

Interviews with Badrul Khan



Interview with Mansoor Al Awar

Hamdan Bin Mohammed e-University (HBMeU), formerly known as eTQM College (<http://hbmeu.ac.ae>), is a futuristic project started in 2003 under the leadership of Dr. Mansoor Al Awar, who has credit for first conceptualizing the project and convincingly getting approval of such an innovation in the Arab World from the visionary H. H. Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and head-of-state of Dubai. As we all know, Dubai under the leadership of Sheikh Maktoum is a world-renowned place for encouragement of application of innovations. Among many innovations started in Dubai, HBMeU is one of a kind and is an exportable model for education and training in the Information Age. I had the great pleasure of getting involved in this project and its e-Learning Plan from its inception in 2003. Recently, both Dr. Al Awar and I were invited to deliver keynote addresses at the 2nd International e-Learning and Distance Learning Conference in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, where we chatted about e-learning issues.

—Badrul H. Khan

BK: At a conference in Abu Dhabi, I was promoting online education as a potential method for delivering instruction and training. One of the participants in my session commented that online education would not work in the Arab world, where brick and mortar education is a tradition. How did you do it? What did it take to establish HBMeU—a completely online institution—in the Arab World?

Mansoor Al Awar: Electronic education is still in its infancy in the Arab World, and most students are used to the traditional form of learning. However, in recent years we are seeing a gradual change in mindsets, as people are beginning to realize the advantages of electronic learning and are

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more open to embracing this concept.

It was initially a major challenge for us, which is why we first offered postgraduate instead of bachelor's programs, and the outcome has been promising. The road ahead is no doubt challenging, but this is what we were prepared for at the beginning. This also complements the vision of H. H. Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum in taking the lead and being patient and determined to achieve our goals. When the university "opened its doors" on September 30, 2003, under the name e-TQM College, he stated that this institute would be the seed through which future universities and institutes would be formed. Few understood the meaning of this, since the UAE Ministry of Higher Education had no idea back then about e-Learning licensing criteria. That, of course, presented a challenge for us, which was successfully overcome by H. E. Sheikh Nahyan Bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, Minister of Higher Education. He became the first Arab Higher Education minister to grant a license to an e-University. This reminds me of the message by H. H. Sheikh Hamdan Bin Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Crown Prince of Dubai and HBMeU President, who instructed us to take the lead and avoid emulating others, and instead adopt creativity and innovation, while settling for nothing but the best.



BK: In researching the question "What does it take to provide meaningful e-learning environments for diverse learners?" I found that there are a myriad of issues which are critical to the development of meaningful e-learning. My research has shown that these issues encompass eight categories, including *pedagogical, institutional, technological, interface design, evaluation, management, resource support, and ethical considerations* (<http://BadrulKhan.com/framework>). I would like to hear your thoughts on any of the eight categories of issues for the successful design of e-learning at the HBMeU.

Mansoor Al Awar: Our academic, strategic vision at HBMeU is to take e-learning to the next level and to encourage innovation and creativity based on the highest standards of quality, which will ultimately help create easy access to information, enhance the overall quality of education, and drive academic performance. At HBMeU we believe that scientific research and knowledge creation are the key factors for success in the Arab region.

We are focused on making the best of the opportunity to reaffirm our full commitment to reinforcing our stature as a hub for excellence and leadership in the scientific and

Mansoor Al Awar is Founder and Chancellor of Hamdan Bin Mohammed e-University (HBMeU) in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates (Website: <http://hbmeu.ac.ae>).

academic fields and for spreading the concept of e-learning across different countries beyond the UAE.

BK: What differences is HBMeU making in the region and beyond? Where would you like to see HBMeU in five years?

Mansoor Al Awar: HBMeU is developing a new learning process through the implementation of learning practices characterized by flexibility and diversity. Moreover, recently we have taken important steps to strengthen collaborative efforts towards realizing our shared vision in the field of education in the region and around the world.

We have launched the “International Consortium for Teaching and Learning Centers” (ICTL), which is an initiative that is in line with HBMeU’s goal to develop a collaborative network with universities that will intensify efforts to adopt technology in the professional development of faculty and staff members, and to equip learners with skills and competencies in the areas of innovative teaching and learning. The consortium is made up of prominent academic institutions in different countries, including Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Egypt, Malaysia, China, Nigeria, and Mauritius.

BK: Will the current wave of change in the Arab World have implications for educational reforms?

Mansoor Al Awar: There are challenges on the e-learning path, and hopefully the changes in the Arab world will be reflected positively in this field. I think that flexibility and transparency in delivering educational systems will happen if we create more awareness of the benefits of electronic learning and focus on addressing the shortcomings of traditional teaching methods. At HBMeU we believe that learning is for all, and our vision is not only for the UAE but for the entire Arab World. Our mission is to drive the spread and advancement of knowledge and e-learning in the Arab world through community engagement, government collaborations, institutional associations, and industry partnerships.

BK: What do you see as the future of e-learning in the Arab World?

Mansoor Al Awar: E-learning serves as an important contributor in comprehensive development and social transformation toward a knowledge-based economy in the Arab World. Recently we have been witnessing a growing adoption of this concept, as countries keep up with the changes and developments in the field of information technology. However, there are some key challenges facing e-learning in the region, including the novelty of this concept, non-recognition of the certificates issued by e-learning institutions in many Arab countries, and the dominance of a more traditional mindset within regional academic institutions. To overcome such challenges there is a need to conduct continuous dialogue with national institutions of academic recognition in order for them to be able to better appreciate the concept of e-learning.

To effectively face such challenges it is necessary to develop a strategy based on a strong commitment to implement the highest standards of quality when offering e-learning and distance education programs. □

Educational Technology Research Journals

The American Journal of Distance Education, 2001 – 2010

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The articles published in *The American Journal of Distance Education (AJDE)* between the years 2001 and 2010 were analyzed for trends in topics and categories, methodologies, authors, and word frequency in abstracts and titles. Results of this analysis indicate that as distance education has evolved, the emphasis of *AJDE* has shifted from design to evaluation and management of online education. In addition, the authors identify a potential new trend in research related to virtual schools.

Introduction

The American Journal of Distance Education (AJDE) is a peer-reviewed, internationally recognized journal established in 1987 with a focus on research where (as stated in *AJDE*’s Editorial Scope), “the principal technology...is the Internet, and subfields of distance education such as online learning, e-learning, distributed learning, asynchronous learning, and blended learning” (*The American Journal of Distance Education*, n.d.). Michael Grahame Moore is the current editor. In this article, we analyze the 122 research articles published by *AJDE* over the past 10 years (2001–2010), looking for the major trends in topics, methods, and authors, and we compare our findings to previous studies of distance education journals.