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ISSUES & CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING E-LEARNING IN MALAYSIA

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1.0   INTRODUCTION

The exponential growth of information has made it imperative for learning to happen quickly. Meeting this challenge requires new thinking about how we acquire knowledge and skills as well as how we develop learning resources that can keep up with the knowledge economy. The advent of ICT and the Internet has greatly influenced the way knowledge is transmitted. This has resulted in the development of e-learning.

There are many definitions of e-learning, some of which are as follows:

- "E-Learning is the delivery of individualized, comprehensive, dynamic learning content in real time, aiding the development of communities of knowledge, linking learners and practitioners with experts." – *http://www.linezine.com/elearning.htm*

- "E-Learning refers to the use of Internet technologies to deliver a broad array of solutions that enhance knowledge and performance" - *J. Rosenberg*

- "E-Learning is the use of network technology to design, deliver, select, administer, and extend LEARNING" – *Elliot Masie, The Masie Center*

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- "E-Learning is the convergence of learning and the Internet" - *Banc of America*

Typically, the content for e-learning is in the electronic form and is stored either in CD ROM's or on servers. Learners access these contents directly from stand-alone computers or from the servers through the networked computers. The contents are typically developed to be engaging and interactive and the learners are supported "virtually" by the instructors.

Currently, increasing number of universities and industries are adopting e-learning to enhance the effectiveness of their operations. It is expected that the concept of e-learning will further develop as technology progresses. Recent market surveys predicted a very positive outlook for the e-learning market with an annual growth rate of 50% up to the year 2004. The revenues generated by e-learning is expected to double every year in the United States, reaching an amount of US$11.4 billion in 2003. In Asia Pacific, it is worth US$233 million. In Malaysia, the e-learning market is estimated to be worth US$6 million by 2005. Recent reports indicated that the greatest growth rates for e-learning will be in the Asia Pacific region.

2.0   E-Learning in Malaysia

In Malaysia, e-learning is introduced to students undergoing open and distance learning (ODL) programmes. Distance learning is not a recent phenomenon to Malaysians. Many individuals, especially those who are still working and aspire to be successful in their career development have enrolled for external degrees offered by reputed universities in the 1960's or earlier. University of London, U.K. is one of the institutions that was popular in awarding external degrees in those days. Many professional bodies, such as the City and Guild in U.K. also offered various certificates and diplomas in different fields through

correspondence programmes. The advent of Internet in the early 1980's had resulted in a gradual introduction of e-learning to ODL students in Malaysia.

E-learning initiatives in Malaysia are being undertaken mainly by universities, colleges and business enterprises. The main players of e-learning are private and public institutions of higher education as well as local and multinational corporations. Malaysia's first open university - Open University Malaysia (OUM) is the main academic institution that leverages on e-learning to deliver its programmes. Apart from OUM, other institutions that embraces e-learning include Multimedia University (MMU), University Tun Abdul Razak (UNITAR) and Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI).

3.0   BENEFITS OF E-LEARNING

There are many benefits that can be derived from e-learning. Some of these are as listed below:

3.1   Flexibility, Accessibility, Convenience
Learners can access the materials in their own time and study at their own pace and place.

3.2   Cross platform
Learners can access the content through window-based, Mac-based or UNIX-based computers.

3.3   Low delivery costs
Once e-content has been developed and uploaded on the server, it is relatively inexpensive to distribute domestically and worldwide.

3.4 Ease of update

It enables the content to be easily and regularly updated and instantly available to all learners.

3.5 Collaborative learning

E-learning promotes collaborative learning thus resulting in a more engaging and richer learning experiences.

3.6 Scalability

Content can be delivered to a small or large number of learners with little effort.

4.0 ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING E-LEARNING IN MALAYSIA

In spite of the benefits outlined above, there are many challenges that need to be overcome in order to enhance the effectiveness of e-learning. These are outlined below:

4.1 Awareness

Generally there is still a lack of awareness amongst the population, especially parents, of the effectiveness of e-learning. Many parents feel the traditional learning mode is better.

4.2 Low Adoption Rate

Most institutions are keen to embrace e-learning. Nevertheless, issues like *lack of e-content, inadequate infrastructure* coupled with the *problem of digital divide*, has resulted in a relatively low adoption rate.

4.3 Bandwidth Issue And Connectivity

Engaging content requires a rich combination of multimedia components. However, due to bandwidth and connectivity limitations, downloading of engaging content to the learners will be slow. This creates frustration and boredom among learners and affects the ease of learning.

4.4 Computer Literacy And Digital Divide

In Malaysia, there is a large segment of the population that is computer illiterate. This is especially true in the rural areas. This hinders the introduction and implementation of e-learning.

4.5 Lack of Quality E-Content

Currently, there is a dearth of high quality e-learning content in Malaysia. This is due to the lack of expertise as well as huge financial resources required to develop the content. As a result, most of the e-learning content has low interactivity and moderate impact on learners.

4.6 Difficulty in Engaging Learners Online

Engaging learners actively is one of the key factors in determining the success of an e-learning program. Online learning requires a very high degree of self-motivation which is found to be lacking among our learners. Learners find it difficult to migrate from the traditional learning mode to the new e-learning mode.

4.7 Language Barrier

The extensive use of English in e-learning contents is also one of the factors that has hindered the success of e-learning, especially in non-English speaking countries like Malaysia. Many, who like to enrol in e-learning programs, are deterred from doing so as they are not confident with the contents in English.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The benefits and potentials of e-learning far outweigh its challenges. Thus, it is imperative that institutions and government come together to resolve the issues discussed above. Some of the recommendations that can be adopted are listed below:

5.1 Blended Approach in e-Learning

Realizing that we are in the transition period between the traditional and e-learning modes, we propose that a blended approach be adopted. The term blended approach is used to describe the creation of a learning environment that combines several different delivery methods such as *face-to-face interactions, self-paced* and *individualized learning* and *online interactions*. In this regard, OUM has taken the initiative to introduce blended pedagogy to its learners. This has proven to be a successful delivery mode as can be seen by its popularity among our learners.

5.2 Improving Accessibility and Connectivity

Accessibility and connectivity needs to be further improved. This can be achieved through the upgrading of technological infrastructure as well as the lowering of the access fees to a more affordable level.

5.3   Mobile Learning Initiatives

Realizing the widespread use of mobile devices in Malaysia, one of the ways to expedite the acceptance of e-learning is to leverage on the use of mobile technology that will facilitate mobile learning. Mobile learning will also help overcome the problem of accessibility and connectivity.

5.4   Set-Up National E-Content Development Center

In view of the limited expertise as well as the high cost of developing content, it is proposed that an initiative be taken by the Malaysian government to set up a national content development center. This center can serve to:

5.4.1   coordinate content development in the country

5.4.2   act as a repository for quality e-contents

5.4.3   train and develop e-content experts

5.4.4   develop and monitor e-content standards

5.4.5   promote knowledge sharing among e-learning providers

5.5   Establish National E-Learning Council

In order to ensure the success of e-learning in Malaysia, a National e-Learning Council needs to be set up to champion e-learning. The Council should be headed by the Minister of Education and its members would comprise of representatives from Ministry of Energy, Telecommunications

and Multimedia, e-learning institutions and industry. The role of the Council is to:

    5.5.1   develop policies and standard for e-learning initiatives

    5.5.2   create awareness of e-learning

    5.5.3   promote e-learning

    5.5.4   monitor e-learning practices

    5.5.5   initiate research in e-learning

    5.5.6   promote international collaborations in e-learning

The establishment of the Council will spur the growth of e-learning in the country and it will also make Malaysia the champion of e-learning in this region.

6.0   CONCLUSION

E-learning is still learning!! We believe that the learners and instructors in Malaysia today have accepted it as one of the practical delivery modes. In view of this, we are confident that e-learning is here to stay and will play an important role in democratizing education and contributing towards generating knowledge workers. However, in order to realize the full potentials of e-learning, the government needs to play a more active role in promoting and supporting e-learning initiatives.

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