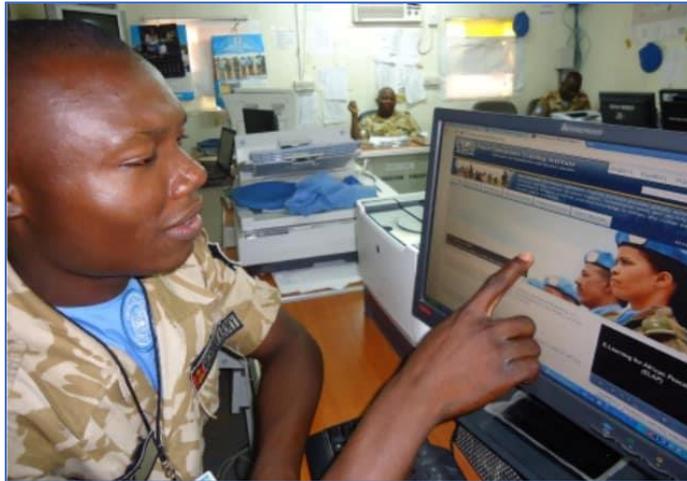


E-Learning Is Nothing New for UN Peacekeepers, but Demand Is Up

By Susan Manuel

May 05, 2020



Michael Edeh, a peacekeeping officer enhancing his skills working for the UN-African Union mission in Darfur, Sudan, through an e-learning program. Demand for virtual training has become suddenly more critical as Covid-19 keeps spreading and national training centers are being shut down.

Covid-19 has forced educators from preschools to universities to create digital classrooms overnight. But at least one global community has been using e-learning for more than a decade. Tens of thousands of United Nations peacekeepers from Chile to Bangladesh to South Africa have long been using online courses to prepare for deployment to the world's hot spots and to improve their skills once they get there.

While each troop- or police-contributing country is responsible for training its own personnel — according to standards set by the UN Department of Peace Operations — national peacekeeping training centers rely on global e-learning courses provided by nongovernmental organizations and others to instill peacekeepers with UN doctrine, policies and practices.

Now, with national peacekeeping training virtually shut down, e-learning has suddenly become more relevant and critical.

*“E-learning is an invaluable resource to UN Peacekeeping, and not just in the current context of the global pandemic, which is delaying dozens of in-person training requirements and opportunities,” said **Nick Birnback**, a spokesman for the Department of Peace Operations, in New York.*

One e-learning provider, the [Peace Operations Training Institute](#), an international nongovernmental organization based in Virginia, has experienced double enrollment from March to April 2020.

*“The pipeline was already laid and flowing,” says **Harvey Langholtz**, the executive director of the institute, which has been providing e-learning to 30,000 troops and police, from 196 countries, annually.*

*“E-learning is the only form of training that potential peacekeepers can get now, no matter where they are,” says **Gen. Robert Gordon**, a Briton who is a former UN commander in Bosnia and a force commander in Ethiopia, now retired and chair of the institute’s international board of directors.*

*With funding from Australia, Britain, Canada, Denmark and the Netherlands, the organization provides its online curriculum through the National Training Centre E-Learning Platform to the largest troop and police contributors of Africa, **Latin America**, South Asia and the Asia-Pacific regions.*

The UN Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations regularly “welcomes” the e-learning programs provided by the institute.

For the duration of the pandemic, the institute is offering its 12 most-demanded courses free for all countries that are not subscribed to the platform. Personnel already deployed on UN, African Union and hybrid missions receive the curriculum at no cost as well. Otherwise, the fee is \$10 a course.

E-learning ensures that peacekeepers from disparate backgrounds all receive the same preparation for service in a UN peace operation.

“It helps us give our peacekeepers a deep understanding of the basics — our core values, our command and control, our roles and missions,” Birnback said. “It allows us to deploy personnel fully versed on critical issues, such as integrating gender into peacekeeping operations and the importance of facilitating environments where all members of a community can contribute to peace and security.”

The institute’s 10 staff members coordinate a network of course-authors based around the globe. They include former heads of UN missions, former senior military officers, academics, technical specialists and partners in UN organizations.

Troop and police deployments for peace operations are usually six months to a year. The constant need for thousands of newly trained peacekeepers both to fill rotations and to support peace efforts is not expected to diminish.

Due to the spread of Covid-19, UN Secretary-General António Guterres [suspended](#) all rotations of uniformed contingents working in peace operations until June 30. But the need for peacekeepers could grow more acute, given the pandemic’s fallout affecting already-weak economies and peace processes.

“As the COVID-19 pandemic is spreading to every corner of the world, the most fragile regions suffering or recovering from armed conflicts and humanitarian crises will be put under particular strains,” European Union nations wrote to the secretary-general on April 7. “UN peace operations in these contexts will need to be able to continue their operations to support the host countries in this especially challenging time.”

In Sudan, the hybrid UN-African Union peacekeeping operation in Darfur (known by its abbreviation [UNAMID](#)) was to complete its withdrawal by Oct. 31, 2020. But Covid-19 has rendered that plan “impractical,” Jean-Pierre Lacroix, the Under Secretary for Peace Operations, told the Security Council on April 24.

Nearly 100,000 UN peacekeepers are currently deployed in 13 conflict zones, more than half in Africa. Most of the troops come from Africa and South Asia. (Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Rwanda and Nepal are the four top contributors of uniformed personnel). The African Union also fields thousands of troops in other peace operations.

Increasingly, troop and police contributors from the African Union as well as the UN are turning to e-learning programs to provide their personnel with a consistent command of policy and practices in peace support, humanitarian relief and security operations.

E-learning, as delivered by the Peace Operations Training Institute, is not inhibited by cultural or digital divides.

“We call it low tech-high tech,” Langholtz said in an interview. Some of the countries contributing peacekeepers don’t have consistent or widespread affordable broadband Internet. Therefore, courses are designed for students to go online once for about two minutes, download their self-paced course package in pdf, then study offline.

When they’ve finished each lesson and quiz, they go back online for a final exam. If they pass with a minimum of 75 percent, they are awarded a certificate of completion from the institute and any partner organization involved with the course content, such as UN Women, the UN Mine Action Service, or a national peacekeeping training center. The institute is developing a course on the protection of cultural heritage with UNESCO.

These credentials have increasing value in the peacekeeping world. Troops, police, and former military members often list the institute’s courses on their CVs when seeking promotions or peacekeeping-related jobs.

Those with better Internet can also link to instructional videos, although they are not required for the final exams. The institute offers courses in English, French and Spanish. Students and instructors can correspond by email, as no live dialogue is available.

“We meet a demand for 120,000 enrollments a year,” Langholtz said. “They get it on every continent.”

With the average student taking four courses a year, that means 30,000 potential or active peacekeepers use the e-learning each year to prepare to deploy or to supplement their field service. During 2019, the institute had more than 40,000 active student accounts.

Obviously, practical training in skills such as shooting weapons may not lend themselves to e-learning and are taught in person by national forces. But some e-courses address real-life and risky situations on the ground. The institute’s mine-awareness course is required for peacekeepers deploying to Mali, for example, where improvised explosive devices are a daily, deadly threat.

“Among the most critical skills for a peacekeeper are understanding when to use force and when the use of force would be counter to the mission mandate,” Langholtz said. “Depending on the individual and the mission, other topics . . . include the role of police, protection of civilians, mine action, humanitarian relief operations, the role of women and others. Peacekeepers must develop both knowledge and hands-on skills. E-learning is the most effective when the topic is knowledge-based, administrative, policy or procedural.”

“E-learning is a resource that national training centers can use as they combine it with their classroom courses,” Langholtz added. “It’s called blended learning. We focus more on providing skills, policy and knowledge specific to UN peacekeeping.”

The institute develops courses in response to new needs and retires those — such as global terrorism — when deemed no longer central to peace operations.

Last year, nearly 10,000 individual students enrolled in the institute’s “Introduction to the UN System.”

The administrators follow up on each course with its “measurement and effectiveness” program, which includes questionnaires, surveys and star ratings carried out over several months.

E-learning can help combat Covid-19 as well: “It meets both the urgency and breadth” of the crisis, Langholtz said.

When Ebola struck parts of Africa in 2014, the institute coordinated with the World Health Organization and the peacekeeping mission in Liberia (called UNMIL), to create an Ebola awareness course within three weeks. More than 1,000 personnel serving in the mission enrolled during the first week it was offered.

Most of the institute’s clientele are uniformed peacekeepers or prospective peacekeepers, with ranks ranging from private to general. The UN has been directing more e-learning for civilian field staff as well; for example, staff heading to the field must take courses on security and preventing sexual exploitation and abuse.

The institute is hoping that more women can enter peacekeeping through e-learning. While men outnumber women by 10 to 1 among uniformed personnel in peacekeeping missions, women experience no barriers or issues in e-learning. In 2019, the ratio of male to female enrollees was 5 to 1. More than 20,000 enrollees in the courses were women.

Covid-19 is now driving training for all UN staff online. E-learning for peacekeepers has proven its utility for preparing the most far-flung, disparate communities to serve a common cause.

Susan Manuel

Susan Manuel has worked extensively in UN peacekeeping and other UN entities as well as in journalism, receiving various awards. Currently, she is an international communications consultant. Previously, she was director, ad interim, of communications and public information for the AU-UN peacekeeping mission in Darfur; chief of the peace and security section in the UN Department of Public Information; acting director of strategic communications and spokesperson’s unit for the UN mission in Afghanistan; spokeswoman and deputy director of communications for the UN mission in Kosovo; regional public affairs officer for the World Food Program; and spokeswoman for the UN peace operations in the Balkans. She also worked for the UN in South Africa and in Cambodia. In journalism, Manuel worked for more than a decade as a newspaper reporter and columnist, including in Honolulu, Washington, D.C., and Nevada. She has a master’s degree in journalism and a bachelor’s degree in social sciences from the University of California, Berkeley.