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Blended Learning in Saudi Universities: Challenges and Aspirations

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ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to examine the nature of benefits and challenges faced at Saudi universities whilst adopting blended learning approach. Four main advantages when employing blended learning in Saudi higher education are examined. One significant value is creating autonomous learners. The role of blended learning in enhancing student engagement and increasing the pass rate is another useful advantage. Furthermore, flexibility and approachability provided by blended learning have enabled more learners to access higher education, regardless of geographical location and culture. Some serious challenges are also considered, such as student dissatisfaction, the quality of teaching and learning, and the lack of IT skills among lecturers, which are major problems in the transaction to the blended learning approach in Saudi Arabia. Lastly, some fundamental cultural issues and practical suggestions that might affect the implementation and could lead to successful transition of blended learning are presented. This study is expected to offer some important understandings into how instructors engage and motivate learners to be active and independent in blended learning environments. This study also provides new insights into how blended learning might be influenced by people's culture. Understanding the link between culture and technology might support the effective implementation of blended learning in Saudi universities. The results of this study are expected to help provide awareness for the faculty members and decision-makers in higher education in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: blended learning; benefits of blended learning; student engagement; self-directed learning.

INTRODUCTION

The extensive practice of using technology in education, specifically in the last decade, has resulted in a reevaluation and reform of traditional methods while providing new combined techniques to enhance communication in the learning environment. The present study was designed to determine some practical benefits and serious challenges that might affect blended learning implementation in Saudi universities. Saudi universities have blended face-to-face teaching with online instruction when evolving new educational processes. As a result, the Ministry of Education has encouraged the adoption of blended learning in universities as one goal to enhance and support the country's e-learning project and ensure the rapid growth of undergraduate students despite the limited capacity of Saudi colleges. Examples include online courses, the monitoring of students' progress, and communications with students. Accordingly, several projects have been implemented that reveal the movement toward blended learning. Almegran, the director of the National Centre for E-learning and Distance Learning, reported that the Ministry of Education is encouraging Saudi universities to diminish class attendance hours by blending online and traditional learning (http://www.elc.edu.sa/). . The goals of the center (National Centre for E-learning, 2015) are to promote e-learning and distance education functions with quality standards, raising the understanding of appropriate e-learning that suit Saudi culture;, support e-Learning and distance education research, reinforce prominent projects in e-learning and distance education; and create national quality standards for the strategy and publication of e-learning practices. Thus, the Ministry of Education recognizes the blended learning approach as a mixture of face-to-face instruction with online teaching to reduce time (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2011).

Interestingly, King Salman recently issued a royal decree to merge the two ministries of education and higher education in an extraordinary decision that indicates Saudi Arabia's motivated plans for education. The king's decision reflected a forward-looking approach to attain comprehensive growth

and a prosperous future for the country and its citizens. In this regard, Nief Al-Roomi, the governor of the Public Education Evaluation Commission (PEEC), mentioned that "the merger will bridge the gap between the two ministries and improve educational outputs" (*Arab News*, 2015). He added that, on one hand, the decision will be useful to overcome many difficulties in the kingdom's educational developments. On the other hand, the efforts in one combined operational system will control this fundamental sector to ensure effective harmonization of its policies and programs.

Although the Ministry of Education has recognized the significance of improving a variety of students' skills required to understand the discourse of academia and the particular disciplines in which they enrolled, as stated earlier, their learning skills remain fairly unsatisfied mainly due to specific issues. One of the main obstacles is the use of traditional approaches in teaching. Secondly, the absence of motivation among students is considered another crucial issue. Smith and Abouammoh (2013) stated that "Saudi Arabia has received sustained international criticism over many years about the quality of its education system, with major concern directed at the content of its curriculum and the didactic nature of its pedagogy" (p. 6). This challenge includes students' ability to acquire learning skills, the efficient interactive delivery of knowledge, and advanced technological teaching facilities (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013).

As blended learning is in its initial stages in the Saudi educational system, this study contributes to the existing research as it demonstrates the current status of blended learning in Saudi universities by identifying benefits and challenges that might affect the implementation of blended learning approaches. This study will also provide new insights into how blended learning might be influenced by people's culture in the community, segregated by gender. Understanding the link between culture and technology will help the effective implementation of blended learning in Saudi universities. The following section will review what blended learning means.

BLENDED LEARNING

Blended learning is a term frequently used in the literature, but to date there is no consensus about a commonly and comprehensively agreed-upon definition of blended learning, although the most common definition refers to a combination of online learning and traditional face-to-face learning. According to Osguthorpe and Graham (2003), blended learning refers to integrated methods of interaction through the Internet and the meeting of teachers and learners via face-to-face sessions. Littlejohn and Pegler, (2007) described blended learning as a mixture of the conventional old-style teaching approach and e-learning elements with a solitary course or program. Similarly, Collis and Moonen (2012) defined blended learning as the way in which teachers and students could communicate physically and electronically. These definitions are the most precise produced thus far. They encompass the various types of instructional technology, such as cooperative learning, to develop learning outcomes and self-directed learning. The next section presents the rationale and challenges for blended learning implementation in Saudi higher education.

Benefits of Blended Learning

Much of the current literature on blended learning pays particular attention to the rationale for choosing it by large numbers of learners. Graham (2006) attempted to explain why learners prefer blended learning. First, it offers more flexibility to learners because some of the learning takes place at arranged face-to-face times, whereas other learning occurs online at their convenience. This is certainly true in the case of adult or female learners in Saudi Arabia who have to balance their jobs and families with their studies. Students who live far from the university and who have other responsibilities with their families that prohibit them from attending class clearly illustrate this point. Such flexibility and approachability provided by blended learning have enabled more learners to access higher education, regardless of geographical location and culture. In a similar case in America, Errol, Hirokawa, and Chi (2008), examined the benefit of blended learning for rural areas in the state of Hawaii and found that students had an optimistic and supportive attitude toward blended courses.

Another rationale for shifting to blended learning was its significance of creating autonomous learners. In other words, teachers gave students more control and implemented more facilitative roles. It is necessary here to clarify exactly what is meant by autonomy. Little (2004) gave his own definition of autonomy as "the capacity of detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action" (p. 15). This definition helps distinguish the characteristics of autonomous learners who accurately understand the purpose of their learning, executing learning and assessing its

usefulness. In settings of blended learning, where the teacher is physically absent for a large part of the time, two essential issues must be considered: First, the design of materials and activities must be clear and purposeful; second, the teacher's role is crucial in encouraging and supporting learners in their decisions and choices. This view is supported by Lamb and Reinders (2008), who claimed that it is challenging for learners to exhibit autonomy without teachers' intervention and guidance. Furthermore, learner autonomy has also been shown to increase learner motivation and engagement. Although autonomy is founded on the idea that students should have the responsibility of learning independently, many researchers believe that teachers still have the responsibility to encourage students. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the teacher to encourage and motivate learners through interesting and creative approaches and techniques to learning. This means designing activities that learners can relate to and have a choice or say in the content. Koutsogianni (2014) demonstrated the importance of providing learners with autonomy in order to enhance their motivation within the learning process through the use of Webquest, a computer game designed for learners. The aim of the research was to demonstrate the impact that the use of the application had on learners' motivation. In particular, "the enhancement of intrinsic motivation was pursued by applying the Webquest design to specific reading focused sessions" (p. 307). The computer program allowed flexibility and choice for individual students while providing a student-centered focus. The results of the study suggested that autonomy-promoting strategies and skills increase motivation and self-directed learning amongst the students. In Saudi schools, learners are more dependent on their teacher and do not have the opportunity to be active learners. Thus, technological applications and activities based on technologies might enhance learners' independence, reduce the focus of the teacher within the learning process, and give students more responsibility and subsequently more motivation. Rather than being dependent on the teacher, learners look to their own resources and skills in order to learn more effectively. As Saudi Arabia was attempting to respond to the global technological progression in education, a royal decree was issued by King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz, the custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, on October 8, 2011, to launch the Saudi Electronic University (SEU) as a government educational institution. The SEU, the only higher education institution specializing in distance education in the kingdom, adopted the blended learning approach to e-learning. SEU students are actively involved in the learning process and totally responsible for their learning. The SEU supports learning management systems (LMS) such as Blackboard and has trained its staff and students to use it proficiently.

Another study concentrating on the relationship between motivation and blended learning is the study carried out by Tubaishat and El-qawasmeh (2006). Their study focused on two Arab countries—the Jordan University of Science and Technology (JUST) in Jordan and Zayed University in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—to explore the impact of technology on students' motivation in higher education. Students' interactions with their peers were increased during off-campus hours and were totally enhanced with the use of technology. The study concluded that blended learning environments expand the motivation and confidence levels of students and permit them to express their ideas freely with others. This result confirms the association of motivation and blended learning. It further supports the idea that conservative Arab countries in general and Saudi society in particular would especially benefit from blended learning approaches to address some of society's constraints due to culture and traditions.

Recently, researchers have shown an increased interest in describing the role of blended learning in enhancing student engagement and increasing the pass rate. Appleton, Christenson, and Furlong (2008) defined student engagement as "a concept that requires psychological connections within the academic environment (e.g., positive relationships between adults and students and among peers) in addition to active student behavior (e.g., attendance, effort, pro-social behavior)" (p. 365). This definition highlights the role of interaction among learners. This view is supported by Weaver, Spratt, and Nair (2008), who stated that "tertiary pedagogy is concerned with building meaningful learning relationships between learners and teachers and learners and their peers. It involves encouraging collaboration in learning as well as cooperation in learning for the promotion of innovative and interactive quality e-learning environments" (p. 38). Another study reported that the use of a blended learning approach could increase students' pass rates (Boyle, Bradley, Chalk, Jones, & Pickard, 2003). The main goal of this study was to develop students' achievement rates in preparatory programming at the London Metropolitan University and Bolton Institute in the UK. This team project followed a three-step procedure. The first step was to determine in detail the problems students faced within the programming module under the heading "identifying the need for change."

A questionnaire was adopted at the beginning and middle of the term. This step was followed by an explanation of the main changes in e-learning design under the heading "design of the new blend." The last step was to examine the impact of mixing face-to-face learning with e-learning in the course delivery under the heading "delivery of the new blended learning environment." The results indicated that the blended learning approach could tackle and resolve some serious problems in a practical manner, such as by providing students with appropriate tutorial support to assist them in managing the variety of problems they encountered. It is interesting to note that another name for a blended environment is "increased student engagement."

One of the most fundamental benefits of blended learning is its influence on language learning. Several studies in Saudi Arabia have investigated the impact of blended learning on language improvement. For example, Al-Jarf (2005) aimed to determine whether blended learning affects the development of grammar in English as a foreign language (EFL). The study showed that the use of online activities supports and enhances EFL students' learning of English grammar. The most important finding was that students are welcoming and appreciative of the use of online learning that allows for communications with their colleagues and flexibility with learning activities. Alasraj and Hael (2014) investigated the usefulness of such an approach in learning Arabic as a second language at the Islamic University in the city of Al-Madinah. They concluded that blended learning is an active approach to conveying knowledge.

Difficulties Faced When Implementing Blended Learning

Despite the numerous benefits offered by blended learning, there are also many weaknesses, as with any other method. Garrison and Vaughan (2007) listed three challenges facing higher education: student dissatisfaction, the quality of teaching and learning, and the expansion of students' enrollment. First, learner dissatisfaction has been considered a problematic concern due to, for example, difficulties related to low proficiencies among some students in terms of dealing with technology. In order to address this issue, the researchers suggested that teachers have to communicate with their students to negotiate their needs and support cooperation among students. It has commonly been assumed that a lack of efficiency among some teachers in using blended learning in the teaching of courses as well as training deficiencies is another serious challenge. Yet Al-Sarrani (2010) warned that a lack of IT skills among lecturers is a major problem in the transaction to the blended learning approach in Saudi Arabia. In other words, unskilled teachers who have not been trained to use computers and the Internet, for example, might lead to a lack of excitement for their teaching in a blended learning context.

In recent years, some universities and institutions have delivered business LMS, such as Blackboard, an electronic framework that supports self-directed learning. Surprisingly, some survey outcomes have indicated that a large number of tutors were not aware of how to utilize this feature of their institutions. A study conducted in Saudi Arabia by Al-Khalifa, Al-Ghreimil, and Al-Yahya (2008) concluded that the reason for this is a deficiency of sufficient support of the usage. They also recommended that Saudi Arabia needed to invest seriously in technology, infrastructure, and proficient human resources. Furthermore, another set of challenges reported included a slow connection, which resulted in distracting the educational progression and producing difficulties for contributing to online activities. Al-Jarf (2009) identified the inadequate number of PCs, deficiency of Internet connectivity in some colleges, absence of qualified and skilled instructors in IT proficiencies, and lack of organizational maintenance as the major causes of blended learning challenges in many developing countries.

A second challenge is facilitating the quality of learning experiences. Much of the current literature on blended learning pays particular attention to the enhancement of teaching methods and professional development. Garrison and Vaughan (2007) stated that, "without the investment in the exploration and redesign of teaching and learning that integrates the best of face-to-face and online learning, we put higher education institutions at a competitive disadvantage" (p. 153). This view is also supported by Alshahrani and Ward (2014), who argued that the lack of a clear plan to shift from traditional methods to a blended learning approach is considered to be a major obstacle. Due to this assumption, it is significant to use a set of systematic techniques that make technology part of the Saudi educational system. The following section provides a brief outline of some cultural dimensions that might affect blended learning implementation in Saudi Arabia's educational system.

Cultural Issues in Relation to the Acceptance of the Blended Learning Approach in Saudi Universities

Saudi culture is mainly based on Islam. When reflecting Saudi Arabians' culture, the most fundamental cultural values are family and religion. According to Hofstede's scale of the cultural dimensions, Saudi Arabia is considered a collectivistic society with a score of 25 (http://geert-hofstede.com/saudi-arabia.html). In the Saudi collectivist culture, loyalty is the dominant value. Supporting this view, Hofstede (1980) stated that "loyalty in a collectivist culture is paramount, and over-rides most other societal rules and regulations. People foster strong relationships where everyone takes responsibility for fellow members of their group" (p. 148). In addition, from childbirth, children in Saudi Arabia are taught lessons related to being loyal and maintaining a harmonious group environment. With regard to the Saudi conservative environment, people unwilling and strongly resist change. Smith and Abouammoh (2013) stated that "traditional Saudi culture and religious teachings, however, [are] based on adherence to standards and norms, structured life style, and reluctance to engage strongly in open collaboration and exchange ideas with the outside world" (p. 182). As a result, Saudi Arabia has high uncertainty avoidance, with a score of 80.. Hofstede (1980) warned that this dimension creates anxiety and ambiguity. Therefore, different cultures have to learn to deals with this anxiety in distinctive methods. Accordingly, there are a continuous challenges when adopting a new approach, such as blended learning. Mazi and Altbach (2013, as cited in Smith & Abouammoh, 2013) suggested that determining the ideal balance between culture and educational vision might resolve this challenge. They added that this strategy is vital for enabling the Saudi educational system to attain a world-class standing. Smith and Abouammoh (2013) supported this view:

[It is] the most significant challenge for Saudi Arabia and it is indeed a major one is to achieve the goals it has set for the country in general, and the higher education system in particular, without undermining the cultural and religious pillars on which the kingdom is built. (p. 190)

Furthermore, the educational environment is gender segregated due to Islamic regulations; the lectures for each gender are taught in separate campuses and buildings. Female campuses are operated by female staff and taught by female lecturers or by male academics through closed-circuit TV. A research project conducted in Saudi Arabia highlighted the need to reevaluate the extent of cultural conservatism and its consequence for the educational system (Baki, 2004). Therefore, there are ongoing challenges to adopting a new approach such as blended learning. So far this paper has focused on some of the benefits and challenges of blended learning implementation. The following part will present some previous studies conducted in Saudi Arabia.

PREVIOUS STUDIES CONDUCTED IN SAUDI ARABIA

The literature shows that relatively few studies in the area of blended learning have been conducted in Saudi Arabia. Al-Jarf (2007) examined the impact of cultural issues on online collaborative instruction in classrooms at King Saud University (KSU) in Riyadh and Umm Al-Qura University (UQU) in Makkah. As previously explained, Saudi students learn in a gender-based setting from the early stages until graduate school. In addition, most use the Internet for entertainment, not for credit. The cohort was divided into two groups of Saudi students to participate in the project. An experiment approach was chosen to determine the factors that affect EFL freshman students working collaboratively in an online learning environment. The first group contained 70 males and females from UQU enrolled in two courses of management system online. The second group consisted of 40 females from KSU who studied grammar instruction from their homes as a supplemental course. The teacher acted as a facilitator during the semester. For example, she offered technical support to students as well as public and private messages to support them in their communication and collaborative efforts. Surprisingly, the online project was unsuccessful and a disappointment for students in both universities. This finding was unexpected and suggests that online courses must be part of course credit hours in order for students to take them more seriously. These results confirm the association between technology and culture. In other words, cultural issues can lead to incompetent participation (unwillingness to communicate) in online courses in Saudi Arabia.

Alebaikan and Troudi (2011) examined three major challenges facing Saudi universities while employing a blended learning approach. The first main difficulty was the adoption of new blended learning elements in a traditional university culture. They concluded that, given the conservative Saudi society, technology was considered a serious threat to their norms and traditions. Second, another concern was how to employ the appropriate blended learning design. Faculty members raised

a practical issue regarding the time they have spent in developing their course material to develop online content. This study suggested that training programs should be implemented to develop faculty members as well as students in order to create a successful blended learning environment.

Badri (2012) examined learners' acceptance of Blackboard at King Khalid University. The study demonstrated that students are prepared to engage in technology implementation and ready to shift to an e-learning approach. Meanwhile, Aldosari (2013) found that faculty members' and students' perceptions have positive attitudes toward the e-learning environment in the English department. The second major finding was that students' learning outcomes were generally enhanced compared to the traditional approach. Similarly, Ja'ashan (2015) found that instructors' and learners' attitudes toward teaching and learning online indicated optimistic thoughts toward the use of ICT in instruction and learning at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals in Saudi Arabia. The data reported here appear to support the assumption that students generally enjoyed the usefulness of online learning.

CONCLUSION

This study has found that implementing blended learning in Saudi universities generally involves adopting some essential techniques initially. First and foremost, challenges that have been faced should be examined to identify appropriate practices related to the context. In other words, a comprehensive understanding of the challenges might be useful for ensuring a successful switch to a blended learning environment. Second, the need exists for a broad orientation for new students and tutors, instructor preparation sessions, and administrative maintenance. Ultimately, providing culturally suitable online materials, particularly for a country like Saudi Arabia, with a unique culture, is necessary. Considering all of this evidence, it seems that a sensible balance between culture and the online setting is a major concern while implementing blended learning. Decision-makers should initially consider the compatibility between the conservative Saudi culture and provide appropriate online materials. More importantly, blended learning requires a redesign that converts the structure of teaching and learning. The vital assumptions of a blended learning design are that it basically aims to integrate face-to-face and online learning, enhance students' engagement, and reform and replace traditional class hours. Moreover, it is necessary to build up a good relationship between students and instructors in a sociable environment like blended learning. A respectable connection can support motivation amongst learners, whilst an ineffective relationship will encourage a lack of self-confidence.

Although this study is specifically linked to the implementation of blended learning in Saudi universities, the expectations and recommendations in this paper can be valuable for other educational contexts as well. This paper might help recognize and consider some practical concerns related to the adoption of blended learning in higher educational organizations, providing a fruitful area for further work. More studies need to be carried out on suitable instructional designs and resources in blended learning as this research has highlighted many questions in need of further investigation.

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