NMMU streets ahead as smart campus

By Devon Koen   15 Jul 2015

Smart devices, free internet access and charging docks placed strategically on all campuses are just some aspects of the smart campus initiative at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU).

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As part of the university's Vision 20/20 Strategic Framework, the university is promising serious technological advancements for current and future students.

According to Professor Cheryl Foxcroft, executive dean for blended learning in the Higher Education Access and Development Services (Heads) department, technology plays a key role in a responsive learning environment.

"This includes engaging actively with students in a digital environment to make [studying] a collaborative learning environment," she said.

Foxcroft said the active engagement included Moodle sites where lecturers and students could engage collaboratively with a variety of topics relevant to specific module sites.

"Two thirds of all lectures offered at NMMU have active Moodle sites which enable the blending of face-to-face instruction and technology advancement," she said.

Stephen Viljoen, NMMU's ICT services director, said all students had access to all modules through a "share-point which is created by default".

"Technology is a supportive and enabling environment ... all students have access to e-mail and collaborative sites," he said.

As part of the smart campus strategy, the "bring your own device" initiative has been started to allow students access to material relevant to lectures.

Since 2010 there have been numerous achievements in this regard. Viljoen said WiFi access had been made available in all lecture venues, buildings and student residences "to empower students by giving them more access".

In 2012-13, Foxcroft said, the initiative gained more recognition from NMMU academic structures, which led to a request for strategy funding to kick-start the Student Representative Council's "one student, one tablet" initiative.

The initiative promised to supply each student with a new tablet or smart device on registration.

It was reported at the time that the project would cost about R40-million in the first year of operation.

Foxcroft said funding was made available, and nearly 500 devices were bought and allocated to specific student research groups.

She said the pilot project was still active and the blended learning committee overseeing the bigger project had seen some significant developments.

"We have learnt a lot from this [three-year] pilot project, including student wants and course needs," she said.

Viljoen said there was space for potential exponential growth in the project, "We have a pool of different devices available at the library where students can borrow one. By the end of the year there will be more devices available."

Blended learning senior systems engineer Shaun Meyer said the university had already shown major strides in becoming a smart institution especially through mobile access and applications. "If a lecturer walks into a venue with a smart device they can access the system," he said.

He said a new mobile application, NMMUTube, would soon be available: students would be able to view, take part in and stream lectures.

NMMU's current Daso-led SRC president Hlomela Bucwa said the "one student, one device" pilot project had shown to be been beneficial to those who had received the tablets.

"Students can access more information and it encourages the blended learning initiative of the university," she said.

Foxcroft said one of the major challenges being faced was the connectivity of students off campus.

Viljoen said the university hoped to partner with cellular networks on a no charge basis for students to link to the NMMU site and applications when off campus.

Source: Herald via I-Net Bridge