

E-LEARNING POLICYMAKING PROCESSES: AN EVIDENCE BASED APPLICATION AT
KENYATTA UNIVERSITY MARSABIT DISTANCE LEARNING CENTRE

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1. ABSTRACT

*The paper discusses evidence-base approach to policy making in general and e-learning in particular. E-learning is understood as a subset of distance education both in theory and in practice. The discussion considers the functions of a policy in general and in e-learning as a tool for enhancing managerial decision making. From the discussions, merits and demerits the theoretical issues of evidence-based approach to policymaking are considered. Even so, evidence-based policy process closes the gap, which sometimes becomes apparent between what is known on the one hand, and what is practiced on the other. Moreover, evidence-based approach potentially avoids or at least minimizes the chances of policy failures on e-learning programmes. The on-going Kenyatta University e-learning Marsabit Project targeting female teachers is used to illustrate how evidence-based policy orientation is helping to **detect** and **correct** e-learning policy at micro-level. In many ways, The Marsabit Project is evidence-led. In many in many respects, this has evolutionary characteristics that are turning out to be very different from the mainstream of Kenyatta University's e-learning policy and practice.*

Key words

Evidence- based approach, e-learning, policy functions.

Introduction

It is well understood that evidence-based movement at first originated from the field of medicine. Greenhalgh T. *et al* (2008; Slavin R. E. 2002). However, transferability of principles of evidence based medicine to improve educational quality in general and e-learning in particular is promising as long as the approach is modified to address key issues in education sub-sector. Indeed, evidence based policy can be seen as an improvement on untested issues about policy. The approach assumes that policymakers who are theoretically informed about use of data are in a better position to learn from experience and empowered by data; to avoid repeating the errors of the past. This also enables policymakers to better apply new techniques to the resolution of both old and emerging and issues. Howlett, M. (2008)

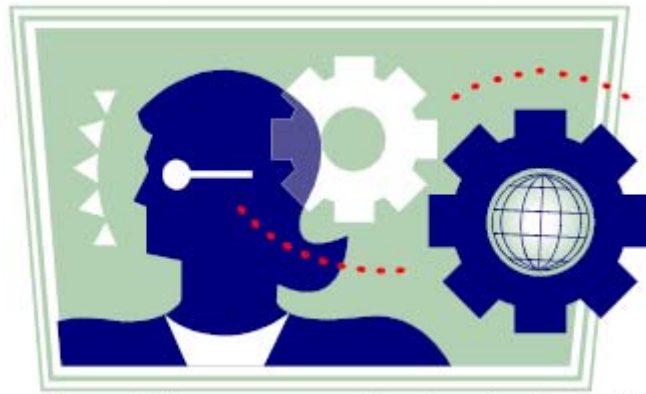


FIGURE 1- Evidence-Based Policy in Contrast With Opinion based policy

Figure one (taken from Davidson (2004) is used to illustrate the contrast between evidence-based policy on the one hand, and opinion-based policy on the other. In general, policies based on untested opinions tend to suffer from overreliance on selective evidence regardless of the quality. This includes influence by groups, lobbyists who could well have a stake on the policy at hand (including the private sector, non-governmental organizations etc) As such opinions that are not back by evidence are also more likely to suffer from speculative conjectures as well as ideological stand points.

Benefits from evidence-based approach are realised when the approach assists policymakers to put the best available evidence from research and other sources at the heart of policy development and implementation Davies (1999). Moreover, if evidence based approach is

correctly implemented, it can improve education quality and outcomes as reduce unnecessary costs.

The need to focus on e-learning policymaking is strengthened by lessons from e-learning history. For example, there are many e-learning initiatives that have that resulted in failure as described by Keegan, et al (2007:9). Paradoxically, some of the initiatives described by Keegan D et al were undertaken by a number of the world’s most successful and highly reputed institutions in their own right. Successful online education should be robust and sustainable. It is therefore of great concern that too much of the online education that has been offered so far has been short-lived, unsuccessful and far from sustainable.

What occasioned the establishment of online education initiatives that have not been robust and sustainable narrated in Keegan et al (2007) study? How come that many of the public sector online education initiatives not proved to be sustainable in e-learning but those very institutions have reported admiration in teaching in other areas? On the same token, why are online education consortia often not sustainable as well? Is profit motive is indeed a panacea, what caused majority of market-driven commercial and investor-driven online education initiatives covered in Keegan et al study to result in failure as table 1 below indicates?

Table 1 *E-LEARNING INITIATIVES THAT FAILED*

			in operation	spent		
UK E-University	UK	2000-2004	4	£50M	Political	University
United States Open University	USA&UK	1998-2002	4	\$27M	Institutional	University
Alliance for Lifelong Learning	USA&UK	2000-2006	6	\$12M	Consortium	Further education
NKN	Norway	2000-2002	2	€7-14M	Political	All levels
IT Fornebu	Norway	1998-2001	3	€9M	Political	Further education
Scottish Knowledge	UK	1997-2002	5	£5.75M	Consortium	University
California Virtual University	USA	1997-1999	2	\$6M	Political Consortium	Further education
The Scottish Interactive University	UK	2002-2007	5	£2.3M	Political	University
Bedriftsuniversitetet	Norway	2000-2003	3	€2M	Consortium	Further education
SWI	Hungary	1999-	6	???	Institutional	All levels

Table 1 (above) is taken from Keegan, D. et al (2007:9) reveals that one of the majors reasons why the e-learning initiatives that failed fundamentally because, among other things, had inconsistent policies due to changing governments and political disagreements. At the same time, proprietary e-learning institutions were observed to have compromised on quality while lack of market knowledge may also contribute to sub-optimal decisions. **“Failure to meet this criterion can be found in the Alliance for Lifelong Learning, the California Virtual University, IT Firebug Notation, Bedriftsuniversitetet, Scottish Knowledge, the Scottish Interactive University, the United Kingdom e-University and the Open University of the United States. New e-learning initiatives need to keep their feet on the**

ground. They need to commission scientific market research. This is especially true if their desired market is outside their home economy, for example in Africa or Asia.”

The report carries a warning note for all those thinking of starting an e-learning initiative to learn from history. This is because if the four of the world’s most famous, most prestigious and most successful universities actually failed to reach targeted goals in e-learning, it is imperative that policymakers learn from both success stories as well as past mistakes of other institution.

While numerous reasons for such failures are easily provided by the management such as market failures, etc, nevertheless policy failures inadvertently contributed to the failure to enhance supportive sustainable e-learning institutions.

2. Functions of an institutional policy on E-learning

A review of literature on functions of policy at institutional level highlights the importance of creating a common vision on the use and development of e- learning. This is because the adoption of e- learning requires a revisiting of existing strategies, especially those associated with e-learning programme development, instructional technology, and crucially, e-learning learner support services. Typically, overall intention is to align e-learning policy with the broader institution’s strategic plan Kashoda, M. et. al (2007). This alignment enables the top management stay responsive on the necessity to modernize its e-learning and capacity building. Policy alignment to incorporate e-learning in a mixed mode institution is also necessary to create a long-term vision and mission of e-learning expected outcomes. Such a policy is useful to prevent event-driven actions, such as one-off episode for instance, hosting of conferences on e-learning while critical issues related to e-learning structures and disused computing and data resources are neglected across an institution. In the case where master plans provide detailed specification of priority projects and the associated allocation of resources over a given period, data analysis is critical in informing management and the development of successful e-learning practice in an institution is critical. In particular, learning from case studies of successful models of evidence-informed practice can be quite instructive Howled, M. (2008). this includes dissemination of research in e-learning among key stakeholders. There are instances, an institution might even require to reorient its infrastructures from their existing state previously not designed to support e- learning with a view to gradually introduce e-learning culture in an entire institution in the very long run.

A recurring point from review of literature is an assumption by policymakers that by providing supply of buildings including the infrastructure; e-learning outcomes will automatically materialise. Less attention is paid to the need to unravel why there could be a sustained effective demand for e-learning in the first place and under what environment in particular. One assumption is that if the right infrastructure is built, functioning institutions and technical support staff can come into being without explicit commitment to e-learning policy development and management.

A conference organized to discuss the functions of distance education policies at Penn State University Park Penn State (1998) concluded that distance education policies shape institutional behaviour in three ways namely:

- Policies control how resources are allocated
- Policies are used to establish rules and regulations
- Policies can create reporting system that establishes institutional accountability for action.http://www.worlcampus.psu.edu/fide/docs.full_3_polysymposia.pdf.

A review of literature on evidence-based e accountability for action

E-learning indicates that in many traditional universities, policies are changed with regard to distance education when practitioners trying to implement a course or programme at a distance meets a barrier. For example, when Kenyatta University staff accompanied Kenya Education Network personnel, it reinforced the perception that there were very few female teachers available to teach even in exclusively girl's schools. In order to induce the supply of trained female teachers in a region predominately Islamic, traditional approaches to e-learning teaching and learning required modification to suit the target groups .E-learning programme policy operational areas are currently focusing on operational aspects such as appropriate laptops for use in an area not fully covered by electricity national grid. Other benefits of evidence-based approach to e-learning policy that are emerging in the projects implementation is through unearthing barriers to online teaching for women learners with multiple roles. Evidence-based approach is enabling policymakers to identify, analyze, and initiate policies changes where necessary to mitigate them; this framework should be useful to administrators and teachers in developing an online learning environment.

Evidence based policymaking

There is no single category of evidence-based policy. However, there is consensus that evidence based policy "is a discourse or a set of methods which informs policy process, rather than aiming to directly affect the eventual goals of a policy" Sutcliffe, S. and Court, J. (2005). Among many justifications to incorporate evidence-based approach in education decision-making process is supported on the grounds that this makes education less vulnerable to the whims of politicians

including ideologies, conventional wisdom folklore and wishful thinking, given the rise in accountability Slavin R. E. (2002). This is because in order to maximize policy effectiveness and efficiency it is necessary to establish an evidence base. The movement from opinion-based policymaking process on the one hand, and evidence-based policy decisions on the other, is not an issue for disputed. What is not self-evident is that capacity of many academic institutions' capability in establishing a reasonably high level of policy analytical capacity in order to perform the tasks associated with managing the policy process in order to implement evidence-based policy-making Howled. M (2006). This is one of the most important policies on policy database to enhance policymakers to learn from past mistakes and move forward in confidence. At state and institutional level the ability to develop medium and long-term projections, proposals for, and evaluations of, policies to avoid reacting to episodic policy activities for short-term political, Economic gains. Instead, what is most critical is a policy on evidence upon which evidence-based policy-making can thrive.

The extent that e-learning is introduced in a conventional policies in an institution, it can be logically expected specific training needs are both a pre-requisite and co-requisites for training, establishment of technical support for e-learning infrastructure through appropriate e-learning policy, McGrath L. (2006)

In the absence of institution wide policy nevertheless at a departmental level particularly when e-learning programmes are launched, McGrath suggest that the following could be used to guide policymakers at departmental level:

1. "The department should discuss its vision for e-learning and create statements about how on-line teaching will be evaluated.
2. If possible the development of a departmental e-learning policy should be preceded by or at the very least coincide with a pilot study of on-line coursed or an assessment of current offerings. Departments should also attempt to assess students' interest in and experiences with on-line learning.
3. All faculty with e-learning experience should be as transparent and open as possible.
4. Reviews of relevant disciplinary literature should be sought out or combined and model policies should be consulted and critiqued.
5. If they are the province of the department, decisions about enrolment caps support for on-line course development and pre-requisites for teaching on-line, should be made and added to policy document.
6. Intellectual property issue should be addressed in the body of policy document... (p.6)."

Typically policies that have not been informed by good evidence and analysis to avoid becoming a victim of 'Law of unintended consequences, as McGrath observes. The on-line initiatives described in the introduction of this paper are a good example of project failure.

From the foregoing, it would appear that e-readiness assessment that leads directly to concrete positive action to all the stakeholders. Evidence-based e-readiness assessment

at institutional level can help assess Departmental preparedness for e-learning; regardless of training intensity. Addon B. K. (2004) investigated the state and usage of information and communication technologies in some Ghanaian universities. This study unraveled that using information Technology in Ghanaian universities for university work at that time was a luxury. More specifically, it was apparent that the Ghanaian universities at that time were facing the challenge of identifying the role ICT could fill in higher education in order to meet the demand of both the students and the other communities. In the next section, we describe how evidence-based approach determined the Marsabit programme design at Kenyatta University,

3. **Marsabit e-learning Pilot Project for Muslim Female Teachers**

Marsabit District is on the northeastern part of Kenya near Ethiopia/Somalia Kenya boarder. The As such, many of educational facilities that can be assumed as accessible to teachers are no available in Marsabit. Although Marsabit is not near Kenya/Ethiopia /Somalia border, it is described as “the last outpost of civilization in the vast desert of northern Kenya” go2Africa.com.

KENNET facilitated a five days Marsabit Open learning Lecturers Training Workshop. The workshop held at the Kenyatta University was aimed at building capacity to the lecturers so that they could be able to produce interactive multimedia content for distance learning for the Marsabit project and similar projects in the future. The Marsabit project is an undertaking between the Kenyatta University, Kenya Education Network, Higher Education Loans Board and the Ford Foundation to assist girls in Marsabit undertakes a distance learning degree with the help of technology.

The next activity was to transform traditional lecture notes and print modules developed for Kenyatta University Institute of Open Learning, first at the Open University (UK) Open Source template from November 2008. The next stage was to mount the content onto module, taking into account the multiple rates of women educators’ intermediation in the realm of language literary, dress, employment and social context that the teaching materials are being developed.

4. **Development of Teaching Materials for Marsabit Distance Learning Centre**

The staff of Kenya Education’s Network mounted a series of workshops for educational practitioners on content development.

The participants were first introduced to Open University U.K. Open Source Open and distance Learning Template. The workshop facilitators were introduced to the following:

- The emerging trends and the state of digital content in Africa.
- Creating Digital illustrations
- Creating animation into multimedia content
- Adding Digital illustrations
- Emerging Learning Technologies: web 20 Technologies

- Incorporating Web 2.0 Technologies and their impact of learning
- Incorporating Web 2.0 Technologies in Moodle Learning Management System

The application of evidence-based approach to e-learning policy process, as a checklist, unraveled some of the barriers to faculty participation in asynchronous learning. Motivating factors that were unraveled included faculty access to on-line internet connectivity appropriate hardware and software, and e-readiness.

However, the creation and maintenance of a functioning evidence-based policy has not been easy because of the many stakeholders involved in the Marsabit Open Learning project for Women Muslim teacher. However, issues on project's priorities, instructor's roles and learned needs have been documented.

5. Summary and Conclusions

In this paper, we have acknowledged the origin of evidence-based approach from the World of Medicine before it became widespread virtually in all fields driven by growing accountability pressures from stakeholders. In stark contrast to opinion-based policy, which relies on selective use of evidence such as single studies irrespective of the quality, interested views of individuals or groups, ideological standpoint is prejudices and speculative conjectures. Davidson (2004) evidence based policy-making represents a contemporary effort to reform one restrictive policy process in order to prioritize evidentiary data based decision making.

An account of the development of teaching materials for Marsabit Distance Learning Centre was provided to illustrate evidence-based approach to policy formulation. This in turn, led to the training of content developers in the skills required in using Moodle platform as well as simplifying targeted Muslim Women with appropriate laptops and other support services.

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