An Outlook on Future Mobile Learning in Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

Saudi Arabia is witnessing a unique and rapid economic growth as well as beyond-oil comprehensive investments relatively at most sectors including education and ICT. As part of the global pedagogical shift from teacher-centred approaches to more learner-centred approaches, Saudi educational system already started to adopt distance and mobile learning practices to support this shift. Saudi higher education sector, in particular, is investing heavily to promote teaching and learning practices that can cope with students' needs in the digital age. Moreover, the rapid advancement as well as the enormous penetration of mobile technologies among Saudi youths have increased the interest in mobile learning. In addition, young population in Saudi Arabia are the biggest users of mobile social media in the Arab World.

There are several challenges that accompanied this rapid development of economic and educational systems in Saudi Arabia. Special and unique 'version' of mobile learning was formed as a response to these challenges. This paper will review some of the challenges found in previous studies, and will highlight other challenges that are believed to have a major impact on mobile learning in Saudi Arabia. A picture of the future of mobile learning in Saudi Arabia will then be drawn.

Author Keywords
Mobile learning, mobile social media, Saudi Arabia, challenges and future.

INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia is one of a few fast-growing countries in the world with a relatively high per capita income; it was $20,700 in 2007 and expected to be $33,500 by 2020 (Saudi Arabia, n.d.). Saudi people get free education and healthcare. University students, in particular, are paid on a monthly basis as part of the country's initiative to promote higher education. Saudi higher education has greatly progressed in the adoption of more student-centered learning approaches as a reaction to the global pedagogical shift. For example, most Saudi universities have launched their own e-learning deanships and signed cooperation agreements with leading international institutions and providers of e-learning logistic services. Mobile learning had and still has a major focus in the practices of e-learning deanships. Students, for instance, are provided with mobile platforms to learning content and trained to use mobile devices, e.g., iPads, for learning purposes. Moreover, Saudi universities have created communication channels with their students via the social media and trained their students to synchronize them with formal platforms.

CURRENT PRACTICES

The Saudi government has established several leading projects that were meant to encourage the implementation of distance and mobile learning:

- The National Center for E-Learning and Distance Education.

- JUSUR (a Learning Management System).

- Saudi Digital Library.

- Saudi Electronic University.

According to Garg (2013), Qassim College of Medicine claims to be the first mobile learning program launched in Saudi higher education. In 2011, King Khalid University launched Mobile Blackboard preceded by an initiative to implement iPads for learning and assessment. The university considered the familiarity of mobile social media among its students. Thus, it introduced the students to how Facebook can be synchronized with Blackboard, so that students can be kept informed of Blackboard announcements while using Facebook (Al-Shehri, 2012). Wi-Fi networks were also provided at most campuses of Saudi universities.

Students' attitudes towards mobile learning in Saudi universities were investigated by several studies. Al-Fahad (2009), for instance, investigated the perceptions and attitudes of female arts and medicine university students' towards the use of mobile technology in their university learning experience. The study indicates that the future of mobile learning in Saudi Arabia is promising since almost every student owns a mobile phone with cutting-edge technologies. Al-Fahad also asserts that Saudi students are making the most of their mobile phones including mobile internet and social networking. Yet, some participants in his study were still cautious about using mobile internet due to the expensive cost of current

mobile phone internet packages. Al-Fahad's study took place at King Saud University in Riyadh.

Chanchary and Islam (2011) conducted another study at Najran University to explore students' perceptions towards mobile learning. The study concluded that the majority of students are not fully ready for mobile learning but want their teachers to implement a blended learning approach where mobile learning will be blended with conventional classroom teaching. However, some students eventually indicated that they did not exactly know how mobile learning would facilitate their learning.

Another study by Nassuora (2012) adopted a Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) model to determine the factors affecting the use of mobile learning among Al-Faisal private University. Nassuora indicated that although the majority of students were not familiar with the concept of mobile learning, students had good perceptions and acceptance of mobile learning. Seliaman and Al-Turki (2012) also used a similar model to analyze to use of mobile devices among Saudi university students to access course materials and do assignments, search the web for related information, and share knowledge. They concluded that "perceived innovativeness does not show high positive correlation with perceived usefulness of m-learning" (p. 393). In other words, students may be professional users of mobile devices. Yet, students at the moment are not well prepared to use their mobile devices for learning purposes.

Al-Shehri (2012) conducted a PhD project at King Khalid University to explore the potential of mobile social media to create more authentic and contextual learning practices, and to provide English language learners with more opportunities to practice the language outside the classroom. His study found that although mobile social media helped in contextualizing the learning task, students listed some technological limitations that they encountered. Limitations included the lack of good network coverage especially in remote areas, the interference between learning and non-learning materials on social media, such as advertising, and the tendency to use their computer rather than their mobile phones.

CURRENT CHALLENGES

According to Almarwani (2011), many generic studies are being used in some developed countries to theorize and evaluate mobile learning. Almarwani claims that generality of such studies do not fit with the unique circumstances, or challenges, found in Saudi Arabia (see Table 1).

Challenges	Description
The large scale projects	The largest national ICT projects in terms of expenditure
The increased demand for education	Huge young population Universities will be unable to admit all students Mobile learning is a short-term solution
Limitations of capital and labor	Rapid expansion of universities implies shortage of good infrastructure and qualified instructors
Geographical distance	Connecting urban and rural campuses will be expensive Mobile learning is the solution
Traditional cultural norms	New technologies are inspected by religious and cultural norms Familiarity with mobile technology could overcome over-conservative cultural considerations

Table 1. Challenges of mobile learning in Saudi Arabia (from Almarwani, 2011).

There are some other factors that may act as barriers to mobile learning in Saudi Arabia discussed so far. For example, students, as found in Al-Shehri (2012) and Al-Fahad (2009), still have concerns over high mobile internet fees. Although Saudi university students are paid on monthly basis, life expenses dramatically increased as a reaction to the high oil prices and high local inflation level. However, mobile phone internet fees have recently dropped as the competition among local mobile phone companies increased.

Students also expressed some concerns in terms of connectivity and technology, as confirmed by Al-Shehri's (2012) study. The hugeness of a country like Saudi Arabia with more than 2 million square km makes it hard for local mobile phone companies to provide fast and effective networks throughout the country. This would explain the tendency among some university students to use available local internet networks (LAN) in preference to slow or unavailable mobile phones internet. In other words, students, particularly at rural areas, do not usually access the internet from their mobile

phones. Alternatively, home internet makes a better choice for them. However, the mobile internet coverage is witnessing huge expansion due to the increased need for mobile internet. Moreover, faster mobile networks such as 4G networks now cover almost all Saudi metropolitan areas.

Some recent rumors indicated that Saudi mobile phone companies might ban some of online services that have affected their profits such as WhatsApp and Skype, after they already banned Viber. Such a step would have an influence on the future of mobile learning in Saudi Arabia, and would enforce mobile phones users to return to the traditional expensive SMS and phone call services. Other rumors implied a governmental decision to connect social networking accounts of Saudi users with their national ID in an attempt to have more control over the freedom of speech. Since the Arab Spring and the increased freedom of speech in the Arab World, identity hiding still a phenomenal behavior of Saudi Facebook and Twitter users in an attempt to avoid any possible punishment while criticizing religious or governmental issues. Once again, such a technique would not allow for a democratic mobile learning practice, and therefore, restricted and ultra-formal student-student and teacher-student mobile interaction is anticipated.

Teachers' resistance to use mobile learning can be another challenge in Saudi Arabia. Current e-learning initiatives should have more consideration of mobile learning, and therefore, more teacher training and/or encouragement are needed. On the other hand, the readiness among Saudi university students to implement mobile learning solutions is not high enough. Students still also need to realize the potential of their handheld devices, and how they can be transformed into effective learning devices. However, Saudi universities and educational institutions should provide mobile learning opportunities and should not necessarily wait until students are somehow ready to this shift. The distinction between mobile phones as personal devices and as devices that have learning potential should be made clear for reluctant students and practitioners. Moreover, more investigation and research on behavior of Saudi students while using their mobile phones would certainly encourage universities and institutions to adopt more initiatives that can promote mobile learning. E-learning deanships at Saudi universities should also consider that technology is 'shrinking', and that mobile learning is not a future as widely believed, but rather, a reality in most parts of the world.

THE FUTURE IS MOBILE SOCIAL

A report by Arab News (2013) states that the mobile phone penetration rate in Saudi Arabia stands at 181.6 percent of the population, which means that most Saudis have at least one mobile phone subscription. 3G subscribers make up around 15 percent of the total users of mobile phones. Another report by statcounter.com indicates that Saudi Arabia is the third biggest country in the Arab World in terms of IOS users, while it ranks has the biggest number of BlackBerry users worldwide (Alhumaidan, 2013).

The availability of current social media platforms on mobile devices, mobile phones in particular, makes the future of mobile learning more interactive and social. Saudis, for instance, ranked number one among international users of the mobile-based video-sharing software, Keek. In addition, Saudi 'Keekers' represent about 44% of the global users (Saudi Keekers, 2013). Thus, the wide popularity of such mobile social software among Saudi young users makes promising future for it to be implemented for educational purposes. For example, contextual learning opportunities can be enhanced through the incorporation of local materials that interest the students. Moreover, the connection between in-class and out-of-class learning activities can be highlighted. Students, for instance, are communicating via Keek most of their time and are uploading and/or downloading numerous videos from their own contexts. Hence, both students and teachers can invest Keek and mobile phones to exchange learning videos in a meaningful way.

Facebook ranked the third most-visited website by Saudi users whereas Twitter ranked sixth (Annual Report of IT Agency, 2012). The Arab Social Media Report (2011) indicated that about 67 percent of Saudi Facebook users range between the age of 15 and 29. Another interesting finding from the report is that some Arab countries have more Facebook users than internet users, "indicating that many Facebook users in these countries rely on mobile access" (Arab Social Media Report, 2011, p. 12). These promising factors illustrate the potential of mobile social media, Facebook in particular, to improve mobile learning in Saudi Arabia.

Saudis are immersed in current mobile phones social applications that dramatically changed the way they behave. Applications like WhatsApp and BlackBerry Messenger are becoming very popular ways of online communications. They even became more than chatting or messaging platforms to tools to share news and opinions away from authorities. The widespread usage of such social mobile services particularly among young students would significantly make the future of mobile learning in Saudi Arabia bright and promising.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper reviewed some of the major mobile studies conducted at Saudi Arabian contexts. Although most of the reviewed studies reveal positive attitudes towards mobile learning in Saudi tertiary education, most of the studies indicated at the same time that students are not fully aware of the potential of mobile learning.

The paper also summarized some of the major challenges of mobile learning in Saudi Arabia. The summary led to a more comprehensive list of challenges that directly resulted from the Arab unrest surrounding the country. The impact of these new technologies, particularly on culturally conservative educational settings such as Saudi Arabia cannot be

underestimated. This paper can be seen as a move towards understanding of how mobile technologies can break open encrusted teaching approaches and democratize students' ownership of their own learning process.

Budget of Saudi educational system approaches about 40% of the annual national income. More than 140,000 Saudi students have been sent abroad to pursue their education as part of the educational reform. Among these are students who experienced and are experiencing rich mobile learning opportunities at leading international institutions. Besides, Saudi Arabia is witnessing one of the biggest expansions of mobile phone projects over the world. These facts indicate that the future of mobile learning in Saudi Arabia is promising, and that more mobile learning opportunities are expected to take place. However, similar to other reform movements, the educational reform in Saudi Arabia would take some time, i.e. no dramatic change is expected in the short term.

We can now wonder whether a top-down approach would successfully work for the adoption and management of mobile learning. Or would it be bottom-up initiatives that can lead the future of mobile learning in Saudi Arabia? To what extent there is a correlation between of the billions of dollars that are being spent on education and mobile technology and effective and meaningful mobile learning opportunities? Finally, to what extent the continuous unrest in the Arab World would have an impact on the behavior of young population as well as the government in Saudi Arabia? Such questions might be a significant area for further research.

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