Tuition-free online university for developing countries

By Shefali Lall

The University of the People is the world's first tuition-free online academic institution that aims to offer students, who are otherwise deprived of the opportunity to obtain higher-level education, the chance to receive high-quality university instruction.

Through the use of a virtual classroom, the university intends to reach out to students from around the world, but specifically students from developing countries.

For many students, higher education is impossible because of either financial constraints or a lack of academic institutions. The University of the People seeks to provide universal access to education by employing open-source technology, open courseware and provisions for peer-to-peer teaching, eLearning, and online communities.

With just a nominal initial application fee of US$15 - US$50 to cover operating costs, students may enroll in the university. All the classes and coursework are available online completely free of charge and are accessible to anyone with even the most basic internet connection. The university will not use advanced internet set-ups, such as broadband, or any audio or video clips, to ensure that everyone has equal access and equal opportunity.

The launch of this university is a true landmark in its innovative approach to education and utilisation of technology to reach out to students from even the poorest places in the world. The mission of the university is ultimately to help people raise their standard of living by providing them with the knowledge and expertise that would facilitate their employment.

"For many students, we are the only alternative to improve their standard of living and to get higher education studies," founder and president of the University of the People, Shai Reshef told MediaGlobal.

Currently, the university offers a Business Administration and Computer Science program that students may pursue once they have successfully completed the mandatory English Composition and Computer Skills courses.

"I will stay with these two programs for the next few years just because, firstly, they are the most relevant to find a job, and

secondly because they're relevant worldwide. However, we plan to introduce other programs in the future, it's too early to know which programs."

At present, the university offers instruction only in English because it is the language in which the most business-related content has been produced. However, there is discussion among the University of the People Advisory Board on whether coursework in other languages will be offered in the future.

"It's a debate among our advisory board because some people feel that 'yeah, why not.' There is no reason, if we have a large enough group of students why not introduce the program in Spanish, Arabic, French, and Chinese… Some others feel that if we teach business and computer science, since most of the reading material and the business is being geared in English, we should stick to English," Reshef told MediaGlobal.

Having opened registration just over two weeks ago without any promotional efforts, the university has already seen over 200 students from over 50 different countries, including Rwanda, Venezuela, South Korea, Pakistan, Jordan, Germany, and the United States, enroll for the academic year beginning September 2009.

Students who have received a secondary school diploma and demonstrated proficiency in English are eligible for admission. The university will cap enrollment to 300 students for its first semester.

While interest in the university is already evident, Reshef has expressed his desire to encourage more students from Africa to register. "Africa is an area where we don't have enough students… I really want to impact many more students from Africa, so we will try to target them," Reshef explained.

The university plans to spread news on its programs through word-of-mouth and through the internet because it is a volunteer-led not-for-profit venture with no budget for marketing.

Perhaps the greatest challenge that Reshef foresees confronting the university is the potential for dropout students. "One of the major problems in online studies in general is the high percentage of dropout… I think that is our case," Reshef added. However, he is hopeful that the students who have no alternate chance for a collegiate education will recognise the unique opportunity and stay motivated and self-disciplined enough to continue with the coursework.

The university also has tentative plans to offer free assistance to their students once they have successfully completed their course of study. "If we can, we definitely will introduce means to help the students find a job…whether it be through connecting them to companies, or through a potential loan," said Reshef.

"I think that helping students to get their academic degree and not helping them to find a job later on if they need it, would be doing half of our mission. I hope that we will be able to help them to find a job," Reshef explained.

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