should be established to create ownership of the national framework and sustain progress towards the shared vision for digital HE in Kenya.

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