The First and Only Ph.D. in eLearning Methodology in the World

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Abstract- eLearning has become an increasingly vital tool for worldwide business, education and social development. To prepare persons to serve the rapid growth of eLearning demands, the School of eLearning Science of the College of Internet Distance Education (CIDE) at Assumption University of Thailand has offered a Doctor of Philosophy in eLearning Methodology. Notably the Ph.D. in eLearning Methodology (PhDeLM) is the world's first Ph.D. in eLearning Methodology program since 2006. The PhDeLM program is the research oriented program, that students can manage their own pace of study progress. PhDeLM students do not have to worry about attendance the classroom but they can use the Internet technology to communicate with all advisors instead. This PhDeLM aims at producing competent academic, professionals and researchers in eLearning science and capable of applying eLearning in various disciplines such as human resource development (HRD), business and industries, education, agricultural extension and cooperatives health science, knowledge centers and management, laws and politics and eLearning technology. The program was developed and approved by the University Council of Assumption University on May 2, 2006. Importantly, PhDeLM program has been legally accredited from the Commission of Higher Education, Ministry of Education of Thailand in 2008.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Doctor of Philosophy program in eLearning Methodology Program (PhDeLM) is the first Ph.D. program of the world, it is also the first Ph.D. program offered at the School of eLearning Science, College of Internet Distance Education (CIDE), since 2006. CIDE is the first and as of the year 2009 still the only educational institution in the world offering Ph.D. in eLearning Methodology. In another word, Thailand is the first in the world to offer Ph.D. in eLearning Methodology [1]. The program was developed and approved by the University Council of Assumption University on May 2, 2006. Importantly, Ph.D. in eLearning Methodology program has been legally accredited from Commission of Higher Education, Ministry of Education of Thailand in 2008.

The program is of interest worldwide. Students from 30 countries have applied for admission, such as USA, Canada, England, Germany, Belgium, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan.

According to students who passed the interviews before being admited to the program, the main reason is that CIDE offers the online venue for all students. Thus, there is no obstacle of distance and places for studying. Most of the students are living overseas. There is no requirement to fly to Thailand for taking oral examination since

the available online communication tools such as SKYPE can simulate an oral examination as same as traditional mode can.

Moreover, the expense of this program is cheaper than other Ph.D. Program from other International University (approximately Thai Baht 485,000 or US dollar 15,435). The expense of this degree also is one of the remarkable points that most of students are concerned. The reason for this is Assumption University is inspired by the principle of preventive education to form honest citizens and good Christians and above all Assumption University is a non-profit organization.

Additionally, applicants are interested in joining this pioneer group or eLearning Methodology researchers. One of the students stated that "it is not easy to find any Ph.D. Program that I can be a part of the pioneer group like the Ph.D. in eLearning Methodology Program". In addition, applicants trusted the capacity of academic committee members of the program especially, Prof. Dr. Srisakdi Charmonman, the Father of Thai eLearning [2].

The online searching technology at Google, the most popular search engine of the world, also supports accessing to PhDeLM. The Internet users who search for "Ph.D. eLearning Methodology" at google.co.th will find 'PhDeLM at College of Internet Distance Education, Assumption University' at the first seven entries. Most local and overseas applicants indicated during the interview that they found information of the program via Google. As a matter of fact, an organization wanting to appear on the first page of a search in Google, would have to pay Google about two million baht. However, for "Ph.D. eLearning Methodology", CIDE did not pay anything since PhDeLM is the first and the only such degree program in the world.

The main rationale that motivates students to decide to study at CIDE, not only PhDeLm but also other degrees program – Master of Science in Information and Communication Technology, Master of Science in Management and Master of Science in eLearning Methodology, is that graduates of eLearning degrees at Assumption University have the same rights and privileges as graduates of classroom learning [3]. Some people have asked the Civil Service Commission (CSC) of Thailand whether or not eLearning degree is accepted. Some members of CSC were not up-to-date and said that it would not be accepted. As a matter of fact, Prof. Dr. Srisakdi Charmonman wrote the first draft of the decree to legalize eLearning in Thailand. The decree was published in the Royal Gazette, Vol. 122, No. 120 Ng, October 26, 2005, Page 8-11 [3]. That decree allows universities in Thailand to offer eLearning degree programs and so the graduates of eLearning degree have the same rights and privileges as the graduates of classroom learning. The transcript does not mention that it is eLearning, i.e. the transcript for eLearning degree is the same as the transcript for classroom degree.

Importantly, eLearning itself is a productive tool for education in the 21st century [4]. The future of eLearning will be more successful than eCommerce [2]. The demand of professional and skillful workers and researchers in eLearning science is the fact that cause people to be interested in studying the PhDeLM Program. The job opportunities of researchers who complete the Doctoral degree in eLearning Methodology Program also is obviously positive. This is because eLearning has become an important part of institutes around the world. It was reported that 96 per cents of large universities in the US are offering eLearning. By the year 2020, more than half of students will be educated by eLearning but less than 50 per cents of students will use the traditional classroom mode. This is because a flexibility of eLearning that is better and more convenient than classroom learning. For examples, students can manage their study time after finishing working full-time, since they can

access the lectures anytime as they wish. Without restriction of transportation and worry free about traffic problem, students can organize their times successfully for communication with instructors and classmates 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. Thus, after having completed the PhDeLM degree from Assumption University, graduates can become either an eLearning Expert or consultants. Moreover, they might run their own business in eTraining, Human Resource Development, Telecommunication corporation offering eLearning Services and so on.

2. VISION, MISSION AND GOALS

The Vision of the PhDeLM is to produce professional leaders, researchers and practitioners in the field of eLearning methodology.

The Mission of the PhDeLM is to produce eLearning educators, researchers, and practitioners who are ethical and highly competitive in the field of eLearning, creative and capable of producing high quality research work with interdisciplinary various approaches; educating researchers through seminars and training classes; and training professional researchers, producing creative thinkers and effective decision-makers and producing high ethical researchers and scholars in eLearning Methodology to serve the country and eLearning community.

Based on the above vision and mission, PhDeLM has set goals of the program as follows.

1) To produce researchers who are ethical and highly competitive in the field of eLearning.

2) To produce researchers who are creative and are capable to produce high quality research work with interdisciplinary approaches.

3) To provide researcher with skills through seminars and training classes, which will produce leaders in eLearning organizations.

4) To train researchers to be outstanding professionals, creative thinkers and effective decision-makers.

5) To produce highly ethical researchers to serve the country and eLearning community.

The vision, mission and goals of PhDeLM has been influenced from both College of Internet and Distance Education and Assumption University of Thailand. Assumption University has 26 IT related programs which incidentally is larger than in any other university in the world [5]. Rev. Brother Martin Prathip Martin, the President Emeritus of Assumption University revealed that at Assumption University, Information Technology is not only a field for concentration, investment and further development, but also the main impetus and mechanism for expanding the university from a top business center to a paradigmatic Information Technology institute of the Southeast Asia region. Assumption University's hope and expectation are to encourage, succor and support for this transition from a campus known for academic excellence in business disciplines to a technologically advanced and superior institution.

Rev. Brother Bancha Saenghiran, the President of Assumption University, stated that the electronic-age view of learning is proving to be an altogether different experience [6]. Consequently, learning can take place anywhere it is needed, typically within the work environment at the time where the need for learning manifests itself. Recently, learning is no more a separate or cloistered event but a regular part of everyday life. Therefore, learners choose when to seek learning and what specific knowledge or skills they will acquire, and it is the learner who decides when to stop or quit.

The Internet is an important means for universities, since a large and increasing percentage of courses are delivered via the Internet [6]. There are many reasons for this continuing growth in enrolment in eLearning

courses. Some students seek out eLearning courses for the same reasons that have always motivated distance education learners, namely, demand for programming that is more accessible and convenient to meet the constraints of busy adult life and its surroundings. Moreover, certain kinds of eLearning courses can be delivered much more cost effectively than classroom-based instruction.

Due to advancement in technologies, learning opportunities will soon be available everywhere. Learning will be almost continuous and much learning will occur during short spare moments. As eLearning technologies are simplified, more and more individuals and organizations will find ways to share their unique expertise. Everyone will become both student and teacher, and learning will be a natural part of every day experience.

CIDE is the leader of online education since Assumption University by Prof. Dr. Srisakdi Charmonman, has leaded the team to construct the first 3D Virtual University of Thailand in Second Life. CIDE also physically, housed at the Srisakdi Charmonman Information Technology Center (www.scitBuilding.com), constructed at the cost of about US$ 15 million [7]. The center has 12 floors of 12,000 square meters, more than 1,000 Internet terminals, and a Network Operation Center (NOC) with a diesel generator for power backup. These excellent facilities are complemented by an equally excellent faculty and staff. With its high standards and full accreditation, CIDE offers "one-stop services for worldwide eEducation for anyone, from anywhere, and at anytime" [1].

The concept of "for anyone" means no matter who the students are, they can study eLearning courses. The advantages of eLearning expand opportunities of learning and become practical. For example, a mother who must stay at home to take care for her baby can earn her degree by logging onto the Internet and studying while her baby is sleeping. Moreover, employees who lack a chance to get permission for taking a leave of absence can combine eLearning with full-time employment, study through eLearning before or after office hours. Those whose alternating day and night shifts prevent them from attending regularly scheduled class can participate in eLearning anytime when they are free, day or night.

The concept of "from anywhere" means CIDE provides an eLearning system that students can access to online courseware from any place with any computer devices connected to the Internet. For example, students can create their own learning environment at office during lunch break, at home when students needs, and on airplanes when students are traveling. Students are allowed to download the offline learning materials such as MP4, iPod and PowerPoint presentation of lecturers provided by CIDE to students' devices. Then students can listen to lecturer and read learning materials wherever they desire. Students who are in the US, can also take eLearning classes from CIDE website at www.eLearning.au.edu.

The concept of "at anytime" means students can freely take classes through the Internet at anytime 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Obviously, students take advantages of this concept. For example, instead of leaving office at 5.00 pm and might get stuck in traffic jams, eLearners might choose to stay longer after working to educate them and have a degree to get promotion after complete the degree. Students who have part-time jobs sometimes during weekend, eLearning is a double luck since students can earn more by doing part-time jobs and earn the degree by completing all online courses at their own time schedule.

3. FACT ABOUT PHDELM

This PhDeLM is a research-oriented program. The duration of the study is about three years or six semesters. However students may complete the program in two and a half year. This PhDeLM might suit people who are working full-time and cannot

leave their jobs for study since it did not require them to attend class. However, since there is no coursework required for students, anyone who is interested in should have a strong research background and have a good self-discipline for studying at the doctoral degree level. The admission requirements are:

1) A Master's degree or equivalent in related field from an accredited institution

2) Administrative experience/teaching experience of at least two years

3) Three letters of recommendation

4) A research concept paper

There is only an online application for PhDeLM on the Internet at http://www.elearning.au.edu/phdelm. Please note that there is no charge for an application and applicants can apply all year round. All forms and information needed are already provided on the web site.

The graduation requirements of PhDeLM program are:

1) Pass a foreign language proficiency test such as TOEFL score of 79 from Internet-based Testing or IELTS at 6.5 in every part.

2) Pass the qualifying examination.

3) Pass the proposal defense and dissertation final defense.

4) Have a research article published or obtain and acceptance of publication in an international refereed journal.

5) Earn 48 credits for dissertation.

From 2006-2008, there are about 40 students who got admitted into the program. The majority of students are younger than 34 years old (27%). About one fourth of students are 35 - 44 years of age. About one fifth of students are older than 54 years of age on the date of enrolment. Approximately, two thirds of students who are admitted to the program were male students. The ratio of lecturers and students in PhDeLM program in 2008 is 1:3.

4. DISSERTATION TOPICS

The dissertation topics for PhDeLM has been expanded since the rapid growth of eLearning Science. The acceptable dissertation topics are in many areas, such as, eLearning management system, eLearning technology, eLearning for human resource development, eLearning for business and industries, eLearning for education, eLearning for Agricultural Extension and cooperatives, eLearning for health science, and eLearning for laws and political science.

"Development of a Flash-Based Mobile Learning System for Learning English as a Second Language" is the topic from Dr. Firouz Anaraki who graduated in 2008. Many topics has been proposed and still in the process of research. The space of this paper is not enough to list all topics and students' names. Some examples of topics in PhDeLM are:

- eLearning Management Model for Higher Education in Thailand by Ms. Kultida Saowapakpongchai.

- Web Accessibility Model for Visually-Impaired Students on eLearning Website by Mr. Pisit Prougestaporn.

- Evaluating Indicators of Interactivity in eLearning Courses in a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) by a Fulbright Fellow, Mr. Kuldeep Nagi.

- Development of eLearning Models for Prevention of Nutrition Related Diseases by Mr. Chusak Narkprasit.

The acceptance of dissertation topics for PhDeLM is determined by two main key factors, namely, originality, and significance. The topics need to prove both originality and significance academically. Students have to propose good topics with concrete references to the committee.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

PhDeLM is the first Ph.D. in eLearning Methodology program in the world. It is also the first Ph.D. program offered at the School of eLearning Science, College of Internet

Distance Education (CIDE), since 2006. CIDE is the first and as of the year 2009 still the only educational institution in the world offering Ph.D. in eLearning Methodology. In another word, Thailand is the first in the world to offer Ph.D. in eLearning Methodology [1]. The program was developed and approved by the University Council of Assumption University on May 2, 2006. Importantly, Ph.D. in eLearning Methodology program has been legally accredited from the Commission of Higher Education, Ministry of Education of Thailand, in 2008.

PhDeLM is the research oriented program which might be suitable for people who are working full-time and cannot leave their jobs for study since it dose not require attending classes. Application is free of charge at http://www.elearning.au.edu/phdelm

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