Interview with Khaled Al-Sultan

Badrul Khan: Where is your University today in e-learning?

Khaled Al-Sultan: In e-learning in Saudi Arabia, King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM) takes the lead, and probably is the role model for the entire Gulf region. We do not force our model, but we share our experience with educational institutions in the region. We have proven this in the workshop that we held late in 2004 on "E-Learning in Higher Education," which was attended by e-learning delegates from all universities in Saudi Arabia as well as from several Gulf countries. We have this spirit of partnership whenever we cooperate, we help our partners, and at the same time we get feedback from the other universities in the region.

It is important to understand that there are similarities and differences among the universities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. We share the same values and have the same culture. KFUPM is proud to be a leading university in the region, due to several reasons: First KFUPM is relatively small in size, and our disciplines are basically applied sciences, engineering, and related fields. Second, KFUPM has rigorous procedures for selecting quality faculties and students. Third, at KFUPM, we have a culture of achieving and maintaining high-quality standards in all our academic programs, which eventually will be the same for our online programs. Finally, the medium of instruction at KFUPM is English.

BK: I was honored to be invited to speak at your E-Learning in Higher Education workshop organized by KFUPM in 2004. I was impressed by the enthusiasm and interest in e-learning shown by the Minister of Higher Education, Dr. Khaled Al-Angari, and the attendees at the workshop. In fact, after attending several conferences in the Gulf region, I saw similar enthusiasm for e-learning among individuals in academic, corporate, and government settings. Upon reflecting on the different grounds for e-learning possibilities in the region, I have proposed the establishment of National Virtual Universities for each Arab Gulf State "for example, the Saudi Arabia National Virtual University." I also

proposed the establishment of an Arab Gulf Virtual University (AGVU). Do you think national level and multi-national level virtual universities are possible in the Gulf region?"

KAS: I would not be surprised if KFUPM plays the role of a national virtual university in the Gulf region. In fact, we have had many successful national programs initiated at KFUPM. An aptitude test similar to the American SAT was initiated at KFUPM, and has been adopted nationwide. Second, academic program assessment was started at KFUPM. We have a national accreditation body, and we have shared our experiences with them. It will be no surprise if the e-learning model from KFUPM is adopted nationwide. We always share our experience.

For the Arabian Gulf region, I am on many committees which include representatives from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, who work on common projects. But, to start with, I am not in favor of establishing a multi-national virtual university. There are too many factors that we must take care of, too many decision to be taken, and from my experience, it will not be successful. We cannot wait for people to share their resources, and go through bureaucratic procedures. We take the lead and share our experiences with our partners. This proves to be a successful approach. For example, our aptitude test has been taken by around 3000 students from Bahrain. Qatar now is asking to benefit from this test. Similarly, many Gulf accreditation bodies are emerging, and they are benefiting from our experience. The same is true for e-learning, and we also will share our experience with all GCC countries. I always suggest that each partner should take the initiative and share his experience with others. If we do that we will end up with many successful initiatives.

BK: Since e-learning is becoming more acceptable in both academic and corporation settings in Saudi Arabia and in other Gulf states, many of these institutions require professional e-learning designing skills to assist in e-learning production. Considering the increasing demand for e-learning designers, it seems that KFUPM can play a greater role in meeting this need.

KAS: Yes, we are planning to establish both certificate and master's degree programs in e-learning. I believe, with our resources and academically qualified faculty, that we will be very effective in meeting the needs of e-learning professionals in the region. As I mentioned earlier, KFUPM has a record of establishing successful new initiatives. Therefore, preparing e-learning designers through KFUPM is very much aligned with our institutional mission.

BK: What is your view of the standards required for successful e-learning efforts.

KAS: We have established an office for quality and planning, and our strategic plan for the coming five years is about to be finalized. Here I would like to mention an important issue that should be taken into account while

developing all of our plans. In the third world, and Saudi Arabia is part of this world, the college degree is the passport to work. This requirement puts a lot of pressure on the degree and on the quality of instructional programs. Academic institutions should work hard to ensure that online programs are of the same quality as the traditional programs, or probably even better, in addition to increasing the awareness in the society about the benefits of e-learning. We should judge our programs, whether online or face-to-face, based on the outcomes of these programs; otherwise, students may seek the shortest path to get the job, regardless of the quality of the program.

There is a national plan for e-learning in higher education in Saudi Arabia. Our seventh and eighth plans have detailed procedures to incorporate e-learning in our academic programs and, in addition, to build the necessary infrastructure. Currently there is a study to establish a national center for e-learning in higher education, and the Minister of Higher Education, Dr. Khaled Al-Angari, himself, is behind this study.

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Dr. Khaled S. Al-Sultan, *Rector of King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals (KFUPM) in Saudi Arabia. He received a Ph. D. in Industrial and Operations Engineering (Operations Research) from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.*

Before his appointment as a Rector of KFUPM, he served as the Deputy Minister for Educational Affairs at the Ministry of Higher Education, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, for five years. Earlier, he was the Dean of the College of Computer Science & Engineering (September 1996–August 1998) and Chairman of the Systems Engineering Department (June 1993–August 1996) at KFUPM. Dr. Al-Sultan has served on the Editorial Boards of several international journals, has published 39 papers in refereed journals, co-authored one book and four book chapters, and has attended numerous international conferences. He is a member of a number of international professional organizations and consultant for several government and private industrial institutions.

BK: What other factors do you see as necessary for your e-learning initiatives?

KAS: First of all, we should make sure that all stakeholder groups are aware of e-learning initiatives. We study the readiness for e-learning among faculty, students, and staff; and, as you know, comprehensive e-learning cannot be successful if faculty members are not psychologically, technologically, and pedagogically ready to teach online. I am concerned about the workload and compensation of faculty who are putting in a lot of hours on e-learning. E-learning initiatives may not be successful if faculty members are not ready to adopt this new innovation.

In our plan we talk about return-on-investment, meaning that our students are actually getting quality, meaningful learning experiences through e-learning. We want to make sure that our graduates get e-learning experience at KFUPM to an extent that they become successful in their professional careers, where nowadays the use of e-learning is very prevalent. We will use instructional design and learning design principles to develop e-learning materials appropriate for our target population. We want to make sure students are satisfied with e-learning, both in the form of a supplement to their face-to-face classes as well as stand-alone online courses. ☐

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