E LEARNING IN SAUDI ARABIA'S HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract
This Paper aims to provide a brief look on present E learning development in Saudi Higher Education. E Learning is the next big thing and getting very much accepted by the Saudi Arabia higher education System. Huge Technological Developments have taken place, many Universities have started using technology such as Blackboard as LMS (Learning Management System) with many other great pulg-ins and tools in a smart classroom like ePodium, Interactive board, lecture sharing, eAttendance, Video Conferencing, etc. Well the evolution from traditional blackboard and chalk to a huge innovative technological development in the education system has not been that easy among teachers and students. “Statistical analysis and data mining tools have been used to find correlations among the technical ability, learning ability, time management ability and preferred mode of study of these learners. Our investigation shows that majority (73%) of the students still prefer classroom teaching to individual study”. [1]

Key Words: E Learning, Distance Learning, Learning Management Systems, Higher Education and Blended e Learning.

Introduction and Background
The Saudi Arabia Education System have experienced an incredible growth with only one objective to ensure that education becomes more efficient, to meet the religious, economic and social needs of the country and to eradicate illiteracy among Saudi adults. SA is the world's top most country spending on education, as per the 2014 national budget education and healthcare remain the priority of the budget. Education receives a huge proportion of the budget at 25% of total spending, considered to be the highest among the world. [2]

According to the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Higher Education in its mission statement, “e-Learning is not just an «added value» to facilitate and accelerate traditional education. It is an evolving environment integrated with various elements of the educational process, in order to be enriched from within. E-Learning does not only provide massive information «vessels», but It also stimulates in the learning mechanisms of information acquisition, its processing, and sharing with others in its construction, and conversion into interactive positive information”.

According to the Saudi Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC), the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is one of the fastest growing countries in the world
in terms of eLearning [5]. CITC data shows an explosive growth in the number of internet users generally, from a mere 200,000 in 2000 to 4.8 million in 2006. The number of students enrolled in institutions of higher education has also increased significantly in recent years. As a result, many of these institutions have turned to eLearning systems as a means to help broaden and enhance access to their courses and subjects [3].

Saudi Arabian education system has a high demand to provide additional educational opportunities for increasing population. With over 50% of the country’s population under the age of 20, and being one of the highest birth rates countries in the world, Saudi Arabia’s higher education institutions have been facing a growing demand for enrolment. “In 2008, Saudi Arabia called for a national plan to adopt information technology across the country. The plan recommends implementation of e-learning and distance learning, and their prospective applications in higher education”. [4]

The Reasons for rapid growth in E learning in Saudi Arabia could be many, the below seems to be majorly effecting. First, the demand for higher education has far outstripped supply, such that institutions are faced with overcrowding and insufficiency of facilities and human resources for the delivery of traditional-style education to all of the nation’s qualified applicants for admission. eLearning has been suggested as a means to overcome these limitations. Second, KSA is a large country in terms of geographical area, with a significant number of communities being isolated from major population centers. ELearning offers the potential to deliver educational services to remote locations, thereby reducing disparities across the various regions and areas. Third, in KSA’s higher education, men and women receive their instruction in separate classes, for cultural and religious reasons. This puts further strains on the limited facilities and human resources available. It has been observed, accordingly, that women are often among the strongest supporters of eLearning, which potentially facilitates their access to higher education [5].

In 2005 the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education has established the National Center of E-Learning & Distance Learning known as NCEL to implement a national plan to develop information technology in the Kingdom. The move comes on the heels of a call made by Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah to adopt information technology across Saudi Arabia. The national plan recommends the implementation of e-learning and distance learning and their prospective applications in higher education. Drawing up the national plan comes in the wake of an expected major transformation of traditional education as most universities in the Kingdom are likely to switch to a system of e-learning next year. Nine universities have already agreed to implement the system. (6)

Recently, the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia has started a project called Learning Resources Program that aims to establish Learning Resources Centers in schools. Learning resources centers aim to make a quantum leap in the school libraries from being repositories of information to a place to work, activity and aimed study, within the framework of a comprehensive system, integrated to achieve harmony between the educational goals and strategies, teaching methods, and information sources and tools. Learning resource centers seek to provide a learning environment able to accommodate technological developments, and integrate what happens inside the classroom. The center is a place where a student can learn on his own as fast as his level of perception.
Literature Review

E-learning has been defined in many different ways and definitions of e-learning, online learning, technology enhanced learning (TEL) and distance learning often overlap (Moore, Dickson-Deane & Galyen, 2011). For example, Urdan and Weggen (2000) focus on content delivery and define e-learning as “the delivery of content via all electronic media, including the internet, intranets, extranets, satellite broadcast, audio/video tape, interactive TV, and CD-ROM”. According to Meyen et al., (2002) e-learning can be defined as the “acquisition and use of knowledge distributed and facilitated by electronic means”, a definition which focuses on knowledge acquisition. Khan (2005, p 3) defines e-learning as “an innovative approach for delivering well-designed, learner-centered, interactive, and facilitated learning environment to anyone, anywhere, anytime by utilizing the attributes and resources of various digital technologies along with other forms of learning materials suited for open, flexible, and distributed learning environment”. This definition includes perspectives on pedagogy as well as content and access.

Al-Harbi’s study (2011), "E-Learning in Saudi Tertiary Education: Potential and Challenges," showed that e-learning acceptance is influenced by different factors. A student’s attitude toward e-learning is the most important factor in determining a student’s intention to use e-learning. Students’ decision to use e-learning is also determined by their subjective norm, i.e., the influence of the important people around them. Moreover, perceived e-learning accessibility plays a role in shaping the students’ behavioral intention regarding e-learning acceptance. Such results support the seminal works in the area of technology acceptance. Bendania (2011) attempted to explore instructors’ and learners’ attitudes toward teaching and learning online at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals in Saudi Arabia.

The results of the study showed positive attitudes toward the use of ICT in instruction and learning. In this study, the factors related to attitudes, mainly experience, confidence, enjoyment, usefulness, intention to use, motivation and whether students had ICT skills were all correlated. Faqeeh (2011) conducted a study on the factors influencing e-learners' acceptance of the Blackboard at King Khalid University. The study’s findings demonstrated that informants identified the facilitators and inhibitors of e-learning previously recognized in prior research. They also showed that students are ready to accept technology implementation and to shift to an e-learning model of education. In the same context, Al-Dosari (2011) examined the faculty members’ and students’ perceptions of e-learning in the English department and observed that their responses were generally positive and indicated that learning improved in an e-learning environment compared with a traditional approach.

Al-Mansour, N.S., Al-Shorman, R.A. (2011) conducted a study on the effects of computer-assisted instruction on Saudi University students’ learning of English at King Saud University, The sample of the study consisted of 60 students randomly selected from King Saud University and assigned to experimental and control groups. Data were collected within an eight-week period via a pre-posttest design for equivalent groups; they showed that the students who were taught through computer-assisted English language instruction alongside the traditional method show better achievement than those who were taught through the traditional method alone.

Farah Habib Chanchary and Samiul Islam conducted a study that found out that Saudi students and young population, on an average, spend 2 hrs on Internet daily and 36% of them told they mostly work on education related web-pages, 27% of them read newspapers and 25% of them play online games. According to some surveys, Saudi students have positive attitude
towards communicating with other online students to take the full advantage of e-learning method. In their survey, the above researchers found that, “54% students stated that they are interested to learn courses over Internet with learners from other SA/non-SA universities but among them 32% still believe they will face difficulties to communicate with other students due to cultural obstructions (50%) or language barriers (62.5%). More interestingly about 45% students mention that they will participate in online learning only if their personal information is not made public”.

Conclusion

E-learning in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia can transform Higher Education effectively in the context of the Arab world, leading to improvements in the learning experience and mapping out pathways to success for everyone committed to blended learning. According to latest studies, almost 97% students in Saudi Arabia are equipped with personal computers with steady Internet connection but only 54% of them expressed interests to learn courses over Internet with learners of other universities. “Most of the students are good users of application software and tools but they do not have independent learning ability. Almost half of the respondents expressed their discomfort to communicate with other online students from different countries around the world due to weakness in English language and cultural prohibitions. Students also showed variety of choices for reading materials and learning methods”. [7] Hence, a large number of Saudi students (73%) still prefer classroom teaching to independent study at home.

According to the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Higher Education’s vision, “the educational tools and modern pedagogy methods are realizing the potential of education process. In fact, they have greater impact and significant effect upon education. We are fully aware that neither «e-learning» nor «distance learning» should be simple educational goals. Thus, we have made our main goal is to have the most accurate design using the best tools and pedagogy to achieve the society and community needs in the higher education sector in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia”.

The student’s response to the new technology increased their confidence in their abilities. This in part is the spontaneously receptive attitude that a large number of them adopt toward any activity in which technology played a role. For instance, students expressed the view that it would be helpful to use the schools laboratory for English language “It will help us to grasp the language more effectively”; said one student and that teachers can also guide them to other English language websites. [8]

Al-Fahad, F. (2009) reported that "students’ attitudes and perceptions towards the effectiveness of mobile learning in King Saud University, Saudi Arabia is positive", The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology (TOJET), Vol. 8(2), pp. 111-119.

The new technology offers infinite opportunities for improving education and perception towards effective use of these technologies is far behind what ought to be. Thus, the Saudis have been unable to reap the optimal benefit at all levels of operation, but the present level of use is encouraging and there is hope for improvement and brighter future.

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Notes


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