Chapter 13

E-Learning Acceptance and Challenges in the Arab Region

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the status and quality of e-learning in Arab Universities located in the Middle East. The first objective of the study was to provide an analytical overview of the use of e-learning and its quality in these universities located in the Middle East region. Another objective is to fill the gap in literature in this particular topic regarding the Middle East region. Also draw into different solutions and recommendations in order to make a successful match that will result in a better adoption and serving of the e-learning technology. The study was based on two different approaches that include a survey to navigate the official web sites of universities in the region plus a questionnaire to fetch for the current stand of e-learning quality in the region. The results of each approach have been analyzed, and the outcomes and recommendations have been presented which can be used for future adoption and other related studies.

BACKGROUND

E-Learning

Electronic Learning or what is referred to as “e-Learning” is defined as the delivery and acquisition of education or training in electronic format using electronic media. The latest technology to lend itself to e-learning has been the internet which is now the largest single resource repository for educational establishments (Smith and Hardaker, 2000). During the last few years, e-learning has witnessed growing interest from different
directions, which helped in fast promotion and prosperity of these electronic educational activities. Different organizations that were involved in distance education have adopted this new technology and started to offer online learning that was treated as a logical extension to their distance educational activities. Educational institutions have also been involved in promoting for higher interest towards e-learning through incorporating this educational technology to improve access towards their educational programs and to provide a better merge with the current market. (Bates, 2005).

The growth of e-learning has also been regarded to the advances in the field of information and communication technologies which has helped in lowering the cost of adopting e-learning services and technology in a better and much effective way.

Despite this massive interest in the e-learning technology, it is not without constraints and limitations. The primary obstacles towards this e-learning technology are the lack of proper infrastructure of information and communication technology (William et al., 2004).

**Middle East Scenario**

In The Middle East scenario, many Arab universities are taking gigantic steps in their use of e-learning to enhance higher education (Abouchedid and Eid, 2004). The countries surveyed in this investigation were found to be heading in the same direction as far as implementing this technology was concerned. It was also found, however, that the process was rather slow and still at initial stages in some cases due a number of factors such as, political peculiarities; rigidity of government agendas; levels of economic development and technological challenges. The political situation in the region has been facing many challenges. These challenges have had a significant bearing on the different sectors of human activity with education being a case in point. So influential has their impact been that it has affected other areas especially those that have a close relationship with education such the country’s economy, technology and financial status (George, and Davoodi, 2003).

**Brief Insight on the Status of Arab Countries in the Middle East**

The Arab World is a region which has suffered both economically and financially compared to the rest of the World which has thus affected the level of literacy and adoption of new education systems and methods. The high level of illiteracy and poor technology infrastructure has meant that good educational opportunities are typically reserved for those who are societies wealthiest, which as a proportion of the overall population in Arab states is relatively small (Cassidy and Matthew, 2002).

The ‘digital divide’ as it is known, is the difference in access to technology between the countries located in the economically richer Northern Hemisphere compared to those in the poorer Southern Hemisphere. Developed nations mainly based in the richer northern hemisphere, have long enjoyed access to fast, reliable technology and communication media due to their greater economic prosperity and financing of IT infrastructures and educational initiatives. This in turn has provided them more opportunities for education and development for their citizens (Elango and Selvam, 2008). The need for e-learning solutions for the Arab world is essential for bridging the digital divide as there are over 130 million illiterate Arab children with no formal education. The adoption of e-learning systems is of paramount importance as currently the average yearly population growth in the Arab States is 2.5%, compared to a figure of 1.5% worldwide, which equates to having approximately 110 million 5-18 year olds by the year 2010. This will drastically change the demographics of the region and place a huge burden on the limited resources and the infrastructure it presently has (Internet World Statistics, 2009). This will also place extra strain on the traditional schooling and education methods.
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