INTRODUCTION

According to the survey and statistical information for higher education (HE) in Iran, more than 1.6 million people took part in the Iranian national HE entrance examination in 2002 (Statistics of Higher Education in Iran, Institute of Research and Planning of Iran, 2001). Also, data show that 177,665 people were registered at HE institutions in the period 2000-2001 with a growth of 8.8% compared with the previous period. In the same period (2000-2001), a total of 46,747 educational instructors were employed at HE institutions in Iran with a growth of 2.65% compared with the previous period. From statistical data, the number of students at HE institutions rose from 67,268 in the period of 1949-1950 to 733,527 in the period of 2000-2001 which indicates an average annual growth of 7.75%. The 70 or so universities and HE institutions in Iran are incapable of accommodating the great number of demanding students wishing to pursue higher education in Iran.

The roots of Internet/Web-based education goes back to distance-based learning where participating learners receive learning materials (e.g., books, audio/video tapes, CDs, etc.) to pursue an educational/training course. E-learning may be defined as education that is delivered or learning that is conducted using Web techniques. Technologies and extensive activities have been focused on improving the flexibility, durability, efficiency, quality and various other aspects of e-learning around the globe.

Many articles articulate the advantages and disadvantages of e-learning; however, among the advantages gained from e-learning one may refer to the considerable contribution to not only to the promotion of higher education by advocating opportunities, but also decreasing the burden of extensive academic and administrational tasks performed by traditional HE institutions.

Unfortunately, like most Web innovations, the views towards e-learning have been focused solely on financial gains rather than the emphasis on all aspects of educational/learning qualities. Numerous e-learning programs have been launched around the globe in recent years. Few programs focus on the flexibility, durability, efficiency, quality and various other aspects of e-learning. Instead, some offer high quality Internet/Web technologies such as high quality video-conferencing requiring high bandwidth, while others go to the extent to offer fancy high class learning contents. Many programs use the existing learning portals such as WebCT or Blackboard; still others use open source e-learning systems which are freely available on the Internet to provide Web-based learning.

What we must bear in mind is that education/learning differs considerably from simply shopping on the Internet. Prior to launching
an e-learning initiative, careful attention must be placed on drafting and adopting strategies, policies and methodologies considering various social, technological, organizational and educational issues and minimize possible short or long term drawbacks and failures.

E-LEARNING AND ASSOCIATED ISSUES IN IRAN

With the explosion of information technology around the globe during recent years, e-learning, in particular, has received a great deal of attention in Iran. There has been numerous national conferences, seminars and workshops in addition to the establishment of various working groups. A number of universities, educational institutions and vocational training organizations have already launched e-learning programs or are in the process of establishing one. Among them Amir Kabir University (http://www.aku.ac.ir), Shiraz University (http://www.shirazu.ac.ir), Iran University of Science and Technology (http://www.iust.ac.ir), Isfahan University (http://www.ui.ac.ir), Sharif University (http://www.sharif.ac.ir) and Hadith Sciences College (http://www.hadith.ac.ir) have already registered students for their e-learning programs. There are also various projects underway to establish e-learning, among them, Open University (http://www.azad.ac.ir), Payam Noor University (http://www.pnu.ac.ir) and Tarbiat Modarres University (http://www.modares.ac.ir).

Most programs are based on a content-centric e-learning model where the e-learning program is based on a system which provides various functionalities and tools such as registration, access to collaboration tools (chat, forum, e-mail, etc.) and access to content. Such e-learning programs are just an access point to content, while the content itself may be dispersed across all of the system (disregarding the importance of sharable content object reference model (SCORM) (http://www.adlnet.org) — sharable content) and learning is guided by the teacher’s coordination using various collaboration tools (e.g., announcements and responses to students’ queries by sending e-mails).

In general, there may be different approaches towards e-learning implementations. One approach is based on content centricity (complementary system to current live education). Another approach may be based on a learning-centric model where the focus is placed on performance and learning-oriented information through various control options embedded in the system (e.g., using SCORM). The learning-centric models move beyond providing a complimentary content-based system to the actual educational program offered by an organization. Learner progress against specified curriculum or personal development plans can be tracked and managed while behavior and content are controlled based on learner’s information, learning progress and history and the learner’s role. It is hoped that attention is placed upon adopting alternative approaches where learning itself is managed and guided using the technology by complying with various standards and specifications provided by advanced distributed learning (ADL) (http://www.adlnet.org), IMS (http://www.imsglobal.org), IEEE learning technology standard committee (LTSC) (http://ieeeltsc.org) such as SCORM, Simple Sequencing, Learning Design and LOM (Learning Object Metadata). Such approaches may free the teachers from extensive interactions with the e-learning environment throughout the learning program allowing them to indulge in more research activities while providing learners with various adaptive or dynamic features to move towards their learning objectives.

Another drawback of e-learning programs in Iran is the lack of suitable quality assurance inspection in addition to appropriate guidelines on the learning programs as well as the content quality and delivery mechanisms.

Although the financial and economical aspects of e-learning are essential factors in providing returns on investments and to assist enhancing the quality using additional resources, unfortunately, e-learning is being transformed into e-business in a gradual manner, disrespecting the profits towards improved services, not only in Iran, but also throughout the globe.
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