PERSPECTIVES OF SAUDI ARABIAN NON-TRADITIONAL MEN AND WOMEN LEARNERS TOWARDS THE BENEFITS OF DISTANCE LEARNING

Khalil Al Saadat[i]
Department of Educational Policies,
College of Education,
King Saud University,
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Abstract:
Distance learning provides many positive aspects, including meeting the needs and goals of nontraditional students with responsibilities to career and family that keep them from taking regular college courses. This new method presents a new source of learning and training realm for the adult population. The overall increase in technology necessitates that community organizations, institutions, schools and universities, and agencies that employ and train workers adopt distance training and learning programs. The purpose of this study is to know the perspectives of a group of nontraditional Saudi men and women learners, about the benefits of distance learning programs to adult learners and non-traditional students.

Keywords: benefits, distance learning, non-traditional students

1. Introduction

The number of nontraditional students has grown more rapidly than the number of traditional students (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). The growth of nontraditional adult enrollment in higher education demands a different and more flexible delivery system to meet students' needs (Chun & Hinton, 2001). Distance learning is designed to ensure compatibility with the characteristics and needs of the adult learner. By retaining their jobs while attending school, adult learners can continue to gain work experience while pursuing educational goals (Nafukho, Thompson, & Brooks, 2004) [1].

Distance learning is gaining popularity among adults who are keen to upgrade themselves for better career opportunities. Distance learning provides an alternative for people to further their education without having to undergo traditional classroom learning. Nowadays, more adults are becoming interested in pursuing higher education in order to compete more effectively in the job market. In response to this growing

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[i] Correspondence: email alsaadat@gmail.com

interest in higher education, education providers are creating new courses using new technologies to meet the demand. Many distance learning online courses are developed to meet this increasing need [2]. Formal online learning is becoming more commonplace among adults, although the Pew Project has not published numbers on the penetration of formal online learning for seniors. In a 2000 survey, they found that 5 percent of adult Internet users of all age groups had taken an online course for credit. A 2005 report from the Oxford Internet Institute in the United Kingdom indicates that one-fifth of UK Internet users have used the Internet for distance learning. The Sloan Foundation reports an 18.2 percent growth in online enrollment in higher education classes from 2003 to 2004; it was also reported that "*two-thirds of all schools offering face-to-face courses also offer online courses*". And in 2007, Michigan became the first state to require all high school students to take at least one online class in order to graduate [3].

Lawrence, 2007, noted that because of the rapid growth in distance learning, the use of technology has overcome many barriers to higher education by providing traditional universities with an opportunity to meet the changing worldwide demand for education (National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, 2001. This growth in demand will result in a change in the type of students undertaking higher education. Educational needs are becoming continuous throughout one's working life, as labor markets demand knowledge and skills that require regular updating (O'Neill et al., 2004). A recent report by the National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education (2001) indicated that more than 50% of higher education students were mature students (someone who starts a degree at age 21 or older). This figure is expected to increase as people realize the importance of education and how convenient it has become to have access to online learning and virtual universities that allow educational experiences to be tailored to the needs of individuals or groups [1].

2. Related works

Many studies have been conducted about the influence of distance education on adult learning. Cahill, 2014 study examined the effects that distance education has had on adult earners over the last four decades, including correspondence courses, single technology, blended learning, and, e-learning. Distance education has changed to decrease situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers for adult learners that students listed in the 1970s and 1980s. Removing these barriers has improved adult education in the 21st century [4].

Gravani's (2014) study aspires, to give voice to the experiences and perceptions of adult learners and their educators, as they embark on distance learning courses delivered by the Open University of Cyprus and the Hellenic Open University to unveil the adult learning and 'fine-grained' processes at work during the organization and delivery of the courses, with the ultimate aim to underline the factors influencing these processes. The project complements previous research and attempts to extract from the findings ideas and practices that could contribute to the re-organization

of distance courses that facilitate adult learning. It has as its main units of analysis 16 adult learners and 8 educators and rests on a research framework that views certain program elements as being vital in unveiling the processes of adult learning. It harnesses a phenomenological approach and qualitative research techniques. The study contributes to a better theoretical understanding of the processes of adult learning and the mediating role of the distance learning context, in comparison to other previously explored contexts [5].

Remedios and Richardson (2013) examined an online survey achievement goal, approaches to studying, and academic attainment in distance adult learners. The Achievement Goals Questionnaire-Revised and the Approaches to Learning and Studying Inventory were given to 2000 students, yielding 1211 responses. The findings confirmed the 2×2 model of mastery-approach, mastery-avoidance, performance-approach, and performance-avoidance goals in adult distance learners. Mastery goals were positively associated with deep and strategic approaches to studying but negatively associated with a surface approach. Performance goals showed only weak associations with approaches to studying. Performance-approach goals were positively related to attainment, performance-avoidance goals were negatively related to attainment, but mastery goals were unrelated to attainment. The relationship between achievement goals and attainment was partly but not wholly mediated by approaches to studying [6].

Achemfuor (2017) reported in his study that Educating adults through distance education provides opportunities for those who for one reason or another cannot attend full-time studies. Inadequate support for distance learners across the world has prompted some commentators to question the effectiveness of using distance education as a tool for addressing the legacies of the past and as a skills development strategy in South Africa. The present research explored how partnerships between education stakeholders can be used as a way of addressing the gaps in learner support systems among students in general and adult learners in particular. The author of this study is of the view that distance education providers such as Unisa can tap into the support structures of the stakeholders to address the gaps in the system to enable students to have enduring distance education experiences.

The study used document analysis and literature review to identify stakeholders and some of the best practices some distance-providing institutions across the world are using to support their adult learners studying through distance [7].

Marcus (2010) believes that many people choose this learning mode of study because of the flexibility and freedom it provides. Some of them enroll in this type of learning course because they are working full-time and cannot afford to lose their jobs. They need their income for their own as well as their family's living expenses, and leaving their jobs would bring about financial problems. They have to find a way to fit learning into their schedule of family and job demands. Some people take up distance learning courses because they live far away from the school and attending classes is inconvenient. For some, this problem arises because the program they want to study is not offered by a nearby school and they have to choose a school far away from their residence. Traveling

to a campus far away is inconvenient and time-consuming. Some people have family commitments which make attending class difficult. These people may have elderly or kids at home to look after and are not able to attend classes. Studying through distance learning can enable them to look after their family while they study. Some people are keen to do a certain course but feel shy about joining a class. Hence, they choose to do distance learning courses because these courses do not require them to attend classes [2].

Lawrence (2007) stated that the distance-learning environment has a major contribution to the educational requirements of the 21st century by encouraging general acceptance of the concept of knowledge as a vital element in social development and economic growth. The authenticity, quality, and competitive standards of such programs should come from reputable institutions so that those in higher education can confidently say that it will eventually lead to economic growth [1].

Keeping pace with changes in technology and meeting the increasing demands of the knowledge-based economy will require a highly skilled and educated workforce capable of working collaboratively to find solutions to diverse economic, social, and environmental problems. The key to success is, in large part, continuing education, which means that online learning, with its open access and opportunities for active collaboration in an egalitarian environment, will have an important role to play in meeting the challenges of the future (Stansfield et al., 2004 in Lawrence, 2007).

Distance learning has several benefits for that classroom learning lacks. One of the benefits is that a learner can learn at his or her own pace. In classroom learning, the faster learners need to wait for the slower learners to catch up with the lesson before the teacher can move on to the next topic. They have to slow down their pace for the sake of the slower learners. With distance learning, the faster learner can go on to the next topic any time he or she wants. Furthermore, in classroom learning, a learner has only one chance to listen to a class lesson. However, with distance learning, the learner can replay a portion of the audio tape or video, or read again the notes for a particular module (Godden, 2010). Many degree programs are available through distance education programs offered by colleges and universities. Adults who want to continue their studies in specific fields or change careers can earn certificates of certification, associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees [8].

3. Research methods

3.1. Purpose of the study
The purpose of the study was to know the perspective of Saudi non-traditional students towards the benefits of distance education.

3.2. Sample of the study
The sample of the study consisted of one hundred and five (105) non-traditional students, forty-five males (45) and sixty (60) females.

3.3. Statistical methods

The descriptive analysis method is used to reach the result, including statistical analysis such as correlation coefficients, reliability coefficients, frequency and percentages, mean and standard deviation.

3.4 Instrument of the study

A questionnaire was developed and distributed among learners containing ten items about their points of view about the benefits of using distance education technology and methods.

4. Analysis of data

The correlation coefficient for five items of the questionnaires:

Table 1: Correlation coefficients

1.	.4018
2.	.2743
3.	.2706
4.	.4005
5.	.4000
Signif . LE . 01	
Reliability coefficients; Alpha = .5703	

The correlation coefficient for five items of the questionnaires which were given three levels: Agree, Not sure and Don't agree.

Table 2: Frequencies and percentages

Don't agree	Not sure	Agree
Count (%)	Count (%)	Count (%)
12 (11.8)	18 (17.6)	72 (70.6)
8 (7.8)	27 (26.2)	68 (66.0)
4 (3.8)	7 (6.7)	94 (89.5)
13 (12.6)	27 (26.2)	63 (61.2)
9 (8.7)	16 (15.5)	78 (75.7)

Table 3: Mean and standard deviation

Number of valid observations (Listwise) = 89.00		
Variable	**Mean**	**Std Dev**
1.	2.59	.69
2.	2.58	.63
3.	2.49	.45
4.	2.49	.71
5.	2.67	.63
TA 24.97 3.54		

Analysis of variance was used to know if there are any significant differences among the sample of the study sample regarding ages between "20-25", "26-32", "32 and above", the result is as follows:

Table 4: Analysis of variance

Source	D.F.	Sum of squares	Mean squares	F ratio	F prob.
Between (G)	2	29.0622	14.5311	1.1577	.3183
Within (G)	101	1267.6974	12.5515		
Total	**103**	**1296.7596**			

The analysis of variance showed that there were no significant differences among the sample of the study due to age category.

Man Whitney (U) Wilcoxon rank test was used to know if there are any significant differences among the sample of the study sample regarding employment statutes, employed-non employed, the result is as follows:

Table 5: Man Whitney (U) test

	Mean rank	Cases
Employed	55.94	9
Unemployed	48.29	88

Note: U W Z Corrected for tise2-Tailed p 333.5 503.5 -.7815 .4345

Man Whitney (U) test showed that there were no significant differences among the sample of the study regarding employment categories.

T-test was used to know if there were any significant differences among the study sample regarding gender (male-female) the result of the T-test is as follows:

Table 5: T-test

Variables	Number of cases	Mean	SD	SE of Mean
Male	45	25.5556	3.101	.462
Female	60	24.5333	3.798	.490

Note: T-value 1.47; 2 Tailed sig .144

T-test showed that there were no significant differences among the sample of the study regarding gender category.
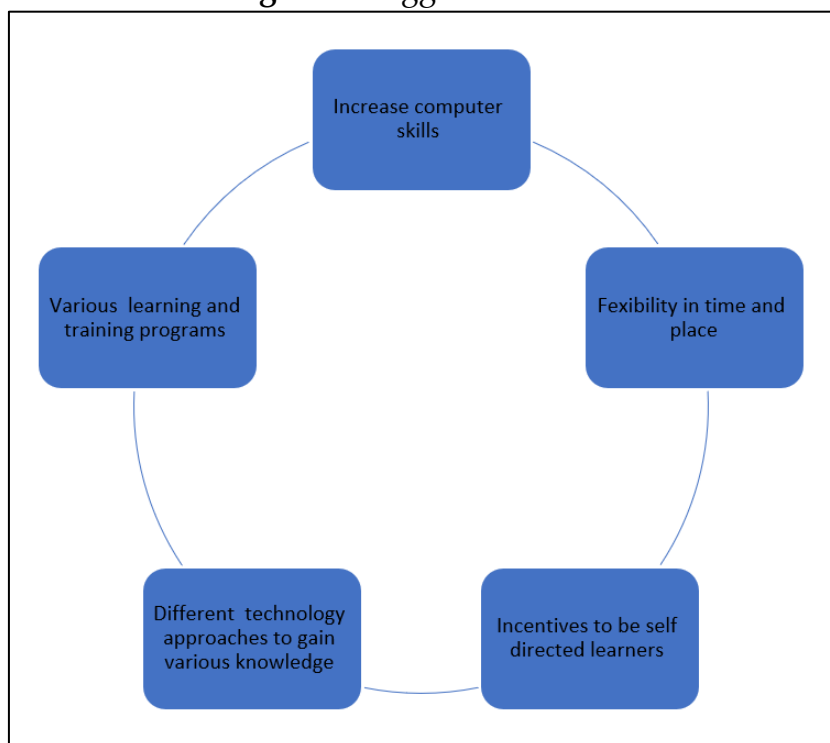
5. Result of the study

The result of the study showed that 89.5% of the learners agree that distance learning helps learners to increase their computer skills and extract updated knowledge from the web and different sources. 75.7% of the learners agree that distance learning programs are flexible so learners can choose the place and time to learn 70.6 % of the learners agree that using distance education methods provides learners with a great incentive to be self-directed learners. 66% of the learners agree that distance learning programs provide

different curriculum approaches by using technology to obtain various skills and knowledge. 61.2% of the learners see that distance learning provides various learning and training programs that learners can choose from.

According to the result of the study, the researcher suggested the following models for the benefits of distance learning for non-traditional learners:

Figure 1: Suggested models

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The result of the study showed that nontraditional Saudi students have a positive attitude toward distance learning and the benefits and knowledge they acquire when adopting distance learning techniques. This coincides with the literature that discusses the best practices in this field.

Neal and Miller (2000) talked about techniques and best practices for the delivery of distance education they argued that teaching online can be quite different from teaching in the classroom. Although not all distance education has a teacher—self-paced courses being an example—when they do the teacher needs to be adept at using the delivery technology and at interacting with students effectively without the physical presence and visual information that are so abundant in the classroom. It is not enough for an instructor to be an expert in the content being taught—instructors must be adequately prepared to ensure their online courses will be a positive experience for students. This reaches beyond familiarity with the technology itself—an understanding of how teaching practices and behaviors need to be adjusted to succeed online is required.

For example, adjustments might be needed regarding the number of assignments and due dates, given that text-based interaction and coordinating coursework and feedback between peers and the instructor often take longer than classroom-based situations.

Berge (1995) defines the roles of an online instructor to be pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical and points out that these may not all be carried out by the same person; in fact, they rarely are. Each type of medium (e.g., print, audio, video, web-based) requires specific instructional skills for effective use. For example, those teaching in video-based environments must learn on-camera behaviors and adapt to a lack of learner feedback, while those using Web-based technology must adapt to the absence of nonverbal cues and learn to interpret online communication nuances (Schoenfeld-Tacher & Persichitte, 2000).

Instructors must understand how to use technology, apply it to the discipline, generalize it to learn new applications and guide students in applying the technology. Ideally, m instructors should try to identify opportunities to improve learning via technology by developing a variety of teaching strategies and understanding how technology shapes new teaching roles and student roles (Coughlin & Lemke, 1999). This understanding and ability to leverage technology in teaching is a learned skill—it does not come naturally to most people [9].

Marcus (2010) added that one of the advantages of distance learning is that the student can have access to learning at any time and any place. There are no restrictions imposed on their study time and location. Students can easily fit learning into their family and work life. They do not need to adjust their family and work commitments to attend fixed class schedules. Besides, it enables students to save on travel time and travel costs. They can spend more time and money on other areas. He continued that Distance online learning creates interactions that stimulate understanding and exchange of ideas. Online programs require the student to actively participate in the learning process. Throughout the course, the student is presented with opportunities to interact with the course instructor as well as other students via website forums, chat rooms, Internet conferencing, and emails. Online course developers try to get the students to participate and engage as much as possible. Some research studies have shown that distance learning education can be as effective as campus-based education. These research studies reported that distance students can perform as well as or better than campus-based students. Many students who have succeeded in distance learning education have reported that they have a positive experience with distance learning courses [2].

Conflict of interest statement
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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