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Pan African University launches e-learning arm

Wagdy Sawahel 11 January 2020

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The open, distance and e-learning (ODEL) arm of the Pan African University (PAU), which will offer free, accredited online courses to African students, was officially launched in December in Yaoundé, Cameroon, enabling millions of Africans of all ages to benefit from lifelong learning opportunities.

A flagship project of the African Union, the **Pan African Virtual and E-University** or PAVEU is geared towards addressing the call by Agenda 2063 to accelerate the development of human capital, science and technology and innovation by increasing access to tertiary and continuing education in Africa.

Currently hosted at the Pan African University Rectorate headquarters in Yaoundé, Cameroon, PAVEU courses – **which are all free and internationally accredited** – are due to commence on 15 January 2020. They are open to applicants from African countries and the African diaspora. Courses include media and information literacy and IT courses.

Lifelong learning

Beatrice Khamati Njenga, outgoing head of the education division at the African Union Commission, told *University World News* that PAVEU provides a “unique opportunity to enable millions of Africans of every age to benefit from first and second chance education and training and facilitates lifelong learning”.

“More than any other region and more than at any other time in history, Africa needs to multiply access to inclusive, responsive quality higher education and training ... that is relevant and addresses areas of need and opportunity – not only for employment and entrepreneurship, but also for empowering people to secure a meaningful quality of life, responsible citizenship and democratic engagement,” she said.

Njenga, who was in charge of education at the African Union Commission at the time of the initiation of the project concept and the establishment of the project's technical task force that included the University of South Africa (UNISA), the African Virtual University (AVU), the Association of African Universities (AAU) and the African Council for Distance Education (ACDE), said: “It is education and training that makes sense of Africa's resource endowment, takes advantage of emergent technological space, while resonating with African values.”

Njenga said a large and increasing number of young people are unable to access “first chance” quality education and training while many others had initial technical and other training but needed new knowledge and skills as a result of the changing face of work and the expanding tech-based opportunities for creating gainful employment and entrepreneurship.



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“Still others desire the freedom to change careers or grow therein,” she said.

“All this calls for flexibility in education provision and recognition of alternative ways of acquiring knowledge and skills.”

Dr Violet Makuku, quality assurance specialist and project officer for the Harmonisation of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation (HAQAA) Initiative at the Association of African Universities, told *University World News* the establishment of PAVEU highlights the efforts of the African Union Commission in developing inclusive education and increasing access to higher education in Africa.

Asked about challenges facing the new initiative, she said fast-moving technological developments meant that both university students and academic staff would need constant training.

Internet connectivity

She said another big challenge was power outages and internet connectivity, particularly in “remote and rural areas in Africa which should ideally be the main target areas”.

According to the 2019 **Affordability Report** produced by the Alliance for Affordable Internet, Africans are charged around 7% of their monthly income for 1GB of data. The average United States earner would be charged US\$373 per month for 1GB if the average cost was 7.12% of their income.

Makuku said contingent power supplies would be needed as well as the strengthening of national research and education networks (NRENs), which could reduce internet costs by 70%-80% due to economies of scale.

Yousef Torman, co-managing director of the Arab States Research and Education Network (ASREN), told *University World News* that PAVEU would boost higher education outcomes and utilise educational and academic resources across Africa for a wider number of students.

He said the existing African regional research and education networks (RRENs), namely, the Regional Research and Education Networking Organisation for Eastern and Southern Africa or **UbuntuNet Alliance**, West and Central African Research and Education Network or **WACREN** and the Arab States Research and Education Network or **ASREN** for Northern Africa and Middle East Arab countries, that work together to establish the Pan African Research and Education Network will support PAVEU by providing the necessary pan-African high-speed network to access educational resources, tools and applications.

“The **AfricaConnect3** project co-funded by the European Commission, which has already started, will also provide further support by connecting African universities to regional, European and global educational resources, applications and content,” Torman said.

Strong foundations

According to Njenga, another bonus for PAVEU is the “cumulative experience” available to the new university.

“Open, e- and distance learning is not new, and there is priceless cumulative experience available,” she said.

“With UNISA having pioneered distance education in the world over a

century ago, AVU providing globally award-winning programmes, many African universities establishing open and distance learning arms to better serve their 21st century 'clients', the ACDE providing a mechanism for coordination and quality assurance, non-conventional providers like TRACE venturing into e-learning as alternative education modes for reaching out-of-school youth, and many Africans accessing such offerings from around the world – PAVEU is in good company,” Njenga said.

“Furthermore, PAVEU has established working partnerships with a number of institutions in and out of Africa in the areas of education and IT, including those named above and others such as UNESCO, VMware and leading experts in Africa and the diaspora,” she said.

Njenga said it was essential that PAVEU's programme mix be “informed by current knowledge and data on the needs of industry and other employers, the opportunities already available, and especially the profiles of learners”.

African character

“The African character of PAVEU has to be reflected in the relevance of programmes and competence of facilitators, even while global competitiveness should not be ignored. After all, Africa will soon be the choice provider of human resources including intellectual capital to the ageing world,” Njenga said.

She said PAVEU should articulate clearly the advantages it provides over multiple other providers, but also engage and partner with other providers to promote “coherence and complementarity”.

She said it was also important that PAVEU invest in the development of qualified programme developers, tutors, facilitators and African educators and forge robust links with industry to “maintain an innovative bent and ensure relevance and responsiveness”.

Currently, the Pan African University has four operational institutes, including Northern Africa's Institute for Water and Energy Sciences in Algeria's Abou Bakr Belkaid University of Tlemcen, Eastern Africa's Institute for Basic Sciences, Technology and Innovation in Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, Western Africa's Institute for Life and Earth Sciences in Nigeria's University of Ibadan, and Central Africa's Institute for Governance, Humanities and Social Sciences in Cameroon's University of Yaounde II. The PAU Institute for Space Sciences, expected to be based at the South African Cape Peninsula University of Technology, is yet to open.

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