Distance Learning in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

In response to the government’s push toward a “knowledge-based economy society”, the development and applications of e-learning technologies have become more and more popular in Hong Kong. E-learning provides a student-centered learning environment and delivers knowledge on-demand with up-to-the-minute information. However, a high student-dropout rate and low satisfaction with the learning processes remain to be the drawbacks currently. In this paper, we review several universities’ initiatives in launching e-learning programs and/or conducting projects in this direction. We also look at some of the trendy directions in addressing the current problems of existing e-learning systems.

Keywords: distance education; e-learning; Web-based learning

INTRODUCTION

Hong Kong, as an international city and like other places world wide, has been emphasizing education as essential and compulsory in order to stay competitive. In such an ever-changing society, many people have realized the importance of continuing and lifelong education. Moving toward a “knowledge-based economy society,” the Hong Kong Government believes that economic success will be more secured through a workforce that continually refreshes and updates knowledge and skills. Due to the limited number of higher education places, entry into higher education in the universities has traditionally been based on achieving good scores on university entrance examinations. There is a huge market of working adults who wish to continue improving themselves. In such circumstances, continuing education (CE) units of the universities in Hong Kong have become the key providers of continuing and lifelong education to the working adults.

In recent years, many universities have started using Internet-based facilities to support the study of full-time students. In comparison with full-time students, adult learners may require a more dynamic and efficient ap-
approach in order to meet their commitments in different facets. In particular, there is a need to deliver the continuing education programs through distance learning mode. E-learning has recently become a practical and feasible approach to support distance learning. With the ability to connect people and information around the world, the Internet is already having a significant impact on the traditional education. The (potential) advantages of e-learning are just remarkable. It provides a student-centered learning environment and delivers knowledge on demand with up-to-the-minute information. Knowledge is available when and where the learners want (and need) it. Moreover, e-learning systems can quickly assess individual and group needs, and tailor learning modules to appropriate interests. Thus, more and more CE providers have started to devise and adopt e-learning approaches.

In the previous government policy initiative, a target of increasing the numbers at post-secondary level in the 2001 to 2010 period from 30% to 60% of the age cohort was set. The Hong Kong Government has realized that further action has to be taken to stimulate the provision of a well-educated and adaptable workforce. At present, around 18% of the age cohort can continue their studies in tertiary education in Hong Kong and a total of 30% of the cohort is approximated to proceed to post-secondary education. The target is to increase this by approximately 30,000 people to 60% of the age group. The CE units of the universities have, in particular, responded well and strongly to this initiative. In order to promote this sector, the Government is also looking for further legislative changes to expand the number of institutions that are able to operate at a higher academic level. Moreover, the Government set up a Continuing Education Fund and a Funding Scheme for Workplace English Training, so as to subsidize adults with learning aspirations to pursue continuing education and training courses. In addition, a Non-means Tested Loan Scheme has also been set up to assist learners in any financial difficulties.

Rapid advances in technology and communications have greatly accelerated the emergence of new knowledge. The Government has also taken a series of measures and devoted considerable resources to promote lifelong learning opportunities as well as new technologies. In 2003, the Government conducted a survey which showed 60% of households use the Internet and 50% of households use broadband Internet service. The Government has set a target of increasing IT manpower through training and education and set up a 5-year strategy for IT in education, with a capital spending of HK$3.2 billion and annual recurrent spending of over HK$550 million. The Government also established the HK$5 billion Innovation and Technology Fund to promote new technologies and linkage between academia and industry sectors.

E-LEARNING IN HONG KONG

In response to the Government’s push toward a “knowledge-based economy society,” the development and applications of e-learning technologies have become more and more popular in Hong Kong. Some of the examples are highlighted in subsequent paragraphs.

The Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK) (www.ouhk.edu.hk) is the first government-established but financially independent institution in Hong Kong that was set up to offer distance learning programs on a regular correspondence mode since 1989. OUHK has developed an online delivery system, the Online Learning Environment (OLE). Based on WebCT (WebCT, n.d.), OLE provides a variety of features, such as discussion board, chat rooms, e-mails, course calendar, course news, course materials, evaluation, and online help.

The School of Continuing and Professional Studies (SCPS) of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) (http://www.scs.cuhk.edu.hk/) delivered distance learning programs both in regular correspondence mode since 1989. CUHK has developed an online delivery system, the Online Learning Environment (OLE). Based on WebCT (WebCT, n.d.), OLE provides a variety of features, such as discussion board, chat rooms, e-mails, course calendar, course news, course materials, evaluation, and online help.

The School of Continuing and Professional Studies (SCPS) of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) (http://www.scs.cuhk.edu.hk/) delivered distance learning packages both in regular correspondence mode and Internet mode. Course materials for regular correspondence mode are paper based and students will receive the Distance Learning Package via mailing. Blended mode and online mode are used over the Internet. For
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