



E-Learning in Higher Education; Challenges and Opportunities

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The paper highlights aspects related to E-learning covering its definitions, and its main factors. These cover the learner's motivation, the learner's attitudes, technology, readiness of materials, and the learning context, followed by the key challenges and opportunities of using E-learning within higher education. The paper also highlights some studies from different parts of the world including Oman, highlighting students' perceptions towards E-learning. A good mix of both traditional and E-learning needs to be worked harder towards before being pushed into to an E-learning situation only, the context of Coronavirus being an example.

Key words: *E-learning, E-learning Factors, Oman, Omani Context*

INTRODUCTION

“The need to observe the changes in educational philosophy; the role of English in society (tourism, business, etc.); students' and parents' expectations, the educational technology and the workplace expectations, all require a clear reflections of plans across the social and educational context” (Al-Jardani (2017 p. 133). Continually reflecting on our plans to suit the educational needs are a key aspects when considering changes of the education role, technology, and others.

Education is developing quickly. However, in times where changes appear, educators need to find ways and methods to adapt to these changes. The example of the time of the Coronavirus tests countries' ability and readiness to overcome such challenges and find ways to keep their children continually studying, even from home. There is also a difficulty for schools, colleges, universities, and different educational providers to keep on providing reasonable input for their students of different levels. This would also include parents and ways to maintain home as a suitable place for learning. In addition, learners do experience hard times shifting from face to face learning to the E-learning context.

In Oman, there are some successful stories and others which require to be revised. Some institutions were able to shift into online learning/E-learning and others found it difficult to cope with such challenges. Below, the paper starts with highlighting the definition of E-learning, factors leading to successful E-learning, and some examples of E-learning from different parts of the world.

WHAT IS E-LEARNING?

E-learning can be defined as learning without using paper instructional material (Goyal, 2012) and the use of technology to teach. Therefore, it is seen as opposite of classroom instruction, traditional teaching or face to face teaching. Several terms are used to cover E-learning such as online learning, virtual learning, network, and web-based learning (Goyal, 2012).

FACTORS FOR SUCCESSFUL E-LEARNING

To have successful E-learning, this is still regarded as at an early stage, with many issues which required to be clarified. There are several factors which needs to be considered when planning for E-learning, and here are a few them:

- **The Learner's Motivation**

One of the main aspects related to learning in general and would be more effective for E-learning, is motivation. As face to face/traditional learning requires a high level of motivation from the student's side, students need to keep track of their learning and to continue developing and learning new things. However, for E-learning, this seems to be even more important as they need to develop and keep that level of motivation on their own and be ready to experience hard times when searching for new information and discovering new words, without having the instructor/teacher in front of them.

On the other hand, Dörnyei (1990) and Ur (1996) state that E-learning seems to be very attractive and may motivate students to study more than the normal learning. This can be because of the type of materials used and the way teachers are communicating with their students. The role of parents can be also an advantage to encourage them to work harder and to follow-up instantly.

- **The Learner's Attitudes:**

Technology can be always seen as something to enjoy ourselves with. Students do spend a lot of their time on devices – texting, watching, and using different applications. The main question here is whether students are likely to use it in a good way (Zhao, 2003). Students' attitudes to E-learning seems to be the most important factor to have a successful experience as stated by Akbari et al, (2012) and Cinkara & Bagceci, (2013). As new generations are becoming more familiar and seemingly enjoying using them for entertainment, this adds to the side of E-learning. This would give a chance to educators and curriculum developers to make use of it, and to familiarise themselves with the methodologies needed.

On other hand, accessing the internet, the material availability and students' readiness to learn from E-learning are also important factors, as stated by Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006) and Aydin (2007).

- **Technology**

Available equipment is required for an effective E-learning experience, for both students and instructors. Students need to have both hardware and software to work smoothly in such teaching/learning contexts. A computer/laptop with good access to the internet is the key item of equipment to ensure a good interaction between the students and the instructor. This can also cover the learning context at home. The ability to track their learning and follow up with their instructors can be the most important target students are expected to achieve.

- **Readiness of Materials**

The ability to develop the materials on time is another challenge an instructor would face. The design aspect and the training needed are important, as they were taught and learned to teach differently. The type of materials and how interesting they are are important issues within E-learning context.

- **Learning Context**

The readiness of instructors, students and the surrounding context – including parents and the society itself – are very crucial. The social factor and how supportive the interested parties are within the E-learning context can make a big difference. Teaching online is different from the face to face teaching as stated above. This would require instructors to develop and learn this new style of teaching, and the sources needed. Yi (2012) stated that instructors need to be aware of this



change and be required to work hard on both their skills and competencies to ensure a high level of teaching through E-learning.

From the students' side, there is a need to modify the learning style within E-learning. Self-taught skills need to be a strength of the students themselves as well as for the instructor, parents, and the education providers.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF E-LEARNING

Zhang et al., (2004) stated that E-learning is still not in a place to replace traditional learning due to several issues, although E-learning is an effective method in certain situations. As learning is more of a social cognitive task, E-learning cannot cover such an element between students themselves and even with the instructor. The lack of face to face interaction would be easily revealed within such teaching. Getting bored can be also observed with students: staying in front of a computer for a long time will add to that. Other aspects which need some consideration are issues related to the responsibilities of instructors, students, and other interested parties. Advantages of E-learning can include liberating from interactions between learners and instructors, from limitations of time and space through the asynchronous and synchronous learning network model (Pei-Chen Sun et al., 2008). Such models are used in most higher education institutions in Oman, and there is a need for in-depth research on such matters.

A study done in Turkey (Erarslan and Topkaya, 2017) aimed to find out students' attitudes towards E-learning at a state university and to investigate how E-learning affects the students' success in language learning at preparatory class. The two main research questions were to find out the attitudes of the students towards the online course and how effective the online learning is in terms of student success in preparatory classes.

Caroro et al, (2013) highlight a study evaluating the effectiveness of the Misamis University Online Learning Environment (MUOLE) in the Philippines. A total of 342 students participated in filling out a questionnaire: they concluded that the online system utilised within their university is effective in downloading the materials and assignments, taking quizzes and examinations, submitting requirements, as well as in checking the files and assessment results. They added that integrating online learning along with the traditional learning would be useful. However, the study also highlights one of the more negative impacts of E-learning, which is that MUOLE (their university E-learning system) encourages students to copy from each other when working online. The Cole, et al. (2014) paper presented a three year study on graduate and undergraduate students' satisfaction with E-learning in Robert Morris University, USA. A web-based survey was used with 553 students. The survey intended to answer two main questions; "Please rate your level of



satisfaction with the online and/or partially online courses you have taken” and “what made your experience with the online course/s satisfactory or unsatisfactory?” The most frequent terms used to highlight their high satisfaction is “Convenience”, and “Lack of interaction” for the other side. There were statistically significant differences in the level of satisfaction based on experience but no statistically significant differences in the level of satisfaction based on gender, age, or level of study. 58.8% of participants are very satisfied and satisfied; per contra, 14.6% said that they were very dissatisfied and dissatisfied. However, 26.7% were “neutral” with their experience with fully online courses.

A study from Oman (Al Musawi, 2010) highlighted that programs can be offered through E-learning as well as the traditional approach. The study summarised that students and teachers are aware of the importance of E-learning and a need to reconsider the standards before having a high level of E-learning, especially when it comes through the implementation stage.

In addition, Wu et al. (2019) stressed that with E-learning, students can study anytime and anywhere. The use of learning and teaching platforms can be developed in a way to suit both instructors and students. Good communication skills and a clear study plan would result in an effective learning. However, some students might be affected negatively depending on their learning styles, but they need to cope with such context and to learn other approaches to studying online.

Other issues related to the absence of face to face tasks need to be considered and training is required for both the instructor and the students. Issues related to trust, accountability, academic integrity and other related aspects should be observed and tasks are needed to cover those at different levels. This would ensure a high level of E-learning approach. Internet security is also a demanding task for the process involved and IT departments with any institution need to be strong enough to make it run smoothly.

THE RIGHT MIX

There are debates on how much students and institutions are in need of E-learning and how much of the course can or should be delivered online. As institutions are keen to reach students abroad, they intend to find way to access as many students who are unable to reach them physically (Allen & Seaman, 2013). With no doubt, online learning has shown an effectiveness and saved time and money (Bowen, 2013); online education proved that it will stay. The only concern is whether it can stay alone from the traditional method.



Many researches have been conducted on students' satisfaction and it seems clear that E-learning and face to face instruction are both effective (Wagner, Garippo, & Lovaas, 2011). For both, direct contact with the instructor is seen as important, as well students are also happy to take part and participate in an online course. As Wyatt (2005) noted, there is a difference of students' perceptions of online and classroom learning, as some students do better in the online environment and for the traditional teaching others are not. Callaway (2012) concluded the realisation that "the right mix" of both classroom instruction and online could show a big difference. Therefore, elements of both models can have a positive effect on students. Ensuring interaction and of course a positive one can lead to higher level of students' satisfaction. Hybrid learning might be the future of the learning process.

CONCLUSIONS

Even with the Coronavirus, noticing that governments are intending to be limiting schools, E-learning is still not in the position to replace the traditional classroom teaching/learning. Nothing to date can replace the most important social cognitive task, the face to face learning; not every student would see E-learning suiting their learning style. Working towards having a right mix of both models can help to develop a good learning/teaching mix, and starting this in a normal context would make students and instructors ready for it without waiting for contexts where traditional teaching cannot take place, as in the context of Coronavirus.



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