Prospect of eLearning in higher education sectors of Saudi Arabia: A review

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Abstract

The number of internet users in Saudi Arabia has increased rapidly from 7.7 million users in 2008, to 21.6 million in 2015. This is a result, in part, of the Saudi government's investment in information and communication technology infrastructure. In addition, the Saudi government spends between a quarter and a third of its budget on education every year. However, even with the number of Higher Education institutions increasing in Saudi Arabia, a significant number of students miss out on a place at a University. ELearning is one way to provide accessibility to more students and to overcome cultural barriers which may prevent some citizens from perusing a university qualification. This paper will focus on higher education in Saudi Arabia, in particular, the advantages and advances which are occurring in this country in terms of eLearning. Supportive departments created to help the educational processes to move toward eLearning, such as the National Centre of ELearning and Distance Learning and the Saudi Digital Library will be described and examined. Challenges in the field of education will then be examined and whether these challenges can be overcome by utilizing effective eLearning.

1. Introduction

Within the literature of learning and teaching, the term "eLearning" is often used interchangeably with other terms such as "online learning" and "distance learning". Clark and Mayer [1] define eLearning as "Instruction

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delivered on a digital device (such as a desktop computer, laptop computer, tablet or smart phone) that is intended to support learning". This clarifies what eLearning actually is and shows that eLearning can indeed be different from "distance learning", which can also be performed using paper communication [2-3]. Other sources show that eLearning can be categorized by its primary purpose as technology-driven, delivery-system-oriented, communication-oriented or educational-paradigm-oriented. Similarly, Garrison [6] points out that it is not easy to provide a complete definition of eLearning due to (in part), the rapid improvement of technology. For example, he even refers to the idea that the letter "e" can refer to "extending and enhancing" the learning experience rather than just meaning "electronic".

With a substantial increase in both the number of internet service providers in Saudi Arabia and the number of imported mobile technological devices purchased, the Saudi Arabia government has set as a priority the use of new electronic systems, to replace the old paper systems. There is clear evidence of this in the way government departments work. In addition, the Saudi government requires that all higher education institutions, whether public or private, establish a deanship of eLearning and distance learning. In addition, the ministry of education has created the National Centre of eLearning and Distance Learning in order to support progress in this area. The establishment of the Saudi Digital library by the government is another support mechanism aimed at modernizing the information systems in Saudi Arabia. The "Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and the National Transformation Program 2020" also places emphasis on national plans to provide a variety of learning methods in the higher education sector, including eLearning [5]. For the residents of Saudi Arabia, eLearning is seen as one way professionals can improve their employability, remain current in their field and achieve their career aspirations. eLearning can be designed to be flexible, without the barriers of set time and location [6]. Currently, eLearning in Saudi Arabia is either completely "distance mode" or embedded in a "blended" delivery style. This paper will examine the advantages of eLearning for Saudi Arabia and examine the challenges the implementation of eLearning will put on education institutions within that nation.

2. The current status of higher education in Saudi Arabia

2.1. Education Providers

Higher education in Saudi Arabia is provided mainly by public and private universities and colleges including some other higher education institutions such as Technical and Vocational Training Corporation. The term "Public universities" refers to universities that are funded by the government and in most cases they are free for the citizens. Private universities and colleges may be options for students who could not find an opportunity in public universities; could not choose a specific course; or for foreign students.

The qualifications in Saudi Arabia can be divided to 7 levels as the National Commission for Academic Accreditation & Assessment (2015) refers[7] to them:
- Entry. Completion of secondary education;
- Level1. Associate Diploma;
- Level2. Diploma;
- Level3. Bachelor;
- Level4. Higher Diploma;
- Level5. Master;
- Level6. Doctor.

Most of the institutions offer a variety of courses starting from basic sciences such as Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics to a number of specialized courses such as Engineering and Medical Science. In Saudi Arabia, there are 29 public universities with more than 133 campuses distributed across the whole country. The number of campuses was calculated by counting one campus per city; however, some universities have more than one physical campus in the same city. Moreover, there are 10 private universities located in six different provinces. In addition, public colleges can be divided into four main categories which are: (a) Technical and Vocational Training Corporation with more than 56 colleges, (b) The Royal Commission for Jubail and Yanbu with 5 colleges, and (c) Institute of Public Administration (IPA) with 4 campuses and Prince Sultan Military College of Health Sciences