Role of Integrated Learning Environment towards Enhancing Professional Competency of Women: A Case Study of Arab Open University- Saudi Arabia Branch

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AOU: AN OVERVIEW

The Arab Open University (AOU), was formally launched in June 2001 with its headquarter in Kuwait. In October 2002, plans were reiterated for inauguration of six branches in Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt in which a system of coordinated open learning was adopted for providing higher education to communities in Arab world in academic partnership with Open University UK. As a result of this collaboration, three sets of undergraduate programs are being offered in English Language and literature, IT and Computing and Business Administration.

The AOU-Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (AOU-KSA) Branch offers the three programs through its network of three regional centres at Jeddah, Hail and Al-Ahsa and the main branch at Riyadh. This branch has experienced rapid increase in student strength with a modest beginning of 3174 (fresh and registered) in these programs in 2002-03, it increased to 20898 in 2006-07. This branch of the University attracts maximum number of students in its IT program followed by Business and finally in English language. This is also evident from the enrolment share in the year 2006-07 wherein 52.33% of the students were enrolled in IT and 39.88% in Business while remaining 7.79% enrolled in English language. The enrolment of female students in academic programs of the University in Saudi Arabia is also impressive wherein an average of 40% of total students enrolled is women. In case of women also, maximum number of them take admission in IT followed by Business and English Language. The program delivery mechanism at AOU is synergy of face to face component and online learning management system and is a platform for continuous networked learning environment.

WOMEN STUDENTS and DROP OUT

Enrolment share of women students in AOU is showing an impressive figure in all the three academic programs of the University. With the initial figure of 16.36% in 2002-03, it increased to 42.07% (2007-08) in fresh admission to IT program and similar trend is also observed in registered students wherein with the start of 21.95%, it increased to 35.8% in 2007-08. Similar increasing proportion of women students is also evident in enrolment to Business program wherein for fresh admission, with a modest start of 19.22% in 2002-03; it increased to its maximum i.e. 40.29% in 2007-08. Like fresh admission, same trend in registered students wherein women students account for 42.76% of total students in Business Program is also observed. If we compare proportion of women students across all the three programs then we find that share of women students is higher in English language as compared to other programs. It accounts for 72.46% and 78.81% in fresh and registered students in the year 2007-08. The above analysis clearly indicates that proportion of women students is approaching towards half of the total enrolment in Business and IT while in English language, they have a major proportion. A similar trend is observed if we analyse the total enrolment in fresh and registered students irrespective of the program. In 2002-03, these students accounted for 24.1% and 25.02% in Fresh and registered category while their share increased to 37.8% and 41.87% respectively in 2008. So it is quite evident that women students are increasingly approaching AOU as an alternative mode of study wherein they can adjust their professional and social commitments with the passion for study and professional development. The details are given in Table 1 below.

It was also fairly interesting to see whether these students are able to cope with the pressure of study while simultaneously fulfilling their other commitments and for this purpose, the change in enrolment trend in registered students was assessed. So far, the difference of enrolment in two successive semesters is positive however quantum of difference varies in both IT and Business Programs but in the case of English program, this change is negative in the year 2004-05 and 2005-06. In the case of IT program except for 2003-04 1st cycle, in all the years/ semesters, the percentage change in registered students is below 100 i.e. not all the students of previous semesters are registering for the next semester. The similar trend is observed in Business also except 2003-04 1st cycle. However if on comparing the magnitude

of change in enrolment of registered students then IT program seems to be better than Business and English wherein percentage change in registered students is very low as compared to IT. So it can be stated that there is significant dropout of students however it varies in all the programs.

METHODOLOGY

This research was undertaken in the female section of the Arab Open University-KSA Branch. For the study, the selection of women students was done on the basis of a number of criteria. These were their programs of study, status of program completion, nationality, age group, family status, employment sector, service length and annual income. Based on these criteria, the women respondents were selected who either were working before joining the program or secured a placement while studying at AOU. Ten students were selected for preparing detailed case studies on their experiences with ODL system and AOU, professional life and social life. These students were subjected to a detailed structured questionnaire which had four main sections, namely, General Information, AOU and ODL Mode, AOU and Professional Development and AOU and Social Development. This process was accomplished in two stages, first the students were sent the detailed questionnaire which they filled and sent back and second, they were invited for personal interviews where these issues were discussed in detail.

REASONS FOR STUDENT DROPOUT

Views of working women-students on student dropout and retention shows that students drop the courses or entire program due to language problem, difficulty in understanding and studying the courses or program, and not enough sessions for specialized courses. Other factors include financial constraint, lack of family support, at times professional constraints and sometimes dissatisfaction caused due to delay in the declaration of mid-term and final results.

It has been also attributed to increasing course fees, language problem since the first language of most of the students is Arabic, not much of understanding of the ODL system of managing ones studies and finally, most of the students are fresh from high schools who do not have the habit and practice of managing self-learning. However in the case of working women students, it was opined that money was not the problem, it was basically the quest for high grades and their inability to reach that level, that makes them to drop the course. Finally, it was also said that students' inability in managing the studies in English language, not taking the program seriously and then believing that the teacher should give all the inputs such as supplementary notes, summaries, question and answer etc prompted them to drop at a later stage of the program.

SELECT CASE STUDIES

A total number of ten case studies have been prepared here to focus on the role of AOU in women empowerment and professional development. There were ten women students out of which six were in the age group of 21-30 years, three in 31-40 years and one less than 20 years. On marital status, six were married and four were unmarried. Eight students were studying business program whereas one each were from IT and English program. Eight students were near completion of their program while other two were in the mid-way of studies. All the ten students were working professional in which half of the students were in the income group of less than SAR.80,000 while the remaining half were in the income range of 80,001 to 120,000 SAR per annum. These students were belonging to different sectors such as cosmetic retail, health care, fast food industry, call center-tourism sector, charity and social welfare (for autistic children), readymade fashion garment retailing, social research center, school education, international non-governmental organization, and airline industry.

Case A:

A 21 years old Saudi Arabian woman, married with no children, motivated and encouraged by her father to join this program is presently in the mid-stage of Business degree. Besides, openness of her family, their desire to see her as a model woman in the society, self-dependent, able to understand and resolve ones own issues and not to be depending on husband and father were factors for her to pursue the program. She is employed as a Conference Coordinator and Secretary in the King Abdul Aziz Centre for National Dialogue in Riyadh, in annual income of SAR. 80,000 to 120,000.

Table 1
Student Enrolment Status

Semester	IT Fresh MALE	FEMALE	Total	% Change	% Female	IT Registered MALE	FEMALE	Total	% Change	% Female	BUSINESS Fresh MALE	FEMALE	Total	% Change	% Female	BUSINESS Registered MALE	FEMALE	Total	% Change	% Female	English Language Fresh MALE	FEMALE	Total	% Change	% Female	English Language Registered MALE	FEMALE	Total	% Change	% Female	Total Fresh	Total Registered	% Female (Fresh)	% Female (Registered)
2002-03 1st	46	9	55		16.36						18	5	23		21.74						5	2	7		28.6						85		18.8	
2002-03 2nd	664	178	842	1878	21.14	633	178	811		21.95	433	103	536	1960	19.22	417	101	518		19.5	94	98	192	4800	51	89	101	190		53.16	1570	1519	24.1	25
2003-04 1st	1076	412	1488	131	27.69	1157	457	1614	156.7	28.31	695	267	962	159	27.75	759	286	1045	183	27.37	165	192	357	95.92	53.8	165	215	380	113	56.58	2807	3039	31	31.5
2003-04 2nd	480	206	686	-50	30.03	1362	585	1947	28.01	30.05	292	112	404	-58	27.72	859	330	1189	15.4	27.75	72	81	153	-57.8	52.9	180	264	444	23	59.46	1243	3580	32.1	32.9
2004-05 1st	891	391	1282	89.8	30.5	1857	886	2743	51.45	32.3	573	286	859	155	33.29	1125	561	1686	70	33.27	100	203	303	150.6	67	202	390	592	48	65.88	2444	5021	36	36.6
2004-05 2nd	425	143	568	-63	25.18	1869	928	2797	4.74	33.18	282	137	419	-52	32.7	1162	611	1773	8.91	34.46	50	67	117	-67	57.3	184	382	566	-2.1	67.49	1104	5136	31.4	37.4
2005-06 1st	422	217	639	51.7	33.96	1890	1011	2901	8.944	34.85	299	178	477	29.9	37.32	1185	671	1856	9.82	36.15	46	116	162	73.13	71.6	180	420	600	9.9	70	1278	5357	40	39.2
2005-06 2nd	453	148	601	-32	24.63	2005	1074	3079	6.231	34.88	347	140	487	-21	28.75	1277	762	2039	13.6	37.37	39	49	88	-57.8	55.7	157	400	557	-4.8	71.81	1176	5675	28.7	39.4
2006-07 1st	1079	426	1505	188	28.31	2532	1302	3834	21.23	33.96	900	431	1331	208	32.38	1662	968	2630	27	36.81	90	158	248	222.4	63.7	149	461	610	15	75.57	3084	7074	32.9	38.6
2006-07 2nd	944	335	1279	-21	26.19	2867	1451	4318	11.44	33.6	872	370	1242	-14	29.79	2013	1120	3133	15.7	35.75	59	97	156	-38.6	62.2	140	472	612	2.4	77.12	2677	8063	30	37.7
2007-08 1st	927	403	1330	20.3	30.3	3763	2098	5861	44.59	35.8	658	444	1102	20	40.29	2640	1972	4612	76.1	42.76	70	157	227	61.86	69.2	181	673	854	43	78.81	2659	11327	37.8	41.9
2007-08 2nd	252	183	435	-55	42.07						259	159	418	-64	38.04						19	50	69	-68.2	72.5						922		42.5	

Source: Student Information System (SIS), Arab Open University-KSA Branch, Riyadh.

According to her, the ODL mode has helped her in planning the studies at her own place and pace which would not have been possible had she got enrolled in conventional mode. She strongly feels that studying here is more convenient because the programs are in English, cost-wise affordable as compared to other Universities, has flexibility, and does not require mandatory attendance, making it more attractive for working women.

From professional and competency development point of view, IT program was given preference by the women students because business programs are available in other colleges and universities and in general companies prefer to employ men due to social restrictions except in separate female section in the company. However, students of IT can use the knowledge and skill in software development business at home. So IT was considered to be more suitable for pursuing a profession in Saudi Arabia.

Studying at AOU has improved her computer skills, English communication, and have professional approach by applying the business skills at work thus making her self dependent. Unable to comment on career progression as she had recently joined the organization, she now enjoys better status in the society and feels empowered, more mature and proud of her awareness, and can guide and help other women friends and relatives. She does not feel much of a constraint in managing both together except during exams which she manages with family support. She is also admired in her family, able to look at the society in a different way with a better understanding of the social issues. So she is better positioned to guide her children in the future since she values and understands the importance of higher studies.

Case B:

Young unmarried Pakistani girl less than 20 years old and about to complete Business program. Earlier working as an assistant teacher in Pakistan International School, but presently she devotes all her time to her studies. Her father is instrumental in her success. ODL mode and LMS is convenient for planning studies and in interacting with group members and tutors and it is the reason for gradual increase in women enrolment in AOU. She feels Business program is more suitable for seeking employment in Saudi Arabia because its necessary components are suited to the requirements for jobs in Bank, airlines company, etc for women. The ODL mode has helped her to manage so many things simultaneously apart from coping with the changing curriculum in the school. She also has more awareness about business organizations and corporate life then her colleagues so she feels more privileged.

Studying and working simultaneously makes her feel empowered and her other lady colleagues realise that she is better equipped professionally and competent to handle issues of work life. She considers herself as a role model for others in the society and is now encouraging others to enrol in programs that are suited to their professional needs. The constraints being shortage of time and local mobility still she is determined to complete her program due to the much needed skill and knowledge. She is helping and guiding her brothers and sisters who feel she is better equipped now with all the knowledge since she is in a professional program. She now has the power to adapt to change and she can make a career in business organizations which she perceived was only a male bastion earlier. Thus, she strongly believes that AOU and its program have helped to reduce the social distance felt earlier.

Case C:

A Saudi Arabian married with more then two children in the age group of 31 to 40 years, about to complete the Business degree. In addition to the responsibilities of family and her studies, she is actively working as Project Coordinator at UNDP and is financially independent with annual income in between SAR.80,000 to 120,000. She is positive about ODL because this facilitated her to realize her dream of getting a university degree. She remained in touch with the course group thus felt togetherness and this is one of the prime reasons for the increase of female enrolment. But to her LMS is not a platform for competence development. When it comes to selecting a particular program more suited to employment, she feels in Saudi Arabia, new job openings and avenues for women employment are emerging, therefore all the three programs are equally important to meet the competitive arena of women employment.

However, this study has not really helped her in getting job but it provided her in-depth understanding of business studies and an organization and she is now more competent at her work place, so it was this upgraded knowledge at AOU and her earlier experience

which made her successful professionally. She now looks at things with a more open, proactive and different perspectives and can give her views with an academic approach. Besides, it gives her a good public image and competitive feeling for better communication skill and British degree. So she feels she is a role model for others and she intends to help them to think differently. Due to flexible time, online availability of material, interaction with the tutors and ability to coordinate course activities, she is determined to complete her program, although her career progression depends on number of years of work experience which is equated with the degree so she gets equal benefits either way.

Main constraints are managing time and balancing work with family but her husband's motivation and support all throughout has enabled her to continue studying. She now feels empowered and admired in her family for her efficient multi-tasking roles, as she is doing something for herself instead of always looking after other's requirements and making them happy. She strongly believes that AOU has been effectively contributing to reducing the social distance experienced by women earlier in the family and the society as a whole.

For wider coverage, seven more cases of working women who are also studying in AOU have been researched, the details of which are available in the appendix.

SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

In the background of the cases studied and the deliberations held, the suggestions have been put forth and classified under two broad categories:

a. **Measures for Enhancing Student Retention:**

1. At the very outset when a woman approaches the University for admission, she should be provided pre-admission counselling in which detailed discussion on the specific goals and requirements of the student should be held to advice and guide her on selection of a suitable program. Then she should be administered English placement test which can be re-designed to make a better assessment of the student's level of English and accordingly assign them the intensive English courses which should be very comprehensive and practical.

2. Can be improved if the University facilitates in placement once they complete the program and acting as facilitator to get internship or part time jobs so as to help them imbibe and improve professional skills.

3. Retention can be ensured if the learning environment and course content is related with the real life environment and the role of student association and council is enhanced and made more visible. Besides, students should be provided with more intensive feedback on their performance. They need to be encouraged to engage with AOU activities, and to give yet another thought on the fees structure and the idea of having second hand course material sold at AOU rather than the obligation of buying new sets of material, this could resolve the issue of financial constraint to a certain extent.

4. Conduct orientation sessions on ODL system and ways of managing self-learning before giving admission, this could be either online (university website) or with the help of academic counsellors.

5. Since at the initial level the mode of delivery is new for the students who are mostly from Arabic school background and they need a lot of skills to manage the learning process, perhaps being a more supportive and objective in performance evaluation at this level would motivate them to continue the program however from the second year onwards the evaluation process should be as per the requirement of the course.

6. Intensive training on English verbal and written communication should be given. Theory / concepts should be linked with the practical application i.e. students should be sponsored by the university for short term summer training for hands on experience.

7. This could also be through more public relations, flexibility in approach and providing more supporting material to the students, having more classes for working women in the evenings and on Thursdays, increasing number of sessions so that they can gain more knowledge and are able to have more interaction with the teachers.

8. The University needs to have initial level short orientation program for newly admitted students that would make them aware of the ODL system and the methodology to be adopted for successfully managing the studies in this system.

9. AOU should develop at Branch level / regional level area specific case studies / reference material on organizations of Middle East / Arab world so that the students

are able to understand and link the concepts of the text books with the local perspective.

b. **Measures for Enhancing Necessary Skills for Professional Development:**
1. Organize short term programs on business communication skills, personality and self development, CV writing and interview skills and confidence building to orient the girls in the final stage of program and would be taking up employment at this stage or after completion of the program.
2. Though the material provided is good but more number of tutors is required for each course so that it can be studied with different perspectives. Besides, in order to provide them more exposure and benefit them from the experience of senior faculty members, the University can develop audio-video lecture sessions of these experts and these can be viewed and discussed by the students with their own tutors.
3. Have internships for at least three months to provide training on the field, and thus, introducing students to different sectors in the country.
4. AOU can certainly contribute in professional development of women by conducting short term programs on translation and basic health care course like first aid course, managing small business, entrepreneurship, banking, finance and accounts etc. which would increase job options.
5. In final year all the women students should be asked to make a project by applying their course on aspects related to community relations, besides short term training programs on confidence building and personality development also be conducted.

On the basis of the study conducted and discussions with the students who are also professionals, one can conclude that AOU has been quite effective in reaching the different segments of the society and in providing them opportunities for learning and enhancing their knowledge. It has contributed towards professional development and competency enhancement of women in the country however, it needs to improve upon the present system so as to have provide a better platform for augmenting access to life long learning for professional and social development of women in Saudi Arabia.

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