

M-education can speed up learning, participation

With many students using their mobile phones to access information, rather than laptop or tablet, South African higher education institutions - whether public or private - are encouraged to support the integration of mobile devices and apps in formal and informal learning environments.



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“A survey of students in preparation for the rollout of IIELearn, the learning management platform of the Independent Institute of Education (IIE), showed that more than 95% of the students involved used their phones to access information,” says Wonga Ntshinga, senior head of programme: Faculty of ICT at the IIE.

“This trend is an international reality which is increasingly reflected in how learning management systems and other learning apps are designed. It is increasingly rare to find an application for teaching and learning that is not mobile friendly.

“The time is long overdue for higher education institutions, who have not yet embarked on incorporating mobile education (m-education), to start investigating how they can do so, particularly when it comes to the opportunities mobile technology provides, for example quick and efficient feedback from students.

“South Africa is still some way from the ideal, where students are able to walk into a classroom, download the presentations or content for the current lecture using their mobile devices, interact with this content, each other and the lecturer during the session and even be assessed – formally or informally.”

While this may sound intimidating, there are many free applications available to teachers and lecturers, even in institutions where no formal strategy exists.

M-education principles

Ntshinga says that success in m-education requires attention to the four following principles:

1. Providing the necessary secure and managed ICT infrastructure and services, particularly Wi-Fi, before introducing additional demand on these resources
2. Focusing on the fact that student adoption will be driven by lecturer and teacher adoption and therefore the need to ensure that lecturers and teachers are well trained and supported
3. Developing and resourcing a content team - including instructional designers, content providers and other experts - that focus on creating a successful user experience with high quality content that is easy to navigate on mobile devices. These teams will usually comprise of internal as well as external experts
4. Designing an ongoing cycle of getting feedback from students and lecturers and using this to improve the quality of what is being offered

“Compared to laptops, mobile devices are more affordable and practical, more robust and require less power. They are also safer to carry in public places or on public transport as they are more readily concealed.

Cost of data coming down

“From a usage point of view, they are already ubiquitous in many spaces, yet very few higher education institutions have so far embarked on a deliberate m-education approach to ensure that learners can use their own devices. To an extent the cost of data has stood in the way of this, but the impact of the personal cost of data is reduced when the opportunities provided by on-campus Wi-Fi, cheaper fibre-based connectivity in communities, as well as city-wide and commercial offering of free Wi-Fi, are taken into consideration.

“Some of our campuses have already seen a reduction in the demand for fixed computing infrastructure, alongside an increase in demand for connectivity options such as Wi-Fi. Given the advanced capabilities of today’s mobile platforms, m-education has the potential to enrich the academic experience of an ever-increasing number of students and prospective students, who for a comparatively lower cost will get access to and be able to interact effectively with a curriculum outside the confines of the lecture room.

“Those wanting to connect learning with where students are already active – on their phones, should not miss the opportunity. Universities and colleges must therefore remain abreast of current and emerging trends in technologies, to ensure that education in South Africa as a whole becomes increasingly current, relevant, relatable and most importantly, accessible.”

For more information, go to www.iie.ac.za.