eLearning in Saudi Arabian universities: Towards blended learning.

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Abstract

This chapter reviews the impact of electronic learning (eLearning) on universities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Such a learning platform was initially seen as a solution to overcome two major challenges faced by the higher education sector in the kingdom. The first was to ensure there was sufficient provision within the HE sector to match the rapidly growing population of high school graduates; the second was to provide a means for potential students to engage in undergraduate study where travel to university campuses was difficult or impossible. The latter objective was intended to have distinct appeal to women who, until 2018, were not allowed to drive thus making regular attendance difficult and expensive. After much enthusiasm for such provision graduates discovered, however, that wholly online degrees were not being recognized by potential employers or by universities as an entry requirement for postgraduate study. Consequently, the Ministry of Education determined that the newly created electronic university, the Saudi Electronic University, was to lead on all eLearning which was to be a mix of face to face and distance learning – blended learning. The challenges facing SEU for effective implementation of this provision are examined here.

Introduction

This case study is set in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), a country with an immense natural resource of oil, the production and sale of which underpins the economy of the country. The country has a rapidly growing population that in 2018 was over 33 million, of which 58 per cent were below the age of 34 years. One consequence of such rapid population growth is that colleges and universities within the country have been confronted with two challenges during the current century: to improve the quality of education and to make higher education available to a vast and increasing number of students.

There have been some key emergent issues in that scenario that initially led the Ministry of Education to permit universities to develop wholly online degree programs.

First, the physical size of the country makes it difficult for all potential students to attend university campuses, especially women who were typically reliant on male relatives or hired drivers to transport them. Secondly, the national social mores did not allow for co-educational learning, leading to the development of segregated gender provision. More importantly, however, was that there was limited capacity within Saudi public universities to cater for those who are entitled to study in higher education. This led the Ministry of Higher Education to identify online provision as one possible answer to these challenges and to establish the National Centre of Electronic and Distance Learning (NCEL) in 2006 to create and categorize change in respect to e-learning and distance learning materials. Subsequently many universities began creating wholly online degree programs, supported by government funding, to the extent that 15 out of 25 public Saudi universities were offering such programs by 2013. By 2014, the number of students enrolled on wholly online programs reached 350,000, which constituted 33 per cent of higher education students at Saudi universities, with more students enrolled on such courses than those receiving traditional instruction.

Students who graduated from such programs suffered, however, from the degrees not being accepted as valid in some private sector companies, for teaching in schools with other Arab countries in the Middle East or even progressing to postgraduate study (Ministry of Education, 2014). In addition, online degree programs were considered to have challenges which disaffected learners and had often proved unpopular in KSA with most students lacking the requisite skills to make use of such learning methods (Al-Mousa, 2004).

In 2014 the Ministry of Education (MOE) published a commissioned report which questioned the value of wholly online programs and concluded that such provision in the kingdom was effectively out of control and had become disconnected from the needs of the labour market (Ministry of Education, 2014). As a learning method and component of the Saudi education system, wholly online learning was considered as no longer fit for purpose, with one study revealing that instructors themselves had little faith in the quality of their own institution's online programs (Al-Draiby, 2010). Furthermore, employers (including the government itself) were placing a low value on the qualifications emerging from this provision and a lack of regulation and quality control.

The ultimate outcome of this investigation was that universities were advised by Deputy Minister for Education Affairs not to accept any further students in eLearning courses for the academic year of 2016-17. Instead, the Saudi Electronic University (SEU), the first electronic university in the Arab world and which had been established in 2012 to offer specific prerequisite courses as demanded by the labour market, was to develop `centres for eLearning' throughout the country with the assistance of other universities. Central to this planned provision was blended learning (BL), a combination of face to face (f2f) and distance online learning (DL).

The case for blended learning (BL):

A wide range of advantages have been ascribed to BL which is seen as advantageous in comparison to wholly online or traditional face-to-face methods. BL is considered as offering enhanced instructor-learner and learner-learner interaction which includes personalized, timely and iterative feedback (Hrastinski, 2008). BL also avoids the pitfall

of DL's potential to become the ultimate in didactic learning with information simply dumped on learners via the worldwide web (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004). With a significant face-to-face component, BL learners are less likely to experience the detachment, demotivation and distraction associated with wholly online degree programs (Galusha, 2011). Instead, BL offers flexible interactions and opportunity for knowledge co-production (Vaughan, 2014).

Additional advantages over face-to-face only methods mainly concern access and cost as BL can channel higher education to parts of a population that were previously problematic, including mature students already in employment or those with family responsibilities which makes full-time attendance difficult, so extending the geographic reach. In Saudi Arabia, BL also creates practical possibilities to overcome social and cultural barriers to male-female interactions. A female student can attend and participate in a virtual class with male instructors and fellow students, for example, in a way that would not occur in a physical classroom. On a theoretical level, BL also fits with a constructivist and co-constructivist approach to learning mainly through its ability to facilitate collaborative tasks (Stahl et al., 2006).

Overall, given the problems emerging from the rapid expansion of online degree programs in the kingdom, it is unsurprising that policy makers viewed BL as a viable new path to achieving their objectives. When combined with appropriate quality control BL was considered to offer the Saudi HE system a realistic path to achieving the country's goals. A major element of this quality control was to bring all BL provision under the control of one institution – the Saudi Electronic University (SEU). For the

2016-2017 academic year, public universities were thus instructed by the MOE to cease enrolling new students for their online degree programs.

The SEU plan:

The SEU was already operating at the time the government withdrew its support for eLearning programs that were running in most Saudi public universities. It was established by royal decree signed on September 7, 2011 and rather than delivering programs entirely online the university was to facilitate BL, with three-quarters of course content being online and the other quarter delivered face-to-face. The royal decree was accompanied by a statement from the MOE that explained that the new public university would provide higher education and lifelong learning with undergraduate, post graduate and continuous learning programs under the supervision of the Higher Education Council (Ministry of Education, 2015). On opening the SEU would have three colleges, Administrative, and Financial Sciences, Computing, and Informatics, and Health Sciences. Subsequently, a fourth college, Science and Theoretical Studies, was opened. In addition to the main Riyadh campus, three branches were opened in 2012 in Jeddah, Dammam, and Madinah. On opening the SEU the Director announced that 60 per cent of places at the new university would be reserved for female students. At the time of its launch, the strategic plan was to open 20 branches across the KSA and serve up to 100,000 students in 10 years' time. The SEU divided most of its campuses into male and female locations, employing female instructors for female learners. For the online component, female learners could interact with male instructors and students as educational segregation does not extend to the internet.

Such an approach to student learning appears, therefore, to be sympathetic to the cultural norms traditionally associated with higher education in Saudi Arabia in that it is based on a relationship between instructor and student, thus allowing for a requisite amount of F2F interaction. In this way the SEU strategy seeks to address the potential issues of isolation and alienation found within previous research studies undertaken in the country. In addition, core aspects of the teaching programs were to be 'live', rather than asynchronous, to encourage the sense of student community that can evolve in learning cohorts.

Instruction and course materials were to be exclusively in the English language, a decision which brought the perceived benefit of being able to partner with global leaders in online learning provision such as Franklin University in the USA and the virtual learning environment, Blackboard Learn. These and other providers enabled the SEU to offer a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate programs designed to an international standard. With such international partners in support, the SEU was expected to be able to deliver successfully a wide range of undergraduate courses and a postgraduate MBA. The use of English only would subsequently have more negative consequences in student retention, however, an issue which will be examined more fully below.

Admission to the SEU requires a secondary school certificate or equivalent though grades are considered the exact requirement is not published. Unlike traditional Saudi universities and as part of the commitment to lifelong learning there is no stipulation for the recency of the secondary qualification. Once admitted, SEU undergraduates follow a common preparatory year comprising English language, computing,

communication skills, basic mathematics and academic skills. Uniquely among Saudi public universities, students could continue to be employed whilst studying at the SEU.

The early years of the SEU:

By the academic year 2016-2017 student numbers at the SEU had grown to 14, 485 studying at one of eleven campuses, but this represented a slight fall on the previous academic year which suggested the planned trajectory towards 100,000 students was overly optimistic. The main reason for this can be seen in data publicly released by the SEU which reveal that only a small proportion of students in the common preparatory year progress onto their major degree pathway either because they do not pass the requirements for English (or other components of the first year) or because they drop out for other non-academic reasons (SEU, 2018). In the 2015- 2016 academic year there were 10,233 students following the preparatory program and 4,844 in other years following their major or undertaking post-graduate studies, meaning that most students enrolled at the SEU were in their first year. In normal circumstances with so many students poised to commence their major degree program in 2016-2017 a huge rise in student numbers taking their major degree pathway would be expected. Instead, major student numbers fell back to 4,153. Allowing for some graduations, it appears that a negligible proportion of preparatory year students were progressing (SEU, 2018).

The SEU was established to widen access to HE to mature students who had already embarked on their career or who had existing family responsibilities. The entry criteria are purposely set at a low level on the basis that a mandatory preparatory year could bring them to a satisfactory level in the skills they will need to complete their major

degree pathway. From the university's data it appears, however, that all too often this does not happen (SEU, 2018). It is recognized that attrition through changes in life circumstances may be unavoidable with a SEU student who is likely to be older, already be employed or already have family responsibilities. A change in job, a pregnancy, getting married, moving home are all potential causes for withdrawing from a study program. In addition to this, Saudi HE in general has a problem with student retention and low graduation rates. Aljohani (2016), for example, analysed institutional data and concluded that the average graduation rate for Saudis on four-year program was 65 per cent and falling to between 35 and 50 per cent for those on two-year programs.

Clearly, student retention is an issue in Saudi HE. In comparison in the UK only 6.4 per cent of first-year undergraduates failed to progress to the second year of their studies in the academic year 2015-16 (HESA, 2017). The rate of student attrition at SEU is high and thus a threat to the ambitions declared at its launch. The lack of an English language admission criterion would seem the most plausible explanation with many students unable to reach the required level by the end of the preparatory year, a level that is equivalent to an IELTS score of 5.5. At Saudi Arabia's traditional public universities there is usually a requirement to hold a recent English proficiency certificate of between IELTS 5.0 and 6.0 before commencing the preparatory year.

There are also issues relating to the stated objective of reserving 60 per cent of its places for female students, with current data shows that only 35 per cent of its students are female (SEU, 2018). The reason for this divergent outcome can only be speculated on as no study has been conducted. However, at the 2015 International

Conference on e-learning and DL held in Riyadh the Saudi Deputy Minister for Education Affairs, Al Ouhali, reported that across all e-learning in the kingdom two-thirds of learners were male, meaning the SEU outcome seems to be in line with the previous DL balance (Ministry of Education, 2015).

The challenges of BL at SEU:

Following a BL program requires greater self-direction than one using traditional f2f methods and this raised the issue of a conflict between BL and Saudi cultural norms. Smith and Abouammoh (2013) explain that the rote learning of information by passive learners is a fundamental element of Saudi culture and religious teachings, as are structured lifestyles and work environments. This would suggest that self-direction may be challenging for some Saudi learners.

Whilst the lack of English language skills has been given as the prime reason for low student retention rates in their first year, individual capability with the use of information technology is also a key component of the preparatory year and some students without a background of such skills appear to find this challenging. The decision to deliver all programs in English had the benefit of SEU being able to draw on the tried and tested technologies and practices of a range of global leading providers, enabling the university to populate its programs with content quickly and draw on non-Saudi instructors and instructor training services. It immediately exposed the university to certain risks, however, that appear to have called its ambitious development plans into question. On the one hand it vowed to broaden access to higher education, while on the other hand delivering courses in English is restricting success only to those with a high level of English proficiency. Having a high proportion of preparatory year students

failing to commence their major degree program in their second year is an inefficient use of resources, not to mention a discouraging experience for the students themselves.

Lessons from the SEU experience:

Improving English language instruction to get more students over that hurdle is one option. From the outset SEU has partnered with its global providers and SEU students have access to their online English school English Live. However, it seems that achieving a substantial increase in proficiency in just one academic year is beyond many students. Another option is to introduce a proficiency requirement at the point of enrolment for the preparatory year. With a common understanding that that it takes one year to improve IELTS by a score of one point, it would seem necessary to have a higher requirement for IELTS first enrolling. Whilst this would exclude many such a requirement would be likely to improve progress to their major degree program.

A further option that could help the SEU achieve its access goals would be to deliver some programs in Arabic. While Saudi Arabia's longer-term ambition (Vision 2030) is to develop an outward looking country with a diversified economy, some parts of that economy are never likely to need English language skills including those delivering services to the local population. The challenge here would be one of capacity to design and populate such programs as their international partners would probably not be able to help.

Concluding thoughts:

The establishment of SEU was a bold initiative initially designed to address the problems that had arisen with eLearning in the kingdom while taking advantage of the technological opportunities that are transforming learning around the world. A very early decision was taken to adopt BL as the preferred model of student learning and whilst it is true that initial plans have failed to materialise as hoped, it remains a viable ambition for the Saudi HE system.

The key issues to address do not include the concept of blended learning as the arguments for its adoption can be deemed to be secure. SEU instead will need to explore how it deals with admission requirements, which language to use for the degree programs, how it improves retention (which may be connected to the first two issues) and why the proportion of female students remains at similar levels to those witnessed on the previous wholly online programs.

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