

experience with advanced distance learning through the use of ICT.

If the report on National Education towards this mode of education delivery is certainly timely, if not crucial.

The report, released last year, revealed that the development of education in China has accelerated greatly since the enforcement of the Nine-Year Compulsory Education Law in 1978.

The law requires all children to attend school for at least nine years.

Twenty-three years down the line, the illiteracy rate among youths and the middle-aged in China has reduced, albeit slowly. The latest figure shows that the illiteracy rate was successfully kept at below five per cent.

While this signifies an encouraging development for China, it also poses a challenge for the Chinese Government and institutions of higher learning.

Both parties must be able to meet the rapidly increasing demand for educational opportunities.

Cui says enrolment into universities is highly competitive.

"Nowadays, only a handful of students are able to enter universities in China," he says.

Despite the existence of more than a thousand general universities in China, "only 10 per cent of the applicants will be accepted into these institutions of higher learning."

The birth of ICT in the early 1990s has led to e-learning which promises to revolutionise conventional learning.

E-learning boasts several advantages including unlimited

Government has embarked on a mission to generate interest in advanced distance learning.

China Education and Research Network (CERNET) Pilot Project.

The Government received the help of 10 local universities including Tsinghua University to build China's first public computer network.

The computer network uses TCP/IP-based protocol which was

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developed to allow cooperating computers to share resources across a network. CERNET was completed in 1994.

Taking the cue from the Government, Tsinghua University, under the guidance of its president Wang Dazhong, took the lead in advocating distance learning in the university in 1996.

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Tsinghua's effort to endorse distance learning did not go unnoticed. Its initiative was recognised in 1998 when the Ministry of Education officially

Education, Tsinghua University, who was also in Kuala Lumpur to attend the e-learning conference, says: "We offer some 137 network courses in various fields from modern business management to civil and commercial law."

Currently, the university is conducting research together with Osaka National University in Japan to test the potential of ICT to generate e-learning.

The joint-venture effort includes exploring the wonders of Hypermirror Synthesized System technology, a Japanese-designed technology to create an environment which enables participants in separate rooms to feel as though they are sharing the same virtual space.

Participants will appear together on a shared video wall and images

Although the students were miles apart, they could still enjoy country, he adds.

Sun says the research is still in progress.

Although the experiment takes the form of a game, Sun says its potential for distance learning is beyond child's play.

"Once the viability of the technology is proven, the university will study the possibility of conducting live lectures for our advanced distance learning programme," adds Sun.

Such an investigation is deemed crucial for the development of advanced distance learning, particularly in a highly populated country as China.

For Tsinghua University council's Yang, the biggest challenge pertains to quality control and not facilities or resources.

"In implementing e-learning, we must ensure that the learning materials and courseware are of high quality."

"Before we can do that, we can only offer a limited number of courses, especially for degree levels."

But what China lacks, it makes up for it in other ways.

China, for example, has many experts in various fields who can impart their knowledge and provide their services as teaching staff, thanks to education modes of the past, particularly education through correspondence, which had created many talented individuals.

The Government's active participation in fostering advanced distance learning is seen as a boost for e-learning in the country.

Xinhua reported that the Government has listed distance learning as an important part of its education development blueprint for the 10th Five-Year Plan from 2001-2005.

Already in the offing is the joint-venture between China's Ministry of Education and Hong Kong-based Li Ka-shing Foundation to launch a project to provide wider access to the Internet, television and broadcasting in remote areas.

Against that backdrop, Chinese experts predict a tremendous surge in e-learning in the next 10 years.

Greater access nationwide is crucial but not the be-all and end-all of e-learning. Quality of learning should not be compromised and must take precedence over other matters.

With watchdogs like Yang, Cui, Sun and the rest keeping a close watch, rest assured the quality will be maintained.

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#### WORDS OF WISDOM

Some people never learn anything because they understand everything too soon. - Alexander Pope



YANG ... Learning materials for e-learning must be of high quality.



CUI ... Only 10 per cent of students can enter universities



GARDEN-LIKE UNIVERSITY ... Tsinghua University's second gate