Promoting a Blended Learning System for Open Education: The AOU Experience

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Abstract

This paper describes the characteristics and features of a dynamically evolving blended system of open education at the Arab Open University (AOU). In creating a blended learning system for open education, it becomes highly important to look, in particular, at the main institutional dimensions underpinning the evolution of said system. It is also significant to examine the guiding measures intended to safeguard the quality of performance. This paper reflects on such issues with particular reference to the AOU experience and the inherent supporting tasks provided by certain specially-developed management information systems.

I. Building a blended learning system of open education

By design, the AOU is structured to operate, by way of Branches, located in a number of Arab Middle East countries. Practically, each Branch is operationally an autonomous academic institution of higher education. However, the Branch operates as a large component within an integrated AOU system. Due to the operational structure of the AOU, the resulting system is perhaps best described as a distributed system of open education.

Managing the learning process and other operational aspects in such a complex, distributed operation, such as the AOU, requires the creation of a somewhat flexible, distributed platform of operation. Our focus in this paper is, however, on attributes of the adopted learning process and its requirements.

II. Building the Framework for blended learning

In structuring the AOU system, a three-tier Framework was utilized in order to invoke the appropriate constructs of various elements of system operation. In turn, said Framework has been motivated by three primary dimensions, serving as the ethos of system operation, management and evaluation:

1. Institutional policy:

The AOU Charter and mission statement make a clear commitment to establishing and funding the institution as a Pan-Arab, multi-branch institution of higher education, based on a highly IT-driven learning system of open education.

2. Pedagogical platform:

Through a formal partnership with the UK Open University (OU), the AOU has adopted, since early operations, curricular program and course design based on open education, with independent study as one of its main tenets. However, the AOU strategy for Student Assessment, while benefiting from certain practices at the OU, has actually deviated markedly in order to foster certain robust measures deemed significant for local accreditation purposes. Technology, for instance, is viewed to play a supporting role to the enhancement of the learning experience, rather than a stand-alone primary tier as viewed in distance education institutions.

3. Learning delivery system:

In translating the general guidance provided by the Institutional Policy and Pedagogy into operational manifests, the AOU leading management team made the decision, since early days of planning, to employ a blended system of learning, thereby encompassing certain particular elements which define such a system of learning.

In turn, we believe that the previous simple Framework encompasses the elements embodied by the more-elaborate Khan Octagonal Framework of blended learning, either in direct form or indirectly as part of the three tires mentioned here. Singh (1) provides an interesting review of this latter framework, while at the same time pointing out how blended learning and training can take on many different forms.

III. Promoting gender equality

Since establishment, the AOU has held a policy of equality in admission with regard to gender. In the early days, the policy was even tilted to the side of female students. The following table, drawn for the AOU-KSA data, illustrates how greater numbers of females are opting for higher education. By design, one of the aims of the AOU is to provide higher education opportunities to marginalized groups, especially in rural areas. Women are considered to fall in this latter categorization.

Year	Total	Female	Male
07/08	15568	6275	9383
08/09	13539	6147	7392

At the AOU-KSA, for instance, teaching is provided on two adjacent campuses, one for females and another for males. However, in other AOU locations such as Jordan and Lebanon, for example, the AOU adopts a full coeducational structure.

IV. Adopting an enhanced blended learning system

As mentioned previously, the AOU has opted, by design, to employ a blended learning system (2) which, in essence, combines certain attributes of traditional education and others borrowed from attributes of distance education. The three primary elements of said

system are described below. These elements, viewed in an integrated manner, define the structure of blended learning as practiced at the AOU.

(a) *Face-to-face presentation*:

Because of the local cultural settings and the expectations of local educational political machinery, it was decided early on to allocate 25-30% to face-to-face class meetings to be run as tutorial sessions. In addition, computer labs are also made available to students for long hours, six days a week. Tutorial sessions are limited to 25-30 students per group. In retrospect, it is believed that this was a wise decision. It has served to reinforce all aspects of the learning process. In one respect, bringing students together has helped to form active peer study groups. In another, it provides the Tutors, via set office hours, to engage in mentoring. Furthermore, coming to a physical campus seems to cultivate a sense of pride and belonging.

(b) *Self-study*:

The second important element of the AOU blended learning system resides in the proper provision of support for independent or self-study, carried out by the student. For this purpose, special student learning packs are procured from the partnering institution, the OU. Course book-readers and other relevant reading materials are prepared with self-study in mind. For each course, the pace of learning is spread out in accordance with a dictated course calendar.

(c) *Digital learning resources*:

Depending on the particular course of study, this part combines online presentation, CD-based learning, and sometimes the use of special applications software packages. In some cases, there is also the provision of "lectures on demand" where students can access videotaped lectures on course contents. These digital resources are usually made available in an asynchronous mode.

Furthermore, in order to keep tuition fees and running costs within reasonable limits, it was also speculated that the ratio of fulltime-to-part time Tutors would be kept around 1:4. As a check on useful productivity, a part-time Tutor's load, for instance, is usually limited to one or two group sessions, depending on the course weight of credit hours.

Once settled on the elements of a blended learning platform, one is tempted to entertain the question of searching for the optimal mix. We believe that it is perhaps more beneficial to keep the learning platform dynamically evolving; always, searching for more effective and efficient ways of delivery

V.   Introducing a new educational culture in the region

One of the arduous tasks in setting up the AOU was the need to deal with an educational cultural transformation. With prospective students, the recruited faculty, and the local and

regional political machinery, a clear message had to be articulated about open education and blended learning; thereby, differentiating it from pure distance education.

With faculty, in particular, intensive training workshops were mounted with the help of the OU during a year of preparations (2001-2002). Since then, such training workshops have become a tradition at the AOU.

With prospective students, with parents, and with the local political machinery, the message had to be repeated over and over again; it is blended learning and not pure distance education that the AOU is all about! The same message is still reiterated and celebrated with the arrival of every new batch of students.

It is rather interesting to note that many prestigious American universities which embarked earlier, part-time though, on some initiatives in distance education are now making the switch to blended learn

In promoting responsible academic monitoring, we chose to introduce a special system of "Academic Coordination." It aims at building shared responsibility among the academic staff. The hierarchy of this Coordination calls for the appointment, at Branch level, of a Program Coordinator for each program of study, and a Local Course Coordinator for each course of study. At the AOU-HQ, each course has an assigned Course Coordinator, located either at the HQ or in any one of the AOU Branches. Coordination duties have been clearly laid down. In this system, the Dean serves as the overall Program Coordinator.

VI.   An integrated e-Learning platform

An integrated e-Learning Platform has recently been accomplished and put to use in the Saudi Arabia Branch of the AOU (3), for instance. This platform is intended for use by the different segments of university constituencies, including students, faculty, administrative staff, parents and general visitors to the website of the institution.

In essence, the designed e-Learning Platform consists of four main components: a Student Information System (SIS), a Learning Management System (LMS), a Content Management System (CMS), and a Student Support System (SSS). The design of all components is based on open source technologies, based on the Moodle platform.

The SIS is designed to facilitate the processes of admission, registration, grade logging and procurement in addition to other tasks such as enrollment management, billing; etc. The LMS, on the other hand, facilitates tasks of course management; content creation; management of learning activities; and, computer-mediated communication such as chat, dialogue, and interactive forums. The CMS supports various tasks like the institution website, bulletin boards and the sorts. The fourth component of SSS serves as the backbone of a customer relationship management system.

VII. Combating plagiarism

One of the major challenges in today's higher educational system3e, and perhaps more so in an open education environment, is dealing with plagiarism. In part, this is due to the ease of access to resources via the Internet. In order to combat this situation, the AOU-KSA employed a special software package called "Turnitin". However, the software was unfortunately incompatible with the Moodle platform that supports the design of the Learning Management System (LMS) in use. Subsequently, another software package, called "Copycatch", has been called to the rescue. It is successfully in operation at the AOU-KSA.

VIII. Feedback from students and tutors

The AOU-KSA has opted to periodically poll the opinions of students and tutors regarding the delivery of the learning process and the available supporting resources. This is viewed by the institution as a constructive feedback which, in the past, has resulted in certain changes to the operating system and structure. The latest surveys were carried out in 2009. A summary is reported herein.

Based on a highest score of 5, students rated the quality of programs, reading material and course websites at about 3.1. Tutors, on the other hand rated the same at around 3.7. With regard to the supporting e-services such as the LMS, students gave an overall rating of 3 while tutors gave a rating of 3.4. One may conclude on the basis of this feedback that the situation is acceptable. But improvements are also needed.

IX. Fostering measures of quality assurance

As part of the established partnership with the OU, the AOU has, in turn, to demonstrate adherence to approved measures of quality assurance which are inherently based on criteria and principles published by the UK-based Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). In particular, the AOU applies the QAA Benchmark Statements for the design and operation of academic programs of study. For other operational aspects, including, for instance, student services, the reference is the QAA Code of Practice (4). These guidelines have helped the AOU earn external accreditation from the UK-OUVS. Local Accreditation, required by the local Ministries of Higher Education is another yardstick of input to gauging the satisfaction of minimum requirements of quality assurance.

The AOU has, in some Branches such as the Saudi Arabia Branch, adopted additional mechanisms for measuring the efficiency and effectiveness of operation by devising a set of useful Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

As part of its submission for OUVS Accreditation, the AOU-KSA made a serious initiative in Code Mapping of the various sections of the QAA Code of Practice with particular consideration for application to activities concerning the Branch. In particular,

the exercise proved very useful as a tool for making changes to current practices in the academic and administrative domains, in particular.

The Benchmark Statements are intended to:

1. Provide a means for the academic community to describe the nature and characteristics of the program, right at design stage.
2. Provide general guidance for articulating the learning outcomes associated with the program; thereby, representing a framework for general expectations about the standards of the award (diploma/degree) associated with the program.
3. Encourage innovation within an agreed overall framework.
4. Provide support to the institution in pursuit of internal quality assurance.

With regard to the QAA Code of Practice, the percepts contained in its various provisions help the institution to:

- Lay down clear definitions of responsibility and accountability
- Uphold consistent application of policies
- Provide access to information
- Ensure the availability of competent staff/faculty
- Provide adequate student services

To institutions of e-Learning, in particular, the issue of quality education has become very central. It is, nevertheless, an area of great concern in all tiers and norms of higher education (5).

References

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