Online universities blossom in Asia

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Students prepare for an exam in front of their computers at Kuala Lumpur-based Asia e University (AeU) in August 2012. Online university education is expanding quickly in Asia, where growth in technology and Internet use is matched by a deep reverence for education.

Thousands of kilometres from Kuala Lumpur in Cameroon, doctoral student Michael Nkwenti Ndongfack attends his Open University Malaysia classes online and hopes to defend his final thesis by Skype.

A government worker, Ndongfack could not find the instructional design and technology course he wanted in his own country, so is paying a

foreign institution about $10,000 for the degree instead.

Online university education is expanding quickly in Asia, where growth in technology and Internet use is matched by a deep reverence for education.

"I chose e-learning because it is so flexible," Ndongfack, 42, told AFP via Skype from his home in the Cameroonian capital Yaounde.

Web-based courses dramatically boost opportunities for students and are often cheaper than those offered by traditional bricks-and-mortar institutions.

But online learning has also caught the eye of some of the world's most prestigious universities, with Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology recently teaming up to offer free courses over the Internet.

"With the improvement in technology, the number of institutions offering online education has increased, both in terms of numbers and the kind of classes offered," said Lee Hock Guan, senior fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore.

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In high-tech South Korea more than 112,000 students at 19 institutions are taking web-based classes, all of which have begun since 2002.

China embraced the concept of online learning in the late 1990s to expand access to education, particularly in its vast rural regions, and there are now scores of providers, with 1.64 million people enrolled in 2010

Online courses are changing the way students learn, educators say,

placing less emphasis on the rote learning that has long characterised education in parts of Asia, and harnessing modern consumer technologies.

And "open" universities, which typically offer courses primarily through the Internet, allow anyone to enrol for online programmes regardless of prior qualification or degrees.

At Kuala Lumpur-based Asia e University, students download course materials from an online forum and virtual library. They are in contact with teachers and fellow students mostly through email, online chats, phone and text messages.

Assignments typically include illustrating what they have learned with videos and other presentations made with smartphones, iPads or other devices and uploading them to YouTube.

Academics say such interactive learning helps students engage with the material more than they would sitting passively in a lecture hall, and opens a window to learning through a medium they know and love—the latest gadgets.

"Everyone is a front-row student," said Ishan Abeywardena, who teaches information technology at Wawasan Open University, based in northern Malaysia.

Students who might be too shy to ask questions or otherwise engage with their class in a traditional setting are much bolder online, Ishan said.

"Can you imagine the iPad, iPod and iPhone generation today, who are going to enter the university say, in 15 years' time, going for a chalk-and-talk kind of model of learning? You learn by doing," said Ansary Ahmed, Asia e University's president.

But even those in favour of online learning admit face-to-face interaction—which can also help keep students motivated and personally engaged—is lost.

Ndongfack, whose web-only institution opened in 2000, said online studies were not easy, leaving him feeling isolated. "There is no one there to give you instant support," he said.

The growth of online degree programmes is also constrained by poor

Internet accessibility in parts of Asia and beyond.

More than 80 percent of South Koreans and 60 percent of Malaysians have online access, but in China the rate slips to about 40 percent and it slumps to around 10 percent in India.

Other criticisms include inadequate regulation, allegations of poor-quality teaching, student cheating, and the fact that online degrees are still not as widely recognised as traditional ones in the marketplace, say industry experts.

But Asia e University's Ansary says such teething problems will be addressed over time, and in a few decades students will no longer attend just one university but several, picking and choosing from online offerings.

"These are early days," he said. "The window is just opening."

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