

Distance Higher Education in the Arab Region: The Need for Quality Assurance Frameworks

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Abstract

This paper considers endeavors to disseminate distance higher education in the Arab region. In particular, three different structures are examined: distance education programs provided by traditional universities, open or distance education universities offering only programs from a distance, and a virtual university. Shortcomings of these endeavors due largely to the lack of quality assurance procedures and accreditation policies are examined in detail. The need for developing quality assurance frameworks and accreditation policies for such modes represents a major step towards gaining accreditation by internationally recognized organizations. Key parties are also identified and discussed that have a great impact on promoting quality assurance and the accreditation of distance higher education in the Arab region.

Introduction

During the 1950s and 1960s, after independence, most Arab countries have struggled to develop systems of higher education that would enable their societies to build an educational system that would flourish and grow. The search to develop such educational systems was consistent with a global trend in which the expansion of higher education had been the most important single post war trend worldwide (Samoff, 2003). Arab governments have rapidly established a great number of universities in recent decades. In 1950, there were no more than ten universities scattered across the region, whereas today, there are more than 200 higher education providers (UNESCO, 2003). At the same time, Arab states have, as never before, witnessed a remarkable increase in enrollment rates in higher education institutions. This increase has resulted from a growing public demand for education, an enlarged population, and the governments' commitments to make higher education as accessible as possible.

Nevertheless, most Arab states have proven unable to meet the needs of all students desiring to pursue their goals because of dramatic increases in student enrollment unaccompanied by sufficient resources. Confirming this, the 1998 Beirut Declaration of the Arab Regional Conference on Higher Education stated "higher education in the Arab States is under considerable strain, due to high rates of population growth and increasing social demand for higher education, which lead states and institutions to increase student enrollment, often without adequate allocated financial resources"(UNESCO, 1998, p.44).

Moreover, faced with the challenges of providing flexible enrollment and lifelong learning availability, Arab higher education institutions have not been able to meet the new demands and needs of their societies. Thus, the urgent need for in-depth reform of university structures is evident. In view of this, the Beirut Declaration calls for harnessing modern information and communication

technologies to “contribute in the provision of courses and degree-awarding programs through multiple and advanced means, thus breaking through the traditional barriers of space and time” (UNESCO, 1998, p.45).

In responding to what is mentioned above, Arab countries have adopted radically new visions that would prevent Arab societies from lagging behind other socio-economically advanced nations. One of these, which relies heavily upon modern information and communication technologies, is distance education. Having succeeded in providing accessible and diversified opportunities at an acceptable cost in many nations worldwide, it would be hoped that distance education can alleviate the pressures on higher education institutions in the Arab region.

Utilizing Distance Higher Education in the Arab Region

Over the last two decades, concerted efforts have been made in the area of distance higher education in the Arab region. These endeavors can be classified into three modes: Distance or open education programs [1] provided by traditional higher education institutions, distance or open education institutions, and a virtual university.

Distance Education Programs through Traditional Universities (Dual Mode)

Dual mode universities are institutions that have extended educational activities to provide off-campus programs as well as on-campus programs. The Arab region is no exception to the worldwide trend of traditional universities providing conventional and distance education simultaneously. Some universities have established open education units, awarding Bachelor's level degrees and sometimes Master's level degrees through distance education mode. There are three established examples we can highlight that exemplify the delivery of distance education. The first example is the Open Learning Centers found in Egypt. According to the 1989 approval of The Supreme Council of Egyptian Universities to provide open learning in universities interested in offering that mode of education, four universities (Cairo, Alexandria, Assiut, and Ain-Shams) may award degrees at undergraduate and postgraduate levels through distance education programs in a variety of disciplines (Egyptian Universities Network, 2003). The second example is the Distance Education Center of Juba University found in Sudan, with a branch in Jordan. Upon the issuance of the 1998 decree of the vice chancellor of Juba University for the academic year 1999-2000, the center is permitted to offer four years of distance courses arranged in collaboration with the university colleges of social studies and education, leading to Bachelor's level degrees, in addition to two years of distance courses leading to Master' level degrees (Majdalawi Educational Institute, 2000). The third example is the Open Learning Centers found in Syria, which utilize distance education modes of teaching. Established in 2001, Open Learning Centers are permitted to award Bachelor's level degrees with majors in English translation from Al-Baath University, in information and translation from Damascus University, and in law studies from Aleppo University (Open Learning Center of Al-Baath University, 2002).

Single Mode Distance Education Universities

With the unique purpose of distance education, single mode universities dedicate all of their activities to that end. This category encompasses five examples in five

Arab countries. The first example is the Higher Institute for Continuing Education found in Tunisia , aims at training teachers at primary and secondary levels. It utilizes correspondence education as well as printed and audio materials (Jamlan, 1999). The second example is the Open University in Libya , which awards Bachelor's level degrees, depending heavily on printed materials to operate its programs. The university's aim is to provide education, training, and culture to all citizens, through programs in humanities, social, and management sciences (Libyan open university, 2004). The third is the Continuing Education University in Algeria , which uses printed materials, television and radio broadcasting, and tutorials to recruit the students who failed to obtain a general secondary diploma. This program aims to rehabilitate the students by providing the skills that will enable them to work in the community, or to provide them with a matriculation to be able to enroll in university programs (Jamlan, 1999).

The fourth example is Al-Quds Open University (QOU), which was established in 1991, with the main campus in Jerusalem and educational centers spreading in major Palestinian cities. It aims to meet the needs of Palestinian students in Gaza and the West Bank (UNESCO, 2002b). It aspires to extend its activities to other Arab and foreign countries . QOU awards first degrees typically Bachelor's level degrees in various specializations, equivalent to its counterpart in conventional universities. It also awards academic degrees in Education, and non-degree courses. Moreover it is planning to offer Master's level degrees as a future prospect (Al Quds Open University, 2001).

The fifth example is t he Arab Open University (AOU), which was established in 1999, with the main campus in Kuwait and branch campuses in Bahrain , Egypt , Lebanon , Jordan , and Saudi Arabia . Making use of modern information and communication technologies, AOU aims to make higher education and continuing education accessible to every willing and capable Arab citizen with the aim of contributing to the training of highly qualified Arab human power in fields which are essential for national and regional development, conducting research, studies, and consultations in these fields (Arab Gulf Program For United Nations Development Organizations, 1999). “To achieve its objectives, the AOU has concluded agreements of cooperation and affiliation with the United Kingdom Open University (UKOU) that cover licensing of materials, consultancies, and accreditation and validation” (UNESCO, 2002a, p.11).

Virtual University

Syrian Virtual University (SVU) is the first online university in this region using this mode. Established in 2002, SVU aspires to provide world-class education without boundaries, internationally accredited degrees, and to link the Arab region to the western world (UNESCO, 2003). This objective arises from its desire to bring American, European, and other international universities to each home in the Arab States so that students do not have to leave their countries to study abroad (UNESCO, 2002a). As AOU concluded an agreement with the UKOU, the SVU has sought to be affiliated with reputed online universities. SVU has concluded agreements with western leading online universities, mainly from Canada , Europe, Australia , and the USA , in order to offer their programs to students from the Arab region with the same requirements for enrollment and

graduation, thus fostering academic quality as well as intellectual honesty and integrity (Syrian Virtual University home page, 2003).
Glimpse of Distance Higher Education Endeavors

Considering distance education endeavors at the higher education level can identify similar characteristics if each structure is considered separately. With respect to dual mode delivery, an examination of student guidebooks and universities' homepages [2] yields the following four observations:

- These centers have awarded credits only and have not yet provided up-grade courses for professionals; therefore, their openness in terms of access has been somewhat limited in so far as the courses require traditional entry qualifications.
- Many distance education programs still rely on printed materials, audio and videocassettes, and conventional ways of linking students and tutors through regular tutorials weekly or every other week. There is no evidence that new information and communications technologies are being used.
- Assessment is summative as a paper-based test held either at the end of each semester or at the end of the academic year, leaving no room for formative assessment.
- Although these programs are made available to all students in the Arab region, it is often not convenient to enroll in them due to a lack of center branches.

Educational researchers and experts have criticized such programs. For instance, Hegy (1993) and Suliman (1995) found fault with the planning and administration of programs offered by open education centers in Egypt with respect to their objectives, policies, delivery systems, self-study materials, and student support services.

In considering the three single mode universities found in Tunisia, Libya, and Algeria, similar characteristics can be identified, such as the adoption of limited and national objectives making programs directed only to those countries. They also rely heavily on correspondence education and printed materials, and still utilize outdated delivery methods, while much recent attention has focused on the most advanced information and communication technologies.

QOU and AOU as two examples of single mode delivery of distance education are different from each other and from the three examples mentioned above. Having been established under the auspices of UNESCO, QOU has become a model of distance education in the Arab region. Although it has limitations and has only been directed at Palestinians, it could provide other Arab institutions with consultation in the distance education domain in general, and in producing distance education materials in particular. QOU has currently adopted an integrated-media approach in an attempt to prepare the best possible materials for its students. It has its own studio for the preparation of audio-visual materials. It produces interactive videodisks, computer software, as well as traditional audio-visual materials like transparencies, slides, wall pictures, maps, and three-dimensional objects. It also includes a complete Animation Unit (Al Quds Open University, 2001). Another feature that distinguishes QOU from other single mode endeavors is the provision of various educational opportunities encompassing undergraduate and postgraduate programs, as well as non-degree programs that are generally scarce in distance higher education programs in the Arab region.

AOU is also distinct from other single mode universities in the Arab region , in terms of being established under the umbrella of the Arab Gulf Program for United Nations Development Organizations (AGFUND), and adopting broad regional educational goals. However, AOU depends profoundly on UKOU materials, consultancies, and so forth, leaving no room to develop home-grown materials. AOU requires pre-entry qualifications that confine accessibility to those who aim to get academic credits, while the others who look for professional enhancement opportunities may feel disappointed at the lack of non-degree practical training courses. These observations were also made by UNESCO (2003), which stated:

Although the AOU promises in its mandate to promote an open system of learning ... that provides ... opportunities for ... professional development and lifelong learning, it still requires the students enrolled to have completed secondary education. This being the pre-requisite for enrolment at all universities in the region, it is still to be seen if the AOU does significantly increase access. Furthermore, the AOU relies heavily in its programs and instruction materials on the UKOU, contributing little to the production of genuine material and the development of Arab expertise in new technologies . (p.8)

In view of this, there are two more issues impeding the majority of Arab people from enrolling in this university. First, only those proficient in the English language will enroll in its programs; such applicants are a minority in the Arab region. Second, considering registration and study fees, only a few people can afford more than one thousand US dollars per semester. Therefore, it is doubtful that the Arab Open University, at least in its first phase, can provide equal accessibility to all peoples of the Arab region.

With respect to the third mode of distance education, like AOU, SVU avoids developing its own educational materials by relying heavily upon western universities' materials.

Having concluded agreements with Western on-line universities, particularly in Canada and the United States , to provide their programs to Arab students, SVU makes no contribution to the development of Arab expertise in using new technologies for the development of genuine instruction materials. (UNESCO, 2003, p.8)

While the delivery system of SVU differs completely from that of the AOU, their policies seem to be similar. Therefore, by directing its programs to particular people in the Arab region, SVU may face the same enrollment constraints as the AOU.

Alsunbul (2002) the deputy director general of the Arab League Educational, Cultural, and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) identified some issues that have a negative impact on the development of distance education in the Arab region. First, traditional distance instructional media are still used widely at open education universities. Second, it is estimated that most of the delivery system rendered by the Arab Open universities is via printed materials. Moreover, the

majority of Arab open universities utilize already available printed materials developed by existing traditional universities. Finally, the bulk of the part-time teachers are hired from the traditional universities pool. They are not training to do distance higher education, and their attitudes towards distance education are not much different from the rest of the people who look at distance education as a second-class form of education.

To avoid a kind of shortage as illustrated above, it is essential to ensure the quality of such programs. Since the success or the failure of such programs depends deeply on the extent to which the quality of these programs has been ensured, the need to develop quality assurance frameworks and to establish accreditation policies are urgent.

The Quality of Distance Higher Education in the Arab Region

Ensuring the quality of distance education is no doubt a major factor for the success of such a mode of education. Accordingly, there is a global trend towards ensuring quality to protect the customer, in this case, the student. In this regard, Alsunbul (2001) indicated that we should go beyond discussing the importance and justification of distance education and focus more on improving its quality, which lies in the totality of all activities that take place during learning experience. The same attitude was echoed by UNESCO, confirming the importance of ensuring the quality of such programs to achieve their objectives (UNESCO, 1998).

Although there is growing interest in the potential of distance education to solve some of the educational challenges, distance higher education in the Arab region needs to invest a great deal of effort to become equivalent to its counterpart in developed countries. Considering distance education endeavours in the Arab region, no evidence that either dual mode universities or single mode universities have any procedures for ensuring the quality of distance higher education programs. In the meantime, both AOU and SVU avoid developing their own programs and their recognition and validation by utilizing the materials and facilities that have been developed by internationally reputed universities. A case study prepared by the UNESCO regional office for education in the Arab states indicates:

Higher education authorities seem to be absent from regulating providers of higher learning that are outside the mainstream of the education system, such as corporate institutions and providers of education opportunities through non traditional delivery means, i.e. open learning, e-learning, virtual universities, etcetera . (UNESCO, 2002a, p . 9)

Alsunbul (2002) also pointed out that:

The issue of quality assurance in the Arab countries stems from the fact that universities which adopt the distance education mode have undertaken no effort to establish national standards to assure the academic quality of all processes conducted by the university, particularly with regard to the course materials and their relevance to the Arab world context. Instead, individual institutions of distance education often achieve quality standards for their academic activities

such as course production, evaluation and delivery by a trial and error procedure, a method that is not effective. (p.73)

The only university that has taken steps toward developing quality policies for its programs is QOU. QOU has a quality control department; however, it is still in development stages. This department will be responsible for achieving a high level of quality teaching and learning, and assuring the quality of services and products on the basis of scientific and professional criteria in all fields (Al Quds Open University, 2001).

It appears that the majority of the Arab societies are skeptical of the practices of distance education programs believing that it may be a process of teaching and learning by correspondence and not an innovative approach to instruction. These circumstances have serious implications for the development of this mode in the region. This can be observed through the educational policies of some countries towards the distance education mode.

Until now, there are countries that do not recognize distance education institutions and thus do not grant a license to anyone. Other countries permit the operation of full-fledged or dual systems of distance education but give very minimal subsidies to concerned organizations, which perpetuate the continuation of distance education as an opportunity for the elite. (Alsunbul, 2002, p.69)

That distance education is new to the Arab region – coupled with the fact it is yet poorly planned – mean that distance education may be distrusted for leaving its graduates without recognized qualifications. In this regard UNESCO stated that: Two attitudes have emerged in the market place towards the qualifications earned within the framework of such programs and institutions. One could be labelled as “pure market value” and considers the competencies earned without consideration of their source. The other, a more prudent one, requires authentication of the qualifications through recognition by the State's authorities or through accreditation of the institution and program by an internationally recognized body. The two above mentioned attitudes have left a number of “graduates” from these “on-the-side” providers with heavy bills and no recognized qualifications . (UNESCO, 2002a, p . 10)

To redress the doubt surrounding the concept and the practice of distance education, great efforts should be made to insure the quality of such programs. Quality assurance of distance higher education in the Arab region must be taken seriously if Arab countries want this mode of education to thrive. Developing a quality assurance framework for distance higher education would be helpful in guiding those responsible for implementing such models in the region, and it would be a major step towards attaining accreditation of such institutions and their programs by internationally recognized bodies.

A Vision for Ensuring the Quality of Distance Higher Education in Arab Countries

The above observations lead to the conclusion that Arab states are falling short of ensuring quality distance higher education programs. More worrisome is the

persistence of this state of affairs, the inevitable consequences of which include poor programs and unrecognized credentials.

Four parties can take part in enhancing the quality assurance and accreditation of distance higher education programs in Arab countries: international organizations, regional organizations, AOU and SVU, and academics.

International Organizations

Through their educational activities and projects, UNESCO and the World Bank play tremendous roles by providing distance higher education institutions or centers with preliminary consultation to establish their own quality assurance frameworks. One precondition for developing quality assurance frameworks is the existence of academic and administration staff qualified in this area. Since, there is much less awareness of quality assurance and of the requirements needed to make it work, such organizations can provide a group of academic and administration staff with training to become capable of improving and ensuring the quality of their institutions.

Regional Organizations

Endeavors to ensure the quality of distance higher education can also be headed by regional organizations through a series of conferences, forums, seminars, and workshops. The Arab region encompasses a reasonable number of regional and sub-regional organizations³ which can take meaningful steps toward enforcement in this domain, such as the Arab Gulf Program for United Nations Development Organizations (AGFUND), the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (AFESD), the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO), the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), the Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (ABEGS), and the Association of Arab Universities. These organizations can strengthen Arab cooperation by establishing a pan-Arab accreditation agency that would have the responsibility of securing the quality of distance education region wide. Furthermore, they should have active roles in sustaining the Arab Network for Open and Distance Education (ANODED), which requires multi-faceted support to be able to achieve its mission.

AOU and SVU

Having closer ties with distance or open universities worldwide and being provided consultation, both AOU and SVU are in a good position to develop their own quality assurance policies. These could develop into leading institutions that may supply consultation to other distance education institutions endeavoring to establish their own frameworks.

Academics

Quality assurance and accreditation of higher education generally and distance higher education particularly - are relatively new to the Arab region. As yet untouched as fields of study, quality assurance and accreditation would present a wide range of research opportunities for educational academics in the Arab region. In this regard, comparative education studies have a major role to play in providing important developments in distance education quality assurance around the world to extend our knowledge and understanding of various quality assurance issues.

Conclusion

The Arab region has witnessed a remarkable increase in the distance higher education domain over the past two decades. This significant progress, however, does not necessarily denote quality programs. A key problem is regarding how to ensure that a quality learning experience is being provided. Thus, the need for developing quality assurance frameworks for distance higher education institutions and programs in the Arab region is evident. With the development of quality assurance frameworks, some points should be considered:

Historically and culturally, the Arab region has many features in common, in particular from the linguistic and religious standpoints; however, it is in many respects a highly inconsistent in terms of population size and national income, resources, stability, prosperity and so forth. So the exact framework, which will be adopted by each country, will depend on the conditions prevailing and no single framework can be presented that is applicable to all universities in all Arab countries. Therefore, we need a number of skeletal or basic frameworks to start with, and will be ultimately set up within the context of each institution's own vision and mission, as well as, objectives and core values relative to distance education.

Of course, there is complex interplay among the separate elements that go together to make a quality distance education program; therefore, it is important that quality assurance of all aspects of distance education programs be considered. Otherwise, the failure in assuring quality of one aspect may have a knock-on effect on the quality of the whole system.

Finally, given all issues highlighted in this paper, it seems honest to conclude that developing such a framework is essential for ensuring quality, but is not enough on its own to ensure quality distance education offerings. It should be regarded only as the beginning of an ongoing comprehensive process that has to be supported effectively to produce the desired results. For successfully executing such a framework, all essential synchronous conditions which foster quality assurance have to be present, such as integration of the quality assurance into the institution' commitments, staff persuasion and engagement, commitment by each of the organizational units involved to ensure the quality in all of the services provided, and the development of a positive corporate culture.

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Endnotes

1 So far there is confusion between distance education and open education in the Arab region, with many authors using the two terms interchangeably. However, all open education universities or programs discussed throughout this paper utilize the distance education mode to improve accessibility, as mentioned on their home pages or in their student guidebooks.

2 See Ain-shams university open education center <http://net.shams.edu.eg/open%5Fedu/> ;

Al-Baath university open learning center. Student guidebook. <http://www.olc-albaath.net/>;

Faculty of Commerce (1991). Student guidebook for registration in open education programs to obtain Bachelor degree in commerce. Alexandria : Alexandria University ;

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Majdalawi Educational Institute services. Center for distance education, Juba university. www.mei.com.jo/services.htm .

3 See Arab Gulf Program for United Nations Development Organizations <http://www.agfund.org/> ;

Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development <http://www.arabfund.org/> ;

Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization <http://www.alecso.org.tn/index.htm> ;

Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization <http://www.isesco.org.ma/> ;

Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States <http://www.abegs.net/> ;

Association of Arab Universities <http://www.aaru.edu.jo/> .

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