

A SOCIO-CULTURAL OVERVIEW OF E-LEARNING IN SAUDI ARABIA

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ABSTRACT

Many regard Saudi Arabia as a conservative and religious nation with a perception of some degree of neglect or discrimination towards its female population. This deters many to realize the kind of revolution this nation is going through, especially in the field of education. Many might not realize that the kingdom of Saudi Arabia has state of art educational institutions with best possible equipment and infrastructure in the world.

In addition, the government is providing very lucrative scholarships to hundreds of thousands of its man and women to study abroad in a country of their choice to acquire the best possible education in their field of study. A very high degree of emphasis is laid on the education of its female section of the society. In this article, we look at socio-cultural issues and their influence on education.

Keywords: E-learning, open and distance learning, female education, tertiary education, religious, cultural, social, political.

INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia, one the twenty richest countries in the world, is currently undergoing an educational revolution. Many world class universities have started during the last decade. Hundreds of thousands of Saudi Arabian students have been provided generous state scholarships to peruse higher education in many developed countries of the world led by the US, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. Universities at home have been offering lucrative pay packets to attract international educationalists from around the globe. For example the number of overseas students and staff at the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology is much greater than the locals. One may be surprised to see the developments of educational infrastructure in the middle of the desert. Given the speed with which the educational developments are shaping, the kingdom is heading to become a well-educated country in the near future.

It is not hidden that the Saudi Arabia is a highly religious (conservative for some) country. It is well know that an internationally acclaimed city Makkah (Mecca), which houses Kaaba, (which marks the direction of prayers for the faithful) (Qibla, 2013), (Yamin, & Ades, 2009) and (Yamin, 2008).

Internationally well-known pilgrimage known as Hajj (Hajj. (2013), (Yamin, M. & Ades, (2009) and (Yamin, 2008). Performed by millions every year, also takes place in and around Makkah. A detailed account of pilgrimage to Makka and the surrounding areas can is provided by Yamin in (Yamin, & Ades, (2009) and Yamin, M. (2008).

Saudi Arabia may perhaps be regarded as a seat of Islam, Makkah having somewhat similar prominence as the Vatican City, the seat of Catholicism. The Saudi government and the people of the kingdom are well known for their generosity.

FEMALE EDUCATION

Given the religious credentials of the country, one may wonder about the plight of the females, especially when it comes to education.

It is true that women are not allowed to drive motor vehicles and are highly encouraged to cover their bodies including faces in the public. Most marriages are arranged by relatives, generally with mutual consent. The family life however enjoys a very high degree of respect in the social and business circles.

There are many shopping malls, sporting facilities and business entities designed either exclusively for females or families. Of course there is adequate number of female-only educational institutions in the country in basic as well as higher educational fields. Saudi Arabia has a unique system of co-education education at the tertiary level.

Nora University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, is the largest female-only university in the world. It has about fifty thousand students and has state of art facilities including a mono rail serving the students and staff in the university. To fulfill the needs of the other female population, all Saudi universities have a female section of academic and administrative units that their male counterparts have. When it comes to teaching of female students by a male instructor is concerned it is usually accomplished by means of a video link arrangement.

A male instructor may teach a section of male students face to face in a class together with a female section receiving instructions in a specially designed classroom in the women's campus, under the supervision of an assistant female instructor. Female section receives the lecture via one-way video link, whereby they can see the instructor but the instructor can only receive the audio from the female side making it possible for females to ask questions during his lecture. This method of education has been approved by well-known international accreditation bodies like the Association of MBAs and EPAS administered by the European Foundation of Management Development (European Foundation of Management Development (2013).

DISTANCE LEARNING IN SAUDI ARABIA

E-learning or distance learning in Saudi Arabia in the recent years has gained a lot of popularity, especially amongst the young married females who otherwise find it difficult to continue their education.

Given the initiatives of the government, demand for distance learning programs is likely to grow in the near future. Emphasis on education in Saudi Arabia now is all time high, specially due to a very generous government scholarship program; the conventional methods of Learning and Teaching (L&T) are not going to be sufficient for the Saudi society.

Special categories of people like full time employees, those living far away from university campuses, old age and people with disabilities, and a large chunk of females find it convenient to continue their education in distance learning modes as opposed to the conventional face to face and interactive mode of L&T. Indeed, for these and other classes of people, Distance Learning is one of the effective and affordable methods of educating themselves.

With the stabilization and proliferation of the electronic technology, all leading universities of the world have introduced distance learning programs along with the conventional methods. Even in the conventional methods, all progressive universities of the world have made it mandatory for instructors to adapt to certain practices of Distance Learning. For example many universities require their teachers to provide teaching material and facilitate bulletin boards on the university intranet. The impact of technological advancement is so massive that a vast majority of students is opting for distance learning with the help of web and multimedia. Nevertheless even the best methodologies need reviewing and fine tuning on a continuous basis. A successful institution needs to assess the impact of its offerings.

Therefore the success of the Distance Learning programs run by different institutions must undergo a rigorous quality assurance program based on continuous input from all stockholders including the teachers and students. The King Abdulaziz University (KAU) started Distance Learning Program in 2006. The university has established a deanship for this purpose.

Currently there are about 1000 students enrolled in this program. Only two faculties namely, Economics and Business Administration and the faculty of Arts and Humanities are offering some of their degree programs through Distance Learning. The Deanship of the Distance Learning has secured in-house course development programs and is in a position to support L&T material and services for up to 10,000 students. The Deanship has also done an excellent work in tailoring the Learning Management System that it uses.

Currently, there are many young people and mature age people enrolled in KAU's distance learning program. The other categories of people enrolled in the program are people with disabilities, mature age people and the people living far away from university campuses or living in remote areas.

The distance learning programs throughout the world has gained significant recognition and popularity. Distance Learning is also known by other names like Distributed Learning, Open Learning, Online Learning and E-Learning.

The need and demand for distance learning courses is rising in the kingdom. At the King Abdulaziz University, distance learning courses, specially offered by the faculty of Economics and Business Administration, and are gaining a lot of recognition and popularity.

As the demand grows, the need to prepare modern curriculum and continuously upgrade the existing teaching material also grows. No progressive institution can afford to ignore the need to review and fine-tune its curricula on a regular basis. If the curricula weren't regularly reviewed and updated, the program wouldn't grow as much we would like it to see it grow and prosper. Keeping this in mind, through this proposal, we are offering to conduct a comprehensive feedback study from the students and teachers in order to determine the satisfaction levels in the areas of teaching contents, policies, technologies and methodologies.

Our research, if warranted, would suggest ways to make improvements in the course material offered in the Distance Learning program as well as policies and methodologies used by the program. These suggestions may be systemic, administrative and/or academic. The aim of the project is to ensure that KAU's Distance Learning program is comparable with those of the leading universities of the world and leads the way for the universities in the Arabian Peninsula. We have been assured by the deanship of the

Distance Learning that our report and recommendation would be studied and suitable actions would be taken.

DISTANCE LEARNING AND WOMEN IN SAUDI ARABIA

Distance learning provides a unique opportunity for the women in Saudi Arabia. Strictly speaking, there is no minimum age for marriage in the kingdom and as a general rule once a person, specially a young girl attains the age of puberty can be married. This coupled with social traditions; many young girls get married before entering a tertiary institution of education. Naturally, many of these women are keen to carry on with their education well beyond their marriage. Of course they can attend universities and actually many do but a large number of them find it very difficult to attend face to face classes. For, the eLearning or distance education becomes very crucial.

Indeed Saudi government has facilitated all educational institutions to provide for the distance learning program. When it comes to technology and means, the kingdom is well ahead of its neighbors' and the entire Arab world. For example, Saudi Arabia has ensured availability of high speed internet through Fiber Optics. New developments of Cloud Computing, (Yamin, 2013) are making it even easier to expand the base of eLearning and many universities and private educational institutions are taking the advantage of this new trend and technology.

In particular, the cloud computing platform as a Service (PaaS) and Infrastructure as a Service (IaaS) are very useful to ensure smooth delivery of the distance learning.

The awareness about e-learning in Saudi Arabia is picking up slowly. Historically speaking, in the beginning there has been is a low degree of public awareness of ICT and e-learning in Saudi Arabia, which may be connected to the other challenges facing the country's learners. a 2007 nationwide survey with 7,500 respondents concluded that a large portion of society remains unfamiliar with e-learning technical advancements and concepts (Abdullah & Siti, 2013)

Historical developments in the field of distance including, an account of plight of female education learning, can be found in (e.g. Ministry of Higher Education, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (MOHE), Quraishi, and Mirza, A. A. & Al-Abdulkareem, M.).

An overview of e-learning in Saudi Arabia can also be found in (Mirza & Al-Abdulkareem, 2011) Their study mentions a number of issues like internet problems, lack of support and advertising, cultural, religious and traditional barriers including some discussion on women's education. By the passage of time, most of these issues have dissipated.

Currently no woman is prevented from receiving modern education. In fact they are highly encouraged to attain higher scientific education. Not only Saudi Arabia has the largest female-only university in the world but it also has thousands of females studying medicine, science, economics and all other disciplines in all government and private educational institutions. In the field of communication, especially the provision of stable internet, the Saudi government has not been instrumental in providing broadband internet connections but has recently enabled provision of fiber optics internet connections.

These high speed internet connections are going to revolutionize the delivery of education, particularly the distance education or e-learning. For details of the Saudi government initiatives, refer to (Government Initiative to endorse eLearning In Saudi Arabia)

CONCLUSIONS

Saudi Arabia is a nation on move as far as the education is concerned. Hundreds of thousands of its young man and woman are receiving state of art education at home and abroad in many advanced countries. Educational institutions in the kingdom are of high quality and standard.

Many university courses of a number of universities are accredited by the well-known US and European accreditation programs.

Female education is on the rise. Distance Education is providing opportunities and is filling the gender gap in tertiary education. As usual, to reap the full benefits, the Distance or E-Learning program requires ongoing quality assessments based on well informed surveys from stakeholders.

AUTHOR's NOTE: This paper is published as "Yamin, M. (2013), A Socio-cultural Overview of E-learning in Saudi Arabia, *International Journal of Emerging Technology and Advanced Engineering*, 3 (12), 57-5."

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