eLEARNING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PERADENIYA: A NEEDS ASSESSMENT

A.R. Ariyaratne[1], P.M.K. Alahakoon[2] and D.C. Bandara[3]

[1]Department of Agricultural Engineering, Faculty of Agriculture,
[2]Information Technology Centre, [3]Staff Development Centre,
University of Peradeniya

Introduction

The emerging global trends have challenged the educational institutions on improvements in quality, equity and access around the world. Policies and procedures are needed to accommodate the three goals of equity, access and quality, and fulfill the requirements for a knowledge society (Griffin, 2004). The unprecedented volume of information that is now available has generated a need for complex analytical skills to appropriately access and use this information in an efficient and meaningful way. In this "information age", a new economy has emerged in which knowledge is traded as a marketable commodity (Tinkler *et al.*, 1996). With these developments, it is imperative that university graduates be equipped to undertake appropriate access to data and manipulate it to fulfill their information needs.

The University of Peradeniya, in its ten-year plan, has given emphasis to further improvements to the teaching and learning environments. This involves transforming of the traditional paradigm of learning into a blended system of learning. For instance, the learning process is partly supported by digital technologies. A study was undertaken to conduct an

assessment on eLearning readiness at the University and to collect the information necessary to identify the strategy and actions required to improve current and future practices. This paper intends to discuss the findings of the study in relation to the aspects concerning the academic staff of the university.

Methodology

A university-wide survey was conducted using three instruments aimed at the Deans of Faculties, Heads of Departments and all staff members covering the entire academic community. The first part of the questionnaire was on usage level of technology in teaching and delivery. The usage was categorized into five levels as very frequently (over 80%), frequently (80-40%), often (39-10%), rarely (9 -1%) and never (0%). The second part of the questionnaire was on availability of facilities/resources categorized into five levels as all / many (over 80%), most (80 – 50%), some (49 -10%), few (9 – 1%), and none (0%). In addition, there were yes/no type questions on training received in eLearning and availability of support staff within departments for content development. The questionnaires were distributed to individual academic staff member through respective Heads of Departments who were requested to summarize data at departmental level and forward to the Dean of relevant

Faculty. The summarized data received from the Deans of eight Faculties in the university were taken for analyses and interpretation. The data received from the entire community of academic staff were summarized to obtain results.

Results and Discussion

The members of academic staff, Heads of Departments and the Deans of Faculties responded by returning the duly filled questionnaires. More than 50% of the members responded to the survey. From the results obtained, two dimensions: use and availability of technology and infrastructure, and human resources are considered in this paper.

Accessibility to technology by teachers as well as students is an essential factor in implementation of eLearning in an academic institution. At the university, 60% of the academic members indicated a PC is always available at own office. Further, 67 percent of the academic members indicated that internet is always available within office indicating some have access through common computer facilities. These two indicators which are at satisfactory level, identify the need for further improvement up to one-to-one computing resources for all academic members in the university. The 12 percent availability of internet in classrooms is a factor which draws attention for improvement for wider accessibility for teaching.

The initiatives for implementing eLearning strategies at Faculty level have been in the university for the past few years. Although there was no university-wide policy for adopting eLearning technology, the initiatives taken by the Faculties or some academic members as individuals, in some instances, have achieved progress. Majority of academic staff members indicated that technology was used at levels of high frequency in teaching. While more teachers tend to use computer based presentations in teaching, less usages were evident in use of web-based teaching material, making material (electronic form) available to students and incorporating web-based information in teaching. Perhaps, these are the areas which require more attention in staff development activities for academic members and in bringing improvements to accessibility for technology.

Conclusions

The assessments were made on two dimensions in eLearning: use and availability of technology and infrastructure, and human resources. It was evident that some Faculties have progressed in adopting technology such as ICT facilities and learning contents, the greater efforts are needed for university level development to articulate the learning and teaching needs of the organization. The second dimension, the human resources, requires sufficient development in terms of quality and quantity to support the University's strive for eLearning which could enhance teaching-learning processes. Despite of the interest in e-learning, the envisaged progress is not without constraints and limitations. The fundamental obstacle to the growth of e-learning is the lack of access to the necessary technology infrastructure. Poor or insufficient technology infrastructure can lead to unsavory experiences that can cause more damage than good to teachers, students and the learning experience (Naidu,

2003). The study signifies the need for capacity building in terms of human resources and infrastructure within the university.

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