

# **Building a Case for the Use of Collaborative Tools for Research, Development and Professional Service**

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## **BACKGROUND**

There is a common belief that Information and Communication technologies (ICTs), by their very nature, afford academics to meet their scholarly responsibilities, share knowledge, and engage in research and academic service through inter-university collaboration, research and mentorship. However, there is lack of evidence supporting claims of the value of eCollaboration for scholarly work, especially in challenging contexts where access to technologies, ICT capabilities, culture, gender and time zones impact participant interactions and contributions. A unique partnership between Aga Khan University (both Karachi and Dar es Salaam campuses), Cambridge University, and the University of Calgary has presented a rich opportunity, as well as a pressing need, for research into the potential of the use of ICT for collaboration (henceforth eCollaboration) to span time zones, geography, bandwidth, ICT skills, cultures and demographics.

A three-phase research and development project was conceived with an overall aim of facilitating collaboration among various research team members through the use of ICT. Specific objectives of the study included:

- Identification of needs related to the use of collaborative tools (for instance which collaborative tools were being used; how successful or otherwise the tools were in enabling collaboration amongst team members; what prevented the use of tools)
- Extending support to the research teams in using ICT for eCollaboration
- Develop a model of facilitating eCollaboration among partners from diverse geographic and socio-cultural contexts and amongst teams of varying levels of expertise for international research and development work.

The first phase, which has concluded recently, included identification of needs through an online survey. Altogether 20 responses were received from members of the various research teams.

## **KEY FINDINGS / MESSAGES**

The results suggest that communication and collaboration amongst the participants, to develop research and professional development programmes, were facilitated through ICT. The participants identified several tools which were helpful in their work, and recognized the benefits ICTs can bring to working in teams, especially in situations where the members may have diverse backgrounds, opinions and experiences. Some commonly used technologies included email, Skype, GoogleDocs, Deli.cio.us, and Moodle. It has also become evident that most people have learnt to use the tools through experimentation or one-to-one consultation with a peer or an expert, rather than through attending formal/ professional courses. Also, while people reported high level of comfort with the social networking and Web 2.0 technologies such as GoogleDoc and Deli.cio.us, their use in online research and development work was limited.

While the issues concerning bandwidth, network configuration, hardware and software compatibility, power outages, and time zones resurfaced, the majority of challenges were centered on people's ability to juggle tasks and manage time effectively in light of competing priorities and expectations, and negotiate meaning in an online setting. The use of lean media to support bandwidth and connectivity realities in the African region did not provide sufficient support for team building, establishing trust and bridging cultural, language, and gender concerns.

## **DISSEMINATION PLANS**

The project findings will be disseminated through publications and presentations at various regional and international conferences. The outcomes will be presented at ZRT2 in Dar es Salaam and submitted to the Sixth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning in Kochi, Kerala, India, in November 2010. A website is also being set up which would provide links to various collaborative tools along with some guidelines for using them in collaborative research and development projects.

## **NEXT STEPS**

The results have implications for the use of online collaborative tools in international research and development work. The following areas will be explored in the second phase of the project.

1. Investigate the use of Web 2.0 and Free and Open Source technologies for supporting online collaboration for research, education and development work
2. Develop eCollaboration models that focus on organizational practices and processes necessary for successful online collaboration
3. Explore pedagogical model(s) that could inform the design of future teacher education programmes in ICT.