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Local firm brings e-learning to Africa

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Lifestyle › Family & Education

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In Africa, e-learning programmes can make a huge difference in poorly resourced schools and universities.

English is one area where educators are particularly interested in using information and communication technology (ICT) to help develop students' learning.

In many parts of the continent, there is little opportunity for students to meet English-speaking foreigners.

But interactive software can give them this experience.

Andrew Stokes, clarity english

Universities simply do not have the money to invest in ICT resources

"There is a big appetite for integrating technology into teaching," says Dr Albert P'Rayan, an instructor at Kigali Institute of Science and Technology in Rwanda. "Teachers and students are eager for access to ICT materials."

A survey of 147 e-learning practitioners from 34 African countries conducted by the University of London backed up Dr P'Rayan's claims.

It found that "the three most significant consequences of introducing e-learning are perceived to be the possibility for higher student motivation, improved student attainment, and increased value of education in the community".

In Hong Kong, educational ICT publisher Clarity English is helping African schools with its language software programmes.

Founded in 1994 by English teacher Andrew Stokes and artificial intelligence specialist Adrian Raper, Clarity English has grown from a floppy disk operation to serving more than 1,000 universities in 110 countries.

Its flagship product is the Road to IELTS, co-published with the British Council. This now generates around three million online sessions a year.

Clarity English gives nine universities in Ethiopia free software, while schools in Sudan also benefit from its services, with help from the UN.

"The biggest problem in Africa is funding," says Stokes. "Universities simply do not have the money to invest in ICT resources for their students.

"In Ethiopia, even asking students to pay one or two US dollars a year is not feasible because money is so tight.

"Infrastructure is also veryill-funded. One university I visited had 7,000 students, and only one toilet." It's the case in many parts of Africa, he says.

Clarity English's first project in Africa was a collaboration with the NGO Voluntary Service Overseas, which provides English language advisers to universities in Ethiopia.

Clarity English agreed to provide them with free software and training to support English education. Following a pilot at Aksum University in 2009, Clarity English extended its support to eight more Ethiopian universities. "The software enables language students to listen to native speakers, to read graded texts, and to record their own voices," says Stokes.

He believes that e-learning is important for two main reasons.

"The first is a recognition that technology is now so central to education that students who are denied it are being actively disadvantaged. Not only will their ICT skills be lower, their language skills and academic performance will suffer relative to their counterparts who do have access to technology.

"The second is more pragmatic: once a student has left university, no employer is going to look at them unless they have basic ICT skills. Or, to frame it more positively, a high level of ICT competence enables young people to compete on a level playing field."

Clarity English also sponsors the secondary education of 25 vulnerable girls in East Africa through the Commonwealth Countries League Education Fund, which helps girls complete their secondary education in cases where, for economic reasons, this might not be possible.

Most recently, the company has developed a tool called the Clarity Course Builder, which lets teachers build up units of study, which can include their own worksheets, local videos on YouTube, links to websites and local images and so on.

"This has great potential for African countries, which have reasonable internet connectivity. We are piloting the Clarity Course Builder in a project in Egypt. The key to this project is that we are putting power in the hands of local African teachers - and this, surely, is the best way forward," says Stokes.

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