

NAMCOL Multimedia Strategy 2009 - 2011

1 Preface

This document is the result of a two-day workshop conducted at NAMCOL's offices on the 28th and 29th July. The aim of the workshop was to discuss and debate the various aspects involved in NAMCOL developing a greater number of multimedia content products. In so doing, the intention was to distil an overall vision for multimedia content development within NAMCOL as well as define the various principles and strategic choices that would be required to enable NAMCOL to achieve the vision set for the 3-year period 2009 to 2011.

Thus, and in being cognisant of the reality of changing environments, rather than attempting to provide a detailed list of tactics, this document seeks to define the principles and broad strategy that NAMCOL will apply over the next 3 years.

2 Introduction

The overriding backdrop to all NAMCOL's work is the Namibian Vision 2030 that seeks to transform Namibia into a knowledge economy by the year 2030. NAMCOL was established primarily to support the formal education system through

- Providing access, equity and quality education to those who find themselves outside of the formal education system
- Upgrading education through the use of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) methodologies

Thus, the remainder of this document needs to be framed by the following core NAMCOL statements.

Mission:

We are committed to providing wider access to quality educational services for our learners and other customers using a variety of open learning methods.

Vision:

We strive to be a world-class institution of excellence, Accessible to all, with committed professional staff educating people through an innovative range of ODL programmes, providing quality services in a sustainable manner.

NAMCOL subscribes to the following values and principles

- Accessibility: To provide access to educational opportunities
- Sustainability: To ensure sustainability of the College in future
- Quality: To strive for quality in-service delivery
- Efficiency: To achieve objectives within our means
- Accountability: To be accountable to all our stakeholders

- Reliability and accuracy: To provide reliable/adequate/accurate information
- Responsiveness: To respond to emerging challenges and training needs immediately
- Transparency: To be open and fair in all our business operations
- Continuity: To contribute to lifelong learning experiences of learners
- Excellence: To strive for excellence

NAMCOL recognises that digital multimedia content can be a powerful tool in helping it meet its mandate; digital multimedia content is understood to encompass interactive computer based content, video content and audio content. In particular, multimedia content has the following benefits.

1. The copy and distribution of digital materials is potentially a fraction of the cost of printed materials especially when one considers recurrent costs of review, redevelopment and redistribution.
2. Multimedia content can support the introduction, use and development of new pedagogies that are effective in developing key 21st Century skills.
3. Multimedia content can more easily be made available to support a range of learning styles and hence enhance accessibility.
4. Multimedia content can potentially be more impactful than more traditional forms of content.

However, NAMCOL further recognises the following limitations and challenges inherent in the use of multimedia resources in the Namibian context.

1. A lack of infrastructure and digital equipment poses significant issues with regard to access.
2. The current reliance on national broadcasters (especially television broadcasters) represents certain risks given issues pertaining to costs and timeslots that are available.
3. NAMCOL lacks many of the necessary skills and capacities necessary to embark on full-scale multimedia content development.

3 The Strategy

NAMCOL's overall strategy in this area will be to utilise the next 3 years to build the organisation's confidence and competence in the development of multimedia content by embarking on such developments in an incremental manner, conducting evaluations at each stage and embedding these results into future developments as well as the organisation's overall knowledge base.

By leveraging this incremental approach, NAMCOL will demonstrate its competence and confidence in the field through

1. The development of recognised critical institutional competencies,
2. Good systemic uptake and use of the materials,
3. Improved examination results, and
4. Formal, external recognition of the materials as being of high quality.

NAMCOL, however, affirms the continued use of printed materials as its primary educational offering (supported by various face-to-face interventions) for at least the next 3 years. Any multimedia content produced will be in direct support of the existing print materials, or those to be created in the future. In so doing, NAMCOL will seek to add value to the printed materials in the following ways:

1. Address specific areas of the curriculum identified as difficult or problematic to learners (based on NAMCOL and National assessments).
2. Leverage the particular affordances of the various media types available i.e. interactive computer based content, audio content and video content.
3. Work within the particular skill sets necessary for the development of production of multimedia materials available to NAMCOL (either internally or externally).

The following further principles will also be applied.

1. NAMCOL will develop multimedia materials, as far as possible, to be able to stand apart from the printed materials so that, over time, learners will have a greater degree of choice.
2. To narrow the gap between learners and teachers, NAMCOL will seek to develop multimedia content that supports teachers in the use of digital resources as well as in the use of better general pedagogical practices.
3. NAMCOL will develop multimedia with a global market in mind with the aim of becoming a leader in the development of such teaching and learning materials in Namibia.
4. NAMCOL will continuously monitor the kind of technology its users have access to and will create multimedia materials accordingly.

NAMCOL recognises that there are various methods of distributing multimedia content and, although it will not limit itself to just one but will seek to use every distribution platform that becomes available without any effort to own or control such platform, the following priorities will be applied¹:

1. CDs and DVDs (sent directly to learners and learning centres as well as sold through various channels)
2. Broadcast (including both radio and television) on both national, community or private networks
3. The World Wide Web through the NAMCOL website as well as partner websites.

NAMCOL will not directly provide digital equipment in order to access multimedia materials but will work with various partners such as NOLNet, the Ministry of Education and individual schools to ensure that access to digital equipment (computers, televisions, audio players) continually increases.

Although NAMCOL will consider releasing some of its multimedia produced over the next 3 years under open licences (e.g. Creative Commons), the institution intends to use

¹ It should be noted that, although mobile penetration is growing rapidly in Namibia and NAMCOL believes it is important to investigate the affordance of mobile technology, this area is in its infancy and so will not for a key part of the strategy moving forward.

the period to investigate the most appropriate open licensing regimes that will contribute towards NAMCOL sustainability as well as the development of the ODL sector both in Namibia and beyond.

In light of the adopted incremental approach to multimedia production, NAMCOL will focus on building internal capacity and skill in content development and will seek to outsource as many production related aspects as possible. This is not to say that NAMCOL will not attempt to understand the production processes involved but will not focus on investing in production capacity (either capital equipment or human resources).

NAMCOL recognises that a key part of this strategy pertains to monitoring and evaluation. Indeed, the very basis of the strategy is one where NAMCOL will endeavour to develop capacity and build a core repository of institutional knowledge in the field. The only way these objectives will be met will be through constant and vigorous research.

NAMCOL has thus identified three key areas requiring monitoring and evaluation.

1. The affordances of various forms of multimedia content – Although there is a great body of theoretical knowledge about this area, NAMCOL understands that there is most often a large gap between the academic theory and the practice on the ground and, in this case, in the Namibian context. Aspects such as usability, relevance, accessibility and appropriateness will be investigated.
2. The impact of multimedia content – As noted, NAMCOL will seek to create multimedia content in ways that directly add value to the primary printed and face-to-face interventions. In doing so, it will seek to assess whether and to what extent value has been added by monitoring learner results as well as attitudes to and perceptions of learning.
3. The development of internal capacity – The extent to which NAMCOL is achieving its stated objective with regard to internal capacity development will be monitored using various skills assessments and surveys.

NAMCOL recognises that it requires the input and support of a range of partner organisations to assist it in effectively delivering on its mandate. This is equally true when producing multimedia resources. As such, the following key partnerships have been identified. NAMCOL will invest in building and strengthening these relationships.

1. Namibian Ministry of Education – The Ministry is a key stakeholder in NAMCOL providing the majority of its operating budget. In most respects, NAMCOL derives its mandate solely from the Ministry.
2. CUP – NAMCOL and CUP have jointly developed print-based materials in a range of Grade 12 subjects and this initiative could be extended to include multimedia resources for learners and teachers.
3. Commonwealth of Learning – COL has been identified as a key funding and capacity building partner in the development of multimedia resources and in improving NAMCOL's capacity to develop high quality resources in support of open and distance learning.

4. Namibian Open Learning Network – NOLNet has been identified as a key distribution and research partner. NAMCOL intends to use the 50 current NOLNet sites as key physical distribution points for multimedia as well as its integration into face-to-face interventions.
5. Namibian Broadcasting Corporation – Despite the various limitations associated with broadcast as a distribution method for digital learning resources, NAMCOL believes that broadcast still represents a highly effective, usable and accessible platform in the Namibian context. In light of this, a close and productive working relationship with the national broadcaster will be sought.
6. Mindset Network – Although not identified as a key strategic partner, Mindset is still recognised as possessing many of the skills and competencies that NAMCOL is seeking to develop. Mindset is thus noted as a valuable agent in developing internal capacity in the area. Beyond this, Mindset also represents valuable opportunities to NAMCOL in terms of its relationship with Multichoice Africa as well as its recent work with mobile technologies.

4 Implementing the Strategy

In implementing the above strategic points, the following points need to be considered.

4.1 Partnerships

As highlighted in the strategy section, partnerships will be vital to NAMCOL and significant energy will need to be expended in setting up partnerships and relationships that deliver real benefit to NAMCOL. It will be necessary to be able to clearly articulate the rationale behind this multimedia strategy to existing and potential new partners. Partnerships will also be crucial to NAMCOL from a content distribution standpoint as well.

As the Ministry of Education is a primary stakeholder in NAMCOL, it will be essential to update the Ministry on NAMCOL's intentions and progress throughout the next 3 years, especially if the Ministry is in a position to financial support any of this work in particular.

If NAMCOL desires broad acknowledgement and acceptance of its digital resources as high quality learning materials for the Namibian context, it will be crucial to foster relationships with educational experts in the country that can attest to the quality of the materials it produces.

Higher education and research institutions can add great value in terms of the evaluation of NAMCOL's progress in this area. These relationships can be valuable sources of external, independent evaluation of the quality of the content being produced as well as of intellectual input into NAMCOL's models and execution of this strategy.

Several of the partners mentioned in the strategy relate to content distribution. It is essential to invest effort in establishing excellent relationships in this area. Ultimately, the

success or failure of NAMCOL's multimedia strategy (and indeed, its entire business), rests on users gaining ready and reliable access to the digital resources being produced. Such access is a necessary precondition to impact being demonstrated – the demonstration of impact being a fundamental requirement in securing future and sustainable investment in this area.

It is important to not underestimate the importance of distribution when dealing with digital resources. Unlike paper-based resources, there are several intermediate layers between the content and the user's ability to view and/or interact with the content. These technology layers are not always as reliable as we would like. It must be remembered that the distribution of digital resources is critically limited by the distribution and reliability of the receiving technology (PCs, TVs etc).

Sustainability of digital content production is predicated, in some part at least, to being able to source funding for such development from external organisations. Most often, funding is predicated on there being a clearly articulated vision and strategy that answers the question "Why develop digital resources and what impact will they make?" This is an alternative statement of "What will be the return on my investment?" This strategy will hopefully be useful in answering these questions in part. The other key component is demonstrably measured impact on the ground as recorded in well devised and executed research. In other words, the value of this strategy will be greatly enhanced by research that measures progress. Too often, research is a sorely neglected area. NAMCOL is encouraged to make it an integral part of its business and operations.

4.2 The Organisation

Crucial to the success of executing this strategy is the level to which it is embedded into the rest of the organisation. Running such a strategy in parallel to the main stream will no doubt lead to it being unsuccessfully or incompletely implemented. Further, it can lead to a sense of frustration within the organisation when staff become unsure as to the overall objectives of the organisation. NAMCOL is thus encouraged to not only embed this strategy into the overall one but also to ensure that all staff are aware of the work to be undertaken and are routinely updated on progress in this area.

Following on from this point, it is important to give due consideration to the organisational energy available to proceed in this regard. Conscious decisions need to be taken regarding where the necessary energy will be drawn from as, without investment into additional human capacity, that energy will need to be drawn from other existing areas. As such clear priorities need to be established in executing this multimedia strategy so that other priority areas have dedicated to them the necessary human resources. Simply put, if the existing organisational plate is full, either the plate will need to be made bigger or other items will have to fall off. So long as the required decisions are made consciously, the process can be effectively managed.

A last point pertaining to the organisation revolves around project management. Experience has shown that the project complexities surrounding multimedia content production (as opposed to print content production) are high, especially as in the case of

NAMCOL where external parties will be providing expertise at several points within the project cycle. It is thus important for NAMCOL to have the correct level of project management skills available. Without this, projects can be put at risk which may impact on NAMCOL's ability to secure future funding for this sort of content production.

4.3 General Points

As noted in the strategy, investment into digital content production equipment is not recommended at this point. This is as a result of both the enormous upfront costs of much of this equipment as well as the fact that the current strategy sees an incremental approach to development. As such, it is not yet totally clear what kinds of digital content NAMCOL will be producing in the future and current development obligations do not justify this kind of investment. NAMCOL are advised to source as much of this technology through partner organisations and 3rd party providers.

The same general advice applies to technical production skills (video editing, video filming, video final mix, advanced Flash programming, graphic design and production etc.). Such skills should be sourced from external organisations. Mention was made during the strategy session to utilise the skills of the local college of arts. Such a relationship should certainly be established. This does not necessarily mean that NAMCOL must not seek to understand these production related areas to some extent.

What is important at this point is investment into high quality digital content development skills and processes (content developers, script writers, instructional designers, storyboarders etc.). The development of digital content requires, in many cases, different expertise to that of traditional print content. The training intervention currently being negotiated with Mindset will go some way to providing these skills but, by itself, will not be wholly sufficient. It will be necessary to continue with skills acquisition both through training of existing staff, recruitment of new staff and sourcing of external experts. The evaluation of the development of NAMCOL's human capacity to execute digital content development projects, as noted in the strategy, must be taken seriously.

The issue of research and monitoring has been mentioned above. A significant part of these frameworks will focus on content quality. A general point to consider in this area is defining quite clearly what is good enough. Without objective measures for content quality (both from an educational and technical/production perspective), judging whether content is good enough can become a slippery slope. As limitless budgets for this work will not be available, it is important for NAMCOL to clearly stipulate what is and is not critical from a quality perspective. These criteria need to permeate the entire content development and production process to ensure that the correct decisions are made to enable NAMCOL to deliver content products on time and within budget. Without a clear upfront understanding of these parameters, projects can be put at risk.

Tied to this is the importance of evaluating progress and quality early on in the process and then often throughout the process. If the up front content development is not of a high quality, the likelihood of developing high quality finished product will be severely

limited. It is much easier and cheaper to correct educational and/or conceptual errors in a project in the initial stages. Further, due to the relative complexity of multimedia content development processes it is also necessary to perform evaluations throughout the process rather than just at the end.

The final points are of a somewhat technical nature. Multimedia content is invariably stored as digital files on a server. These files often tend to be many times larger than print-based content files (especially when dealing with broadcast quality video). It is thus important for NAMCOL to give upfront consideration to how completed multimedia content will be stored and managed.

Related to this is the issue of creating devices that provide user access to digital content when not distributed via a broadcast platform. The above strategy points to CD/DVD as the primary content distribution platform. In this case, NAMCOL needs to consider the creation of usable interfaces that organise and provide intuitive access to the content for users utilising multiple (often competing) computing platforms. Important in this (and indeed for any content distribution) is the generation and management of descriptive metadata. It is thus suggested that NAMCOL investigate the use of an appropriate Content Management System for digital multimedia content.