For discussion
on 22 March 2007

Legislative Council Panel on Education

GRANT TO THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG
FOR ESTABLISHING A CENTRE FOR INNOVATION

Purpose

      This paper proposes the provision of a capital grant of $62.8 million to The Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK) for establishing a Centre For Innovation (CFI) to support its initiatives to enhance pedagogy, programme delivery and students' learning experience.

Background

2.   OUHK (formerly the Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong) was established in 1989 with the aim of providing tertiary education opportunities to adults, primarily through a system of open access and distance learning. It is a key provider of adult education, retraining services and life-long education programmes through which our workforce can upgrade their knowledge and skills and adapt to the rapid economic, social and technological changes in Hong Kong. In recent years, OUHK has offered a number of full-time face-to-face post-secondary programmes to cater for the needs and aspirations of our senior secondary school leavers and sub-degree graduates.

3.   Starting with only about 4 200 places and eight courses in 1989, OUHK now has over 17 000 students and offers over 170 post-graduate, degree and sub-degree programmes. Some 6 700 students have graduated in the 2005/06 academic year, bringing the total number of OUHK graduates to over 45 000.

4.   Although OUHK operates on a self-financing basis, the Administration has been supporting worthwhile projects that are conducive to fulfilling OUHK's mission.   In particular, the Administration acknowledges that effective use of information technology (IT) in teaching and learning will inject new impetus into the development of open and distance learning, which is particularly relevant to the mission of OUHK.   Over the years, the Administration has provided a total of about $600 million capital grants to OUHK for the implementation of various initiatives, including IT-related projects such as the establishment of an electronic library in 1996-97, establishment of a Centre of Excellence in 1997-98 and the implementation of the Information Technology Development Plan in 2000-01.

The Centre For Innovation (CFI) Project

5.   Building on its reputation as one of the leading distance learning providers in the region, OUHK aspires to develop a next-generation learning model that blends the virtues of distance, face-to-face and online learning through innovative online learning tools to further enhance students' learning experience.   Online learning materials are especially important to courses delivered in a distance learning mode in that they could greatly enrich the course content and enhance the pedagogical value of the otherwise traditional, print-based distance learning materials. Despite OUHK's ongoing efforts in enhancing its electronic learning services and course delivery through the use of IT, its IT facilities are becoming inadequate to enable it to keep pace with the rapid technological changes and developments in the e-learning arena.

6.   To maintain its leading position as a centre of excellence in distance learning, OUHK proposes to implement the CFI project so as to create an intelligent, flexible, interactive and personalized learning platform for students and enhance teaching quality. The CFI project comprises an information infrastructure in the form of a web-based service delivery platform (INFOWAY), through which OUHK can deliver a collection of online services including innovative learning/teaching tools and administrative support services for students (known as Intelligent Flexible Learning Model of Open Learning (IFLMOL)), as

well as electronic learning modules and courses.

7.   Specifically, the CFI project aims to achieve the following objectives –

(a) **Introduce blended learning mode through innovative learning/teaching tools**

OUHK plans to develop a number of innovative learning and teaching tools to assess students' strengths and weaknesses, customize students' learning paths and develop course materials in an interactive manner. Under the blended learning mode, students can learn more effectively through various synchronous collaborative tools such as online interactive tutorials, virtual classrooms, etc. To this end, OUHK aims to include sophisticated multimedia online elements in most of its courses.

(b) **Enhance administrative support services for students**

OUHK plans to develop an integrated administrative support system to provide a one-stop service platform for students, who are mostly working adults[1]. In particular, OUHK plans to improve the existing online course registration system so that the system can be made accessible to students year-round and provide additional functions. Moreover, communication and transmission of data between students and teaching staff will be greatly improved and streamlined to facilitate submission of assignments to course instructors, selection of tutorials by students, easy access to library facilities and other student services.

(c) **Enrich student learning experience**

OUHK plans to create a set of artificial intelligence software tools to provide prompt, personalized, round-the-clock advice to students on study choices and feedback on study progress.

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[1] In the 2006/07 academic year, about 87% of students enrolling in distance learning programmes of OUHK are aged 26 or above.

Students enrolling in programmes delivered in face-to-face or distance learning mode alike can enjoy the flexibility of drawing up personalized learning timetable and monitoring study progress. Through the tools, students can identify learning problems more easily and refine their study methodology in a timely manner.

(d) Promote e-learning and prepare for future development

Currently, all OUHK's distance learning courses contain some online elements, though they are not purely online courses yet. To promote e-learning in Hong Kong, OUHK plans to develop about 30 e-learning modules and about 30 e-learning courses. The e-learning modules are short courses that have no fixed duration, whereas the e-learning courses will be credit-bearing courses of about 10 credits each. These initiatives will benefit not only existing students, but also pave the way for the possible development of OUHK into a Virtual University as a long-term vision through the offer of purely online learning courses.

Anticipated benefits

8. The CFI project will enable OUHK students to learn more effectively and interactively through the use of synchronous collaborative tools such as online interactive tutorials, virtual classrooms, instant chat, and virtual office hours to communicate with tutors and students. Such online technology-driven learning models are expected to greatly enhance students' learning outcomes. At the same time, the CFI project will also assist teachers in preparing course materials, grading assignments, posting announcements and various other tasks. Teachers can teach more effectively, as the systems and tools will help them monitor the students' progress and performance, deliver automated tests, and update course materials in a timely fashion.

Evaluation

9. The CFI project will be fully implemented by around end 2009. To evaluate the effectiveness of the project, OUHK will conduct a

post-implementation evaluation after the full implementation of the project. The results of the evaluation will provide useful insights into how OUHK can exploit more fully the potential of IT in its pedagogy, teaching and learning, as well as whether offering purely online courses and/or developing into a Virtual University would be a sustainable objective for the longer term.

Financial Implications

10.   OUHK estimates that the project will cost a total of $80.8 million, comprising $44.8 million for system upgrading and software enhancement, and $36 million for developing a total of 60 e-learning modules and courses. Detailed breakdown is as follows –

Activity	Estimated cost ($ million)
(a) INFOWAY (e.g. web-based service delivery platform, middleware development)	13.6
(b) Intelligent Flexible Learning Model of Open Learning (IFLMOL) (e.g. multimedia interactive online elements, integrated student support system)	11.0
(c) Staff cost	10.2
(d) Related Projects[2] (e.g. intelligent student counseling system)	8.0
(e) Contingency	2.0

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[2] These projects are not research-oriented but are related to OUHK's pedagogical and student learning processes. For example, the proposed intelligent student counseling system is a set of artificial intelligence (AI) software tools that provide prompt response to study choices and study progress. Other projects being considered include electronic newsletters and journals in Greater China, using Rich Site Summary technology to support teaching and learning etc.

<table>
<tr><td>Subtotal for system upgrading
and software enhancement</td><td>44.8</td></tr>
<tr><td>(f)   Development of 60 E-learning
Modules and Courses</td><td>36.0</td></tr>
<tr><td>Grand total</td><td>80.8</td></tr>
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11.   OUHK will provide \$18 million, representing half of the costs of developing the e-learning initiatives (in paragraph 10(f) above), from its own private funding. We propose to provide a capital grant to OUHK for funding the balance of \$62.8 million, to be disbursed according to the actual expenditure of the project. As a self-financing institution, OUHK has undertaken to absorb all recurrent costs, including maintenance and repairs, arising from the CFI project.

12.   The estimated cash flow for Government's contribution is as follows –

Financial year	Estimated cash flow ($ million)
2007-08	44.8
2008-09	18.0
Total	62.8

Way forward

13.   Subject to Members' views, we will seek the approval of the Finance Committee for the proposed capital grant of \$62.8 million to OUHK.

Education and Manpower Bureau
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