

Chapter 2

Investigating Faculty Members' Beliefs About Distance Education: The Case of Sultan Qaboos University, Oman

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ABSTRACT

This research paper aims to investigate the beliefs (perceptions) about distance education (DE) held by the faculty members of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) at the Sultanate of Oman as well as the differences between their beliefs (perceptions) with regards to gender, teaching experience, college academic rank, nationality, etc. This study used a questionnaire as a method of data collection. Findings of the study indicated statistically significant difference in terms of gender. Results show that female faculty members hold positive beliefs (perceptions) about the use of DE in learning and teaching whereas compared to their male colleagues. With regards to nationality, the study found statistically slight differences, wherein the Omani faculty members yielded higher scores on the positive statements and lower at the negative statements.

1. INTRODUCTION

Distance Education (DE) plays a vital role in facilitating education; it opens the door to everyone to achieve the principles of equal opportunities. According to Davidian (2010) DE is the way of deliver education by any means other than the traditional method of classroom lecture and activities, in which a lecturer is regularly and constantly present including corresponds by e-mail television, videotape,

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interactive CD, live and interactive videoconferencing, Internet and or web based instruction. According to Zhang & Cui (2010) the elements of DE include separation of instructor and learner in space and occasionally also in time, use of educational media to link instructor and learner and carry course content provision of two-way communication between instructor and learner, and volitional control of learning by students rather than by the instructor. In fact, the success and spread of DE depends on the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) which refers to technologies that provide access to information through telecommunications (<http://www.techterms.com/definition/ict>). However, there is a clear difference between ICT and e-learning (electronic learning) according to Research machine (2003) e-learning can be defined as all activities required for the delivery of effective teaching and learning through the use of ICT in its broadest sense. This includes Classroom delivery, online learning, tutorials and coaching, staff/student communications, Planning, preparation and assessment. While Itmazi (2013) thinks e-learning is the use of new multimedia technologies and the Internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services as well as remote exchanges and collaboration.

Although DE is a tool for students and especially the passive students to switch them from receiving information to be the information producers, the application of DE depends on the faculty member's beliefs and convictions about the importance of this method. Bandura (1986) thinks that there is an increasing understanding that the beliefs that individuals hold are the best indicators of the decisions they make during the course of everyday life. Faculty members' decision in accepting or rejecting DE is important since this is an area where faculty members vary. Some people accept this method of teaching, while others do not. It all depends on their beliefs. The faculty members' beliefs have the potential to provide significant and profound insights into many aspects of their professional world. Pajares (1992) notes that attention to faculty members' beliefs can impact educational practices in ways that prevail research which is essential to improve their professional preparations and teaching practice.

2. PROBLEMS OF THE STUDY

There are many studies that have been conducted on the subject of general ICT educational uses in higher education in Oman, with emphasis on the Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) (e.g., Abdelraheem & Al Musawi, 2003; Al –Hashimi, 2002; Al Khawaldi, 2000; Al Musawi & Abdelraheem, 2004; Al Musawi & Akinyemi, 2002; Al Rawahy, 2001; Al-Senaidi et al., 2009)]. The results of these studies showed that some faculty members have certain internal and external barriers to adopt ICT for education and learning (Akinyemi & Al Musawi, 2002; Al Farsi, 2004; Al –Hashimi, 2002; Al-Saleem, 2006; Al-Senaidi et al., 2009). For example, the Al-Senaidi et al. (2009) study revealed that there are five factors that stand as barriers to prevent faculty members from using ICT in education. These factors are: lack of computing equipment, lack of institutional support, disbelief of technological values and benefits, lack of personal confidence in using technology, and lack of time. In addition, Al Khawaldi (2000) found that unsatisfactory staff skills fail to fulfill the required levels. So, if this is the reality of using ICT by faculty members in teaching and learning at SQU and higher education in Oman, what will be the faculty members' beliefs and perceptions about the use of DE in teaching and learning? Does it require ICT skills? This study is an investigation into the beliefs about DE held by faculty members of SQU in Oman. This study will examine two questions:

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