

Learning From Students' Perspectives On Open Education At Arab Universities: A Case Study

Vineet Kansal, Arab Open University, Kuwait

ABSTRACT

Open learning provides a unique opportunity to professionals for their continuing education and capacity building. Arab Open University, Kuwait (AOU) has been a successful enterprise with an objective to address the educational needs of masses in the Arab universities. Continuing education in the Arab region was the most neglected part of the educational system. AOU, in collaboration with Open University, UK (OU/UK), tailored graduate programs in the field of 'Business Administration', 'Information and Computing Technology' and 'English language & Literature' in 2002, which presents a number of futuristic strategies that can be used in the process of design to improve the harmony between the user and building the environment in which it is placed. In this study, the students' perspectives of the graduate programs in Arab Open University, Kuwait Branch have been studied through a questionnaire survey to evaluate the effectiveness of open education. The data collected from 5,430 students were analyzed through descriptive statistics and provided qualitative inputs to the study. Most of the respondents found the program useful for their career and jobs. The study explored and revealed that there were potential issues which were addressed, but there is still a lot to be done for attainment of the objective of the establishment.

Keywords: Open education, students' perspective, learning

INTRODUCTION

The Arab Open University (AOU) is a non-profit institution that aims to establish itself as one of the leading institutions of open learning, offering opportunities for independent study, and creating a forum of life-long learning. It is committed to making education and learning available to those who do not have a chance to attend the traditional system of higher education. In December 2000, the AOU started planning the AOU Headquarters (HQs) to be based in Kuwait. The AOU launched its first offering of academic programs in October 2002 in a number of branches. Included in the first stage were Kuwait, Lebanon, and Jordan, followed in 2003 with branches in Bahrain, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and in 2006 with a branch in Oman. The AOU has its partnership with Open University, UK (OU/UK) and receives licensing course materials for AOU. Unlike the OU/UK open education system, AOU/KWB has added face-to-face tutorials. The AOU open learning system relies primarily on a tutoring process that aims at promoting a proactive environment of learning. In addition, course lectures are structured in a programmed and progressive mode via textbooks and supporting notes as well as other supporting forms of delivery media on CD-ROMs, online websites, and video-conferencing, audio and video cassettes.

The AOU Kuwait branch (AOU/KWB) is a pioneer and the only university in the state of Kuwait to offer programs of study based on open education since 2002. The AOU/KWB has gone through a series of accreditation processes by the Open University, UK (OU/UK), Open University Validation Services, UK (OUVS), local institutional agreement from Ministry of Higher Education and Council for Private Universities, and General Secretariat. AOU/KWB offers three undergraduate programs: 'Business Administration', 'Information Technology & Computing' and 'English language & Literature' and has registered 12,021 students in the academic year 2007-

08. The number of registered students over the years in AOU-Kuwait branch is shown in Figure 1 according to data received from the registration office at the branch.

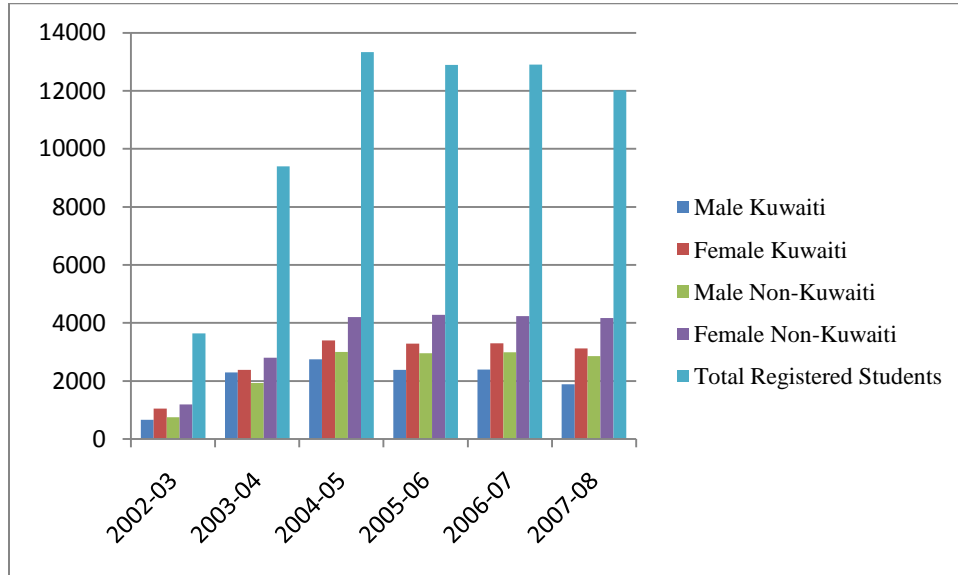


Figure 1: Students' registration in AOU, Kuwait Branch

LITERATURE REVIEW

Open and distance learning (ODL) gives learners control of the time, place, and pace of learning, often characterized as 'Flexible Learning'. However, this flexibility goes hand in hand with procrastination and non-completion (Tattersall, C. et al., 2006). Zhang D. (2005) conducted two experiments to assess effectiveness of interactive e-learning. Students in a fully interactive multimedia-based e-learning environment achieved better performance and higher levels of satisfaction than those in a traditional classroom and those in a less interactive e-learning environment.

The case study analysis presents details regarding the evolution of the e-learning market and provides the opportunity for students of strategic management to build critical industry analytical skills by applying a variety of techniques highlighted in the accompanying case teaching notes (Kaliski et al., 2008). The undergraduates placed significant emphasis on the pedagogical issues while graduate students focused on skills they obtained in the course and the fact that the course related to their career/job (Rosenstein, et al. 2008).

Huett, J.B. et al. (2008) argues that simple, cost-effective, and easy-to-design mass e-mail messages show potential for addressing some of the motivational needs and retention concerns of online students. Based on the literature review, a study was proposed to measure the students' satisfaction and the subsequent learning actions based on a case of open education set up in Kuwait.

METHODOLOGY

A standard survey questionnaire was used to obtain feedback from the students enrolled in AOU/KWB in an attempt to achieve students' satisfaction through the improvement of the quality of their education and facilities.

The target population was students registered in AOU, Kuwait branch. The response data from 5,430 students were collected during the fall semester of 2007-08. Clear guidance and instructions about anonymity were provided to the students before responding to the questions. The questionnaire instrument used was made available

at <http://lms/kumodle> in both Arabic and English versions. Using an e-survey for data collection has cost and time advantages when compared to a traditional survey in terms of costs of hiring staff to collect the data, coping papers, and getting clearer written comments. The descriptive statistical analysis was used to analyze the data collected. In addition, the individual interview with randomly selected students helped to understand the insights to complement the learning from the questionnaire survey.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The respondents were divided; i.e. 44.4% male and 55.6% female students. About 50% of the population was age 25 years old or younger and 36.9% of the students were married. The students' academic backgrounds were observed as commerce/business (63.2%), followed by literature and science (31.9% and 2.6% respectively), and only 2.3% of the students were from other backgrounds. At the time of this survey, 60.6% of the students were in paid jobs.

An accredited university degree and the financial affordability of the courses offered at the branch were the main factors to join AOU/KWB, whereas opportunity to get a better job, interest in courses, and to improve their English language were the other important factors considered when registering. 76.5% of the students commented that they were actually prepared for this course and 93.1% showed their satisfaction over the timeliness of receipt of course materials, such as text books, CDs, software, and other necessary material.

Table 1.1: Quality of Educational Material, Its Objectives and Orientation

Quality of Educational Material, Its Objectives and Orientation		Very Low	Low	Just Right	High	Very High	Can't Say
		(F%)	(F%)	(F%)	(F%)	(F%)	(F%)
CR3	Quality of teaching in the printed texts Mean: 2.99; Std. Error: 0.016	8.7	13.2	43.9	28.8	9.7	3.6
CR4	Quality of teaching in Videos, DVDs, etc (if any) Mean: 2.27; Std. Error: 0.02	13.3	15.2	35.3	12.6	5.4	18.2
CR5	Quality of teaching in course-related software (if any) Mean: 2.5; Std. Error: 0.019	11.2	14.8	38.9	15.8	5.8	13.4
CR6	Clarity of learning outcomes Mean: 2.98; Std. Error: 0.015	9	15.2	43.9	21	8.6	2.3
CR7	Your success in achieving the learning outcomes Mean: 3.08; Std. Error: 0.014	5.7	12.7	48.8	21.9	8.4	2.4
CR8	Usefulness of course calendar Mean: 2.72; Std. Error: 0.017	10.8	16.3	43	16.9	6.4	6.5
CR9	How difficult was this course Mean: 3.5; Std. Error: 0.016	4.2	7.7	35.4	29.4	21.4	1.9
CR10	How interesting was this course Mean: 2.88; Std. Error: 0.017	13.1	18.7	36.1	19.8	10	2.2
CR11	How heavy was your workload in this course Mean: 3.55; Std. Error: 0.016	4.2	7.7	33.3	30.1	22.9	1.7

In terms of academic infrastructural, 63.6% of the students responded that the computers were in good working condition, only 41.3% of them were satisfied with the printing services, and 55.1% of them were found happy with the CD/DVD viewing machines. Satisfaction over internet access availability was shown by 65.2% students. The response observed for availability of manpower help with hardware or software computing problems in the laboratory and library was found similar (53% and 53.7% respectively). Around 38% of the students were satisfied with the sufficient time allowed for the computer lab and library access. About 48% of the students showed

dissatisfaction with noise level in the library, 69.5% were not satisfied with the working space in the library, and 73.8% were dissatisfied with the number of copies of text material available in the library.

The significant response to the “just right” column in Table 1.1 indicates the satisfaction level of the students over the quality of educational material, its objectives and orientation. The respondents’ satisfaction levels over the quality of learning assessment can be observed in Table 1.2.

Only clear and simple language, appropriate with a target group of students, is stressed in all programs. English language proficiency is the important concern and, to cope with this, an English Language Unit (ELU) is established to improve language understanding. The AOU/KWB is trying to deliver open education based on IT-driven platform. A logical presentation is ensured with well-designed templates for the development of virtual classroom modules and a clear and precise detail syllabus is specified in a well-structured format. The work of implementing a Learning Management System (LMS) and a Students Information System (SIS) is complete and work for building virtual classes is in progress. Many well-illustrated images, appropriate with the contents, are used in the virtual classroom modules.

A realistic time schedule for each important activity in the total teaching-learning process is clearly focused. In case, due to unforeseen circumstances, some activities cannot be completed as scheduled, a time schedule for clearing its backlog must be clearly specified. Learning materials should generate curiosity; only then are students motivated to learn and explore new knowledge. This is ensured with well-designed templates for the development of virtual classroom modules.

Rather than producing students with designer level expert knowledge, the aim is to produce ‘Power Users’ or ‘Application Experts’ of today’s technology who can think logically and creatively about the real problems encountered in a technical job by applying basic concepts, principles and skills. In addition to the OU/UK text materials, the course team at the branch sincerely works to provide students with case studies and issues considering present and future trends in the regional and global industries.

Table 1.2: Quality of Learning Assessment

Quality of Learning Assessment		Very Low	Low	Just Right	High	Very High	Can't Say
		(F%)	(F%)	(F%)	(F%)	(F%)	(F%)
MTA1	Difficulty of the mid semester assessment Mean: 2.98; Std. Error: 0.021	5.3	4	34.9	25	15.8	14.9
MTA2	Helpfulness of TMAs in learning this course Mean: 2.97; Std. Error: 0.017	14.6	10.2	38.2	23.8	10.5	2.8
MTA3	Difficulty of the TMAs Mean: 3.54; Std. Error: 0.015	5.5	3.7	34.8	30.9	23.5	1.6
MTA4	Relevance of TMAs to course materials Mean: 2.97; Std. Error: 0.017	13.3	8.7	43.2	20.7	10.8	3.3

To improve relevance of the Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs), the students are encouraged to use and discuss local business examples. Over time, the focus of mid-semester and final examinations has also shifted toward understanding and application rather than pure memorization.

The students have shown their high ratings for some tutoring learning process quality components. The quality of teaching received from tutors, helpfulness of the tutors’ answers to the queries, tutors’ knowledge of the subject, and tutors’ punctuality (referring to timeliness for attending tutorials and availability to office hours) were

observed significantly in the “very high” column of Table 1.3. The tutors help to study the course and encouragement to participate in discussion and feedback about the students’ progress were observed and rated significantly in the “just right” column of the same table.

AOU/KWB is aggressively working on the appointment of an academic full-time teaching staff in accordance with well-defined qualification and experience norms. Working as an academic staff for the development of virtual classroom modules, the tutors’ ‘Online Counseling’ is voluntary extra activity, which is normally not possible without self-motivation.

The branch has a large number of part-time faculty members. The teaching staff, both full-time and part-time, are overloaded and underpaid (compared to what other local universities pay) and there is serious risk of losing prominent faculty and staff for better opportunities. The university promotes an activity-based exploratory style of the teaching-learning process, which offers enjoyable learning. In case a student is not able to attend regular face-to-face teaching at the branch, ‘Virtual Classroom Modules’ and ‘Online Counseling’ on the web offers him extra flexibility to ensure a regular teaching-learning process. The students-to-tutor ratio in class set-up is an important concern.

Table 1.3: Tutoring Learning Process Quality

Tutoring Learning Process Quality		Very Low	Low	Just Right	High	Very High	Can't Say
		(F%)	(F%)	(F%)	(F%)	(F%)	(F%)
TUT1	Helping you study this course Mean: 3.38; Std. Error: 0.017	7.4	12.1	34.5	21.6	23.3	1.2
TUT2	Quality of teaching you received from your tutor Mean: 3.51; Std. Error: 0.017	8.2	10.2	28.9	22.6	28.9	1.1
TUT3	Helpfulness of your tutor’s answers to your questions Mean: 3.59; Std. Error: 0.017	5.7	9	29.4	23.7	30.5	1.8
TUT4	Tutor’s knowledge of subject of the course Mean: 3.74; Std. Error: 0.017	4.9	7.9	25.9	24.1	35.7	1.6
TUT5	Tutor encouraging you participate in discussions Mean: 3.49; Std. Error: 0.017	6.5	10.8	30.3	23.3	27.2	1.9
TUT6	Tutor coming to tutorials on time Mean: 4.08; Std. Error: 0.015	2.9	2.7	21.2	24.4	47.7	1.2
TUT7	Available of tutor during his/her office hours Mean: 3.46; Std. Error: 0.022	3.1	3.9	23.5	23.6	33.9	11.9
TUT8	Giving you comments about your progress in the course Mean: 3.21; Std. Error: 0.019	7.7	13.2	32.7	20.1	21.7	4.6
TUT9	Usefulness of tutor’s comments on your TMAs Mean: 3.25; Std. Error: 0.019	7.3	9.7	37.1	22.5	23	6.5
TUT10	Returning your TMAs on time Mean: 3.29; Std. Error: 0.018	6.9	10.5	33.6	22.2	22.3	4.6
TUT11	Sufficiency of the number of tutorials per semester Mean: 2.78; Std. Error: 0.017	16	20.9	36.9	12.6	11.8	2
TUT12	Scheduling of tutorials Mean: 3.12; Std. Error: 0.016	9.2	11.8	43.6	19.1	14.4	2

Having learned from last experience, the branch has reduced class batch size to 25 students. This will ensure effective peer group interaction during regular face-to-face teaching at each study center. Open education

pedagogy is used in the development of virtual classroom modules. Conformance to distance education pedagogy with a multimedia approach ensures an effective, efficient, quick, and interactive learning experience. Evaluation of the subject is a continuous process at the branch, headquarters and OU/UK level. This continuous evaluation pattern dramatically improves effectiveness of the teaching learning process.

Table 1.4 reflects that a significant number of students rated the speed of declaration of grade “low”. The students also have shown their dissatisfaction over the administration and the timing of the final examinations.

Table 1.4: Quality of Examination Administration Process

Quality of Examination Administration Process		Very Low	Low	Just Right	High	Very High	Can't Say
		(F%)	(F%)	(F%)	(F%)	(F%)	(F%)
FE1	Administration of the final examination (For example, was exam room quiet, if you were thirsty could get any water, etc) Mean: 2.62; Std. Error: 0.017	1.3	37.7	38.7	1.6	12.5	8.2
FE2	Speed of getting your final grade Mean: 2.02; Std. Error: 0.012	5.7	66	17.7	0.3	2.1	8.2
FE3	Timing of the final examination of this course Mean: 2.38; Std. Error: 0.015	2	38.8	43.7	0.6	4.9	10.1

Table 1.5 shows that the students’ views toward most of the infrastructural facilities is “low” to “just right”. The car parking space is rated significantly “very low”.

Table 1.5: Quality of Infrastructural Facility in Campus

Quality of Infrastructural Facility in Campus		Very Low	Low	Just Right	High	Very High	Can't Say
		(F%)	(F%)	(F%)	(F%)	(F%)	(F%)
SPC1	Your classrooms (space, seating,) Mean: 2.43; Std. Error: 0.062	30.1	19.6	33.3	11.0	5.9	0
SPC2	Cleanliness of classrooms Mean: 2.89; Std. Error: 0.064	17.3	18.8	35.6	14.4	13.9	0
SPC3	Cleanliness of public area in your branch Mean: 2.87; Std. Error: 0.063	17.8	19.1	33.6	17.1	12.4	0
SPC4	Quality of cafeteria services Mean: 2.69; Std. Error: 0.066	22.8	21.2	29.1	17.7	9.2	0
SPC5	Adequacy of car parks (if any) Mean: 1.85; Std. Error: 0.05	50.4	25.1	17.5	3	4	0

A lot of facilities were developed over the last academic year in the campus infrastructure. This includes training & conference room, copy center, computer pool, cafeteria facilities, greenery in campus, meeting room, data show machine, academic programs logistics, and a female mosque. All classrooms in the present campus are now

equipped with LCD projection and web-based computers. Knowing that the Virtual Classroom Modules (VCMs) require much larger disk space and Internet bandwidth, a suitable increase in data space and bandwidth was done.

A new AOU/KWB campus building is being constructed on an allocated piece of land in Al-Ardia, Kuwait, and is expected to be complete within the next two years. This will solve the problem of crowded and present location disadvantages.

Table 1.6 reflects that the students have shown their dissatisfaction with the service qualities at campus, including the registration process and guidance and help in the process and usefulness of counseling services. The branch has developed a well-structured and interactive website which provides anywhere, anytime, fast, easy and cost-effective access to clear program information for everyone.

Table 1.6: Service Qualities

Service Qualities		Very Low	Low	Just Right	High	Very High	Can't Say
		(F%)	(F%)	(F%)	(F%)	(F%)	(F%)
REG1	Registering via the Internet Mean: 2.45; Std. Error: 0.074	36.2	20.4	18.5	11.9	13	0
REG2	Paying registration fees through a bank Mean: 2.70; Std. Error: 0.075	28.7	16.6	25.9	13.5	15.2	0
REG3	Clarity of registration procedures Mean: 2.13; Std. Error: 0.063	39.9	27.7	17.7	8.7	6.0	0
REG4	Guidance during registration on academic issues Mean: 1.81; Std. Error: 0.059	54.1	26.2	10.1	4.1	5.5	0
REG5	Helpfulness of Admission and Registration personnel Mean: 1.92; Std. Error: 0.061	51.8	21.7	14.9	6.5	5.1	0
REG6	Usefulness of students Handbook Mean: 2.11; Std. Error: 0.064	42.2	22.6	22.3	8.2	4.7	0
REG7	Helpfulness of course related advertisements/notices Mean: 2.21; Std. Error: 0.062	36.7	25.6	24.5	6.7	6.5	0
REG8	Helpfulness of personnel at the Registrar's Office Mean: 1.92; Std. Error: 0.061	50	22.9	17.3	4.7	5	0
REG9	The way Financial Department personnel treated you Mean: 2.15; Std. Error: 0.06	38.3	23.4	28	5.2	5.2	0
REG10	Speed at which financial matters were completed Mean: 2.19; Std. Error: 0.064	40.1	21.7	23.8	7.6	6.8	0
REG11	Opening hours of Students Services (Affairs) Office Mean: 2.18; Std. Error: 0.064	36.6	30.3	20.7	3.3	9.1	0
REG12	Helpfulness of staff of Students Services (Affairs) Office Mean: 2.27; Std. Error: 0.06	30.3	31.1	26.1	7	5.6	0
REG13	Information supplied by Students Services via the Website Mean: 2.27; Std. Error: 0.06	30.3	31.1	26.1	7	5.6	0
REG14	Usefulness of Counseling Service Mean: 2.09; Std. Error: 0.065	42.4	25.3	19.8	6.1	6.4	0

Further, the developing e-Discussion forum allows anywhere, anytime, fast, easy and cost-effective interaction among students, study centers and universities regarding clarification of any doubts. After forum

subscription, it will offer automatic email notification about any new interaction, without any junk or virus mail-type email problems.

The branch is working to ensure minimum and consistent quality of counseling sessions by using Virtual Classroom Modules (VCMs) from a master trainer, followed by interaction with peer students and tutors during face-to-face teaching. 'Online Counseling' on the web will offer excellent academic support from expert and peer group interaction opportunities without any geographic place and time separation problems.

CONCLUSION

The Kuwait branch of AOU is constantly exploring new but appropriate managerial and technical innovations to develop proactive systematic systems and procedures that would consist of a clear focus on prevention of problems rather than on correction after its occurrence. These innovations also have clear focus on effectiveness, efficiency, and maximization of value-added activities while reducing non-value-added activities.

As many problems are built into the existing system, nothing was taken for granted from earlier design patterns while designing these new academic programs. The University tries to push the exposure of problems back toward the starting point of the process until an initiation point is reached, which is prevention. It is strongly believed that every problem has a cause and every cause is preventable. Obviously, the sooner the problem is detected, the sooner it can be addressed, saving substantial quality costs. The AOU/KWB has used a program design that uses existing families of standardized multipurpose subjects with many common subjects across academic programs. Elimination of many non-value-added activities and highly modular program designs with innovative synchronization of many events with a realistic time frame substantially improves time efficiency.

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AUTHOR INFORMATION

Dr. Vineet Kansal is presently working with Arab Open University at Kuwait Branch, Kuwait for Business Administration department. He has earned his master and doctorate degrees from Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, India. The author has vast experience of teaching for more than seventeen years to graduate, post graduate and working students in India and abroad. He has lot of publications to his credit in international journals of repute. The author has conducted lot many executive development programs and involved in many charitable missions.

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