

Factors in E-Learning in Universities in Thailand

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Abstract— At the present, learning does not only take place in the classroom, as in the past; it also occurs outside the classroom because of the progression of information technology and communication. This is convenient for students in their learning. Teaching via the Internet, or E-Learning, has become more common in many universities, and is no longer restricted to distance universities. There are many universities in Thailand which have taught via electronic means of communications for many years as documented by Boondao et al. [1]. The study was about the factors involved in the success of learning via the Internet. They consisted of policy and planning, finance, support from higher administrators, readiness of the staff involved, adequacy of the infrastructure, evaluation and follow up, and electronic media. Given the importance of these factors, and their interaction with each other, the universities must ensure that all are continuously given appropriate levels of consideration by administrators, faculty and support staff.

Keywords—E-Learning, Internet, Thailand, Universities

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is drawn from the research of Boondao, Komlayut and Punnakan in 2004. The purposes were to analyze and summarize the factors involved in the organization of E-Learning in universities in Thailand. It was found that higher institutes in Thailand make relatively little use of E-Learning. The primary survey of the research involved sending questionnaires to 84 universities in

Thailand. Fifty-seven universities (67.9%) responded. The details are in Table 1.

TABLE I
STAGE OF ADOPTION OF E-LEARNING

University (57)	Use E-Learning		Preparin g to Use E-Learning		Do not use E-Learning	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Government	17	29.2	6	10.5	23	40.1
Private and AIT	3	5.3	2	3.5	5	8.8
Total	20	35.1	9	15.8	28	49.1

The details from table 1 indicate that there were 20 universities (35.1%) that used E-Learning and nine universities (15.9%) were in the process of developing E-Learning. It meant in 2004 that only 50.9% of the responding universities were using or just preparing to use E-Learning in 2004 despite the fact that the Internet and E-Learning had been available for many years.

II. THE FINDINGS

After receiving the questionnaires, a process of interviewing the executive administration members, lecturers and technicians from the responding institutions was conducted. The topics were about the teaching and learning via E-Learning in their universities. It was found that to organize successful E-Learning the following key factors needed to be considered.

A. Policy and planning

The first important factor to be identified is the need for a clear policy about E-Learning from the executive administration members. Everyone involved needs a clear indication of the aims that the university has for its E-

Learning program. The policy also is an essential guideline for the university's development and operation plans.

Fifty two lecturers from the universities that used E-Learning suggested that the university should have clear policies and practical plans. Also the policies need to clearly specify, for each person involved, timelines for each step of the plan for which they are responsible. Careful and continuous supervision of all steps involved is necessary to ensure success. The organization of E-Learning can only be as successful as the policy under which it is developed allows.

Having decided on a policy for E-Learning, executive administration members should not make any changes that are not absolutely necessary until the project is complete and has undergone evaluation to identify any weaknesses. Changes before this time can cause confusion among the lecturers and other staff members who are involved with the project and lead to disruption of the development process and a failure to properly address problems. This may result in the inability of the E-Learning program to meet the expectations of the university.

B. Finance

Financial support is just as important as the policy and the planning. E-Learning needs both technologies and manpower. It was found that 70% of 27 universities had prepared financial support; the rest had not yet done so.

The universities should provide adequate and timely financial support at each stage of the work during the development and implementation. The initial implementation of E-Learning may be expensive because of the need to prepare internet infrastructure, hardware, software and other tools as well as human resources such as lecturers, technicians, and producers

The executive administration members must have vision and understand about the high capital cost of setting up the system. In the long term E-Learning can provide savings through cost-effective course delivery. It can also enhance the reputation of the university through increased enrolments and greater

student satisfaction. After the initial set-up costs the main E-Learning expenses are ongoing course development, lecturer and support staff salaries and equipment maintenance costs.

C. Executive support

It is important that support for E-Learning from the top executive level of the university continues after the policy, planning, initial implementation and evaluation stages. It must be seen by all concerned that the leaders consider E-Learning as a major contribution to the ongoing work of the university and not just a passing fad.

The support may also be in the form of recognition of the course materials produced as academic works, special payment for work done or counting the time involved as part of the lecturers' workloads. It was found that 14.8% of the lecturers did not get anything for their work on E-Learning and 7.4% used their own money to produce the E-Learning courses.

D. The readiness of staff members

The survey divided the staff in to three groups: lecturers, students and technicians. Each of these groups needed to be ready in all aspects to organize E-Learning successfully.

Lecturers

The lecturers had the important role of transferring the knowledge to students via E-Learning. The study found that some administrators who responded to the survey stated that one factor which delayed the E-Learning development was the fact that some lecturers did not realize the importance and the need for E-Learning. Not many lecturers were interested in E-Learning. Therefore, the first priority should be to prepare the lecturers by building their understanding of E-Learning and developing their enthusiasm to be involved.

The study found that the successful lecturers' gained satisfaction from producing the E-Learning products. They believed that E-Learning was useful for

students. The students were able to study anywhere and at any time. The lecturers were proud that students were benefitting from their products. This was reinforced when they received positive feedback and encouraging comments from the students.

Another vital priority was providing knowledge about the process, the methodology and training about the technological skills involved in E-Learning. These helped the lecturers understand the role and the work that was involved. Furthermore, it helped them to feel as comfortable using E-Learning technology as they were teaching in the classroom. It was convenient for them to revise and add more content and activities for students as well as increasing their interaction with students. It made the lecturers feel comfortable using E-Learning and saved time compared with teaching in the classroom. They were able to teach and revise the contents any time without any limitation. The study found that 63.5% of the lecturers were satisfied with teaching via E-Learning. The reasons were they were able to produce the content for the electronic medium by themselves. The lecturers who did not have technology skills and could not manage the E-Learning by themselves found that it was a burden and involved extra work.

Students

The lecturers suggested that students must be made aware of the features and benefits of E-Learning. The universities had to find ways to help students develop a disciplined approach to study and a high sense of responsibility for their own learning. Students should not be forced to learn via E-Learning, but it can be another channel to extend their understanding of the course content.

Some students found that one problem of studying via E-Learning was their lack of skill in using technology such as not knowing about using the system. Some universities provided training for new students on how to use the system. The study found that 55% of students stated that the main advantages gained from learning via E-Learning were helping students to better understand the contents, a more interesting way to transfer knowledge, more detailed and up to date contents.

Technicians

The technicians should be ready to work with lecturers. The study found that the lecturers had problems regarding the technicians. There were not enough technicians available to help to develop the E-Learning courses. This caused some delays in launching E-Learning courses. Sixty-three percent of the lecturers claimed that there was a lack of cooperation problem from the staff. The technicians complained that they experienced a problem with cooperation from lecturers who provided the contents. Forty-four percent of the technicians commented that the lecturers did not have time to prepare the contents and were afraid that E-Learning would replace their teaching. Therefore, the university should organize seminars to enable the lecturers and the technicians to understand each other's needs and develop the cooperative working relationships that are essential for the success of E-Learning.

With regard to staff development, 57% of the executive members commented that the universities needed to continue develop every group of the staff and students in every aspect concerning E-Learning. In the initial stage of E-Learning, the universities needed to develop the knowledge and foundation skills to produce E-Learning. Further continuous training at a higher level should include such skills as analyzing the factors involved and activities on the internet and evaluation of the efficiency of using E-Learning courses. The design and production of E-Learning to include more multimedia should be another feature of the ongoing staff development.

E. The readiness of the infrastructure

E-Learning is dependent on basic infrastructure; the internet, computers, software and a responsible administrative unit. Two thirds of the lecturers stated that the most common problem that occurred was that students could not access the system from outside the campus. The second most common problem was that the capacity of the internet system was not

enough to cope with the extra load generated by E-Learning. There was also a shortage of computers and related equipment for lecturers.

The foundation infrastructure: hardware, the internet system and software were considered inadequate by 59.3% of technicians. About fifty-five percent of students found that they did not have good convenient access to E-Learning. The readiness of the infrastructure is an essential factor to support the successful implementation of E-Learning.

F. The evaluation and follow up

To organize E-Learning successfully, evaluation and follow up should be done. The achievements of students who study via E-Learning and those who study in classes without E-Learning should be compared. The problems, the strengths and the weaknesses observed while using E-Learning should be recorded and studied. The results of the evaluation should be used to devise ways to improve the quality of the E-Learning. The study found that 23% of the lecturers had conducted research into the organization of E-Learning. A further 38.5% were comparing the results of teaching via E-Learning and teaching without E-Learning.

Electronic media

E-Learning is a learning system via electronic means. Therefore, electronic means have an important role in the transfer of knowledge from the lecturer to the students. There were different forms of electronic means including HTML, Word documents, PowerPoint presentations, Flash graphics and multimedia presentations. Each form was appropriate for a particular group of students and contents. The study found that 43.7% of students felt that they had gained knowledge from E-Learning at a moderate level, 43.2% at good level and 9.1% at an excellent level.

Furthermore, some students commented that the presentation on E-Learning was not interesting. Some also found that when they had difficulty in understanding problems, it was difficult to communicate with the lecturers.

III. CONCLUSIONS

All the factors mentioned above are necessary to organize E-Learning successfully. The universities need to have good cooperation from all levels of staff and students. The universities must work actively and continuously to reach their goals. Since information and communication technologies influence society in many ways, it is clear that E-Learning has great potential to be another channel to transfer knowledge. Also it is a very useful tool to develop valuable human resources.

REFERENCE

- [1]Boondao, S; Komlayut, S and Punnakan, W, *The Study of the Status of e-Learning in Universities in Thailand*. Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Nonthaburi. 2005.