

CoverStory

Online learning clicks into place

DISTANCE EDUCATION BENEFITS STUDENTS AND INSTITUTES AS TECHNOLOGY CONNECTS GLOBAL MARKET

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When universities set out to develop campuses abroad, they need to prepare to face foreign bureaucratic hurdles and a myriad other problems. A surefire shortcut to skirt the risks of investing in the vast Asian education market, however, is through online learning.

Also known as distance learning or distance education, students and universities around the world can instantaneously connect with students in Asia, now that technology allows it. Moreover, this is a low-cost alternative to the traditional way of learning through attendance at brick-and-mortar institutions.

In countries as diverse as India, China, Turkey, Cambodia and New Zealand, the online learning trend is developing apace.

Campus-based universities are increasingly offering online programs. In China, for instance, 68 universities have affiliated online learning institutes. The government has given grants of around \$10,000 to professors at dozens of universities to put their teaching materials online. More than 10,000 courses at Chinese universities are now available online.

Universities outside of Asia are also eyeing the huge online education market. Philadelphia-based Drexel University is one such, which partnered with the Shanghai Advanced Research Institute (SARI) to open the Drexel-SARI Center in Shanghai last year.

Rebecca Clothey, a professor of online programs with the School of Education at Drexel University, says Asia has the largest number of adult online and distance learners through 70 open universities worldwide.

In China, more than 10 percent of university students learn online. In India, 20 percent or more of tertiary students enroll in the Indira Gandhi National Open University, a distance learning institute based in New Delhi.

The sharp increase in Internet penetration in Asia is helping to drive online learning. Among Asian countries, China, Japan, India and South Korea are in the top 10 places in the world with the highest number of Internet users.

"These trends, as well as pedagogical and technological innovations, have increased the potential for interaction and collaborative work in distance learning," says Clothey.

"International interactions can now be fostered more easily, including accessing global resources, publishing to a world audience, taking



Indian students on campus at Khalsa College in Amritsar, northwestern India. Institutes across Asia are eyeing the potential of the online education market, with the sharp increase in Internet penetration in the region helping to drive distance learning, as course materials can be made available through the Internet.

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virtual field trips, communicating with a wider range of people and collaborating across borders."

Online learning has also opened up opportunities in countries where religious strictures may have blocked certain normal educational practices. In Saudi Arabia, for example, video conferencing provides more opportunities for female students to study under male lecturers, who are not supposed to interact directly with the female learners.

Of course, challenges remain. Clothey says that even if a country has the best technology, the system will not be fully effective if the infrastructure is not up to standard or if users are inadequately trained.

Although Internet use has spread fast in Asia, countries in the region still need to catch up with the sophisticated scientific know-how.

Infrastructure-wise, demand is outpacing supply. World Bank figures show that developing countries representing 80 percent of the global population have just 5 percent of Internet hosts. North America, with 5 percent of global population, has 65 percent of Internet hosts. More-

over, in many developing countries, digital coverage is uneven between cities and villages.

However, the number of mobile users is expanding rapidly and that may open up a new way to spread online education. Course-related materials can be made accessible with smartphones through the use of Wi-Fi for mobile learning, or "m-learning." Clothey adds that China, India, and the United Arab Emirates are examples of countries that have experienced success through distance learning.

There are an estimated 6 billion mobile subscribers worldwide in a total population of 7 billion. China and India have been recording high increases in mobile usage. According to figures from the two largest carriers, China Telecom and China Mobile, there are 1 billion mobile phone users in China.

According to the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, China currently has around 800 million portable-Internet users. Global consulting firm Nielsen says there were 27 million smartphone users in India at the end of last year.

Clothey adds that universities face the challenge of language and culture. Currently, much web content is in English, but it cannot be understood by many people in Asia, particularly in China where the percentage of English speakers is low.

The most widely used Asian language online is Chinese, accounting for 15.7 percent of global web content. Japanese accounts for 7.4 percent, Korean at 2.9 percent and Arabic at 2.5 percent.

However, there are 6,000 languages across the world and most do not appear on the Internet at all, Clothey says. In Southeast Asia there are at least 15 to 20 different scripts. In China, there are numerous different languages, many with their own scripts or none. Providing a culturally relevant curriculum online for a linguistic minority will be difficult in the short term.

Universities have to make a leap to cater to students' needs, with a more comprehensive information technology system to support the operation of classes. Other challenges include the translation of teaching materials from different languages.

Education is a means to tap the rising markets in Asia. Investment bank JP Morgan sponsored a regional distance-learning program, jointly developed with the University of Hong Kong and the International Institute for Educational Planning under the United Nations. The program was aimed at delivering management training in Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam simultaneously, and ran from May of last year to June of this year.

That collaborative experiment in distance learning followed two trials in Africa by the UN. The program sought to have a large number of students from the same region participate in a class simultaneously. The other aim was to pull students from different backgrounds together as a way of boosting regional cooperation.

Such programs are still in their early days so their success cannot be fairly judged. But what is not in doubt is that the technology is there for distance learning to continue to become an increasingly important part of the education sector across Asia.