

Global Virtual University



CASE STUDY

When Fronter became the learning platform of choice at the University of Agder, six years ago, few imagined this would lead both Fronter and the University to the forefront of a global e-learning initiative: the Global Virtual University (GVU), operating under the auspices of the United Nations University (UNU).

The Global Virtual University (GVU) is a network of learning institutions that work together to harness education for sustainable development. Sharing a common pedagogical approach and standards for online course development constituted an important first step. Another key success factor was the selection of a learning management system (LMS) that facilitates GVU's goals. "University of Agder (UiA) had Fronter as its LMS," recalls Åke Bjørke (GVU Course Developer). "As UiA was academically responsible for running a pilot course in 2004, it was natural to use Fronter."



Students Learning Online

Once the GVU's flagship, the pilot Master in Development Management was launched, new users from around the world – mainly from Africa – discovered Fronter. One of them is Dr Samuel Aikins, a GVU coordinator from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Accra (Ghana). He was introduced to Fronter by his former coordinator, and also during a face-to-face meeting at the University of Agder. "The meeting helped students and coordinators alike to discover the Fronter system and technology. It's where I learned how to monitor the students online in the virtual classroom, follow-up their discussions and review their contributions."

Asked to list the challenges of the GVU, Åke Bjørke is very straightforward: "introducing students to the LMS and collaborative studies purely online". Some students however, do discover Fronter "purely online." Mr. Olubodun Olufemi, a member of the dental school faculty at the University of

Lagos (Nigeria), became an online tutor after attending GVVU's E-teaching courses in 2006 and 2007. Mr. Olufemi recalls: "Fronter was my first experience with a learning platform. Within a week I was able to understand and work with Fronter. Having completed two master's level diplomas via Fronter, I find it user friendly, simple to new users, and has sufficient opportunities to navigate, collaborate, upload documents of any kind and interact with fellow course mates with little or no difficulty."

Åke Bjørke remembers his online student very well: "I am very pleased with my eager student Olufemi. He took the E-teaching courses – which are purely online - with flying colours."

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Mr. Olubodun Olufemi



International Cooperation at GVVU means:

- Shared curriculum development procedures
- Mutual recognition of competence
- ECTS standards (Bologna process)
- Learner-centred collaborative Pedagogy

Selection of African Universities involved with GVVU:

- Ethiopia (Mekelle University)
- Ghana (Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology)
- Kenya (Kenyatta University)
- South Africa (University of Pretoria)
- Zimbabwe (University of Zimbabwe)

Dr. Samuel Aikins agrees with Olufemi on Fronter's user-friendliness: "I learned the Fronter system easily because the rules and metaphors that govern the virtual classroom are the same as in real life." Bjørke adds, "I find that Fronter is most convenient when working asynchronously in higher education." The reason for this is that live courses and other synchronous forms of education are not as practical in developing countries: people are living in different time zones, electricity and internet connections can break down quite frequently, and bandwidth is usually very low. This has resulted in many students making use mainly of the asynchronous tools and resources such as forum and resource folder.

Collaborative Pedagogy

Unlike other learning networks which insist on course delivery (the so-called "instructivist" pedagogy), GVVU focuses on developing elaborate study guides for asynchronous, collaborative online learning, at times combined with building self-instructional learning resources and learning objects. In a paper co-authored with Åke Bjørke, Harald Holt (Director of UNU/GVVU) writes that "the students of tomorrow must be given opportunities to study in collaboration with others," using technologies "flexible enough to accommodate the individual needs of the student."

Because it allows students to learn collaboratively in online communities of practice and spreads knowledge globally at a reasonable price, Fronter created a new form of online stickiness that translated into practical results for Gvu: the social aspect to the learning platform led to a very low student drop-out rate for the Master of Development Management.



Another advantage, Bjørke points out, is that the students can take a high-quality, recognized “western” education without physically going to study abroad. In addition to reducing the risk of “brain drain” associated with ordinary scholarship programmes to the West, the costs of studying can be considerably less expensive.

For more information about the Gvu and their partners, please visit: <http://gvu.unu.edu>