

STRATEGIES FOR AN ENHANCED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT THROUGH eLEARNING AT UNIVERSITY OF PERADENIYA

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Introduction

The concepts described under many terms such as eLearning, Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), Distributed Learning, and Learning Management Systems (LMSs), refer to attempts made to introduce modern technological advancements to enhance the teaching and learning process. Based on the present day usage, eLearning can be considered to encompass any technologically mediated learning using computers whether from a distance, or in a face to face classroom setting, which matches with the definition that summarizes all of the above ideas as; 'The use of information and communications technology to provide a range of approaches to enhance and extend learning for a wide range of individuals and groups, regardless of their physical presence in relation to the institution that provides the education and training' (University of Greenwich, 2006).

It is necessary for today's society to cater to a much larger clientele who are willing to learn while being engaged in other activities, work, and even recreation. Besides, it is a well-accepted norm that self-directed learning is more effective in pedagogical terms compared to teacher centered learning in a classroom

environment. Increased access, convenience and flexibility to learners are considered to be the main benefits of effective eLearning today (Wikipedia.org, 2009; Means *et al.*, 2009; MELD, 2009).

Since the University of Peradeniya is at the verge of launching a university-wide effort to promote eLearning, it is worthwhile to investigate the approaches by other higher educational institutes in introducing such systems in their organizations, and study the transformations that should take place, and how such approaches could best be adopted by the University of Peradeniya.

Objective

The objective of this study was to carry out a literature survey on different aspects of eLearning related issues especially in relation to the technological and pedagogical factors, in parallel with the planning workshop on eLearning for the University of Peradeniya, and suggest strategies suitable for the University. This paper describes the different learning systems available today and discusses possibilities and strategies for the University of Peradeniya to enhance and expand the learning environment through introduction of modern computer based technology. The paper

further discusses different strategies of eLearning implementation that may be of use to the University of Peradeniya in future developments.

Approaches to eLearning implementation

Planning and implementation process

The portfolios and strategies developed by other university level educational institutes indicate that the planning and implementation process must consider issues such as; means of embedding eLearning into curriculum design, proper assistance for the developers and practitioners, infrastructural environments, supporting the students, and embedding sound pedagogical practices as key factors (Oxford Brookes University, 2008; University of Huddersfield, 2008).

Based on the published material, key principles the university should stand-by in adopting the new technology can be summarized as below.

- Fully embedded into the present systems of teaching, learning, and quality assurance
- Blended approach to ensure the availability of wider range of options
- Motivation for change created by supporting, and improving infrastructure, and providing resources available across the university
- Empower and enable the teacher in making a professional judgment on level of technology used, and to play a leading role in the implementation process
- Ensure that the pedagogical objectives are met while adopting new technology

- Use on-line, computer-based assessment systems that are robust, secure and efficient in staff time, and that supports learning and assessment of student performance (University of Bristol, 2005; University of Huddersfield, 2008).

Present progress

It must be noted that there are many attempts to develop and use eLearning material at department level by the University of Peradeniya. Beside many efforts in different Faculties, the IT Center of the University also provides computer based teaching materials for a range of courses through its LMS, and also hosts such efforts made by individual faculties.

The first university-wide effort to launch eLearning related work, the planning workshop on eLearning on July 3rd, 2009 was held to provide awareness on eLearning readiness to the participants, and also to develop an eLearning vision for the University and for the faculties. Some of the results of this workshop and connected survey are reported separately.

Strategies for the future

The best benefits of VLEs could be reaped by the University by using it to reach a wider audience, with no significant additional cost, while making use of the flexible times. However, the scale of implementation must be improved gradually while ensuring the success at each level. First, the attempts must be at Department level, while the second stage being a Faculty-wide implementation that could be resulted with proper support and encouragement given by adopting the

above strategies. The third level of implementation would be the University becoming a resource centre to the whole country by offering on-line courses and remote study opportunities through eLearning.

A blended approach provides the teacher, the freedom to use the traditional classroom teaching together with eLearning material, and a wider range of options for selection as it suits best in achieving the required pedagogical objectives, which may seem appropriate for us as well (University of Bristol, 2005; University of Huddersfield, 2008).

Conclusions

The above literature survey clearly indicates the strategic path the University of Peradeniya must adopt in implementing eLearning system at large scale in the future. One of the major initiatives would be to provide support and encouragement to the academic staff in developing computer based material that could be used in teaching in a blended pedagogical model as described above. Developing infrastructure facilities, and making the technology available university-wide, would be the next major step towards success. It can therefore be further concluded that the University is on the correct path towards successful implementation of the plans, provided that it would be sufficiently facilitated by making funds available.

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