

INTER-ARAB ONLINE EDUCATION

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October, 2013

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ABSTRACT

The future of education in the Middle East or the Arab world as a whole is standing at the crossroads or better stated; the turning point. Education reform is essential to cope with the ever changing world needs. Renovating the concept of education and building learning methodologies remarkably affect the global economy; by stimulating poverty remedies and supporting economic growth at the national and the domestic levels. Online education can be the answer to the road forward or the road not travelled yet.

There are implications for every action taken towards developing the learning tools and styles. Therefore, those should be studied carefully looking at the current situation and considering the forthcoming employment choices. We need to arrive at a profitable situation meaning that adequate learning techniques should give rise to economic growth and increased productivity which will automatically lead to improved living standards for everyone. ¹

Internationally speaking, online learning has become the trend and prevailed noticeably in the United States, not only at the university level but also in schools. Nationally, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is heading in the same direction. The reasons behind this are that UAE is known for being the leader country keeping pace with the fields of technology, business and trade evolution. Moreover, UAE considers granting employment priority to its residents in regards to the increasing job vacancies. UAE and similar countries are endorsing e-learning due to the fact that online education is key to preventing migration to other countries with intentions of obtaining education from renowned institutions and universities. In addition to that advantage, online learning facilitates the earning of a degree disregarding the geographical barriers and time restraints. It is also critical to keep in mind that the Muslim women in the Arab world are

rarely allowed to leave their homes; hence, online education is the finest reaction. ²

We should start by investigating the aspects of the present and the future of the Middle East which play a big role in creating the earnest need for online education. After all, the chief notion of online education or *education empowerment* is focused on providing every interested candidate or learner with competent and proportionate learning and working opportunities. Therefore, Arab countries are urged to look into the obstacles that are pausing or detaining the flow of the electronic learning schemes.

THE ARAB WORLD COMMITMENT TO E-LEARNING

Many factors drive the Arab world towards the undertaking and expansion of online learning. As such are request for a more skilled workforce, the brutal fact of economic fundamentals, the political instability, and the need for professional development at the time that one is working - taking into consideration that quitting a job or switching careers for the sake of studying abroad is out of question. On the narrow scope, conservative, religious, financial, and practical reasons contribute towards adopting e-learning in the Arab land. E-learning serves well women who are on maternity leaves and would like to learn something new, but are unable to make huge investments of neither money nor time. ⁶

ONLINE LEARNING CHALLENGES IN THE ARAB REGION

UNESCO had reported that higher education in the Arab world is not efficient enough to fulfill the needs of the students, the employers, and the societies in their entirety. In addition to that, universities and schools in our region are jam-packed producing too many graduates with qualifications that are not coinciding with today's and tomorrow's labor market. Businesses are short-staffed and are hardly financed. ³

To elaborate further, elements that influence the breakthrough and power of virtual learning in the Arab World are:

ISSUE ONE: ACCESS TO COMPUTERS

The total number of computers available is not congruous with the existing population. Also, it is important to perceive that young learners need to use computers to be competitive in the global workplace. ¹⁸

ISSUE TWO: ACCESS TO THE INTERNET

An Internet blackout in many Arab countries caused educational sessions to be postponed. ¹⁸

ISSUE THREE: TEACHER PREPAREDNESS AND PEDAGOGY

Teachers and professors are not adequately trained or equipped with the strategies for online teaching. ¹⁸

ISSUE FOUR: POLICY

Policies aren't formally developed to integrate ICT in education and enhance the infrastructure.

ISSUE FIVE: CERTIFICATION AND ACCREDITATION

Accreditation is often given more importance than actual knowledge and learning.⁴ Many national and international universities are not recognized as accredited institutions when ministries of education or higher education resort to accreditation paradigms that only correspond with conventional learning styles. This is the case in the Arab reality. ⁷

ISSUE SIX: EDUCATION VS. JOB MARKET

Employers are reluctant to hire applicants with online degrees due to the fact that employers question the knowledge and skills that online graduates will be equipped with. Despite that, 80% of the employer

respondents admitted that online-only degrees provide more opportunities for adult students who may have to balance school with work and family responsibilities. Looking at this, it becomes clear that there's a need to improve communication between colleges and employers about the insights and competencies that the latter is seeking in their employees. ^{8, 10}

ISSUE SEVEN: EDUCATION QUALITY

A 2012 Online Learning Survey reported that more than 6.7 million students have taken at least one online course, and that the trend of e-Learning is growing faster than traditional enrollments. Taking this detail into account, online quality education should be investigated and scrutinized. ⁹

ISSUE EIGHT: CULTURE AND THE COMMUNITY

Most of the people believe that online learning is a failure because it is offbeat. This is called "poor perception of e-learning". The education culture has to change; trained online teaching staff should believe in their training capabilities and should work on committing to online teaching. Teachers in this case are only mentors and supervisors not dictators. Also, students should behold online learning as a great education method that leads to a better job and a higher salary. A better job means improving organizational performance by building job-relevant knowledge and skills. ^{7, 8}

ISSUE NINE: LANGUAGE

Language is one of the most important barriers facing the Arab nation. Most of the e-learning contents were developed in English. This generated fear of using e-learning and unease as e-learning contents do not support the students' native language. Further, the cost for developing Arabic contents and e-courses is very expensive and complicated.

ISSUE TEN: OTHER ASPECTS

Different ICTs notably depend on economic and infrastructural peripherals (e.g. availability of electricity and Internet connectivity). Other matters that have an impact on e-Learning outcomes are:

- Contents (use of OER, Free and Open Software (FOSS), and other open solutions for learning),
- Access to and use of hardware (devices, including mobile technologies, one-to-one computing options),
- connectivity, and
- Learning (including digital literacy, and issues of assessment).

Realizing the above points and after thorough study, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) declared that Jordan, Oman, and Qatar were the most responsive to online learning requirements. Palestine and Egypt were rather poor in terms of infrastructure; computers, computer labs, local area networks, and ICT support services. ⁵

SOLUTIONS

We have ten fundamental issues to solve in order for online learning to prevail and attain the goals behind it in the Arab territories.

Almost all of the answers to the aforesaid issues tremendously depend on Arab governments. Therefore, Arab governments should support business institutions that will invest in developing the required technology to support online education. Dr. Talal Abu Ghazaleh stated that Arab governments need to see daylight in regards to the fact that they lack substantial capacity and workforce essential to cater for the students seeking higher education. ⁷

ISSUES ONE AND TWO, FOUR, AND TEN RESOLUTIONS: ^{7, 18}

Arab governments should adopt the internet service project as one of their priorities. Arab governments should initiate and encourage the distribution, access, and the use of the Internet widely by assigning a

reasonable amount of their budgets to support and build an infrastructure which offers internet services to almost everyone. Additionally, Arab governments should reward organizations or individuals that show a desire to provide Internet services. Equally important, ICT curricula should be enforced in schools and universities.

Arab governments should create and draft a mutual strategic cooperation to develop and reinforce the use of the Internet between the Arab countries and between the institutions and organizations in the same country. In order to enhance the use of the Internet in every society, Arab governments should build the “user acceptance” of new technology.

They should consider offering free Internet strategy as Egypt did in 2002.¹⁸ We should also increase the number of computer devices to meet the community needs. Effective laws and legislations that control Internet use and e-commerce should be based whether inside an individual Arab country or among the Arab countries.

ISSUE THREE RESOLUTION:

In order for the students to receive adequate online education, the Ministries of Education and Higher Education in the Arab countries should pay greater attention to the training programs targeting their teachers on how to use the Internet. A teacher should be lavishly trained to teach online and become familiarized with using computers (Human resources training).

ISSUE FIVE RESOLUTION:

Now that the community has become a knowledge-based global economy, the ministries of Education in the Arab world should deem the fact of online learning systems by accrediting diplomas and certificates granted from online universities and institutes that yield and embrace high-profile teaching standards.^{7, 18} Internationalizing the curricula could be another opportunity that Arab governments could look at and acknowledge.

ISSUE SIX RESOLUTION:

Arab governments should work on motivating efforts towards the collaboration between universities, schools, institutions and the job market. Hence, by linking the workplace needs to the university or college curricula, graduates will have better chances of performing well at work and providing the employer with the right skills and knowledge. This will highly slacken immigration to foreign countries with aims of receiving better education. Also, this will stop the country citizens from leaving their homes and families in search for jobs and competitive salaries.¹⁸

ISSUE SEVEN RESOLUTION:

Arab governments have to understand that quality online education is at hand. Accordingly, the Ministries of Education should accredit online programs and degrees that meet consistent standards. In response to this issue, attention should be given to five pillars; learning efficacy, cost effectiveness and commitment, access, faculty satisfaction, and student satisfaction. Those pillars are a framework for measuring and improving an online program within any institution.⁹ This is a guarantee that the online curricula are being updated regularly and conveniently.

ISSUE EIGHT RESOLUTION:

Arab governments are accountable towards communities to change their way of thinking in terms of online learning and education. A culture cannot be changed by passing a law bearing in mind that culture is deeply embedded belief systems and that shifting towards new concepts and cultures is time-consuming and challenging. Education leaders must make speeches and attend board meetings by virtue of the statement "improvement begins with cultural change which can only begin when leaders set the model for this change." ¹⁹

ISSUE NINE RESOLUTION:

Arab governments should encourage learning another language and especially English for the reason that international business is done in English and English is the language of technology. Such facts cannot be overlooked or worked around. Arab governments should spread awareness, allocate financial resources, and commit to making efforts to expedite the right of learning English which in turn will give rise to e-learning. ¹⁸

THE SWOT ANALYSIS

"Online learning is not a fad. It's here to stay." ¹³

Consequently, strategic thinking and planning are crucial for the correct role of online learning and accomplishment of its objectives. The SWOT Analysis is the main ingredient to describe the major strengths and weaknesses of e-learning and the opportunities and threats, but this should be embedded in actual examples of what is occurring as SWOT helps in identifying the barriers and leaders to e-learning success.

Every delivery system has its strengths and weaknesses keeping in view that many of the weaknesses are the flip side of the strengths.

Hence, each person should measure the advantages and disadvantages of online learning. If the bright side outweighs the drawbacks, then this type of learning suits that person well. Some learners might prefer passive or active learning. Thus, it is a matter of preference.

ONLINE LEARNING STRENGTHS ^{12, 14, 15}

- Improve the quality of learning or creative learning,
- Defeat time and place restraints and Increase flexibility (A3s as in any time, any place, any pace), ¹⁷
- Teach 21st century skills,
- Develop IT literate graduates,
- Give the student abundant guidance,
- High-quality dialogue in synchronous discussion structures,
- Widen access to educational resources and links,
- Enhance classroom teaching and teamwork, and
- Improve cost effectiveness.

ONLINE LEARNING WEAKNESSES ^{14, 15, 16}

- Internet connection,
- Accessibility to computers or laptops,
- Technology limitations,
- Hands-on learning restraints,
- Self-directed learning, and
- Validation of the learning progress that students achieve.

ONLINE LEARNING THREATS ¹⁶

Poor access to broadband networks, low connectivity areas to large dropout rates and revitalizing motivation and engagement in e-courses. Furthermore, low download times, links that do not work, and uncertainty about where to go and what to do can be very daunting.

Universities need to consider allowing flexible enrolment and should adjust methods of evaluating e-courses and academic performance. The curriculum taught should contain interactive tools. E-books, discussion forums, blogs, and students' notes should be part of online learning promising synergy and interconnection. National laws on accreditation and Copyright rules need to be redesigned to fit the new learning scheme and walk in sync with e-learning requirements and values. Besides, online education engenders convulsive cheating on the grounds that digital information can be effortlessly shared, reused, revamped, and repositioned.

ONLINE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES ¹⁶

E-Learning brings in astounding opportunities for capacity building, connecting students spontaneously to knowledge and learning resources and communities of practice by being both affordable and convenient to access. In addition to that, e-learning awards enhanced learning experiences through multiple means of interaction like animation and simulation cases.

WHY SHOULD STUDENTS IN THE ARAB WORLD TAKE ONLINE LEARNING SERIOUSLY? ¹¹

- **CHOICE:** online learning provides the students with options of study fields that are not available or hard to find in their region.
- **FLEXIBILITY AND OPEN SCHEDULING:** online education resolves time and place issues.
- **PACING:** students can learn and study at their own speed.
- **NETWORKING:** in online education, there are higher chances for stronger chains between teachers and students. The relationship between a teacher and a student is namely built on closer supervision and individual attention.
- **SAVINGS:** there isn't a need for visas or travel expenses.

- **LACK OF COMMUTE AND ENVIRONMENT-GREEN:** a fact that speaks for itself as means of transportation are not needed when virtual learning is present.
- **CONNECTIONS:** students will get to know other students around the world as if they were on campus and more.
- **EFFECTIVENESS:** e-learning allows mentoring and coaching that enable learners to develop new ways of doing, knowing, and being.

CONCLUSION: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Students are becoming more responsible for discovery and self-learning while teachers take on the role of a facilitator. We should keep in mind that the shift in the teaching and learning pattern and technology are evolving at the same speed.

People should realize that E-learning is being used not to replace instructors but to strengthen their role.

It is vital to note out that barriers to the success of adopting online learning vary from one Arab country to the other. Therefore, there is a need to conduct sufficient research and factual studies to understand the major issues that each country encounters to resolve our concerns properly.

Ultimately, e-learning is about education not technology. People should be able to comprehend that online learning focuses on results rather than attendance. It withstands to equip learners with the insistent skills and attitudes that belong to a global setting.

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