A Pilot Study of the Challenges Associated with eLearning Developments in Saudi Universities

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing developments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) lead IT professionals of the academic environments worldwide to adjust the eLearning Management Systems of their universities’ domains in this reality by adopting the new ideas and recommendations. As a direct consequence, the influence on teaching and learning environments is more than emphatic and the challenges revealing the all the more increasing need in utilizing modern learning applications, procedures, and policies more apparent than ever before. Nevertheless, their institutions remain teaching organizations with their core processes focused on the need for education and training of their student bodies often increasing in size, especially in the emerging economies and developing countries. The Middle East and especially the Gulf Council Countries’ (GCC) higher education systems are no exception. Saudi Arabia in particular can be considered a special case in the GCC due to its numerous and rather crowded higher education institutions. In this research, a number of diverse types of administrative, technical, and general challenges and issues related to eLearning are covered in order to examine the current situation of eLearning progress in Saudi universities, investigate the obstacles preventing high rates of eLearning development, and discover what kind of learning procedures people of Saudi prefer to accommodate their educational preferences. A pre-tested questionnaire was used for the purpose of data collection. The data were gathered from students of these educational institutions in Saudi Arabia and from other individuals from all walks of life and of various employment statuses. This pilot research study suggested that the main reason behind the slow progress of eLearning in Saudi Arabia is the result of problems in the local telecommunications and other infrastructure, as noted by the survey participants, and far less the outcome of weaknesses of the established procedures and facilities available from the local eLearning institutions.

Keywords: Education, eLearning, eLearning in Saudi Universities, Gulf Council Country (GCC), Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

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1. INTRODUCTION

ICTs have changed the way we think and act. No one can deny the fact, that their influence and penetration in our lives is so intense that we cannot think of a day without utilizing their vast services and applications. As far as the education sector is concerned, the level of domination of ICTs can be determined better by how well eLearning has been adopted in the developed world and the ample benefits that have been deployed utilizing them (Shehabat & Mahdi, 2009).

Even the definition of eLearning, to start with and given its various elements addressed by the scientific community, cannot be thought of as an easy task to clearly provide in a way unanimously accepted by all. However, one can describe eLearning as learning that is made easier using digital instruments and learning topics/subjects that need some type of interaction including, but not limited to, online interactivity between the teacher and the student or between academic or otherwise colleagues (Sangrà, Vlachopoulos, & Cabrera, 2012).

Moreover and due to the limitations of face-to-face education, eLearning can be utilized as a natural and effective substitute or even enhancing complement of traditional learning. Especially when compared to schooling eLearning is revolutionary in terms of how it deals with the time, location and the methodologies of teaching and learning. Aiming to satisfy the learners’/students’ needs, many institutions have adjusted their eLearning environments in such a way as to make the Internet to play a major role (Aixia & Wang, 2011). Such examples are the various types of Learning Management Systems (LMS from now on) that are dominant in the higher education organizations and embedded in the core teaching system to support as effectively as possible the learning needs of the students of the academic organizations. Actually their role is so valuable that one of the most frequently asked questions during the interviews of new faculties in academic organizations worldwide is whether they are familiar and comfortable with the use of such systems. Any negative answer to this or similar questions is, usually, a quick and unsuccessful end of the interview.

Another approach that has gained a great deal of popularity in recent years is, in many cases, the mixed approach of teaching using a combination of face-to-face and online methods (Tahar et al., 2013). Indeed several academic organizations are taking advantage, not always to the benefit of their students but just for reduction of administrative costs, this opportunity to reduce the face-to-face credit hours needed by supplementing those with online teaching using these new systems and methods. The various “open” type of universities around the world and, also, those often referred to as “electronic” universities follow such or similar approaches. That way the universities can significantly or even dramatically reduce, in several cases even eliminate, the demand for physical presence of the students and their faculties without, at the same time, having their academic programs termed as “distance” or “online” with all the negative burden that these characterizations still have, most likely wrongly.

In general, eLearning has visible benefits on all groups of people. Single learners can acquire substantial amount of knowledge without having to travel, or taking time out of their work. Governments can also benefit by improving the quality of life of their citizens by establishing an environment that facilitates the basic development of skills and provides the directions that might result in more qualified labor force and expertise. Finally, the private sector has also incorporated eLearning methods with a profound impact on their employees’ knowledge proliferation (Shehabat & Mahdi, 2009).

Christophe Marcinkowski (2009) mentioned in his book, that eLearning plays a major role in providing fertile grounds for the literacy and knowledge-based evolution of the societies, bringing societal changes and encouraging awareness of the problems faced by many countries. He states that the adoption of eLearning can improve communication and increase the understanding amongst the mem-
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