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Determining the Best Plan to Launch the Saudi Virtual University

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Abstract

This paper presents a project for the development of a virtual university in Saudi Arabia, associated challenges, and, remaining questions that need answering to ensure successful implementation and adoption of the university.

Keywords: virtual university, e-learning, internet penetration, challenges, Saudi Arabia

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With a high annual population growth of 1.85% the demand for higher education in Saudi Arabia is on a constant rise. Just over the past decade, the number of universities has increased from 7 to 28. The start of the 2008/2009 academic year has seen 68% of the 295,000 high school graduates of that year enroll in Saudi universities. Additionally, an estimated 70,000 students are on scholarship sponsored by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) in countries around the World including the USA, UK, Canada, and Australia. This tremendous growth in demand for higher education has led the Minister of Higher Education to initiate an ambitious project for establishing a public nonprofit virtual university.

The Saudi Virtual University (SVU) is to be established with the intent of providing world class education to aspiring students using the latest information and communication technologies. This project was started with a vision grounded on a fundamental need: To provide the highest quality learning, carefully adapting e-learning resources to fit the culture and context of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The expected launch of the university is planned for the fall of 2011.

In spite of the ambitious goals of the SVU, several challenges exist that may hinder the general adoption of virtual learning within the country:

1. The MOHE has recently introduced rules and regulation that govern distance learning. These rules need to be adhered to thus imposing limitations on what can be implemented by the virtual university.
2. While Internet penetration rate in the country has seen a tremendous growth, increasing from 200,000 users in 2000 to almost 10 Million users in 2010 (38% penetration rate) as reported by internetworldstats.com, a recent national study conducted by the Saudi Communications and Information Technology Commission in 2008 of nearly 10,000 citizens has found that only 48% knew what e-learning is about, and only 4% had ever used the Internet for learning purposes.
3. An e-government symposium held at the end of September 2010 has revealed that many of the intended projects started in 2006 with the planned launching date in 2010 have failed to materialize, with only 20% of those projects being achieved.

In addition, before the university can be established, the project needs to address the following issues:

1. What is the appropriate model for the university? Should it start as a start-alone project, or as a consortium of public universities?
2. Developing and deciding what academic programs to implement and how to roll them out.
3. Deciding on what international universities should be approached, to enter strategic partnerships with them?
4. What are the target student demographics?
5. What is the needed ICT infrastructure for the virtual university?

These and other challenges and questions represent major risk factors for the SVU. We seek to develop a robust plan to guarantee the successful implementation and adoption of this project.

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