ABSTRACT

The Benefits and Barriers of E-learning in Higher Education in Saudi Arabia

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1. INTRODUCTION

E-learning and the application of information and communication technologies into the traditional education systems in the Arab world has continued to lag behind that of many industrialized nations. However, most of the countries especially those in the Gulf region have in the recent past adopted the implementation of E-learning and as a result; their online student populations are increasing at a relatively high rate. For this reason, the need to adopt this new system in Saudi Arabia has become highly inevitable as the traditional model has proven to be quite inappropriate in equipping students for the complexities they are likely to encounter in the rapidly developing society [1]. The government of Saudi Arabia has come to realization that Information and Communication Technologies coupled with the local technologies with the current education system. Strategies must be implemented to integrate the available qualities within minimum costs. For maximum benefits of E-learning at minimum costs, proper policies and strategies must be implemented to integrate the available local technologies with the current education system.

To meet the increased demand for flexible learning systems in the local and international market today, the Saudi Arabian Ministry of higher education has resolved to take advantage of ICTs to improve virtual education through E-learning in most of its institutions of higher learning. This calls for the development and implementation of a well-designed E-learning plan both at the national level as well as at the institutional level. A good example of such a plan is the National Virtual Education Plan (NVEP) implemented at the national level and an Institutional Virtual Education Plan (IVEP) implemented in every educational institutional which wishes to adopt the E-learning system.

3. NATIONAL E-LEARNING PLAN IN SAUDI ARABIA

In Saudi Arabia, King Abdullah has introduced a new national plan meant to facilitate the adoption of IT in all the sectors of the economy across the country. This national plan particularly calls for the implementation of E-learning and distance learning systems of education that are aimed at making higher education available to...
many people at a cheaper cost. E-learning system of education, which most universities in Saudi Arabia are seeking to adopt, is likely to transform the kingdom's traditional systems of education to incorporate new forms of technology that are fit for learning in the modern society.

The ministry of Higher education in the kingdom has already set up a National center that caters for both E-learning and distance learning. This National Centre is known as the ELC and is aimed at organizing the transformational changes from traditional systems as well as preparing the E-learning materials.

The Ministry of Higher Education has already established a repository for storage and retrieval of E-learning materials that will assist many universities to adopt the new system. A number of international universities have already adopted this system and nine other universities have expressed interest in incorporating this new system into their current systems of education.

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS STUDY

This research is highly significant in establishing the current status and the likely trends of E-learning in Saudi Arabia. This information will help to avoid barriers that are likely to hinder the development and expansion of E-learning in higher educational institutions. Present studies have gained a lot of significance against the backdrop of various challenges faced by various institutions and individual students in adapting this new system of E-learning in Saudi Arabia. Some of the factors which validate this research study include the heavy reliance of Saudi Arabia's population on the Arabic language for learning purpose which is might not be available in the digital information landscape, lack of proper past orientation of the students to an active and independent learning approach which is vital for E-learning and finally, though the ICT technology which facilitates E-learning is well developed in Saudi Arabia, its availability in homes, schools and work places is still quite limited.

5. DEFINITION OF E-LEARNING

E-learning refers to a system of education which integrates Information and Communication Technology with the current forms of education to improve the manageability of the learning process. E-learning can be divided into three major stages which include the informative stage, integrative phase and the transformer stage. The informative stage involves provision of relevant information for program specification in form of books, modules and other external resources. The integrative stage involves the more dynamic interactions, which replace direct face-to-face interactions between the teachers and the students. Finally, the transformative phase allows the integration of the actual resources into the education systems that yields an online learning community. When E-learning is combined with traditional methods of learning as in the case of Saudi Arabia, it is known as blended learning [12].

6. RECENT STUDIES ON E-LEARNING

Many studies have been carried out on E-learning processes in Saudi Arabia and the Arab world in general. In the past, most of these studies have been aimed at identifying the main reasons behind the wide gap between IT utilization in the educational institutions located in Arab countries and those located in the developed nations. However, Saudi Arabia has embarked on a national plan aimed at integrating ICT in its institutions of higher education that is aimed at assisting students to gain access to equal education opportunities at lower costs. In the last five years or so, there has been an increase in the amount of research evidence aimed at identifying the major impacts, benefits and barriers of the use of ICT for E-learning in higher education in Saudi Arabia for individual students as well as the respective institutions of higher learning.

A review of literature has revealed that most E-learning education schemes promote online courses targeting a given segment of either local or international student population [3]. Majority of this particular student population is made up of working people who wish to further their education but have no time to attend traditional classes. Studies have further shown that the dynamic situation of the current global economy has gradually increased the number of working people who are seeking higher education in Saudi Arabia universities but the fact that such prospective students are unwilling to leave their jobs for full-time studies limits them from studying. According to MacDonald, a rapid increase in technological changes have been attributed to the rise in the number of working people who are seeking to further their education due to the need for them to keep in tune with the technologies of the modern society in order to remain competitive in the job market [12]. The recent research articles reviewed in this dissertation have been derived from the Electric Journal of E-learning. These articles mainly consist of different case studies and findings of research studies carried out in Saudi Arabia, parts of Middle East and some comparison studies from Europe. The studies reviewed from these articles are mainly related to the benefits and barriers of E-learning to the students and institutions of higher learning.

7. BENEFITS AND BARRIERS OF E-LEARNING

Most of the research studies carried out recently have indicated that the implementation of an E-learning system in Saudi Arabia's universities is bound to confer many benefits for the students as well as the institutions. The most evident advantage of E-learning is that it allows flexibility and open learning for the students hence giving them time to attend to other things such as working and so forth.

In addition, the increased demand for off-campus or distance learning is likely to create a larger geographical market especially for small institutions.
through online education systems (Smith, 2001). A study by the Madar Research Group has indicated that by implementing an E-learning system in universities, the Saudi Arabia’s IT market is expected to grow by more than 10 percent while the online education market is expected to increase at a compound growth rate of around 32 percent [10].

Kahiigi has comprehensively outlined the benefits of E-learning [8]. In his opinion, E-learning programs are easier to monitor than traditional class-based courses. In addition, e-learners are given the opportunity to interact with faculty members, instructors and other peers via electronic mail. He further adds that E-learning is likely to result in cost savings both for the students and the institutions in various ways. For instance, the funds, which are previously used by institutions for building and maintaining classrooms, are no longer necessary and that results in more savings. E-learning is also cheaper for the students as it saves both time and money thus making higher education more available than before. Some contemporary studies have argued that, E-learning educational systems provide more instructor-student and student-student interaction than the traditional systems. They further indicate that slow learners are particularly advantaged by online programs since they get to spend as much time as they wish reading and participating online than they would in a class-based program [4].

However, a study by Milani has shown that most online students may not be in a position to determine their academic needs, attributes and weak points precisely since there is no direct interaction with the instruction or other students [11]. In this case, successful E-learning programs require a lot of faculty involvement, which encourages online peer support among the students. Moreover, some researchers have expressed concerns over the high dropout rates experienced in E-learning systems as compared to traditional education systems [4]. In addition, an E-learning educational system may not provide an adequate balance between intellectual learning skills and team building community skills. According to Boulton, a student centered teaching approach like the one being adopted by institutions of higher learning in Saudi Arabia is aimed at providing the necessary learning materials, evaluating and assessing the student continuously hence improving individual student's performance and capabilities [2].

8. EMPIRICAL STUDIES ON E-LEARNING IN SAUDI ARABIA

A recent study carried out at the King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals (KFUPM), Dhahran in Saudi Arabia by Harvey (2003) was aimed at examining the student’s attitude towards using computers and effects of E-learning in their overall performance. In this study, 172 male students were examined through interviews, pre-test and post test at the beginning and at the end of the semester respectively [7]. From the data collected, a quantitative analysis was done using a Computer Attitude Scale to determine the individual attitudes of the students. In addition, a qualitative analysis of their individual academic performance was evaluated using the end of semester examination scores.

The findings of this study indicate that, the students’ attitudes towards computer based learning in Saudi Arabia are quite positive at all levels of the semester and they are almost equal at the beginning and at the end of the semester. The pre-test and the post tests showed that, the overall students’ performance increased at the end of the semester, a fact which was attributed to the use of flexible E-learning methods.

Another study carried out in the same university by Balarabe Yushau in 2006 was aimed at determining the contribution of E-learning to the study of mathematics [13]. In this study, 70 randomly selected students in the preparatory year program. Data was collected at the pre and at the post program period using questionnaires and analyzed quantitatively using the MINITAB software and the Aiken Mathematics Attitude Scale.

The findings of this study indicated that, the students’ attitude towards mathematics changed drastically in the course of the study program with a shift towards a more positive attitude. In this case, most students who had a notion that mathematics was a hard subject at the beginning of the program had this belief changed for the better by the end of the program. This study shows that E-learning has a positive impact on the students’ perception and attitudes towards certain subjects in Saudi Arabia universities.

9. CONSISTENCY OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Though most of the above mentioned research studies have been carried out in different cultural and historical backgrounds, the findings have shown some consistency on the fact that E-learning can be highly beneficial to both the students and the institutions if properly implemented. The empirical studies have shown those students’ attitudes towards certain subjects that are usually known to be hard can be influenced for the better through E-learning. Most of these research studies are basically abounding on the same issue of benefits and barriers of E-learning. However, the issue of the impact of Internet technology on the quality of education in institutions of higher education has predominantly influenced the current studies.

Despite these major benefits, some studies have shown that E-learning programs are not suitable for everyone. According to a research study carried out by Kearsley, most of those students who perform well in the traditional system of education which encourages face to face instructor-student interaction are likely to experience some serious difficulties with online based learning and the vice versa is also true [9].
10. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Recent studies and research findings have expressed diverse views on the advantages and disadvantages, benefits and barriers of E-learning in Saudi Arabia and other parts of the Arab world. However, one thing which is evident is that E-learning if properly implemented has the potential of making higher education available to millions of people both locally and internationally by facilitating faster and cheaper sharing of knowledge, resources and information via internet and other digital technologies. Though most researchers and scholars agree on the fact that E-learning offers many advantages in terms of student’s flexibility and larger online market for the institutions, the quality of online studies is still a matter of much debate. Moreover, although many studies have already been carried out on the topic of E-learning, very few of the reviewed studies have surveyed e-learners in their research-sampling frame. For this reason, more research needs to be done focusing on the views of e-learners to determine the actual impact of E-learning on the students in terms of the quality of such education.

REFERENCES


AUTHOR PROFILES

Naif Jabli get his masters from La Trobe University in Australia in 2010 and he worked as lecturer at King Khalid University in Saudi Arabia. Also, he taught several courses such as Introduction to education technology, Producing educational programs and tools (1, 2) and Using computer in education. His research interest: online Training Instructional design Social network. So, He offers some Short Courses such as Train of trainers (TOT), The Self Establishing Trust, Creative Thinking Skills and Certified Certificate in (N.L.P). Recently Mr. Jabli is EdD student majoring in Instructional Technology, Research & Assessment at Northern Illinois University.

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