Empirical Investigation into Motives for Choosing Web-based Distance Learning Programs

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ABSTRACT

Today, in association with rapid social and economic changes, there is an increasing level of demand for distance and online learning programs. This study will focus on identifying the main motivational factors for choosing a web-based distance-learning program. Moreover, it will investigate how these factors relate to age, gender, marital status and parenthood. The results are based on a questionnaire, which was conducted amongst students enrolled in the distance-learning programs provided by the E-learning and Distance Education Deanship at Al-Imam Mohammad bin Saud University during the autumn semester of 2013. In addition to their background characteristics, the survey aimed to determine students’ motives for undertaking distance learning.

KEYWORDS

Distance Learning, Student Motivations, Web-based Courses

INTRODUCTION

During the last two centuries distance learning has been a familiar concept, however the period has witnessed significant changes in how learning happens and is communicated (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006; Spector, Merrill, Merrienboer, & Driscoll, 2008). The term “distance learning” is often used to describe the process of providing access to learning or learning materials for those who are geographically distant. It is noted that access methods to these learning materials has gradually changed over time from the “traditional distance learning” which depend on using basic postal services, to the wide range of web-based tools that are available today; which is in line with the evolution of communication technologies which has taken place over the years (Harasim, 2000).

In Fact, there was a shift during the last decade toward using “web based distance education” where students could be engaged more into the course during the semester. Moreover, the evolution of the Internet and ICT has increased the attention shown to blended learning with regard to the routine practices of universities. Simultaneously, it has given distance education a new horizon (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). In fact, web-based distance education has become an increasingly popular method, for universities in many countries, to offer opportunities and meet the needs of a growing and increasingly varied student population (Rumble & Latchem, 2004).
For its ability to overcome spatial and temporal boundaries, a web-based distance-learning environment could offer promising solutions to many of the issues faced by traditional educational settings (Bates, 2005). In fact, one of the main features of distance education is freedom from constraints, such as freedom of content, space, medium, access and relationship development (Anderson, 2006; Paulsen, 1993).

However, there are many critical factors that should be considered in order to enable the successful application of web-based courses (McIsaac & Gunawardena, 1996). Motivation is one of these factors (Bekele, 2010). As is the case in traditional learning environments, motivation is one of the key success factors for education in a web-based environment (Brophy, 2010; Jones & Issroff, 2007). Moreover, weak motivation has been considered a vital factor in contributing to high dropout rates from web-based courses (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005).

This paper will focus on the web based version of distance education programs and aims to identify some of the main motivational factors for choosing a web based distance online learning program. Understanding these motives in a specific context could shed some light on students’ needs and expectations, and could be very useful for policy makers to take the right decisions towards the current state of distance education programs and for any future plan to decrease the dropout rate. Furthermore, finding out the local trends and perspectives in comparison to the global trends could lead to better adoption and utilization of the international experiences. Moreover, this study investigates how these factors relate to age, gender, marital status and parenthood, which could lead to better understanding for the target audiences and attract new students.

WEB-BASED DISTANCE LEARNING

Since the involvement of ICT in the delivery of education, major changes have been seen in the field of distance learning. These emerging technologies have enabled the delivery of instructional materials using electronic media. Instructional delivery may involve an instructor being physically situated in a different place from the learner, or may involve the instruction being provided at different times (Moore, 1990).

With the widespread use of technology, learning became the focus of all types of instruction, and the term distance learning mainly focused on the restrictions related with “distance”, i.e. time and place (Guilar & Loring, 2008; Newby, Stepich, Lehman, & Russell, 2000). Then, the term evolved to explain other types of learning, such as online learning, e-Learning, technology, mediated learning, online collaborative learning, virtual learning, and web-based learning. (Conrad, 2006). However, it is noted that all definitions agree that some form of instruction occurs between two parties (a learner and an instructor), whether held at different times or in different places, and use varying forms of instructional materials.

Most authors describe web-based learning as access to learning experiences using some web-based technology (Benson, 2002; Carliner, 2004; Conrad, 2002). Moreover, web-based distance learning was identified as a more recent version of distance learning, which improves access to educational opportunities for learners described as non-traditional or disenfranchised (Benson, 2002; Conrad, 2002).

During the last two decades, web-based distance learning has seen considerable shifts in the pattern of communication and learning, it has also achieved a larger share of the total supply of available courses (McLoughlin & Lee, 2008).

Saudi Arabia, like many nations, has moved slowly but steadily towards distance education. In fact, Saudi Arabia has a very short history of using printed, electronic, or broadcast resources for
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