PUBLIC PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS BRING ADDED VALUE TO THE CLASSROOM

Although there has been global progress in improving access to information and communication technologies (ICT), many countries in North Africa and the Middle East still lag behind in making new technologies commonplace in schools and businesses.

A recent European Training Foundation (ETF) initiative shows that effective public-private partnerships in the region can be key in fostering new technology-based learning solutions that address skills needs in the global market in general and in the fast expanding ICT industry in particular.

In close cooperation with the European Learning Industry Group (ELIG), the ETF has gathered valuable information on current ICT learning activities and approaches in the region based on interviews with private companies and school representatives.

The material clearly indicates that public-private partnerships should be promoted as a cooperation model through awareness raising and capacity building programmes and that future ICT-learning solutions need to better address the overall learning environment including cultural characteristics and languages.

The interviews underlined that public-private/school-business partnerships must be built on shared values, goals and needs. They must respect and reflect the cultures of both the education and business partners, and support the core mission of the school. The principles for partnerships should be guided by a written collaborative agreement on mutually beneficial goals, an action plan for implementation and measurement of progress.

Both parties see the logic for school-business partnerships as compelling. Part ownership allows education projects to remain in the public sector to safeguard social and economic agendas while tapping private resources and expertise. The private sector gains valuable feedback on the projects

and companies it runs. It is a win-win situation for both, when such partnerships work.

The results of the ETF initiative are based on the outcomes of interviews with member companies of ELIG and representatives of the governments of Jordan and Morocco.

ICT and knowledge society development

The countries of the Middle East and North Africa want to improve their education and training systems so they can better compete in a global market. Their economies are traditionally based on natural resources, state-owned enterprises and small family businesses working in arts

and crafts and other types of manual labour. Some of their natural resources are running out. Increasing trade with the EU and market liberalisation put higher demands on the quality of their products and services and thus on the skills of their work force. And their traditional industries cannot provide sufficient employment for a population that is among the fastest growing in the world. Such factors call for new ways of thinking in education and training strategy.

The European Union and the ETF help them to reform their education and training systems along the lines of agreements between national authorities and the European Commission. The European Training Foundation has carried out a series of education and labour market studies which, among other things, highlight the need to develop skills for knowledge societies[1].

New technologies in education and training

New technologies can play an important role in the development of such skills. Although there is no proof that ICT actually improves learning processes, researchers across the world are looking at ways of utilising new technologies to cost-effectively improve the quality of and access to education and training[2]. Countries in the region do this too, where Morocco, Jordan and Egypt in particular are at an advanced stage of developing new learning models that integrate ICT. However, overall the

e-readiness of the region is low[3] and its countries face considerable challenges in becoming true knowledge economies[4]. Key skills gaps include general computer literacy and professional ICT skills. There are infrastructure and connectivity problems and there is limited access to computers. This is compounded by the fact that pedagogical models for technology-assisted learning are weak and scarce.

The potential of public-private partnership

Working with IT companies that provide services and products for the education and training sector can help to alleviate these problems. Strategic alliances can also combine the best of both worlds, benefiting from the input and intellectual capacity of the demand and supply sides.

Furthermore there is a generally perceived mutual economic benefit for all parties

involved, with immediate investment pressure on scarce government resources traded against a future return of investments for the companies involved.

Finally private sector companies can offer globally recognised certificates, which are in increasing demand in the countries in the region because they tend to increase opportunities for employment and further education. In the Ministry of Education in Jordan, for example, it is now obligatory to have documented ICT skills, while in Morocco certain company certificates facilitate the transition from vocational education and training to higher education.

Challenges

Although the ETF interviews identified a number of opportunities, they also clearly demonstrated that the introduction of e-learning and the role of private partners in it can pose considerable challenges.

The countries in the region have little tradition for cooperation between education and the private sector. Although this is a challenge, it also is a marked opportunity for developing something new from scratch. In practice, however, such cooperation is not developing on equal terms as companies involved generally view their counterparts as clients. As such, partners are not true partners: education authorities seeking learning reforms are simply differently labelled customers for companies looking for promising markets. This doesn't mean that there cannot be a mutual benefit but it is important that all partners are aware of not just their common interests but also their different agendas.

There is little coordination among the different parts and levels of the education system. The same fragmentation is evident among donors and companies. This negatively affects the efficient use of resources.

Cultural context

A great problem is the fact that learning materials and training are currently offered off-the-shelf. A majority of these are in English and while some are in French, only in exceptional cases are they in Arabic. Often examples and illustrations do not reflect the realities and the cultural context of the targeted individuals and institutions.

Most initiatives offered are still at pilot level and have yet to reach the wider education and training system.

Solutions currently offered by companies tend to focus on teachers, while comprehensive reforms ought to address the entire learning environment, including management, finance, legal aspects, and recognition. The latter need to be addressed by the country authorities, closely coordinating with the different parts and levels of the education system.

Preparation is key

Experience from the EU and the ETF offer many suggestions for policymakers to prepare themselves for the challenges of introducing e-learning with private sector partners.

Country authorities must look into their own specific needs, either through self-developed monitoring mechanisms or with external support, before they enter into advanced negotiations with private sector partners. They must insist on tailor-made learning programmes and training but make sure that these follow internationally accepted standards.

Country authorities must be aware that a broad introduction of e-learning solutions requires adequate investment in compatible equipment and connectivity.

Lessons from the EU and elsewhere in the world have taught that a critical mass cannot be reached if ICT is introduced as an add-on and not integrated into the entire learning process, including curricula, learning management, and assessment procedures. ICT needs to be integrated in education and training and sufficient finances must be allocated to this.

Focus must be on the entire environment, not just on parts of it, such as teachers, higher education, or a limited range of skills.

Capacity building

Financial and career incentives do work and the feasibility of their application should be seriously considered. In the entire process of integrating e-learning solutions into education reforms, capacity building across the board is crucial. It helps to ensure ownership and commitment and should cover teachers, parents, directors, inspectors, ministry staff and the wider community.

Models for public-private partnership must be developed that are both viable and relevant to the local education and training environment. Experience from Jordan and Egypt convincingly suggests that such models may be based on memoranda of understanding with shared roles and responsibilities for both private and public partners. In this context, close cooperation among different education levels, actors (authorities, employers and social partners) and donors active in the sector is imperative.

[1] *Employment Policy Reforms in the Middle East and North Africa, European Training Foundation, 2007.*

[2] *E.g.: Benchmarking Access and Use of ICT in Schools, Empirica, Bonn, 2006.*

[3] *Economist Intelligence Unit 2007*

[4] *Arab Human Development Report 2003*