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A Holistic Approach to E-learning in the Palestinian Higher Education Sector

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Research Domain: Digital University and new learning technologies (DU)

Abstract: The objective of this paper is to examine the conditions needed for holistic approaches to e-learning in higher education (HE), through an empirical investigation of factors informing e-learning in Palestine. Existing research has highlighted the need for more holistic approaches to the development of e-learning. This paper contributes to this objective by empirically examining how such approaches can be operationalised. Our research is part of a six-year project entitled 'Equip Palestine with E-Learning (E-Pal)' funded by NORAD and carried out by two Palestinian and two Norwegian HEIs. We present results from a comprehensive needs analysis, consisting of qualitative and quantitative data from a range of stakeholders, where we examine multiple factors informing e-learning, including pedagogical, organisational and policy contexts. The paper addresses the challenges and enablers for developing e-learning in the Palestinian HE (PHE) sector and examines how a holistic approach to e-learning can be conceptualised and developed.

Paper: Introduction

The main objective of this paper is to examine the conditions needed for holistic approaches to e-learning in higher education (HE), through an empirical investigation of the case of Palestine. More specifically, we examine conditions for e-learning in Palestine in regard to a range of contextual factors, such as standards, policies, infrastructure, capacity building, research, and academic programs. We report on the results of a comprehensive needs analysis, consisting of qualitative and quantitative data from a range of stakeholders.

The COVID pandemic has highlighted the need for improved preparedness for e-learning in HE globally. On the one hand, the HE sector rapidly managed the initial transition to online learning, in that a basic educational offering was quickly established for most students (cf. special issue, Goedegebuure & Meek, 2021). On the other hand, research emerging from the pandemic emphasises the need to develop more holistic approaches to e-learning, as many of the immediate

measures adopted were characterised by "solutionism" (Teräs et al., 2020), in which the priority has been to identify immediate solutions to pressing problems. The call for more holistic approaches is also reflected in systematic reviews on online and blended learning published prior to the pandemic (Martin, et al., 2020; Rasheed, et al., 2020). This paper contributes to existing research by responding to this call. We present results from a research project that has deliberately adopted a holistic approach to conditions for e-learning, including pedagogical, organizational and policy perspectives and conditions related to technological infrastructure. We ask the following research questions:

1.

2. What are the main challenges and enablers for developing e-learning in the Palestinian higher education sector?
3.
4. How can a holistic approach to e-learning in Palestinian HE be developed?

Analytical Perspective and Empirical Context

For the purposes of this paper, we define e-learning as forms of digitally mediated teaching and learning in higher education, which may be conducted fully online or with the use of digital tools on campus. Analytically, we rely on holistic approaches to the development of e-learning (Khan, et al., 2021), which seek to view pedagogical, organisational, political and infrastructural factors in relation to each other.

Our research is part of a six-year project titled 'Equip Palestine with E-Learning (E-Pal)' funded by The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD). The project is a cooperation between the Palestine Polytechnic University (PPU), the University College of Applied Sciences (UCAS), the University of Oslo and Oslo Metropolitan University. The E-Pal project aims at strengthening the institutional (PPU, UCAS) and Palestinian national environment for e-learning in higher education with regard to national policies, organizational infrastructures and pedagogical practices, thereby enhancing student learning. In addition, the project aims at strengthening Palestinian academics' capacities for the design, implementation, and evaluation, and undertaking research in e-learning in the higher education sector. It also aims at strengthening graduates' competitiveness in the labor market by developing their digital skills and competencies.

What makes this project innovative is its holistic approach to developing e-learning policies, capacity building, research and learning practices. The project is also unique in the Palestinian context, in involving a wide range of policy makers, researchers, and practitioners in the process and production of the project outcomes.

Methodology

Data are currently being collected using the following instruments: questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus groups and observations. These instruments are being used in a national needs assessment that includes a large number of PHEIs as well as other national stakeholders, including university teachers, students and elected student bodies, educational leaders in the HE sector, the Ministry of Higher Education, the Ministry of Telecommunication, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and the private sector.

Themes addressed through the different research instruments include existing standards, policies and procedures; previous experiences in distance, blended and online learning; organisational capacity related to e-learning (e.g. e-learning centers and other forms of academic support), research capacity and academic programs related to e-learning.

Expected results:

By December 2021, all data will have been collected and analysed, and we will be able to present results based on the RQs outlined above. Furthermore, a road map for the development of e-learning policies and standards, framework adoption, infrastructure solutions, capacity building, research design, and academic programs will be suggested. In addition to the empirical findings, the analysis will point to theoretical and conceptual implications for our understanding of "holistic" approaches to e-learning in higher education.

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