E-Learning in Taiwan’s Higher Education: Policies, Practices, and Problems

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ABSTRACT

It has been three years since Taiwan started the comprehensive e-learning initiatives in 2002. What is the current status of Taiwan’s e-learning in higher education? What has been shaping and guiding the e-learning practices there? What are the problems in its e-learning policies and implementations? What can policy makers and higher education systems elsewhere learn from Taiwan’s experiences? With critical analyses on related policies and a thorough investigation on e-learning in all of the 147 four-year universities in Taiwan, this study investigated these questions, identified fundamental problems in Taiwan’s e-learning, and generated suggestions to address these problems. With 1.3 billion Chinese speakers worldwide and estimated 30 million people learning Chinese in non-Chinese speaking countries, this paper is of particular value not only for policy makers and the higher education system in Taiwan and elsewhere, but also for e-learning vendors and developers who would like to extend e-learning business to the broader Chinese-speaking market.

Keywords: e-learning; educational technology; higher education; policy; Taiwan

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, higher education has only been accessible to a very small portion of applicable populace in Taiwan due to the limited number of universities. Recently, as a result of the educational reform, the number of universities in Taiwan has increased substantially. From 1990-2001, the number of four-year universities has tripled, from 46 to 148 (Huang, 2002), while the birth rate has been decreasing for years (Ministry of the Interior, 2003), and the admission rate through the annual national entrance exams has increased from 30.66% in 1986 to over 88.94% in 2004 (Ministry of Education, 2004). Thus, like never before, all universities in Taiwan now face severe competitions in recruiting students,
increasing enrollment, securing funding, and generating financial gains.

The development of distance education in Taiwan, starting in the 1960s, has gone through three phases (Chu, 1999) characterized by different delivery media and technologies: from the broadcast radio and television systems in the first 20 years (1966-1985), to broadcast television systems in 1986-1993, and to computer-based instructional systems in 1994-2001. With the National Science and Technology Program for e-learning initiated by the Executive Yuan in 2002, Taiwan’s distance education is stepping into a new era with Internet-leveraged e-learning. Three years have passed by now. What is the current e-learning status in Taiwan’s higher education? What is guiding and shaping the e-learning practices in Taiwan’s higher education? What are the problems and difficulties that the government and higher education system are facing in the e-learning initiatives? What can we learn from Taiwan’s experiences? All these critical questions are yet to be answered through empirical research. This research study, through critical analyses on related government policies and a thorough investigation on e-learning practices in Taiwan’s four-year colleges and universities, identifies fundamental problems in related policies and practices, and generates suggestions for the development of e-learning in Taiwan’s higher education.

MILESTONE POLICIES
To understand related government policies and their impacts on the implementation of e-learning in Taiwan’s higher education, the researchers closely examined related milestone policies, in a chronological order, focusing on guidance and regulations that were related to e-learning, and their direct or indirect, existing or potential impacts on e-learning practices in higher education.

Taiwan government’s educational policies typically focus on the delivery media and hard technologies for distance education (Tu & Twu, 2002; Wei & Su, 1997, December). Consistently, the majority of governmental funding for these distance education initiatives is allocated to hardware purchase and maintenance, equipment purchase and setting up, and so on (e.g., Lien, 1994; Executive Yuan, 2002a, 2005). With the implementation of National Information Infrastructure (NII hereafter) project, computer and network infrastructures were rapidly set up in educational institutions since 1994. The specific goals of NII relating to higher education were to make Internet applications widely available and to set up infrastructures for Taiwan to become an “Internet hub in Asia Pacific area” (Gong, 1998; Lien, 1994). Through the NII project, three interactive systems were established for education: (a) real-time multicast instructional systems; (b) virtual classroom systems; and (c) curriculum-on-demand systems (Chu, 1999), and all these were synchronous systems. As part of the NII project, seven top-tier national universities were selected by the Ministry of Education (MOE hereafter) as pioneers to develop and offer online courses with special governmental funding (Wei & Su, 1997). Thus, the NII practically started e-learning pilots in some of the best universities in Taiwan.

In the late 1990s, MOE started full-scale reform in educational technology (Tu & Twu, 2002). In 1997, MOE published the Draft Plan for Distance Education in Higher Education Institutions, and strongly encouraged all colleges and universities to offer