

The Status of Open and Distance Higher Education in Iran: A Rapid Assessment

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Abstract

Open education is an approach to teaching and learning emphasizing the student's right to make decisions and that views the teacher as facilitator of learning rather than as transmitter of knowledge . it may include such characteristics as vertical grouping, cross-age teaching, independent study, individualized rates of progression, open plan schools, and unstructured time and curriculum.

The purpose of this study is to present a macro-evaluation on the present status of open and distance education in Iran. The methodology of this research is rapid assessment. The findings are classified into five categories based on UNDP model: policy development, content and application development, developments of institutions and those involved, technical infrastructure and development of human resources.

Key Words: Open Higher Education, Distance Higher Education, Open Course Ware, Rapid Assessment, Iran

Introduction

Open University of Iran was established about forty years ago aiming to develop distance higher education. In 1998, it commenced the second set of its activities under the name of Payame Noor University. At the present, there are 1,100,000 students attending this university at 400 different centers throughout the country. Additionally, about twenty virtual higher education institutions admit students in various disciplines. The number of students who study at virtual courses in Iran has increased from 5,000 to 20,000 in the previous three years. Although it is a small number compared to the total number of students, that is 4,400,000, there has been a good progress in the process of admission.

Sarfarazi and Memarzadeh (2009) indicated that in Iran universities, E-learning is implemented with different strategies in the execution phase.

Taherkhani and Abbasi (2009) argued that virtual educations in Iran universities have been established imperfectly. They possibly mean that complete virtualization has not occurred yet. Here, we approach blended learning model.

In this regard, Taleb (2009) considers blended learning as a response to challenges of E-learning in Iran. Yavar and Rahmani (2009) have also considered this model as a way to improve efficiency and performance of students in the traditional education system.

Yaghoobi and Zafari (2009) suggested E-learning solely as a supplement to face-to-face education in Iran .

According to United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) development of information technology is the product of interaction between the following five main factors: equipments and technical infrastructure – development of human resources– policy development – content and application development, and developments of institutions. This five-sided model is used in this assessment.

The purpose of this study is to present a macro-evaluation on the present status of open and distance education in Iran.

Method

The methodology of this research is rapid assessment through analyzing the statistical data and the policies being implemented, study the official reports and “qualitative content analysis” of the articles published in Iran. Besides, in order to collect more information, the websites of these institutions were visited by the researcher and the necessary information was recorded in the check list

Results

The findings showed that open education in Iran is a supplementary system and not an alternative one. This system includes both independent virtual universities and dual mode universities. These institutions focus their attention on the third generation of virtual education. The policymakers were aimed to have flexible education and variety access to higher education and not on the full virtualization in the education.

The majority of volunteers for open universities in Iran are not adults, managers and entrepreneurs but also the youth who did not succeed to attend face to face courses prestigious public universities. These courses bear cultural theme and they are not for financial aims yet. The universities first aim is responding to the dignity and social needs of families and their aims not to increasing efficiency and profits or decreasing the per capita costs.

However, these courses does not meet the expectations of seekers of knowledge yet and classical and traditional educations have maintained its position.

Technically, good distributions tools are also available, but the level of interaction is not ideal due to bandwidth problems.

Some universities such as Shahid Beheshti University put on MIT Open Courseware in its website and translate it to Persian (farsi) and they are encouraged students to use it.

Others like Sharif University of Technology try to provide a native model for development of participation stakeholders in curriculum.

Many (Dozens of) other universities established Virtual learning beside the other faculties and they use their academic abilities.

All of them have shown a crowded market and variety of higher education.

Results on the Rapid Assessment of status of E-learning in Iran higher education based on UNDP model:

Factors	Status
Policy Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of high council for IT in the government • Execution of IT application development project • The policy of diversifying and increasing access to higher education
Content and Application Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entry of universities into supply and demand market of E-learning since 2003

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using SCORM standard • Benefiting from LMS • Developing blended learning system in the majority of traditional universities • Incomplete multi-media systems • Utilizing virtual classrooms, research and discussion halls, mobile version, video conference, voice mail, and etc. • Weakness in standardization of educational contents, instruments and activities • Some universities using open course ware
Developments of Institutions and Those Involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of E-learning committee in Ministry of Science, Research and Technology since 2005 • Authorizing those universities able to present 10 percent of courses electronically • Increase in the number of virtual students from 5314 in 2009 to 20000 in 2012 • Establishment of 20 virtual higher education institutions • Increase in the number of students in semi-attendance and distance learning system (PN universities) up to 1100000
Technical Infrastructure (According to US Internet Usage Statistics Website)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 42 million internet users (53.3% of population) • Thirteenth rank in the world in the number of internet users • Number of internet users having access to high speed internet is 734000
Development of Human Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having too many IT experts in the country • The shortage of interdisciplinary experts • Good level of information literacy among students, professors, and university staffs

Conclusion

Although social demand for open education courses and distance education is not high, universities and ministry of science and research have prepared themselves for a new phase of rapid development of these kinds of education. In comparison with the past 3-4 years, students are interested in virtual education four times more than before. However, part-time course wares which are presented for working students have more advocates. Therefore, Payam-e-Noor University with 400 branches and 1100000 students in Iran is one of the major universities in the world.

Open education in Iran is a native model which is developing. The policy of diversifying and increasing access to higher education is followed strongly. Regarding 5 components of UNDP relevant to IT, we are assessed in an intermediate level. If we make use of all the facilities of these 5 components to develop open education, we can expect a better situation. 20000 virtual students in contrast to totally 4400000 students is a low figure. The reason is the feeling of more prestige and social status when attending face-to-face courses. Students tend to communicate with their professors in the campus and take photos with them. This tendency is more observed in eastern countries where social relationships are stronger. In this condition, infrastructural developments do not necessarily result in the increase of students interest in open course wares. Finally, university volunteers and their families consider them as subordinate education.

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