

ITEM FOR FINANCE COMMITTEE

HEAD 176 – SUBVENTIONS : MISCELLANEOUS

New Capital Account Subhead “Grant to the Open University of Hong Kong for implementation of its Information Technology Development Plan”

Members are invited to approve a new commitment of \$50 million for providing a one-off dollar-for-dollar matching grant to the Open University of Hong Kong to support the implementation of its Information Technology Development Plan.

PROBLEM

The Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK) does not have sufficient fund of its own to develop the information technology (IT) necessary for enhancing the provision of open and distance learning.

PROPOSAL

2. The Secretary for Education and Manpower proposes to provide a dollar-for-dollar matching grant of up to \$50 million to the OUHK so that it can implement its IT Development Plan.

JUSTIFICATION

3. The OUHK was established to provide, through open access and distance learning, tertiary education opportunities for adult learners. Today, it has become a key provider of adult education services in Hong Kong and aspires to be a centre of excellence in distance and adult learning.

4. The advancement of IT poses new challenges and provides fresh impetus to the development of open and distance learning. Over the years, the OUHK has made tremendous efforts to apply telecommunications and IT in the modernisation of its course delivery and other learning-related facilities. For instance, it has launched an electronic library, set up a multimedia laboratory, and introduced more web-based courses (i.e. courses that are conducted and delivered entirely via the web) and web-enabled courses (i.e. courses with online elements to supplement the traditional delivery mode). This is of particular importance to the OUHK because most of its students are working adults with full-time employment. OUHK has also been developing interactive multimedia course materials to enhance the interest of students in learning and facilitate interaction between teachers and students. The availability of multimedia distance learning materials allows students to study where and when they wish, and at a pace that suits their needs. As at 2000/01 academic year, there are three web-based and 85 web-enabled courses available at the OUHK, representing about 30% of the total number of its courses.

5. Despite OUHK's ongoing efforts, its existing equipment is inadequate to meet the rapidly increasing demand for web-based and web-enabled programmes, and to keep pace with the fast developing world trend in open and distance learning. To accommodate the growth in student population, OUHK wishes to have wider use of information and communications technology to overcome space constraint and facilitate future expansion. A more advanced and co-ordinated IT system will not only facilitate teaching and learning but also help maintain OUHK's status as a regional centre of excellence in distance and adult education. To meet these challenges, OUHK has drawn up an IT Development Plan for implementation from 2000 to 2002. The Plan will enhance OUHK's IT systems, enable more extensive use of the Internet and multimedia facilities in teaching and learning, thus creating a more flexible, interactive and student-centred learning environment. It will also enhance OUHK's administrative support for the benefit of students and staff.

6. Specifically, the Plan will bring about the following benefits –

- (a) Enhance the IT components of programmes and IT literacy of students –

All course information will be put on line. Students can access information whenever and wherever they like. The OUHK proposes to develop at least 100 courses with online components and ten courses with extensive hypermedia content which allows web pages to be linked to other texts, audio and video contents, graphics and

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animations, and other computer applications, and online interactive learning activities. Moreover, the OUHK will develop and provide an IT literacy programme free of charge to students to improve their IT skills and knowledge in the Internet era. With more hands-on experience in using IT, students will have greater confidence in using IT in their daily lives.

(b) Using IT in student support services –

An integrated system for student support service will be developed to allow online transactions such as course registration, tuition fee payment and student loan application. This will provide a one-stop service for students round the clock. Students will also benefit from the new features to be provided in the electronic library, including a web-based inter-library loan system which allows users to file in inter-library loan requests for books and articles that are not available in the OUHK library, an e-text centre with digital version of books and documents, and enhanced browsing and searching capabilities to improve the response time and to ease navigation of browsing and searching in the E-library.

(c) Enhance development opportunities for OUHK–

For the OUHK as a whole, the Plan will lead to improved operation efficiency and service. It will also help OUHK overcome space and geographical constraints, thereby facilitating OUHK's future expansion and collaboration with other distance education institutions and organisations engaged in IT development. All these will support the University's vision of being an exemplar in the use of IT in distance learning.

Encl. Details of the deliverables are set out at the Enclosure.

7. The Plan serves as a blueprint for the systematic and coordinated development of IT at the OUHK for three years starting from mid-2000. OUHK plans to provide online course information for all courses by the end of 2001, and to develop at least 30 courses with online components in each of the next three years. OUHK plans to implement the IT literacy programme in 2002. Other continuous improvement will be made throughout the three-year period. Since IT is changing rapidly, the plan must be a dynamic one, reacting to the changing IT environment, students and staff needs, and feedback of initial development. The implementation schedule and details will be reviewed on a regular basis, and modified if necessary.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

8. We estimate that the project will cost \$100 million. The OUHK has advised that it will finance the project in part through private sources but Government support is essential. Subject to Members' approval, we will make the grant of \$50 million to the OUHK in one single payment in 2000-01. The grant will be expended on a matching basis, which means that if the project turns out to cost less than \$100 million, and thereby requiring less than \$50 million contribution from Government, the OUHK will return the balance to the Government. The OUHK is content with this arrangement. The OUHK will absorb all recurrent costs (for example, maintenance and repairs) arising from the implementation of the Plan.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

9. The OUHK (formerly known as the Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong) was established in 1989 to provide, through open access and distance learning, tertiary education opportunities for adult learners who did not have the opportunity of receiving tertiary education when they left school. It is also the key provider of continuing education and retraining to upgrade the work force to adapt to technological, economic and social changes. The OUHK complements the formal tertiary education system and promotes life-long learning in Hong Kong. It was granted self-accrediting status in 1996 and then university status in 1997. In the 2000/01 academic year, total student enrolment exceeds 25 000. Moreover, its institute of professional and continuing education offers short courses for more than 10 000 students, providing them with vocational training and enhancing their professional skills.

10. The quality and achievements of OUHK are recognised by the regional and international academic and professional communities. It has received three major international awards in 1999 and 2000 for its excellence and achievements in open and distance learning as well as its electronic library.

11. The OUHK operates on a self-financing basis. In the past few years, we have provided in total \$170 million capital grants to support worthwhile initiatives of the institution, including the establishment of a Regional Learning Centre (1999-2000) and an electronic library (1996-97).

12. In Government's 2000 Policy Objective Booklet on Quality Education, we announced our proposal to provide a matching grant of \$50 million to the OUHK for implementation of an IT Development Plan. This is well received by the OUHK and its students. The Legislative Council Panel on Education also indicated support for this proposal at its meeting on 20 November 2000.

Education and Manpower Bureau
November 2000

Deliverables of OUHK's IT Development Plan

Wider use of technology is the key to the future development of distance learning. To continue to excel in the new century, the OUHK has mapped out an IT Development Plan.

2. The IT Plan will benefit students in the following ways –
 - (a) Provide a flexible, interactive and student-centred learning environment. The deliverables include –
 - provide online course information for all OUHK courses (about 300 in the 2000/01 academic year);
 - develop at least 100 courses with online components. The target is to have all courses with online components in due course;
 - develop ten courses with extensive hypermedia (multimedia plus hypertext) materials and online learning activities. Audio and video streaming technologies will be used to deliver the audiovisual course materials in those courses;
 - webcast over 75 hours of “The World of Learning” television programme;
 - apply speech recognition technology to enhance language learning in some language courses; and
 - try out synchronous interactive distance learning (multi-point, multi-cast video conferencing) on a few courses with such needs.
 - (b) Allow round-the-clock transaction and access to information and learning resources. The deliverables include –
 - an integrated system for student support service to allow online transactions, e.g. loan application, registration, tuition payment, etc.;
 - online interactive tools for student enquiry and counselling;
 - online submission and return of assignments to save money and time;
 - new features in the electronic library, e.g. web-based interlibrary loan system, e-text centre with digital version of books and articles, etc.; and
 - call-centre and web technologies in the Information Centre to enhance communication with students.

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(c) Enhanced training in IT and communication. The deliverables include –

- an IT literacy programme to be provided free of charge to students to improve their IT skills and knowledge; and
- one-stop technical help and online support services to help students in the use of online learning environment and various online support services.

3. For the OUHK, the workflow will be completely re-engineered. The deliverables include –

- (a) A new student record and administration system to reduce the record processing time, effectively linking up time-table and room allocation, examination management;
- (b) Web-based information management systems to facilitate enrolment of students, payment of course fees, course and programme selection, provision of tutorial schedule, provision of information on employment opportunities, processing of students' applications including transcript; and
- (c) Hong Kong's first integrated, Internet-based, multimedia interactive call centre system in its Information Centre to cope with the increase in public enquiries.