

Towards Flexible Learning for Adult Learners in Saudi Higher Education

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Abstract

This literature review discusses the status of online learning in Saudi higher education and its advantages for Saudi citizens. Online learning helps to accommodate the growth of enrollments in Saudi higher education institutions, allows students from small cities to pursue their studies without the need for traveling, and provides women the chance to pursue their education without having to neglect their main role within the home. Although online learning has spread worldwide, some weaknesses appear in integrating distance learning in Saudi education in general and higher education specifically. These weaknesses are due to some constraints, including physical, personal, and administrative constraints. Saudi Arabia could benefit from distance education opportunities for many reasons. Recommendations to improve online learning in Saudi Arabia are given.

Key words: online learning, distance education, Saudi Arabia, higher education, adult learning, Saudi students, flexible learning.

Introduction

1. Definition of Distance Learning

Distance Learning is a method of teaching that allows students to learn at flexible times from a variety of locations without the need to be physically present in a classroom. Distance education, also referred to as distance learning, online learning, and e-learning, and is generally defined as "a situation where learners are separated at a distance from their teachers, involves the provision of systems to establish and maintain communication between teachers and learners, and employs a form of pedagogic interchange between the teacher and the learner" (Holmberg, 1989, p. 168). Distance education is characterized by educators, learners and sometimes other facilitators communicating through different types of media to exchange materials (Nagar, 2010).

2. History of Distance Learning

Distance learning has a long history in formal and informal education systems in the United States and Europe. In 1728, a Boston newspaper published an advertisement about providing lessons through a mailing service whereby lessons were delivered to people in the form of letters (Cabuk & Halac, 2013). William Rainey founded the world's first distance education program in the late 1800's at the University of Chicago. Rainey was convinced of the importance of distance education and predicted that distance education students would in the future outnumber classroom students (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2003). American and European educators took advantage of distance learning in the mid-nineteenth century to facilitate the learning process (Abarashi, 2011). From 1920-1940, radio and TV surfaced, creating dramatic changes in the distance education field. The National Association of Home Education established distance education programs in schools in 1926 (Abarashi, 2011). Educators used radio courses as supplemental materials to enhance postal mail courses. In 1934, educators tried to simulate face-to-face classes and shifted from the audio experience to audio-visual experience by using educational television (Samans, n.d.). The State University of Iowa (UI) was the first to widely use educational television in 1934, and by 1939, the total of audio-visual courses that provided by UI was almost 400 courses (Unwin & McAlesse, 1988).

In 1969, the first Open University was founded in the United Kingdom, and as a result, distance learning gained momentum (Cabuk & Halac, 2013; Panchabakesan, 2011). Open University is “a university that usually accepts students without formal qualifications and allows them to study from home, receiving and sending work by post, by email, or over the internet” (“Open University,” n.d.). Educators established a mailing system by which they could deliver lessons and receive student work in order to increase educational opportunities for those unable to attend regular schools. The beneficiaries of the mailing system included people with special needs and women who were not allowed to attend the same classes with men (Abarashi, 2011). In 1982, the term distance education received official recognition after the International Council for Correspondence Education changed their name to International Council for Distance Education (Panchabakesan, 2011). The advent of the Internet in the decade 1990 made it possible to simply provide distance learning via computers (by providing online programs) (Abarashi, 2011). Whereas at first, distance education was limited to printed materials, in the present time distance education includes non-print materials such as radio, television, websites, recorded lectures, power points, and video (Panchabakesan, 2011, p113). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (1999), in 1997-98 academic years, the number of online learning programs in the United States grew by 72% compared with the previous two years. In addition, around one third of US higher education institutions provided online learning courses at this time.

In 2000, the digital revolution helped distance learning to keep growing, especially in the most developed countries. By 2000, Internet access was available for a majority of people in Europe and United States (Valade-DeMelo, 2009; Dutton, Helsper and Gerber, 2009), and distance learning was widely adopted in both public and private educational institutions (Crook, 2008). Of course, the technologies used in distance education became more various, including: “telephone and/or audio recordings; television and/or video recordings; computer-assisted instruction; group communications (asynchronous and synchronous); the Web and multimedia materials; simulation and gaming; collaborative learning; asynchronous learning networks; collaborative knowledge systems; immersive simulations; and wireless and handheld devices” (Roxanna & Turoff, 2005, p. 59). With all these technological developments, distance learning courses witnessed increases in enrolment numbers. In 2004, at least two million students in the U.S. were involved in online learning in higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2004). By 2015, the number of students taking at least one online course in the U.S. reached 5,828,826 (Babson Survey Research Group, 2015). These changes from 2000 until now show how adult learning has been influenced by distance learning “qualitatively and quantitatively” (Eynon & Helsper, 2011).

3. Advantages of Distance Education

Online education has gained in popularity among students of all ages since the technological revolution. Online courses and programs offer educational opportunities for many students who lack the time to complete or lack access to traditional face-to-face courses. There are a number of barriers that often prevent people from enrolling in traditional classroom courses such as lack of funds, working a full-time job, or issues with long distance commuting (Demiray, 1999; Nagar, 2010). Distance education provides opportunities for those students who cannot make it to campus (Abarashi, 2011; Nagar, 2010). Some learners choose online learning because they do not have another option, but many students choose distance learning despite having access to traditional learning because distance learning has numerous advantages. One of the major reasons students prefer distance education is learners have daily schedules with their families or jobs which do not allow them to attend in face to face classroom environment. Distance learning helps to save people's time and money, especially for those who live in small towns without universities offering their desired degree. Enrollment in distance learning will save the time and expenses needed to travel between home and university (Al-Asmari, 2011). In addition, distance education serves the students who benefit from speakers and coaches who do not live in the same city or country, but who may share their expertise through streaming video, recorded presentations, or the like (Nagar, 2010). Distance education is an important training tool with a wide range of audiences (Abarashi, 2011). Through distance education, students and teachers from different cultures, beliefs, and experiences can meet and learn from each other (Nagar, 2010).

Distance learning also provides flexibility to instructors as well as students (Nagar, 2010). Teaching online offers instructors ease of access to classes, course information and document sharing as well as the flexibility to access the course from many locations (Willing & Johnson, 2009). Through distance learning, instructors can reach a large number of students from different locations or countries in the same time.

In addition, the instructor can easily digitally provide students with a large amount of course materials and the materials can be reached easily by students (Nagar, 2010). The accessibility of instructors and course materials for learners regardless of time or location can make distance learning more convenient than traditional learning for both students and teachers.

4. Problem Statement

Although online learning has spread worldwide, some weaknesses appear in integrating distance learning in Saudi education in general and Saudi higher education specifically. Barakat (2011), for example, stated that despite the positive attitudes of Saudi faculty members towards online learning, there were weaknesses in applying online learning effectively. These weaknesses are due to some constraints such as faculty concerns about technology, lack of awareness regarding the using of online learning systems, and lack of awareness of the importance of distance learning. In addition, lack of technological skills and time management problems have been cited as hindrances (Al-Dosari, 2011). Research on the integration of online learning in the American higher education system is plentiful. However, few studies have examined the integration of online learning in the higher education system in Saudi Arabia.

5. Evolving Education in Saudi Arabia

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has given education special attention, and the Saudi Ministry of Finance has spent hundreds of millions of dollars in order to develop education, especially higher education. Saudi Arabia offers free education at all levels, starting from kindergarten through higher education (graduate and undergraduate). In addition, the government provides free textbooks for students in schools and a monthly financial reward to students in the university until they graduate (Ministry of Education, 2012). According to Saudi Education policy, educational authorities in schools, institutions, and universities have the responsibility to offer visual and audio clarification means, besides training in order to reach educational objectives (Ministry of Education, 2012). From 1999-2003, Saudi Arabia redesigned their system of education (Geneva, 2004). The development included establishing new educational institutions and improving the curriculum and incorporating technology for educational purposes (Aljabre, 2012). These policies and improvements suggest that the Saudi government gives great attention to education to give students a chance to make the most of their education.

6. Distance Learning in Saudi Arabia

Distance education and the use of technology in e-learning received official recognition from the Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia in 2006. According to the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education (2015), Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz has called for a national plan to adopt information technology and implement e-learning and distance education in Saudi higher education. The plan recommends establishment of a national center to provide technical support and the necessary tools to develop digital education. This plan came as a result of increases in population, insufficient numbers of faculty, and an effort to reduce any financial waste. Saudi Arabia took its first step to establish the system of distance education when the Ministry of Higher Education signed a contract with the Malaysian company METEOR to found the National Center for E-Learning and Distance Education in Saudi Arabia with a budget exceeding 47 million Saudi riyals (12,531,161 US dollars). The National Center for E-Learning and Distance Education was established to be the nucleus of distance education for Saudi educational institutions, with the purpose of helping institutions seeking to apply this type of learning, facilitating distance learning opportunities for Saudi students, and helping institutions overcome the insufficiency in university faculty. Moreover, the center aims to facilitate university education to Saudis in all regions of Saudi Arabia and employ e-learning to support women's education. Finally, the center aims to help to facilitate the connection with different higher education institutions around the world (Ministry of Higher Education, 2015).

The role of the National Center for E-Learning and Distance Education is to spread e-learning and distance education applications in the educational institutions and disseminate technical awareness and the culture of distance learning. In addition, the aim is to improve distance learning applications to help in increasing the absorptive capacity of the institutions. It evaluates and supports distance education projects, programs, studies, and research. Its role is also to provide consultations to e-learning organizations and offer training programs for educational institutions' personnel.

They also aim to establish distance education standards and coordinating activities which help to improve e-learning and distance education in Saudi Arabia (Ministry of Higher Education, 2015). Despite the fact that distance learning is receiving attention in Saudi education, there are some physical, personal, and administrative constraints that affect distance learning in Saudi Arabia. In terms of physical constraints, Hussein (2011) pointed out that the infrastructure in some Saudi universities does not help distance learning processes. Despite the fact that the government has offered a proper curriculum, software, and accessories for distance learning courses, these infrastructural facilities are limited to the major cities (Al-Shehri, 2010). In addition, internet service is expensive compared to in other Arab countries (Al-Draiby, 2010; Hussein, 2011). Also, there is a shortage of direct technical assistance to both students and faculty (Hussein, 2011). Besides that, Hussein (2011) mentioned that there is a lack of computer devices or internet connection in the universities. Since distance education has only recently been adopted within Saudi Arabia, a need exists for financial support to equip labs with devices, internet, and programs, all of which constitutes a financial burden for the Ministry of Education (Al-Shahrani, & Al-Shehri, 2012). Al-Draiby's study (2010) showed important findings about the quality of online education in Saudi Arabia. Al-Draiby asked a group of academics involved in online learning to rate the quality of e-learning in their institutions. The results revealed that, only 9.5% of the participants chose "high quality", 33.33% chose "medium quality", 33.33% chose "low quality", and 23.81% rated the quality below "low quality". Based on the previous studies, the physical constraints had great negative impact on online education in Saudi Arabia.

The personal constraints that inhibit greater adoption of distance learning in Saudi Arabia include a lack of computer skills on the part of students and faculty. Also, there is a lack of active online learning systems exist because of the limited awareness of the importance of distance learning (Hussein, 2011). In Saudi Arabia, there is a shortage in understanding how to approach and implement effective online learning, so institutions do not offer the proper tools to support online learning. However, promoting awareness among staff can be achieved by providing rewards to encourage them to improve their productivity and performance in online courses (Al-Shehri, 2010). Moreover, Hussein (2011) mentioned that there is a lack of acceptance of distance learning because of Saudi society's perception of it as a sort of luxury. In addition, there is a concern about using technology from both faculty and students' families. Many Saudi faculty in different institutions have deficiency in online learning skills, thus they resist and refuse to accept this new methods of teach (Hussein, 2011). The administrative constraints include scarcity of support from the technology department (Hussein, 2011) and lack of technicians in universities (Al-Asmari, 2011). Any technical issues such as connection problems present a big challenge to any educational institution (Al-Shahrani, & Al-Shehri, 2012). Hussein (2011) also stated that there is "strong resistance of some faculty members for any change or development in the academic departments, feeling threatened regarding their gained positions for the benefits of others with good knowledge of technology" (p.51). Al-Shehri (2010) concludes that developing the efficiency and effectiveness of distance learning in Saudi Arabia will require appropriate organization and management, technical support and infrastructure.

7. Advantages of Distance Learning for Saudi Citizens

Saudi Arabia could experience many benefits from distance education. Saudi Arabia has one of the highest birth rates in the world, which has led to an increase in the number of enrollments in Saudi higher education institutions (The Communication and Information Technology Commission [CITC], 2010). The population in Saudi Arabia growth from 27,019,731 in 2006 (Library of Congress, 2006) to 31,015,999 in 2015 (General Authority for Statistics, 2016). As result of the increase in the population, the number of graduated students from high school is growing; in the meantime, the number of students who are not accepted to the universities due to overcrowding is growing as well (Aljabre, 2012). In 2015, the number of high school graduates was 405,941 (Ministry of Education, 2015), and only 271,453 students were accepted for the Bachelor degree (Ministry of Education, 2016). Saudi institutions have become unable to accommodate the large number of enrollments. The large amount of enrollments existing in the Saudi educational institutions' capacity affects the quality of education (Chanchary & Islam, n.d.). Government officials and educators agree that it will no longer be possible to adjust to the large number of students (Alshangeeti, Alsaghier, & Nguyen, 2009). The growth in enrollments makes distance learning appears to be an excellent solution to the issues resulting in many higher educational institutions from the growth in the number of students (Alrashidi, 2014; CITC, 2010). Distance learning is beneficial for young and old, employees and stay-at-home parents, and disabled individuals. Certainly, distance learning is more important for women in Saudi Arabia for many reasons. First, statistics show that the number of females in Saudi higher education is growing.

In 1970, the number of female students in Saudi higher education was only seven; by 2011 the number had grown to 700,000 students which represented 60% of the total enrollments in higher education (Ministry of Higher Education, 2013). From 2009 to 2013, the number of females enrolled in higher education (master's and doctoral programs) increased annually at a rate of 43.4% for the master degree and 22.6% for the doctoral degree (Ministry of Higher Education, 2014). This increasing caused difficulties for universities to accommodate this large number of enrollments. Second, female driving is not allowed in Saudi Arabia which would be an obstacle for some women to reach their schools. Finally, women in Saudi Arabia have a special status because of the religious nature of the country which gives women a great role at home. However, this role has expanded as Saudi women opt to continue their education and obtain jobs outside the home. Distance learning can help to overcome the previous issues and provides women the chance to pursue their education without neglecting their main role within the home (Aljabre, 2012). On a national level, the advantages of online education are great, but the advantages on the individual level are even more far reaching (Aljabre, 2012).

However, there continues to be issues with and criticisms of distance education, some criticisms are related to applying distance education in general. These concerns relate directly to curriculum problems, distance learning participants, and technology issues. Numerous people consider the traditional teaching method, face-to-face, to be more effective, and they believe that there is no other method that could replace it (Nagar, 2010). In fact, however, recent research has shown that more than 85% of instructors believe that distance learning improves teaching methods and student learning. Also, the study found that 83% of instructors had positive feedback from their students regarding online learning. Distance learning has the ability to bring new experiences to higher education and it is no longer sufficient to provide only face-to-face classes (Willing & Johnson, 2009).

Recommendations

In order to realize the benefits from distance learning in Saudi Arabia, the following actions are recommended:

- Increase public awareness about distance learning's importance
- Develop infrastructure for distance learning in Saudi universities
- Improve the computer skills of both students and faculty
- Offer enough computer devices and reliable Internet connection in the universities
- Provide direct technical assistance for both students and faculty
- Encourage faculty members to be involved in online programs

Summary

In general, distance learning has a long history in formal and informal education systems. Since the technological revolution, online learning has spread worldwide and has become an valuable option in many educational institutions. Students choose to study online programs for many different reasons. Distance learning offers educational opportunities for many learners who do not have the ability to complete their studies in traditional courses. Also, distance learning provides a maximum amount of flexibility to students as well as instructors. For these reasons, distance education has gained popularity among students and faculty. Distance learning is a major development in Saudi higher education which can help Saudi Arabia to keep abreast with developed countries. In 2006, distance learning received official recognition from the Ministry of Higher Education in order to improve the educational system. Although online learning is growing in Saudi education, some weaknesses appear in integrating distance learning in Saudi institutions. It is important to strengthen the online education to help Saudi government overcome many educational issues.

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