What has been going on in e-Learning of South Korea?

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Abstract: In South Korea, the demand for e-Learning is growing as a methodology to meet such a demand. Its technological infrastructure, ranked with the world’s most advanced nations, along with strong government support for e-Learning related policies, both provide the necessary conditions for the proliferation and success of e-Learning in Korea. To guarantee success for the next generation of e-Learning in Korea, however, issues regarding quality control, the development and maintenance of human resources, the improvement of laws and regulations for e-Learning, and efforts to standardize e-Learning technology need to be pushed forward in tandem—not as discrete issues, but as an integral whole.

Introduction

As the information society approaches a certain level of maturity, the demands for distributed learning, lifelong learning, and learner-regulated learning also increases. Cyberspace has all the elements to meet such demands. In South Korea, as of 2004, there are 17 on-line colleges and universities. On-line graduate schools, in the meantime, have been established and authorized as special graduate schools under the Higher Education Act, and six colleges or universities now operate on-line graduate schools. With the web-based training project of 1999, the Ministry of Labor, through its institutional and financial support, has contributed in promoting the e-Learning industry for corporate and vocational training and education (MOCIE, 2003). With a total budget of eight billion won over the four years from 1999 to 2003, the Ministry of Information and Communication has been operating a college of information and communications. In addition to primary, secondary and on-line high schools, e-Learning is utilized in college prep institutes, English language institutes, and other private educational institutes, as well as government offices and public organizations (MOCIE, 2003). However, the rate of growth for e-Learning is greatest in for-profit businesses, such as corporate education and private learning institutes. These businesses focus on building business models for e-Learning that would maximize profit, and corporations tend to expand their internal corporate training programs into e-Learning services for their external adult learner clients.

The primary purpose of this research is to look at the trend of e-Learning in South Korea by 1) reviewing its background, goals, and structures; 2) examining the current e-Learning practices and research trends found throughout Korean society; and 3) discussing the important issues for future developments based on these findings.

e-Learning Practices in Korea

Primary, secondary, and higher education, on-line university and college, corporate training, and government employee training, are the primary areas where e-Learning is expanding in Korea. However, these various institutions show some differences in their missions and goals, due primarily to the differences in the target learners for each institute. Moreover, the extent of proliferation and promotion of e-Learning in schools and each concerned state department are somewhat different.
Primary and Secondary Education

In the area of primary and secondary education, e-Learning has been taking root and expanding through projects led by the Korea Education and Research Information Service (KERIS). Nevertheless, e-Learning in the regular primary and secondary schools curriculum, compared to lifelong education and higher education, is not as widespread. In fact, the private education sector in primary and secondary levels is likely to become one of the biggest e-Learning markets. One study indicates that the projected proliferation of e-Learning in the private education sector is accelerated by the educational system in which a student’s academic evaluation is solely for getting admissions to college (Kang et al, 2003). The private e-Learning market for primary and secondary schools is comprised of businesses that provide only on-line learning, groups that operate on-line education as well as publishing businesses (MOCIE, 2003).

Higher Education

The government’s active role has contributed to the introduction of e-Learning into Korean colleges and universities. E-Learning, which started among a few departments in a handful of universities in the mid-1990s, along with the pilot on-line university under the MOE project, opened 836 e-Learning courses in the spring semester of 1999. It is astonishing that 1 out of 8 four-year college students registered for on-line courses. The results of this two-year (1998-2000) pilot project run by existing off-line universities contributed in laying the legal basis for establishing on-line universities under the Lifelong Education Act that became effective after March 2000. Moreover, the project catalyzed the introduction and establishment of e-Learning in government and other public institutes, such as the on-line graduate school program of the Ministry of Information and Communication, and Cyber Environmental Education Center of the Ministry of Environment in 1999, and the Cyber Unification Education Center of the Ministry of Unification, created in 2000.

However, the monitoring research on the pilot project by the MOE shows that participating on-line universities suffered financially and technologically and tended to be heavily concentrated in popular departments such as information technology, design, and business management (Kim, 2000). These features anticipate the potential problems that on-line universities may undergo under the Lifelong Education Act.

In April 2001, the Korean University Alliance for Cyber Education (KUACE) was established for the advancement of e-Learning in higher education. According to a KUACE study on the current state of e-Learning, over 40 percent of Korean universities have implemented e-Learning in one form or another. More specifically, of 376 Korean universities nationwide (including 9 on-line universalities), 151 universities have implemented e-Learning either partially or entirely in their curriculum. Twenty of these are four-year national or public universities, 6 are elementary school teachers’ colleges, with 75 four-year private universities, 31 two-year private colleges, and 19 other universities. Moreover, the Higher Education Act has authorized the establishment of on-line special graduate schools, and as of January 2003, six universities are operating on-line graduate programs. Policy studies on e-Learning in higher education began appearing since 2002.

On-line University

The establishment of nine on-line universities in March 2000, under the Lifelong Education Act (MOE, 2000) legislated in August 1999, signaled the beginning of the second generation of e-Learning universities, and as of March 2003 there are a total of 16 on-line universities in operation. In the meantime, lifelong education institutes accredited by the Lifelong Education Act became eligible to offer credit courses under the Credit Bank System.

The on-line university is a lifelong education facility as well as a higher education institute. Upon completing the courses defined by law and academic regulations, a student of an on-line university will be accredited with the same degree as a traditional college or university graduate. As of the second-half of the 2002 academic year, students enrolled in on-line universities are primarily in their twenties and thirties. Additionally, the fact that 85.8 percent of the total students have jobs indicates that the majority of the students are workers seeking a degree or continuing education while working.
Since the on-line university is only at the start-up stage, more time, effort and legal support are needed for e-Learning culture to take root. Since on-line universities are authorized, operated, and supervised under the Enforcement Decree of the Lifelong Education Act without an accompanying set of operational regulations there may be some potential limitations and problems. The criteria for establishing an on-line university (school buildings, education facilities, the recruitment of teachers, etc.) as well as provisions for managing academic affairs (the number of school days per semester, the academic year, the number of hours per credit unit, etc.) are based heavily on quantitative factors inherited from the regulatory policy of the traditional off-line classroom educational institutes. Recent research for making improvements in on-line universities is in the areas of content design, educational system establishment, the current situation survey, guidelines for establishing on-line universities, and quality management.

*Corporate Training and Education*

With a gradual upward trend in the number of the Internet users, e-Learning in the vocational sector is also growing. The growth of e-Learning is particularly visible among large corporations, where both in-house programs and outsourcing programs supplied by e-Learning companies operate side by side.

Currently, the Ministry of Labor provides policy and financial support for the enhancement of employees’ vocational competency. In September 2000, there were 18 companies operating these training programs and a total of 206 courses offered (Yi et al, 1999).

Through full utilization of the Ministry of Labor’s Internet-based Training, there have been positive results in terms of the educational cost effectiveness of education. However, as a response to the criticisms that the criteria for reimbursement of employment insurance has produced uniform Internet-based educational content (*Digital Times*, 10 July 2001) and that subsidies for training have been given mostly to large corporations (MOCIE, 2003), the Ministry of Labor is directing its efforts towards quality management and to necessary revisions in the relevant laws and regulations

Within the area of corporate e-Learning, there is much discussion addressing current critical issues and future development. There is a growing demand to expand blended learning to maximize teaching outcomes and to conduct more measurable and specific studies on the effects of e-Learning. From 2003, research in such areas is expected to be in full swing, led primarily by e-Learning companies and large corporations. Along with the concerns about inefficient information sharing and resources due to a lack of consistent standards, there has also been a growing debate about the standardization of e-Learning since 2002, which will be the top priority for future expansion and marketability of e-Learning. Similarly, high-quality customized content, improvements of the Internet-based Training System, and the fostering of e-Learning professionals have all been receiving much attention.

*Training for Government Employees*

E-Learning for government employees is expanding with the Central Officials Training Institute (COTI), subsidized by the Ministry of Government Administration as well as with local officials training institutes. Twelve of the 37 training institutes operate e-Learning courses, and most of them have been implementing e-Learning courses as part of the traditional classroom curriculum. With the leadership of the COTI, the government’s official training institutes, the Seoul City Officials Training Institute and the Incheon Metropolitan City Local Officials Training Institute, have organized the Council on the Cyber Training of Government Official to prevent overlapping content development and to cut costs by sharing existing content. In addition to content sharing, they are sharing a server system. Among 16 institutes, including 4 self-governing bodies, 14 institutes are sharing a server system, and 12 institutes are sharing content (MOCIE, 2003).

Because e-Learning in government officials’ training institutes is still at the start-up stage, hardly any research is currently in progress. However, there are several issues under discussion to promote e-Learning for government officials. First of all, a need to appoint an e-Learning specialist to manage the project for e-Learning has been noted. This demand for an e-Learning specialist seems to arise from the fact that in most of the training institutes there is no e-Learning specialist or expert, or else they are hired on a short-term contract,
making it difficult for them to be involved in long-term planning and strategy building. Moreover, the need to support self-directed learning and to link the e-Learning to the Knowledge Management System is being acknowledged (MOCIE, 2003). These concerns seem to arise from the awareness of the urgency to create a lifelong government employee education system, responding to the effort to establish an electronic government.

Issues for Reflective E-learning in Korea

South Korea’s technological infrastructure ranks among the highest of advanced nations. Some suggest the following factors as criteria for predicting the future prospects for e-Learning: accessibility of the home and the workplace to the Internet and network; costs of Internet connections; benefits and values of services through the Internet; the impact of the rapid development of new technologies on the Internet; and the influence of the Internet on interpersonal communication (Cunningham et al, 1998; McCahill, 1998; Posner et al, 1997). In terms of those technology factors, South Korea holds a relatively advantageous position in expanding and establishing e-Learning.

However, several issues to be resolved can be found when taking stock of the current state of e-Learning in primary, secondary, and higher education, on-line universities, corporate training, and general public education. Only when issues related to quality management, human resources development and recruitment, the amendment of e-Learning laws and regulations, and the standardization of e-Learning technology are addressed mutually and ecologically, can e-Learning in Korea make a successful transition to its next generation.

Quality Issues

Since the quality of e-Learning content is the most essential for the success of e-Learning, government agencies and departments in charge of e-Learning need to continuously develop various methodologies for quality management. There are many instructional design studies currently underway, focusing around designing an e-Learning environment that would support self-regulated learning worldwide and in South Korea. Solutions for quality management have also been suggested. Among them, the most frequently discussed issues are the need to foster more e-Learning specialists (MOCIE, 2003) or to operate a quality management system, such as an internal or external experts’ evaluation committee (Lee, et al. 2003).

Human Resources Development and Recruitment

In order to develop and distribute an instruction-learning model that maximizes the special advantages of e-Learning, we must foster specialists who can meet the demands. For this, the training and support system for specialists in educational development, instruction, and administration should be operated in a mutual and concurrent manner.

Amendment of E-learning Laws and Regulations

An open lifelong education system demands new or revised laws and regulations that accommodate the diversity of educational types and services, application technology and learners. Despite the promotion of various e-Learning projects by the government at different levels of education, the current laws and regulations lack a specific legal means to support the various e-Learning programs. The deficiency is particularly salient in the areas of primary and secondary education laws, and even though there are related regulations for colleges, they are so sporadic that they are effectively insignificant. In the cases of primary and secondary education laws, however, even the legal basis for e-Learning is virtually nonexistent (MOCIE, 2003).

Standardization of e-Learning Technology
Unlike during its start-up phase, e-Learning businesses and organizations are becoming yet another auxiliary industry to that of off-line education, in terms of the number and system. Ultimately, through standardization, we can expect to cut development costs by reusing existing content, to have easy access to the contents needed to redesign curriculums through efficient indexing, and to create the possibility of re-usage and the revision of content through various development tools. In addition, standardization will allow the independence of content from the upgrades of the Learning Management System and the ability to conveniently manage content. (MOCIE, 2003). Currently, there is no international standard for the standardization of e-Learning systems; however, there is a movement to create an international standard. South Korea is currently participating as a voting member in JTC1/SC36, the legislative organization of International Organization for Standardization.

Conclusion

As society grows more intricately interconnected with information and communications technology, and as people’s lives become more dependent on that information, there is a growing demand for not only high-quality education but also continuous and open lifelong education. Along with it, so is the demand for e-Learning as a methodology. Internet analysts are predicting a phenomenal growth in the demand for e-Learning. Although it is not readily visible today, in four or five years the importance of e-Learning in higher educational institutions will increase more rapidly than in any other area, and corporate teaching will continue to utilize e-Learning as a tool. Independence from time and space, significant cost reductions, learner-centered, customized and one-on-one education, provisions for the most updated information, and multimedia based learning will offset the disadvantages of traditional classroom learning, making e-Learning an attractive alternative in corporate training. However, because e-Learning demands innovative changes, a systematic and strategic approach (Hall and LeCavalier, 2000) is necessary for the individual learner and organization, the final decision makers in implementing and operating e-Learning, to fully recognize the potentials of e-Learning.

South Korea’s technological infrastructure, which is one of the most advanced in the world, provides the necessary condition for e-Learning to proliferate. As e-Learning in Korea approaches a certain level of maturity and proliferation, there will emerge issues to be resolved at the national level for a more reflexive progress of e-Learning. The future of e-Learning in Korea will be promising when measures to create an efficient and effective e-Learning culture—such as promoting the awareness of the need for e-Learning, the establishment of a quality management system, the development and recruitment of e-Learning specialists, the amendment of e-Learning laws and regulations, and the establishment e-Learning technology standardization—result in a favorable synergic outcome.

References


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