

An Exploration of Distance Learning in Saudi Arabian Universities: Current Practices and Future Possibilities

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Abstract

Distance learning is a growing topic in education. Studies have reported both benefits and drawbacks to the use of distance learning. Many higher education institutes have recognized the benefits that distance learning provides to its students and developed successful distance learning courses. The universities in Saudi Arabia have also recognized these benefits and have since begun implementing distance learning programs. Despite the implementation of distance learning programs in Saudi universities, a void still exists. The growing number of women joining new programs and the growing number of students denied admission due to overcrowding show that there is room for growth. This paper analyzes the current distance learning programs in three Saudi universities, as well as the need for the expansion of distance learning. Finally, the future possibilities of distance learning in Saudi Arabia are explored.

Keywords: e-learning, higher education, Blackboard, program expansion, women in education

1. Introduction

Distance learning is not a new topic of discussion or feature in education. Distance learning is, however, an emerging educational tool in Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has recently spent hundreds of millions of dollars improving the nation's educational system, specifically higher education. These improvements include the construction of new state-of-the-art universities, which rival top institutions around the world. The new institutions have come with curriculum development and changes and the introduction of technology for educational purposes. Such improvements have helped the Arab nation to tap into and cultivate previously neglected areas of study and bring education to non-traditional students. Distance learning is a tool that when utilized properly has the ability to do just that.

Distance learning opens a new mode of education to many who otherwise would have never had access to higher education. Implementation of distance education has come with some resistance and trepidation on both the students and instructors part. Yet, the use of distance education can prove to be beneficial in numerous ways. Its use has the ability to provide students with another learning option that may suit their learning style better than the traditional classroom setting, reach students who otherwise are not able to attend traditional classes, and offer flexibility by reducing the constraints of rigid scheduling. Although the use of distance learning is increasing in Saudi Arabia, there are still many technical and social challenges that the nation face in order to improve distance education. The paper will give insight into how distance learning is carried out in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the paper will describe the changes that have occurred as a result of the implementation of distance learning, as well as the benefits of the use of distance learning. Aside from that, the paper offers suggestions to improve distance learning from a technology standpoint.

2. Distance Learning in Saudi Arabia

Distance learning has been present in higher education in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom for some time. The use of distance learning has created a new realm of education. No more must students trek to the classroom lugging heavy textbooks at a scheduled time. Now, this new realm of education is delivered to students via the Internet in the comfort of their own home and at a more flexible time. The development of telecommunications networks around the world has provided educators and students access to more information than ever before. The dissemination of information has promoted the understanding of worldwide cultures and peoples (McIsaac&Gunawardena, 1996). The benefits of telecommunications are undeniable.

Likewise, the benefits of distance education have proven to be beneficial to many, but if implemented on a large scale, can prove to be especially rewarding to students in Saudi Arabia.

2.1 The Benefits of Distance Learning

The benefits of distance learning are all inclusive extending to the young and old, the working professional and the stay-at-home parent, and the handicap and disabled. Little is required to make use of distance learning and with limited training even the most unlikely tech savvy person can become a competent user of distance learning tools. Yet still, the digital divide continues to haunt the world on a global level, separating the developing from the developed and on the national level dividing the *haves* from the *have nots*. The digital divide challenges the concept of distance learning attempting to leave students on the wrong side of the boundary in its wake. One drawback to the use of distance learning is that students do not always have access to a computer and the Internet from home, which is one of the appeals of distance learning; the ability to choose where, and sometimes when, the classes are taken. The Saudi Arabian government offers its citizens free education from primary school through higher education. And while the digital divide impacts Saudi Arabia, the government counters this with monetary stipends that are allotted to students in higher education giving students the opportunity to make the most of their education (Rugh, 2002). This does not, however, end the struggle of retaining students in distance education courses.

An ever-increasing number of students withdraw from distance education courses opting for a traditional classroom setting (Ibrahim, et al., 2007). Many students are reluctant to enroll in and often withdraw from distance learning courses for a variety of reasons. A definitive underlying explanation for this trend is still lacking. However, it has been suggested that the cultural background of the students has a high effect on the students' willingness and ability to participate in distance learning courses. Whereas Western students have a more individualistic learning style that relies on analytical analyses, non-Western students have a more collective learning style that utilizes a holistic approach to analysis (Al-Harhi, 2005). The "absence" of the instructor, who is often viewed as the single source of information, may also explain students' trepidation when faced with distance learning. Despite student fears, distance learning studies have demonstrated that the amount of information in most cases equals or surpasses that of traditional classes (Al-Harhi, 2005; Altowajry, 2005). Even though the amount of information is equal to or more than the traditional classroom, distance learning requires students to have time management skills beyond that of the traditional classroom. Moreover, the students must be willing to interact with the professor and their fellow classmates both individually and in groups. This point, however, may be to the benefit of students who are reluctant to participate in live classes.

Overall, distance learning does have some drawbacks depending on where it is used and by whom and these drawbacks are said to be ever present in Arab nations. However, if distance education courses are designed in a way that suits the specific culture in which it is used, there is less of a chance of ambiguity and more opportunity for shared meaning and understanding by the professors and students (Al-Harhi, 2005). The participants in distance learning must be taken into account for the instruction to be effective and comprehensive. Utilizing a generalized practice of distance education that does not suit the needs of the culture in which it will be actualized is to the detriment of the students and is not only ineffective, but deterrent to students. The educational system in Saudi Arabia has been the topic of many articles ranging from its overt religious nature to the status of women within it. It is the topic of women in education that can be of particular interest in distance learning in Saudi Arabia. Distance learning may be exceptionally appealing to women.

Statistics demonstrate that in 2000, the number of females in schools rivaled or surpassed the number of males. Specifically in 2000, the number of Adult women enrolled in educational institutes was 74,000 compared to 34,000 men (Rugh, 2002). The number of women in higher education continues to grow. The growing number of women has created a challenge for Saudi universities as administration attempts to house women in courses that women are taking for the first time as they become available them. In an attempt to cater to both men and women, a sort of distance learning has been utilized in Saudi Arabia for women in higher education. This distance learning was used extend access to courses to women that were traditionally only offered on men's campuses, as women and men classes and campuses are segregated. In these cases, the men's class that is being taught by the instructor is broadcasted to the women's classroom, where the women can participate in the class by being heard, but not seen by their male counterparts (Rugh, 2002). Women in Saudi Arabia place high value on family and caring for the family. It is the general belief that the role of women is the fundamental base of the family structure and in turn the fundamental to society (Hamdan, 2005).

The education of women traditionally prepared women for the role. However, this traditional role is being expanded upon as more and more women opt to work outside of the home and pursue higher levels of education. Distance learning offers women the opportunity to better manage home and education. Women, while maintaining the home, can continue their education via distance learning. Bringing ease to learning and relinquishing some added expenses, such as car services for women to and from universities. Distance learning has the possibility to resolve many of the issues facing Saudi Arabia's educational system in higher education. The growth in enrollment, the inclusion of women in new programs and courses, and the desire to compete on a global scale by making use of technology make the appeal of distance learning even larger. On a national level the benefits of distance learning are great, but the benefits on the individual level are even more far reaching. Distance learning provides an ease in learning in terms of a more flexible schedule and the ability to self-pace. It also makes access to higher education more available to more people including working professionals and women. Distance learning has all of the components to be a vital element in higher education; however that is, of course, if culture is considered and the most advanced technology is used.

2.2 The Need for Distance Learning Expansion

Better use of distance learning in Saudi Arabia is needed in response to a number of factors. The increase in enrollment, as well as specifically the increase in women in new educational programs and courses, validates the need for distance learning programs alongside traditional courses in Saudi Arabian universities. Al-Sultan, as cited by Altowajry (2005, p. 22), demonstrates the increase in enrollment coupled with the number of students who were denied access to higher education. In 1993, the study shows that 70,000 students graduated and 2,000 were unable to proceed to a higher education institute. However, in 2003 more than 200,000 students graduated and more than 12,000 students were unable to find a place in higher education (Altowajry, 2005). The statistics further show that the gap between the number of students graduating from high school and the number of students admitted to a higher education institute will continue to widen. Clearly, there is room and a need for a solution to provide those students eager to continue their education with access to higher education.

As aforementioned, the digital divide is a factor in Saudi Arabia, as it is in all nations. However, as Saudi Arabia continues to transition into a technology-driven country, so too do its citizens. Making use of technology in education is merely another manner in which the Arab nation can continue to develop not only technology, but also its educational system. Distance education has the ability to reach students who otherwise were not in a position to either attend higher education or continue their education once they have graduated and begun a profession. The estimated population of Saudi Arabia is just over 26 million with 65 percent of the population between the ages of 15 and 64 (CIA World Factbook, 2012). According to *Internet World Stats* (2012), the number of Internet users in 2011 was estimated to be 11 million signifying that just less than 50 percent of the population has Internet access. In correlation, the percentage of Internet users in the United States is 50 percent (Internet World Stats, 2012). Furthermore, the results of a study conducted with 205 high school students and 71 workers, who were unable to secure a place in a higher education institution as a result of overcrowding, in Riyadh and Jeddah reveal that 68 percent of the participants agreed that they had basic PC skills and that 80 percent of those same participants have a computer in their home. Importantly, of those participants that stated they did not have basic PC skills, 80 percent said they would be willing to learn how to use a PC (Altowajry, 2005). What's more is that the Saudi Arabian government, which governs education at all levels, has allocated increasingly large amounts of the nation budget to higher education.

The 2010 budget allotted \$36.5 billion to education and vocational training. The government's five year development plan is coursed to increase the spending on higher education institutes and vocational training to \$200 billion by 2014 (Lindsey, 2010). The Saudi Arabian government will continue to increase the budget for education and training as it continues to invest in its own people. In 2011, the budget for education and training increased to \$40 billion, which was 46 percent of the total national budget (US-Saudi Arabian Business Council, 2012). The government has begun to transition the focus of its education and training programs to increase the productivity of its workforce in public sector. In order to do this the government will need to increase the number of students admitted to higher education institutes, but for this to happen the government will be forced to make changes to accommodate the number of students and their needs. These numbers demonstrate that the participants for distance learning are there. The bulk of the population of Saudi Arabia is the prime age for higher education. The number of students graduating high school continues to increase, as does the number of students who are denied admission due to overcrowding.

Yet, despite the statistics that demonstrate the enrollment growth, the number of competent Internet users and the number of students with home access to a computer and the Internet the Saudi Arabian government has not made full use of distance learning throughout higher education. Distance education provides students with another learning option that could potentially allow them to continue their education while still contributing to the national economy while working.

2.3 Distance Learning Tools in Saudi Arabia

Currently in Saudi Arabia, the use of distance education is budding. Yet, there is room for improvement and expansion. It is first important to evaluate the status of distance learning as it currently stands before discussing the prospects of distance learning in higher learning in Saudi Arabia. In this section, the distance learning programs at three major universities in Saudi Arabia will be presented. The three universities, King Saud University in Riyadh, King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, and King Faisal University in Al-Hasa, are all leading universities in Arab region. While previous forms of distance learning took the form of print materials utilized through standard mail services and the use of print materials still continues in forms of textbooks and the like, this paper will turn its focus to the use of technology to facilitate distance education.

The three universities, King Saud University (KSU), King Abdulaziz University (KAU), and King Faisal University (KFU), though stated in different ways, all share the same mission in delivering distance learning to its students. The mission of the universities' distance learning programs is to utilize, integrate, and train students and faculty with the latest technology in distance learning. The establishment of the Deanships of e-learning and distance learning at each of the respective universities developed at different times with KAU being the first in 2006. In 2010, both KSU and KFU implemented a new *Deanship of e-Learning and Distance Learning* program at their universities. As stated on each university's webpage for the Deanship of e-Learning and Distance Learning, the program is responsible for providing the students with online resource training and access to tools such as virtual classrooms and online lectures and seminars (King Saud University, 2010b; King Abdulaziz University, 2011b; King Faisal University, n.d.).

To ensure that the faculty was able to make full use of the distance learning technology all three universities have stated that they fully train their faculty to meet the needs of students taking distance learning courses. An exemplary example of faculty training can be seen in KSU's efforts. KSU held training sessions during the summer of 2011 during which specific members of the university were given instruction on the management system. As a result of the success of such training sessions, the university reported that it would continue the training program to include all KSU faculty members. To further ensure that the distance learning program at KSU was making full use the technology available in the most efficient and effective way, faculty members at the university participated in the 2011 *Blackboard Exemplary Course Program*. The program, established by *Blackboard, Inc.*, is effectively faculty development in the realm of distance learning. Through the program, faculty members are assisted in developing best practices for distance learning (King Saud University, 2010a). Currently, King Faisal University (KFU) and King Saud University (KSU) have made strides with the use of distance learning at the institution. As listed on the universities' websites for E-Learning and Distance Education, the e-learning systems that are made available to the students include a Blackboard/Web CT Learning Management System, virtual classroom synchronous system, class capturing/recording system, authoring tool and content management systems, and an online exam system (King Faisal University, n.d.).

The Blackboard system functions as a distance learning management system that serves as a medium through which classes can be held, work can be assessed, and grades can be tracked. Using basic functions, students are able to exchange files, communicate with instructors and classmates through discussion boards, forums, chats, and email. Instructors and students can also utilize authoring tools in multiple formats to present and exchange audio, video, and image files. The Blackboard system can fully sustain a distance learning course or function as a supplemental site for a traditional course or hybrid course through the use of the virtual or synchronous classroom. Through this system, students can attend live classes and participate in those classes by using the whiteboard, real-time quizzes, recording and playback capabilities, and application sharing. The students experience the live class through real-time synchronous voice over that does not require a minimum Internet connection speed. To provide a more flexible schedule for students in distance learning, the class capturing/recording system can be utilized. This option affords instructors two different options. Instructors can record the synchronous an upload it for students to review at their leisure. Similarly, instructors can record classes that were not presented synchronously.

This gives the students more freedom in their schedule to view the class within the parameters of the course outline. King Abdulaziz University (KAU) makes use of several different distance learning components that allow the students to engage in classes and collaborate as if they were in a traditional classroom. Like KFU and KSU, KUA also makes use of the virtual classroom providing students access to recorded classes at any time from any location with an Internet connection. The virtual classroom also provides students with access to content material such as lesson overviews, tasks, assessments, links to online resources, and downloadable training resources and files (King Abdulaziz University, 2011c). One system that KAU has plans of introducing that differs from the other two universities is a mobile learning system. This system would be compatible with mobile cellular devices or other devices that make use of cellular data or connect to the Internet such as the iPod, iPad, or other tablet or device (King Abdulaziz University, 2011b). As the university recognizes the increased use of changing technology used by its students, it realizes that learning must also adapt to reach students on their level utilizing technology as students do.

The three aforementioned universities are all leading universities in Saudi Arabia and are beginning to earn recognition on a global scale. The universities have made use of some of the best educational technologies available for distance learning in ways that try to increase student understanding and provide access resources and training. Such technology creates a virtual classroom that in many ways mirrors a traditional classroom. KSU and KAU have been recognized and awarded for their distance learning programs (King Saud University, 2010; King Abdulaziz University, 2011a). Despite these efforts, if Saudi Arabian universities hope to be able to provide education to its growing population, then not only will the universities have to remain current with education technology, as well as increase the number of trained instructors to teach distance learning courses.

3. The Future of Distance Learning Development

Technology is ever changing and in many changing the lives of people who use it. This has never been truer for students. Educational technology has changed the way that instructors deliver information to students. No example is more palpable than distance learning. Distance learning opens a world of possibilities for higher educational institutes, as is the situation happening in Saudi Arabia. However, when universities introduce distance learning programs, they then have a responsibility to their faculty and students to remain current as educational technology develops in order to provide both faculty and students with the best educational experience possible. If Saudi Arabia hopes to ensure its future and its future workforce lessening the dependence on foreign workers and strengthening fields in which those workers currently fill, then the nation will have to expand the number of students admitted to universities across the country. There already exists an answer for this dilemma. With the expansion of the distance learning programs at Saudi Arabian universities, more students will have the chance to be given admission to a university. Distance learning will also help give students, not living in one of the major cities where most of the universities are located, the opportunity to receive higher education. The possible benefits of expanding the distance learning programs in Saudi Arabian universities are numerous. What's more is that the benefits can possibly be to the gain of universities worldwide.

Saudi Arabia is sitting on an abundance of wealth, both literally and figuratively. The steadily increasing budget for education, and specifically the budget for higher education and career training programs, puts university administrators in a unique position. While national and state budgets continue to be cut and funding dwindles, education has seen the brunt of this. However, Saudi Arabian universities have the potential to bring innovation and renovation to distance learning. All of the components are present: the funding, the technology, the faculty, and students. The institutions have newly implemented distance learning programs that have not only been acknowledged on a global scale, but also awarded. The growing budget has also allowed the institutions to invest in the latest technology. The training programs for faculty members at the universities have been met with acceptance and an eagerness for more. And the growing population in the country is knocking at the door and eager for education. Given these components, it is up to the faculty and administration at KSU, KAU, and KFU, as well as other Saudi Arabian universities employing distance learning, to be leaders in the field. If distance learning is to progress in terms of teaching methodology and technology integration for educational purposes, research must continue to be conducted. The large number of students and faculty who would be able to participate in distance learning will be able to provide ample feedback, suggestions, and criticism. Again, Saudi Arabian universities are in the unique position to utilize such information in way that will not only be useful in the development or modification of technology for educational purposes, but also in the pedagogical expansion learner-centered instruction in distance learning.

4. Conclusion

Distance learning has developed over decades to become what most students know it to be today. The development of technology has undoubtedly spurred the growth of distance learning and afforded students who otherwise might not have the opportunity to receive higher education or continue to postgraduate degrees the chance to do so. Moreover, in countries such as Saudi Arabia, distance learning opens up doors to women that have long been closed. The overall benefits of distance learning are numerous when implications regarding culture and student-centered methodologies are fully considered. Educators in Saudi Arabia realize the benefits that technology brings to learning and thus have implemented it throughout the nation's universities. Yet, there is room for growth. As the number of students denied admission to higher education because of overcrowding continues to grow, educators must respond. Distance learning can serve as a possible solution to this dilemma. With the expansion of the distance learning programs, comes the opportunity to be leaders in distance learning research. If Saudi Arabia so wishes, it has the opportunity to advance teaching and technology methodologies that will have an impact beyond its borders assisting both developing and developed nations make better use of distance learning.

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