

E- Learning Experiences from the Arab World

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Abstract

Although most Arab countries offer free public education, the majority of their educational systems do not prepare students for the labour market or equip them with the skills needed to compete in today's global society. Teaching methods and techniques do not encourage critical and analytical thinking, and are still teacher-centred instead of being designed with intentional focus on students and learners. E-learning technologies have the potential to address most of these challenges. For example, digital technologies can make education more efficient, scalable and accessible. And with the wide spread of the internet in the region, an increased adoption of e-learning has been witnessed among Arab students and life-long learners. To assess the current state of the e-learning sphere in the Arab world, we conducted a survey to learn more about the digital learning experiences of Arab students. In this paper, we report our findings. Most of the 200 participants who responded to our survey hold a bachelor degree and higher, and claimed to spend more than 4 hours online. However, only 19.5% of all participants have enrolled in an Arabic e-learning program or MOOC, and 70% still prefer to take their courses in English. We also assess the different factors Arab learners take into consideration when joining an online course, and also explore the reasons that lead 80% of participants not to join any online courses. Our observations show that adoption of digital learning in the Arab world is very low but has significant potential for growth. The paper concludes with recommendations on how to spread digital learning in the region.

Keywords: digital learning; education; life-long learner; MOOC

1. Introduction

While the 21st century brought an economic boom to some Arab countries, investments allocated to “sectors such as education, information infrastructure, research and development, and innovation have been insufficient” in most of these countries (Aubert & Reiffers, 2003, Kamel, 2014). [1,2] However, over the last few years, some Arab countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, embarked on educational reform initiatives to improve university curricula, advance quality in tertiary education and expand vocational training programs. Yet, and despite that most Arab countries still provide free public education, most of these efforts overly focus on quantifiable changes. The majority of Arab educational systems do not reflect the needs of labour markets, and are not preparing students to compete in today's global society. (Traifeh & Meinel, 2018). [3] According to the United Nations Development

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Programme (UNDP), current curricula and teaching methods discourage critical thinking and encourage instead a “submissive attitude towards higher authority” (Arab Human Development Report, UNDP, 2016). [4] Another challenge that faces education in the region could be the shortage of qualified teachers, the low teacher salaries and the limited opportunities for professional development. (Faour, 2011) [5]

With the spread of the internet and the introduction of digital technologies that impacted several fields around the world, including education, different educational models started to emerge and new terms such as “e-learning”, “online learning”, and “digital learning” began to be used since 1999 (Gogos, 2013). [6] The influence of digital technology and the use of the internet on education in the Arab region was no exception. In 2011, two individual initiatives: The Aldarayn Academy and the Arab E-Learning Academy, were established to explain specific lessons by recording videos and uploading them on a YouTube channel (Sallam, 2017). [7] Later on, following the global trend of MOOC (Massive Open Online Courses), several Arabic MOOC platforms emerged, such as Edraak which was launched in 2013 as an initiative of Queen Rania Foundation in Jordan and supported by the queen herself. Edraak offers free online courses for Arabic-speaking learners. The contents of the courses consist of both originally created courses and edX (free online) courses that are translated into Arabic (Pirkle, 2014). [8] Other popular MOOC platforms that offer MOOCs that cater to Arabic language speakers are: Riwaq, KKUx and Doroob.

2. Methodology

According to a study conducted by Sangrà et al, there are several definitions of the term ‘elearning’ that can be divided into four categories: while some definitions are “CommunicationOriented”, others are “Educational-Paradigm-Oriented”, “Technology-Driven”, or “DeliverySystem-Oriented” (Sangrà et al., 2012). [9] For the purposes of this study, a questionnaire was designed and built based on Koohang & Harman’s definition that “E-learning is the delivery of education (all activities relevant to instructing, teaching, and learning) through various electronic media” (Koohang & Harman, 2005). [10] The aim of the study is to explore the experiences of e-learning in the Arab region, to understand the reasons behind using, or not using, online learning resources, and to identify a list of the most popular e-learning platforms in the region. The questionnaire contained a total of 21 questions divided into three main sections:

1- General questions to assess what devices participants use most frequently, their ability to access the internet, and what type of online activities they do the most. Respondents answered questions about whether they own a desktop/laptop and/or a smartphone. If internet service is available in their area, and how many hours they surf the internet every day. Participants were also asked about the sorts of online outlets they visit regularly (they were asked to arrange the suggested 5 categories according to their perceived importance: Social media, news, e-learning, search engines, and entertainment.

2- Questions that ask participants to reflect on their experiences with e-learning, with a specific focus on online Arabic courses (MOOCs in particular). Participants were also asked about the reasons behind joining or not joining an Arabic online course.

3- Demographic questions to collect the participants' age, nationality, sex, academic achievement and professional experiences.

4- One open-ended question to give the participants the opportunity to share their input about any e-learning project or experience that they find interesting or had a particular impact on them.

The survey contained mainly closed questions with the possibility to use open/additional answers for a few questions.

3. Survey Findings

3.1. Survey Results

The survey was conducted online over a period of two months (from July to August 2018) targeting Arabic speakers of any age who have access to the Internet. All the survey questions were asked in Arabic to ensure the respondents match the intended target audience. The survey was circulated via social media channels, and no incentives for participation.

In total, 263 people responded to the survey. However, 63 responses were incomplete and hence excluded from the analysis. Out of the completed responses (N=200), 52% came from female respondents, and 48% from males. The majority of the respondents (71.5%) were between 18-35 years old. Almost half (49%) hold a Bachelor degree, and 40% hold a Master degree or higher. Table 1 shows the occupations of respondents, and Table 2 shows their geographic distribution.

Table 1. Occupations of Survey Respondents

Respondents' Occupation	
Education	21.5%
Art & Design	17.5%
IT/Programming	17.%
Business Management	9%
NGO	2.5%
Health	2.5%
Engineering	2%

Journalism	1%
Other	7.5%
Still a student	15%
I do not currently work	4.5%

Table 2. Countries of Survey Respondents

Geographic Distribution of Respondents	
Algeria	1
Bahrain	0
Comoros	0
Djibouti	0
Egypt	7
Iraq	0
Jordan	68
Kuwait	0
Lebanon	3
Libya	1
Mauritania	0
Morocco	4
Palestine	6
Qatar	0
Saudi Arabia	3
Somalia	0
Sudan	1
Syria	94
Tunisia	9
United Arab Emirates	1
Yemen	1
Other	1
Total (N)	200

Almost all survey respondents own a smart phone, and only one respondent answered that he/she does not own a smart phone. 85% of respondents stated that they have access to a good Internet connection, 13% have Internet access of poor quality, and 2% do not have access to the Internet at all. Out of those that have Internet access, over 42% use the Internet over 7 hours per day, 37% use the Internet for 4-6 hours per day, and 19% use the Internet for 1-3 hours per day.

When asked about the websites they frequently visit, social networking sites came first, with over 61% of respondents citing these as their most frequently visited websites, followed by search engines at 27%. Only 3.59% of respondents answered that e-learning websites top the list of their most frequently visited websites. Most respondents use desktop computers to access the Internet for educational purposes (61%), and 39% use mobile devices.

One of the important insights the results revealed, the majority of participants (over three quarters) have *not* enrolled in online educational programs presented in the Arabic language. Out of the 19.5% who enrolled, two thirds joined 1-3 online courses, and only 12% enrolled in 7 courses or more. The most popular reason for enrolling in an Arabic online learning program as reported by respondents was general skill and knowledge development (76%), followed by gaining deeper understanding of a discipline of interest (64%). The least popular reasons were the participant's inability to enroll in formal education (7%), recommendations from friends or teachers (17%), and the belief that obtaining new educational credentials increases the chances of getting a new job or a promotion (17%). Table 3 presents the reasons for enrolling in online Arabic educational programs as reported by the survey respondents.

Table 3. Reasons for Enrolling in Arabic Online Educational Programs

Why did you enroll in an Arabic online educational program?	
General skill and knowledge development	76.92%
Deepen my understanding of a discipline of interest	64.10%
Curiosity to learn about a field I heard about	30.77%
Support a scientific study I am conducting	25.64%
Connect with other like-minded learners	20.51%
Other reasons	20.51%
Obtaining new credentials to increase my career prospects	17.95%
Recommendation from a friend or a teacher	17.95%
Could not enroll in formal education	7.69%

The survey also gauged the experiences of participants who enrolled in Arabic online courses. Most participants rated their learning experiences as good (46%) and average (33%). A smaller percentage (18%) reported having excellence experiences, while less than 3% rated their experiences as poor. Participants were split when asked whether they prefer online

education over traditional education: 51% stated that they prefer online education, while 49% stated that they do not. However, more than two thirds of responders reported their preference of English online educational programs over those offered in Arabic.

When choosing the online educational program to enroll in, the name and reputation of the website offering the program is the most important consideration. Moreover, YouTube was also reported to be a source for finding learning content and materials. The least popular reason was whether the program offers a certificate of attendance. Table 4 presents the reported factors in choosing an online educational program.

Table 4. Factors for Choosing Arabic Online Educational Programs

What factors do you consider when choosing an Arabic online educational program?	
The name and reputation of the website offering the program	61.54%
I depend on YouTube when I want to learn a new skill	56.41%
The program duration	53.85%
Whether the program start time suits my schedule	51.28%
The program cost	46.15%
Whether the program offers a certificate of attendance	30.77%

On the other hands, the participants stated several reasons that prevented them from enrolling in an Arabic online educational program. The most frequently stated reason was not finding a program that satisfies their needs, followed by the lack of awareness about such programs, and the inability to find Arabic online learning websites. Table 5 lists the reasons for not enrolling in an Arabic online educational program as reported by the survey participants.

Table 5. Reasons for Not Participating in Arabic Online Educational Programs

What reasons prevented you from enrolling in an online Arabic educational program?	
I could not find a program that satisfies my needs	28.75%
I did not know about the availability of such programs	27.50%
I do not know where I can find Arabic educational websites	26.88%
All the programs I checked were not of good quality	21.25%
The programs that interested me were very expensive	13.13%

3.2. Respondents' Feedback

In order to better understand the respondents' perceptions and opinions towards digital learning, the survey presented participants with an open-ended question to share their input

about any e-learning project or experience that they find interesting or had a particular impact on them. Most of those who answered this question and who also have a good command of English language, stated that they prefer to learn in English for several reasons. The following are a few examples of the collected feedback:

- “Most of the available online Arabic courses are not developed by trusted sources and do not accommodate different learning styles (e.g. auditory/visual learners)”
- “I do not trust Arabic content/information”
- “Scientific terms are very hard to understand in Arabic”
- “In fact, Arabic online platforms lack new topics and technologies in various fields, so far I have not found a competitive Arab educational platform compared to those offered by foreign educational websites. Edraak is a step in the right direction but it is limited and it supports only academic education while sometimes we need to learn skills”

Those who were interested in learning in Arabic expressed their interest in finding courses to learn a second language such as English. They said that they could not find good sources where they can enroll in such courses. Many participants also said that they come from a design background and the Arabic content available online in this field is either not very useful or very expensive, therefore, they are not able to advance their knowledge by enrolling in design elearning courses.

When asked about the most visited e-learning platforms, Coursera, Edraak and Udemy came first. Table 6 lists the websites the participants have enrolled in courses at.

Table 6. List of the most visited e-learning websites by Arab learners

Please list the e-learning websites/platforms you visit frequently	
Coursera	32%
Edraak	28.50%
Udemy	17.8%
Riwaq	17.8%
Youtube	10.7%
Udacity	10.7%
LinkedIn Learning	7.14%
Duolingo	7.14%
Doroob	7.14%
edx	7.14%
FutureLearn	3.57%
Mahara	3.57%
Edlal	3.57%

Ethrai	3.57%
Aanaab	3.57%
Ideo	3.57%
KKUx	3.57%
Alison	3.57%

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The survey results indicate low levels of adoption of digital learning in the Arab region. Moreover, the adoption levels are particularly low for Arabic digital educational programs. This indicates significant potential for growth that could yield many benefits and advantages as those afforded by digital learning in other regions of the world.

However, in order to stimulate this growth, several challenges and issues must be addressed, including improving the quality of the Arabic digital educational content online, investing in the development of diverse Arabic digital online courses and educational programs to satisfy the needs of Arab learners, and promoting Arabic courses and programs to increase awareness of these programs among their intended target audiences.

To address these challenges and issues, and to reap the benefits of digital learning in the Arab region, governments should invest in targeted initiatives to develop and promote high quality Arabic digital educational content, and provide incentives for educational institutions and content developers for their investments in digital education. Educational institutions should seize this opportunity to develop high quality learning programs in Arabic, and ensure the widest access possible to these programs. Institutions should also build the capacity of their teachers and academic staff in digital instruction design and digital learning delivery. Business engagement is also important to create digital training programs for vocational skill development, and to leverage the scalability of digital learning to upskill their employees for the workplace of the future.

It is important to note that the results and findings of this study are limited by the skewed regional participation from the different Arab countries. The study will be extended with an expanded scope to attract participants from all Arab countries. This would improve representation and enable the analysis of regional differences.

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