

# E-learning Accessibility for Saudi Women

## A Literature Review

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**Abstract**—Saudi government has made significant efforts and heavily invested in its e-learning innovation in order to offer students alternative opportunity to complete their higher education. However despite all the efforts being made, Saudi Arabia is still in the early stage of its e-learning development and faces many challenges especially for female's students from their ability to take the benefit of such technology. Therefore, understanding the ability of Saudi women to access and use e-learning is more important than just make it available for them. In other words, the use of e-learning involves not just technical availability but the capability to benefit. In this regards, this paper will review the literature of e-learning accessibility for Saudi women by considering several different aspects including: general information about Saudi Arabia (e.g. country, society, education system), women's education, higher education and e-learning, challenges of e-learning and women's capacity to access e-learning freely.

**Index Terms**—E-learning; Capability Approach; Saudi Society; Higher Education.

### I. INTRODUCTION

The Saudi government sees education at all levels as key to developing the skills and knowledge of its citizens [10] and expenditure has been considerable with a quarter of the Saudi government budget being spent on improving education [2]. The increase in the number of universities from seven universities ten years ago to twenty four public universities has certainly gone some way to meeting the needs of the female population [15]. However, women in Saudi Arabia are severely restricted by the cultural and religious dictum that a woman must at all times be accompanied by a male guardian whenever they leave their home [ibid], and this seriously limits their opportunities to access higher education [8]. Therefore, further measures are needed to make education accessible to all, but particularly to women, and new technologies such as e-learning could have a significant impact which could revolutionise the way higher education courses are accessed. However, the issue is not just about technical availability it is also about the capability of women to benefit from such a technology. Thereby, focusing on the things people are able to do and the power they have is more important than concentrating on the things they buy or own (computer and Internet) or are offered by others (in this case e-learning) when thinking of the benefit of e-learning to women wanting to achieve an educational goal [19][16]. Due to the diversity of humans beings, the capabilities a person can show from external resources are influenced by three sets of conversion factors namely personal, social and environmental [20][18]. As such, differences would affect Saudi women's ability to convert the

resource they have (e-learning) into a valuable educational achievement. Thereby, it is not enough to know the goods the person own or can own to measure the well-being that he or she has achieved or could achieve, instead, you need to know a lot about the person and their living situation [ibid]. Based on that, it will be appropriate to illuminate the ability of Saudi women to access and use e-learning freely.

### II. SAUDI ARABIA

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established by King Abdul-Aziz Bin Saud in 1902 with Riyadh as its capital city. It is one of the most developed countries in the Middle East and is divided into thirteen administrative divisions. The official language is Arabic and the official religion is Islam [2]. It is a vast country covering approximately 2,218,000 km<sup>2</sup>, almost four-fifths of the Arabian Peninsula with largely uninhabited deserts and semi-arid lands [15] with rugged terrain. The total estimate of its population in 2013 amounted to 29,994,272 or 16,945,836 males and 12,852,059 females [11]. Saudi Arabia is the homeland of Islam, where you can find the two holiest cities of Makkah and Medina and is one of the largest Islamic countries. The Holy Qur'an is the foundation of the law and Islamic law is employed in the country [7]. The major source of income in Saudi Arabia is oil and because of its large resources, it has become one of the richest countries in the world [22] [5]. The thirteen administrative regions of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are distributed between five areas namely: centre, east, west, north and south. Each one of these areas comprises a number of regions which in turn contain numerous provinces. For example, the North part of the country consists of four regions namely: Tabuk, Al Jouf, Hail and Northern Border [11].

### III. SAUDI SOCIETY

Saudi Arabia is a socially and religiously conservative country [14]. It has high cultural homogeneity based on tribal and Islamic affiliation and therefore has a unique and complex culture. It is difficult to differentiate between Islamic principles and Arabic customs [1]. Some customs, such as the belief that women should not drive cars or practise Law or Engineering are not from Islamic law but have become entrenched in the culture [13]. Women's function in the wider society is limited and Saudi Arabia has one of the lowest participation of women in the workplace, particularly graduates [24] and yet this is needed for the country to achieve progress [8]. Therefore, the government faces great challenges if it is to achieve its goal of development. Fundamental changes in the way society is conducted are needed.

#### IV. EDUCATION FOR WOMEN

Formal education for women began in the 1960s with the establishment of the first authorized primary school for girls in the City of Riyadh, but before this, women's education was in informal settings concentrating on religious education and the Quran [13]. Higher education for women began in 1962 at King Saud University [2]. In 1970, the Kingdom established the first college for women to provide female teachers [ibid]. Since then further universities and colleges in both the public and private sector have been opened and women's education has developed [8]. Some universities educate women in separate centres while others are exclusively for women. The Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University, Riyadh, started in 2008 to cater for 40,000 female students [4], was officially opened by King Abdullah on 17 May 2011 with a new university city [9]. Thus the only Higher Education institutes exclusively for women are located in the capital Riyadh and the second city Jeddah which demonstrates the difference between the urban elite and the rural population who have less opportunity [24].

#### V. HIGHER EDUCATION AND E-LEARNING

Higher education has had to progress quickly to extend its student capacity due to increasing demand. This has partly arisen due to the increasing competitiveness for entry to employment and higher education is seen as important for improving prospects for young people [12]. The Ministry of higher education is working to encourage the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to meet demand. In 2006, the National Centre for E-learning and Distance Learning (NCeL) was established to carry out research, development and implementation of e-learning [4], and some centres have opened at some universities [5]. However, e-learning in Saudi Arabia is still in the early stage of its development due to the many challenges of e-learning that will still have to be faced.

#### VI. CHALLENGES OF E-LEARNING

The implementation of e-learning in Saudi Arabia faces various barriers, which mainly arise from the educational society of Saudi Arabia [3]. The major barrier to e-learning in Saudi Arabia relates to the cultural beliefs and the nature of the education system. One major feature of this society is the dichotomy that exists between the adoption of modern technology and the preservation of beliefs and religious values. Many authorities believe that numerous social skills are associated with the adoption of the internet and are related to the reluctance to adopt this technology. Cordesman [12] suggests cultural issues are another reason as to why e-learning in developing countries such as Saudi Arabia is challenging, as countries that have distinct cultural traditions often find it hard to embrace change. People who are rigid might not be willing to adopt new technologies [23]. Alebaikan [5] is in agreement with this and argues that blended learning is to a great extent affected by how ready the public is embrace and use technology as a tool for learning. The Saudi government has, in fact, recognised this and is playing a great role in enhancing the acceptance of technology and its diffusion by providing incentives to those who are specialists in Information Technology (IT) as a way of motivating Saudi Arabians to venture into technical fields.

#### VII. WOMEN'S CAPACITY

Knowing what "*people are able to be and to do, and not on what they can consume or on their incomes*" is the main focus of capability approach [17, p. 62]. According to Sen [21], the key idea of the capability approach is expansion of people's capability (freedom) in order to promote or achieve valuable beings and doings (functioning). He argued that people's ability to help themselves is increased when they have increased freedom as it gives them more opportunities to achieve their goals [21] [22]. He also added that the more people are responsible for their own lives, the more they can determine their own well-being and they decide the path they take to achieve this, based on deploying their own capabilities [21]. Thereby, in order to expand people's valuable freedoms, they should be seen as agents instead of patients and left to make their own decisions and run their own lives [21] [6]. As Sen argues the members of any society should actively decide what to take forward and what to leave behind [21]. Supporting this view, Nussbaum [15] said that a person is offered an opportunity to do something needs to have the power to perform that duty. However, women in Saudi society do not have this power as they force to do what their men want them to do rather than live the way they would like to, as a result their ability to access and use e-learning is fall under their male's mercy. Thus, providing Saudi women with an opportunity to complete their higher education via e-learning is not enough without giving them the power to access and use it freely, whenever they are able to and want to do so. In this regards, it becomes necessarily to investigate the capabilities requirements of women to access and use e-learning freely. In addition, because of the natural of Saudi society and its differences from region to region, women's ability to access and use e-learning is various. Therefore, the person ability and the situation in which he or she is living should not be ignored, as it impacts on the degrees of capabilities a person can produce from resources and influence by three sets of conversion factors, which are personal, social and environmental factors [20] [18]. This indicates that the human side of e-learning application is very important to be focused on by Saudi government in order to ensure the success of e-learning application for women.

#### VIII. CONCLUSION

It becomes apparent that e-learning could play a role as a bridge to enable women in Saudi Arabia to access higher education. However use of e-learning is set in a context and involves not just technical availability but the capability to benefit. Issues include family willingness, the cultural use of the internet, the attitude of the woman to convert the opportunity offered by e-learning into a valuable educational achievement through her approach, and her ability to achieve. These issues are needed to be addressed by Saudi government to reinforce the power of women to access and use e-learning as it would help them to enhance their freedom to do so.

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