

VLE e-Library and the digital divide : A mining- based classification survey

Case Study – Arab Open University

Abstract - Arab Open University is the first academic institution in Middle east and North Africa that adopted the open learning concept and has been dedicated to form this concept and present it with various layers of perfect e-monitoring and e-measurement systems for quality assurance purposes. This paper investigates the Arab Open University (AOU) students' levels of access and the usage of the e-library, in relation to the concept of the 'digital divide' as the Arab Open University is a multi-campus academic institutional located in seven branches. A questionnaire including both quantitative and open-ended questions was utilized, allowing a mixture of statistical and mining – based qualitative data to emerge. This data aims to further understand students' attitudes to e-learning, and state difficulties or barriers faced in accessing/ delivering the online learning materials implying a continuing need for a variety of access points to learning materials and preferences for new technologies for e-learning.

Keywords : VLE e-Library, digital divide, e-monitoring & e-measurement systems, quality assurance.

1. Introduction

Using the technology of internet and new concept of open learning education along with the advanced e-technologies and innovating learning methods, higher education has been presented in a flexible interfaces that reduces the need for traditional education procedures while maintain the assurance of quality that is a vital for any educational institution.

AOU uses Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), also known as Learning Management System (LMS) as Virtual online platform for students to mainly build richly collaborative communities to deliver online customized contents to students. This community assesses learning process and provides many monitoring systems for quality assurance based on pedagogical model. It is a sort of a dual mode blended learning program supported with e-technologies of using online platforms for support, student interaction and some delivery of learning materials offering both full time, campus-based study, as well as self paced, flexible open learning for students who wish to combine employment with studying towards a professional qualification.

Endorsed studies in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have, created a social divide that is known as the digital divide. AOU as a multi-campus university located in more than seven different countries in middle east and north Africa as Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Egypt,

Bahrain and Oman is a perfect study case for the 'digital divide' concept. Statistics show that there are significant disparities among the students in these distinct branches of the developing learning process in terms of the accessibility to, and usage of afforded online material in general and e-library as an open source material in specific with different barriers of ICT. As a result, students in some of these branches are being deprived of e-Library material and e-services provided by AOU.

Research and development in e-libraries supported or integrated with VLE, do not only require sophisticated ICT, they also call for intellectual resources and learning skills to be able to get the ultimate goal of providing the online material. This absolutely has also widened the gap between the "being able to afford" and "Not being able to afford", the 'have' and the 'have nots'. In other words, new technologies, while improving our life in many ways have created what is called the 'digital divide'. The digital divide has become a popular phrase to describe the perceived disadvantages of those who are either unable, or do not have the choice, to use the proper ICT in their daily activities, decision making, learning and pleasure which caused a number of divides that can negatively impact the e-learning process which is very crucial for an open institution such as Arab Open University.

The proposed survey investigates and reports open and e-learning students' access to and use of online material available in the e-Library and information and communications technology (ICT) for their studies at the Arab Open University. The survey points out some difficulties AOU students face during their e-learning process as a result of their different levels of access and utilization of the e-library.

The paper ends with a few suggestions that may be used by e-librarians and information professionals in the seven branches to exploit the benefits of these digital information resources and services, and thus to some extent can bridge the gap of digital divide.