Collaboration that works: Public universities learn to share

With schools indefinitely closed due to COVID-19, the soft underbelly of Malawi’s education system has been exposed and calls to invest more in Open Distance and e-Learning (ODeL) could never be any louder.

With limited resources to fast-track the provision of ODeL among the country’s higher learning institutions, collaboration is the obvious way to go.

Unfortunately, higher learning institutions are not too popular with sharing resources as they regard each other competitors – but not anymore.

Thanks to the USAID-funded SHEAMA project, four public universities in Malawi can now work together, sharing knowledge and material resources in a bid to upscale delivery of lessons through ODeL as a response to COVID-19.

What started last year with the signing of a MOU among the institutions – Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR), Mzuzu University, Chancellor College, Polytechnic and Malawi University of Science and Technology (MUST), has blossomed into the actual sharing of resources to achieve the common goal of increasing access to higher education.

Among other things, the five colleges have opened up their satellite centers to the rest of the group. This means any of the colleges has access to a satellite center owned by any of the member colleges for delivery of lessons through ODeL in a cost-effective manner. What a winner for Malawi’s underserved students!

Dr Mhango (left) sharing knowledge across all five public universities and (right), participants from Chancellor College
SHEAMA facilitated the development of an ODL center business model which ensures that the facilities are utilized amongst the colleges in a sustainable manner.

Explains the ODL Director at SHEAMA, Dr Joshua Valeta: “The SHEAMA project is built on a defined fundamental principle of collaboration and it is exciting to see prospective students accessing application forms and related program information at a center belonging to one college for a course advertised by another college.”

The collaboration is even more evident in the sharing of human resource. A good example is LUANAR which has allowed their asset in ODL, Dr Ndalapa Mhango to be key facilitator for ODL trainings aimed at equipping lecturers with skills in e-lesson delivery.

Dr Mhango, an accomplished trainer and lecturer with experience in ODL at both local and international stages, has been instrumental in equipping lecturers at all the five institutions with skills.

He has so far been involved in sharing his expertise at MUST, Mzuzu University, Chancellor College, Polytechnic and LUANAR itself.

Thanks to the collaboration, lecturers from other institutions have been able to tap from LUANAR’s asset and can now design quality ODeL content and create supporting multimedia for online course delivery, complementing prime knowledge and skills shared by Arizona State University, America’s number 1 university on innovation.

As if that was not enough, SHEAMA and Malawi Polytechnic developed a self-instructional ODeL course orientation manual which is accessible to all university partners. The icing is that industry was involved in the development of this tool with a representative from the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA) making a presentation on ethics.

“The manual will make it easier for all students to understand what it means to be an ODeL student pursuing a program designed to equip them with entrepreneurial as well as soft skills for excellence irrespective of the college they are studying with,” says Dr. Valeta.

The SHEAMA project, funded by USAID but implemented by Arizona State University, seeks to enable 14,940 students access to higher education through the provision of scholarships to vulnerable students and upscaling the use of ODeL. The strength of this collaboration is likely to aid the institutions sail through COVID-19 and celebrate the unique success together with all Malawians in due season.