

Chapter 25

Online Learner Satisfaction and Collaborative Learning: Evidence from Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

Despite the considerable potential for e-learning to improve learning outcomes, particularly for female students and students who need to rely on distance learning, feedback from current users of e-learning systems in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) suggests a relatively low level of satisfaction. This study adopts a mixed-methods approach in investigating the underlying reasons for this situation. Results indicate that students are not unhappy with the information technology infrastructure or with other technical aspects. However, many students report a low level of interaction between them and their fellow students. When interactions do occur, students indicate overwhelmingly that they find such interactions useful. Together, these findings suggest that greater student interaction, which could be fostered through the use of collaborative learning, is likely to be both popular with students and beneficial to their learning outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC), the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is one of the fastest growing countries in the world in terms of e-learning. CITC data shows an explosive growth in the number of internet users generally, from a mere 200,000 in 2000 to 4.8 million in 2006 (CITC, 2010). The number of students enrolled in institutions of higher education has also increased significantly in recent years. As a result, many of these institutions have turned to e-learning systems as a means to help broaden and enhance access to their courses and subjects (AlSaif, 2005).

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Reflecting this trend, a growing number of research studies have been conducted on e-learning in KSA (see below for references to some of these). Many of these studies have focused on identifying the key factors that differentiate online education from face-to-face learning, analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of online courses, investigating factors that facilitate or hinder the adoption of e-learning, or developing strategies to achieve a suitable online learning environment (Alshehri, 2005). To date, however, relatively little attention has been paid to the issue of assessing the e-learning environments that have been set up in the country, especially from the viewpoint of student users.

This paper is part of a research project that has been conducted in response to this gap in the literature. The overall project's aim is to evaluate existing e-learning environments in KSA on the basis of a range of criteria and dimensions (Alkhalaf, Nguyen, & Drew, 2010). A key purpose of the present paper is to focus more narrowly on student perceptions and feedback regarding these e-learning environments. It turns out that the level of satisfaction among student users is rather low. In the paper, we also investigate some factors which may account for this result. Our findings suggest that one possible method to enhance existing e-learning environments may be to promote greater use of collaborative learning, which has the potential to make e-learning both more popular with the students and more effective in terms of learning outcomes.

This paper is organized as follows. The next section presents some background information on e-learning in KSA and key findings from previous studies. This is followed by an outline of the research methods used in this study, and then a quantitative analysis of the results. In the penultimate section, we discuss the role that Collaborative Learning may play in improving student satisfaction with e-learning. The final section presents a summary of the main points raised in the paper.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

E-Learning in Saudi Arabia

Interest in e-learning has grown rapidly during the past decade or so in KSA, for at least several reasons (Albalawi, 2007). First, the demand for higher education has far outstripped supply, such that institutions are faced with overcrowding and insufficient facilities and human resources for the delivery of traditional-style education to all of the nation's qualified applicants for admission. This has occurred despite the fact that in the five years to 2009, growth in the higher education system had seen the opening of one university every three months and five colleges every month, and the award of 800 scholarships every month to students going abroad for further studies (Al-Shehri, 2010). According to Al-Khalifa (2010), "thousands of students are over-enrolled ... and are simply given the course materials and sent home to study on their own." E-learning has been suggested as a means to overcome the continuing limitations.

Second, KSA is a large country in terms of geographical area, with a significant number of communities being isolated from major population centers. E-learning offers the potential to deliver educational services to remote locations, thereby reducing disparities across the various regions and areas.

Third, in KSA's higher education system, men and women receive their instruction in separate classes, for cultural and religious reasons (Mirza, 2007, 2008). This puts further strains on the limited facilities and human resources available. In particular, there is a considerable shortage of female lecturers (Al-Khalifa, 2010). It has been observed, accordingly, that women are often among the strongest supporters of e-learning, and may have the most to gain from further growth in e-learning (Bates, 2009).

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