

THE STATE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN SAUDI ARABIA

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This article provides an overview of the role of distance learning within Saudi Arabia by first briefly introducing the country itself, a general overview of the traditional education system currently in use within the country, and then an examination of the status of distance education in Saudi higher educational settings. Insight into how distance education can be successfully implemented, as well as the potential educational advantages that may arise with the further adoption of distance education in Saudi Arabia are presented. The adoption of distance education within Saudi Arabia can help address the issue of the educational overcrowding and the steady increase of the demand of Saudi students for higher education credentials, as well as empower Saudi female students to overcome social and cultural obstacles.

SAUDI ARABIA: THE COUNTRY

Saudi Arabia is the largest Arab country of the Middle East, with a population of approximately 30 million citizens and an average age of 25.3 years (Almutairy, Davies, & Dimitriadis, 2015; Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). The country, founded in 1932, was impoverished until the discovery of oil in 1938 (Alshehry & Bel-loumi, 2015). Saudi Arabia in 1960 became one of the founding members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (Alamri, 2011). Endowed with vast fossil fuel resources, Saudi Arabia is one of the world's largest holder of crude oil reserves as well as the world's largest exporter of oil, making

energy exports the most important component of the country's gross domestic product (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015; Alshehry & Bel-loumi, 2015). The immense revenue coming from oil makes the country one of the leading economic powers and the fastest growing economy in the Middle East and North Africa (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015).

Saudi Arabia is located within Southwest Asia, and is bordered by eight countries: Jordan and Iraq to the north; Kuwait to the northeast; Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates to the east; Oman to the southeast; and Yemen to the south. Saudi Arabia occupies 80% of the Arabian Peninsula, and has a strong relationship with the Gulf countries

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(i.e., Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates). This close relationship resulted in the establishment in 1981 of the Gulf Cooperation Council to strengthen regional economic integration among these six countries (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015; Niblock, 2004).

The religion of Islam was born in Makkah (Mecca) and Medina in the Hejaz region of Saudi Arabia, and Saudi Arabia holds the two holiest places for Muslims (Almasjed Alharam in Makkah, and Almasjid Alnabawi in Medina). Saudi citizens are predominantly Muslims, and Islam is the core of most Saudi's culture, beliefs, and customs (Alshehry & Belloumi, 2015). Arabic is the official language in the country as well as being the major language of more than 200 million native speakers in the Middle East (Versteegh, 2014); this is in addition to Muslims around the world who learn the Arabic language for Islamic practices, including prayers.

EDUCATION IN SAUDI ARABIA

In 1953, Saudi Arabia established its Ministry of Education, charged with overseeing all schools across the country that are required to implement the government-directed curriculum (Deraney & Abdelsalam, 2012). Saudi Arabia has been successful in establishing broad access to education, which has resulted in high adult literacy rates (Saqlain, Al-Qarni, & Ghadi, 2013). General education consists of three stages: primary, intermediate, and secondary (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). Saudi Arabia has long been able to provide free education to Saudi students from primary school through higher education levels, with the government allocating a large portion of the country's budget to education (Alamri, 2011; Algarni & Male, 2014; Aljabre, 2012; Al-Seghayer, 2011). In addition, undergraduate students receive financial assistance and free housing from the government in most Saudi universities.

Because the mixing of genders is not allowed within Saudi Arabian schools and most educational settings, schools are segregated based on the gender of both students and teachers, which forms the basis of a single-sex school system (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). Thus, schools are divided into other schools, some for males and some for females. Likewise, Saudi universities consist of two geographically separated campuses: one campus serves male students, and the other, female students (Alshahrani & Walker, 2016). This separation is due to religious and cultural norms of the society that are upheld by governmental laws and policies (Almutairy et al. 2015; van Geel 2016). However, it has been shown that male and female students receive the same quality of education and governmental financial assistance (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013; Taylor & Albasri, 2014).

Saudi Arabia launched a large-scale project in 2007 called the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz's Project for Development of Public Education, ("Tatweer," as it is known in Arabic) to improve education in public schools (Alghamdi & Higgins, 2015). With a budget of \$2.4 billion, this project was designed to improve the quality of public education by introducing a more modern system of instruction (Tatweer, 2016). One of the objectives of the Tatweer Project is to promote learning by providing effective training and professional development programs for teachers, leaders, and school staff (Tatweer, 2016). Despite undertakings such as the Tatweer Project, however, challenges, including teacher professional development, time allotted for training, and Internet access, persist. It is understood that these factors must be considered if a successful adoption of a modern system of instruction is to be accomplished for 21st century students within Saudi Arabia (Alahmari & Kyei-Blankson, 2016).

The Saudi Ministry of Higher Education was established in 1975 as a centralized authority to exclusively supervise and manage higher education in Saudi Arabia (Alamri, 2011; urRahman & Alhaisoni, 2013). Some 25

governmental (public) universities and an associated number of private institutions commenced in the last decade, a number that is steadily increasing (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). However, Saudi public universities continue to face significant overcrowding where the estimated number of students attempting to matriculate is some 450,000 individuals (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010; Almutairi et al. 2015; Asiri, bt Mahmud, Bakar, & bin Mohd Ayub 2012). Indeed, the number of enrolled Saudi students in 2005 was 151,998, but subsequently swelled to a staggering 905,892 students in 2011, a 600% increase (Baqtayan 2011).

This enormous growth in higher education has prompted the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education to take significant steps to address the issue. The government, for example, offered government-funded scholarships for students to study abroad (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). For example, the King Abdullah Scholarship Program was established in 2005, arguably the largest government scholarship program in the world, with approximately 125,000 Saudi students studying in 23 countries (Taylor & Albasri 2014). The Ministry of Education has similarly encouraged the use of Internet-based and technology-based tools to deliver college education in support of the country's rapidly growing student population.

The use of the Internet for business and socioeconomic development within Saudi Arabia commenced in 1995, and some form of Internet access has been generally available to the public since 1999 (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010; Xanthidis, Alali, & Koutzampasopoulou, 2016). Although Internet access was implemented quite late in Saudi Arabia in comparison with other countries due to governmental concerns and reservations (Alshahrani 2016), some Saudi universities and colleges have increasingly turned to Internet-based technology, including the web, to deliver their educational curricula in an attempt to address the significant student overcrowding within these institutions. Simultaneously, by the end of 2016, the Internet

penetration rate in Saudi Arabia reached 74.9%, with the number of high-speed Internet users continuing to rapidly rise to now reach some 24 million users, a number that is predicted to increase significantly over the next few years (The Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, 2017).

DISTANCE EDUCATION IN SAUDI ARABIA

Reflecting on this background, one where Saudi Arabia holds a booming population of learners seeking a higher education degree, the number of overcrowded schools, and the presence of a high Internet penetration rate, it is logical and apparent that Saudi Arabia could benefit from an e-learning-based approach as part of its higher education setting. This “new” vision of education would be designed to provide valuable and accessible education for all learners using a variety of technological tools that are both freely available and also easy to use. Distance education would also extend the opportunity to learn to students who work full time, to students with special needs, and others unable to attend traditional classes at a specific time and location.

The widespread technological innovations distance education can provide include a diverse set of methods of delivery (Al Ghamdi, 2017). Considering the Saudi Arabian religious, cultural, and technological context, technologies that might be best leveraged in the Saudi higher education environment to deliver distance education include: (1) interactive audio or video conferencing (which provide real time interaction), (2) prerecorded audio or video (which can be used to present class lectures and visually oriented content and allow students to watch and/or listen at their own pace), (3) discussion forums and threads (which permit students to interact with their instructor and with each other), and (4) e-mail (which can be used to send messages and assignment feedback) (cf. Al Ghamdi, 2017; Simonson, Smaldino, & Zvacek, 2014). Many

colleges and universities around the world have made the decision to adopt online and distance education because of these very technological features, all of which can make distance learning options more robust while less costly to implement (Simonson et al., 2014), and would theoretically yield the same benefits in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia, like other similar countries in the 21st century, are nevertheless moving toward distance education due to the opportunities afforded by the approach, including reach of a broader student audience; improving methods for addressing student needs; reduction in educational delivery costs; and perhaps most importantly, the ability to implement the principles of a modern learning pedagogy. These can be demonstrated in the Saudi case by considering that use of distance education in the Saudi Arabian higher education context has increased in the last five years (Badwelan, Drew, & Bahaddad, 2016), with some Saudi universities and colleges increasingly utilizing the Internet and the web to deliver their educational content online. For example, King Abdulaziz University (located in Jeddah), was the first Saudi university offering bachelor degrees partly through distance learning, and Imam Muhamed Bin Saud Islamic University (in Riyadh), offers distance learning programs delivered entirely online, providing students the opportunity to study at their own pace (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010). Other Saudi universities, including the Arab Open University, and later, the Saudi Electronic University, have also subsequently adopted partly online programs that lead to bachelor degrees.

Other universities in Saudi Arabia have also begun to implement facilities to support distance learning, leading to a proliferation of a variation of differing learning management systems (LMS), including Blackboard, WebCT, and Tadarus (an Arabic-based LMS) to facilitate teaching and learning in higher education (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010). King Saud University (Riyadh) has launched a Short Message Service (SMS) to allow faculty and administrators to deliver timely and relevant

information to their students (Almutairy et al., 2015; Altameem, 2011). According to Al Ghamdi (2017), using up-to-date e-learning features can reduce the feeling of separation between students and lecturers within the distance education environment, can promote effective communication, and can improve the learning outcomes of students. Saudi universities are attempting to do so for these very reasons, even if the technology type is simple, such as SMS.

To encourage distance education in higher education, the Ministry of Education has established the National Plan for Information Technology, which seeks to enhance the educational system and improve the quality of outcomes for its students through providing information and communication technology at all schools (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010; Saqlain et al., 2013). The National Plan for Information Technology has resulted in the establishment of the National Center for E-learning and Distance Education (NCED) in 2006, which undertook a group of initiatives designed to help transform traditional teaching and learning to make greater use of technology and to improve educational accessibility (Al-Asmari & Rabb Khan, 2014; Al Ghamdi, 2017).

The National Center for E-learning and Distance Education seeks to:

1. support the implementation of the “Jusur” System, the course management system used by National Center for E-learning and Distance Education (the Jusur is not simply focused on content delivery, but also manages the entire learning process, including students’ registration and progress reports);
2. train higher education staff to effectively use the Jusur system;
3. offer student advising and support for e-learning applications, as well as implementing best practices in both functions; and
4. work in parallel with universities to spread “awareness programs” which

describe the potential for change and the development of distributed learning (this is accomplished via the distribution of print materials such as brochures, as well as conducting lectures and training to spread awareness).

The “Excellence Award” is another step that the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia has undertaken to encourage initiatives that can enrich e-learning processes. The Excellence Award focuses on the concepts of excellence and creativity in e-learning applications to achieve total collaboration of efforts among universities in promoting positive learning outcomes. The Award for e-Learning Excellence focuses on supporting using modern technologies in higher education (Al-Fahad, 2009). Awards such as these are designed to reward efforts in the distance education realm, as well as demonstrate the government’s commitment to such endeavors.

Female Learners

Distance education has been used in Saudi universities continuously since 1970 to educate women, due to gender segregation in most education settings and the shortage of available female faculty. The year 1970, of course, greatly predates the development of the Internet, but the need for male faculty to teach within female campus was present, and was accomplished using distance learning via closed-circuit television. Female students viewed (and still view) lectures in real time via a TV monitor, and use a microphone system to ask questions, or give feedback (Yamin 2015). Because most students enrolled in the distance learning programs offered by some Saudi universities are females (due to their need to access education from within the home because of the cultural restrictions on women in the country (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010), this salient case of distance learning is very enlightening, because it demonstrates the use of distance learning without the Internet and the web. Nevertheless, the more sophisticated

features available in a web- and LMS-based delivery mechanism are driving an interest in a “conversion” of modalities to web-based e-learning for female Saudi students. In this case, the development of such distance education initiatives in Saudi universities can empower Saudi female students to overcome social and cultural obstacles.

Despite of these efforts to encourage distance education in Saudi higher education, the approach is being adopted at a relatively slow pace in comparison with some other countries. Furthermore, distance education is not accredited in the same manner than that of “traditional” education in Saudi Arabia, particularly in regard to recognition of these degrees within the job market. This is because distance education is still often perceived as of lesser value, and distance education graduates are often not as successful within the job market (Alsaysi, 2016). As a consequence, this accreditation difference between traditional and distance education may, in turn, be self-limiting the enrollment of distance programs.

TOWARD SUCCESSFUL DISTANCE LEARNING IN SAUDI ARABIA

Realizing that students learn at various rates and in diverse ways, the adoption of distance education in Saudi Arabia is essential to meet the various needs of diverse learners and to increase their chance for educational success. Distance education can meet the unique learning needs of Saudi students who cannot attend school for various geographic or personal reasons. Because distance education supports the idea that learning does not take place only in a school building, but rather at home, on the road, or wherever an Internet connection can be found, the approach can extend the reach of educational systems, as well as meet the needs of advanced learners who are looking for an academic challenge. Importantly, distance learning can provide opportunity for Saudis to upgrade their educational status without regularly attending a geographically located insti-

tution and leaving their jobs or business, particularly for those who have a demanding work schedule and family responsibilities.

Offering degrees at a distance using modern technology tools is appropriate for Saudi students by assisting them master a variety of technology skills using communication and learning technologies. It is an effective method for delivering a quality education while at the same time encouraging an independent learning style and reducing the costs traditionally associated with education.

Although many factors come into play with the successful implementation of an e-learning-based distance education system, in the Saudi context this will, at a minimum, require:

1. the selection of a suitable LMS that provides features sufficient to allow instructors to easily manage and deliver the educational content and resources to students and increase interaction between instructors and students (this interaction can be asynchronous when interacting through threaded discussions and forums, or synchronous when interacting at the same time through live course);
2. the deployment of advanced technologies with instantaneous messaging or live video interactions that can assist in replicating the behavioral “immediacy” found within interaction carried out in traditional classrooms (Al Ghamdi, 2017);
3. the development of syllabi that do not simply list course content outlines, but that work in conjunction with the LMS to guide and support students in their learning experiences (syllabus design is perhaps one of the most critical components of successful online learning experiences, for the syllabus serves as both the roadmap and provides guideposts that online students use as they work through an online course module); and
4. The development of a cadre of skilled instructors who can select, design, and develop meaningful online learning activities with clear guidelines, facilitation,

and explanations that support student interaction, collaboration, and expectations. Stated another way, Saudi Arabia requires instructional designers who are thoroughly familiar with developing and delivering online learning experiences to learners. This can be achieved both by offering professional development to instructors, and by bringing in instructors with such skills so that they can mentor existing instructors transitioning into the online teaching context.

CONCLUSION

This article’s description of historical, cultural, and religious dimensions present in the Saudi Arabian context lend credence to the vital usefulness of distance learning within the Saudi higher education context. For decades, countries around the world have taken advantage of the affordances and benefits provided by e-learning-based distance education, and numerous studies have been conducted demonstrating the effectiveness of this modality and asserting that it is at least as effective as traditional methods (Simonson et al., 2014; U. S. Department of Education, 2009; Ward, Peters, & Shelley, 2010). It is now time for Saudi administrators and decision makers to carefully examine the potential of e-learning-based distance education just as they would for any educational innovation that will require new skills, behaviors, beliefs, or understanding to be effectively implemented. However, designing e-learning-based distance learning programs requires careful planning, preparation, and organization.

The realization of e-learning-based distance education within the Saudi Arabian higher education context can not only address overcrowding and the steady rise of the Saudi student population, but can provide enriched and customized learning to meet the various needs of Saudi students. It can also help achieve equity of education opportunities across the Saudi populace. It is wise for Saudi govern-

ment to continually develop and advance the quality of distance education to make education a part of everyday life, accessible and affordable for anyone, anywhere, at any time. It can be argued that Saudi Arabian higher education *must* learn to correctly utilize this educational technology if it is to achieve parity with similar educational institutions around the world.

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