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The current status and future of e-learning in Taiwan

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FOCUS INTRODUCTION

The current status and future of e-learning in Taiwan

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Background

Like any other modern, forward-looking and technologically advanced nation, Taiwan has realised the current and future importance of electronic learning – now commonly referred to as 'e-learning'. Bearing this in mind, some years ago, the Taiwanese government introduced a number of initiatives that were intended to promote the development and uptake of this important approach to learning, training and knowledge dissemination. These initiatives were embedded within a national framework for electronic learning called the *National Science and Technology Program for e-Learning* (ELNP).

The first phase of the ELNP initiative commenced in 2003. The aims of this national programme were to promote the development of industries related to e-learning and to encourage new waves of academic research in order to support and underpin the scientific study of learning and the development of technology to support it. It was also intended to increase the overall competitiveness of Taiwan in this era of knowledge-based economies through the effective use of e-learning technologies. Furthermore, it was envisaged that a major achievement of the ELNP activity would be to make Taiwan a world leader in terms of its output of published papers and the number of citations made to its e-learning research.

Following on from the first five-year phase of the national e-learning programme (2003–2007), the government of Taiwan initiated another five-year national programme called the *Taiwan e-Learning and Digital Archives Program* (TELDAP). This commenced in 2008 and will run through to 2012. This new national programme is intended to promote the use of Taiwan's digital archives and e-learning applications in order to facilitate the development of the country's culture, society, industry and economy. There are eight core projects included in TELDAP: the *Taiwan Digital Archives Expansion Project*, the *Research and Development of Digital Archives and e-Learning Technologies Project*, the *Core Platforms for Digital Contents Project*, the *Academic and Social Promotions and Applications of Digital Archives and e-Learning Project*, the *Industrial Development and Promotion of Digital Archives and e-Learning Project*, the *Digital Education and e-Learning Project*, the *e-Learning for Chinese Language Project*, and the *International Collaboration and Promotion of Taiwan e-Learning and Digital Archives Program*. Within the latter programme, the *International Collaboration on e-Learning Project* is a sub-project that is intended

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to focus on promoting the international visibility of Taiwan's e-learning research and e-learning industry. The aims of this project and the strategies that are being adopted for its implementation are briefly described below.

Aims

There are three main aims for the International Collaboration on e-Learning Project: (1) to promote the international visibility of Taiwan's e-learning research and industry so as to strengthen the international influence of all e-learning stakeholders in Taiwan; (2) to establish an e-learning international exchange platform so that e-learning researchers and CEOs in Taiwan can play important leadership roles in the global e-learning community; and (3) to initiate the creation of an international cyber-university to expand Taiwan's international e-learning market, shared by integrating resources from our digital archives of learning content, Chinese-language learning know-how, e-learning enterprise products and academic e-learning research outputs.

Strategies

In order to realise the aims described above, we have developed two major strategies and a set of action plans for this project. The first strategy involves establishing an international e-learning exchange platform which includes *an association*, *an academic journal* and an *international conference*. The second strategy involves initiating an international cyber-university which would offer online credit-based courses and would also make available international 'double-degree' programmes.

The association would take the form of a non-profit-making permanent organisation called the *Taiwan e-Learning Association* (abbreviated to TWELA). This would be used as an instrument that would oversee the production of the e-learning academic journal; it would also be responsible for organising the annual *TELearn* international e-learning conference. In addition to these two regular tasks, the full-time staff of this association would also be responsible for providing help in relation to inviting distinguished international scholars to visit Taiwan – as well as making arrangements for Taiwanese research groups to visit outstanding international research centres. The association would also be responsible for participating in international exhibitions in order to promote the marketing of Taiwan's e-learning products and know-how. Another important function of this organisation would be to ensure that international collaboration on e-learning becomes a long-term sustainable task – after the national programme has finished.

The *academic journal* would play an important role in relation to e-learning knowledge dissemination. Although there are already many existing journals related to e-learning, there is still a big gap between theoretical research and practical applications. This new journal would aim to bridge this gap by providing a forum for any research work that reports details of how learning technology is being used in real teaching and learning contexts. In other words, simply describing conceptual issues and prototype implementations would be unlikely to meet the requirements for publication; instead, emphasis would be given to work that involves experimental research and empirical studies involving scientific data collection and analysis in order to produce evidence-based conclusions. Research on large-scale deployment, adoption and long-term longitudinal analysis and comparison would be more favourable topics for publication.

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Hopefully, the journal's publication efforts would ensure a wider, more rapid and more effective adoption of technology-enhanced learning within the next generation of educational systems.

The *international conference* (TELearn) will be an annual event hosted by the association. In the past, TELearn has provided (and in the future will continue to make available) a forum for researchers in the area of technology-enhanced learning to publish research findings and exchange new ideas and experiences for establishing potential international collaborative research. In addition, e-learning companies with popular products and 'best practice' e-learning applications would be invited to exhibit their wares. Also, in order to serve better the e-learning community in the Asia-Pacific region, the venue of this conference will be located in different cities from countries across this region. Authors of the best papers would be invited to submit a full paper for possible publication in a special issue of one of the more prestigious academic journals. For example, the papers that have been included in this special half-issue of the *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* journal were selected from among more than 50 papers that were presented at the TELearn 2008 conference which was held in Hanoi, Vietnam in December 2008.

The *cyber-university* initiative is intended to be a joint international and inter-disciplinary venture. Because of its multi-disciplinary nature, e-learning requires a holistic educational programme involving the collaborative and co-operative efforts of professors/educators from different subject domains such as information technology, education and psychology. Such a collaborative approach is needed in order to produce students with the required knowledge and skills. Bearing this in mind, we believe that it is important to initiate online international degree programmes that are delivered by a cyber-university which is run by a group of co-operating universities in different countries. This would enable many online credit-based courses to be offered to students by leveraging teaching resources across many countries. As a first step, we plan to conduct an online research seminar on e-learning by inviting e-learning experts from around the world to give professional talks using a synchronous cyber-classroom. This will not only cultivate students' global vision by receiving professional guidance given by different experts, but it will also promote international research collaboration among participating professors. For the second step, we plan to start up an international e-learning PhD programme by co-operating with the Università Politecnica delle Marche in Italy and the National Sun Yat-sen University in Taiwan. Students enrolled in this programme must be admitted by either one of the two universities. Students would undertake PhD research supervised by at least two professors, with complementary expertise, from the two different countries. Once students graduated, they would receive a double-degree from both universities.

Concluding remarks

Through the aims and strategies described above we hope to expand the influence of Taiwan in the global information society so that high-quality digital content can be effectively used in various e-learning contexts. It is also hoped that through the international e-learning exchange platform established in this project, we can help Taiwan to promote research, education and enterprise applications for e-learning. Of course an equal and mutually beneficial linkage will be established between Taiwan and its international partners through bi-lateral exchanges and collaborations. These will also promote Taiwan's global visibility and influence on e-learning.

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