What are the trends and challenges in distance education?

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1.0 Introduction

Across the world and from m-learning to e-learning, distance education has spread in many dimensions. Therefore, during the last decade, due to this assortment, distance education has extended in multi-directions. However, still, there are many challenges, specifically, for those, who think, for improving performance, distance education plays a significant role. For instance, how can they keep up with the global issues and trends that are describing the options of the next generations' distance education?

2.0 Discussion

Simonson et al (2014) claimed that many forms of distance education such as virtual universities and online courses including e-learning and m-learning have emerged on the arena of education. They are all identified distinctively because of their unique applications and qualities. For instance, in the USA, e-learning may be considered like animated show of all-too-common low interface and it has become common in several organisations. On the contrary, in other parts of the world, e-learning may be considered as modules leading by instructors that enhance and encourage interactions from learner-to-learner. Both the examples just exhibit the diversity and variety of e-learning and its different approaches around the world.

2.1 Knowledge, Models and Technology

O'Malley (2012) pointed out for characterising distances education, one example or outcome of such tendency is that those who know and understand how, for instance, virtual schools or e-learning are usually used in one country; they may not have knowledge about the other distance education and how they are using models and technologies effectively. This frequency, for professionals, who are working for the enhancement of learner's performance, means that stakeholders have not much knowledge regarding available options. Hence, the role of international trends can improve information and be shaping the perspectives of stakeholders regarding distance education's several forms and provides solutions for the challenges of local performance. To prove the point, the example of Chinese learners helped and enhanced the designing of Chicago e-learning modules.

According to the study of Van et al (2012), the application and variety of models of distance education can however, develop any trends and issues' legitimate discussion and that

seems expended very thin. Equally, specific e-learning technologies' limited explorations, for example, learning management systems, generally are unable to provide significantly elaborative conceptualisation that can be applied across diverse contexts. Hence, the study of different trends is essential to meet all the challenges and resolve all the issues related to distance education.

2.2 First Trend: Knowledge's Advanced Forms

Allen and Seaman mentioned in their study that due to the changing of the information revolution, the awareness of sharing, representation and of new knowledge has become a crucial factor. Knowledge is not confined to textbooks and instructors only, now it has many forms beyond them. Web2 technologies provide access to the wisdom of crowds and opening access to journals where one can find that knowledge is expandable very quickly.

2.3 Second Trend: The Evaluation of Learning Achievement

According to Lya, Yusra and Ray (2012) and Moore and Kearsley (2011), Evaluation findings have not always been justifying the growth in distance education. Therefore, the learning's' application and assessment has become an essential element of distance education studies. For instance, in K-12 education, distance education's evaluation is inclusive of online courses, virtual schools and others, specifically, in the United States, it now resembles like the traditional environment of classroom focusing heavily on standardized tests. Similarly, for e-learning and m-learning and more within corporate distance education scenario, learning's evaluation is usually underpinned with alarm related to workplace application and ROI (Return-on-Investment).

2.4 Third Trend: Accessibility and convenience of learning

Lya, Yusra and Ray (2012) Stated that the insignias of the distance education are availability, accessibility and convenience. However, these characteristics of distance education are challenging because of the learning commodification, as they come with advantages and disadvantages and marketplace approach brings them into learning. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that these trends have inseparable relation with learning and learning is being demanded by people and they want to access it whether they are anywhere in the world.

2.5 Fourth Trend: To Reach all learners

Lya, Yusra and Ray (2012), emphasized that for the development of distance education and its many dimensions, quality of education and equity in access are necessary. For minimizing the distance in achievement and access, distance education can be made appropriate consciously. In fact, in the national education system, the application of distance education seems justified for corporations' e-learning. Veletsianos and Navarrete (2012) found that for K-12 and higher education, the equity of access related to learning is always at the front position. Therefore, for organisations, providing access to employees to learning beyond their geographical limits has become a challenge.

Lya, Yusra and Ray (2012) stated that when employees work in satellite offices, are they at a disadvantageous position for accessing to learning and association to promotional opportunities as compare to employees working in central offices. The experiences, technologies and models that have been defined throughout distance education's trends and issues can provide solutions and resources for supporting and accessing all the learners.

2.6 Fifth Trend: Use of Designed Experience and Media for Engaging Learners

According to Bozkurt et al (2015), the last trend is the most important of all because of its relevance to various performance technologies. It is the application of new media for creating designed experiences for the engagement of learners. For instance, 3D technologies, social media, wikis and countless applications are all media driven tools that are used or can be used in distance learning scenario.

3.0 Challenges to Distance Education

Five trends have been identified in distance education environment and their solutions have been suggested. However, apart from these five trends, researchers have recognized the following issues in distance education.

3.1 Academic Standards' Maintenance

Jung and Latchem (2012) commented that around the globe, the distance universities have been facing a significant and common problem and this is the maintenance of academic

standards. The distance education environment does not have traditional education and teaching sessions, teacher and learner's regular and close interaction and timely guidance and the counselling of the learner by the tutor. Therefore, it is claimed that this system of education lacks quality because non-formal education is provided through distance approach.

3.2 Financing Issues

Specifically, according to Howell, Williams and Lindsay (2003), in developing countries, the most significant problem is the financing of distance education. One programme of distance education has different costs as compare to another distance education programme. Nevertheless, as compare to the formal education system, the distance education system offers many costs saving possibilities; moreover, not only the cost can be reduced as much as possible but also it keeps the standards of education high even in low costs. The core issues are related to resources, and ways to increase them, access to the resources and their deployment within distance education system.

3.3 Organisational issues

McPherson and Nunes (2008) proposed that the social and economic impracticability regarding educational opportunities for those who are concerned and have the desire of learning are the foundation of distance education system. The required education, in scope, is rather restricted generally. On one hand, the philosophy of community stresses that every person ought to be guided for expanding his/her personal latent to its parameters; on the other hand, there is for satisfying the question of cost-benefit because the financial resources of the community required to be shared and budgeted along with different services. Therefore, it has been exhibited that within the environment of distance education and products (results measure them) at least be equivalent to the formal education. Formal education as compare to distance education is significantly expensive, specifically, in recurrent cost. According to Driscoll et al (2012), the following two points are relevant to prove that fact because for saving the costs these steps must be taken:

- In the specific or selected course, standard lesson instructions, assignments for each course, tests and materials are delivered to each student. Therefore, all of these must be

prepared skilfully and carefully, it must be tested and skill and money that have been invested in those assignments must not force their continuation without any revision.

- The teachers who teach in distance education. They must believe in this education system and these teachers should be selected based on their understanding, supervision and expertise; otherwise, these teachers should be trained in understanding the perspective of distance education.

3.4 Issues Related to Study Centres

Generally, as mentioned by Rice (2009), it has been observed that universities or institutions related to distance education have one main campus and two or three sub-campuses; thus, they have very limited jurisdiction. On the contrary, the learners of these universities are everywhere and across the country. Therefore, if the university is only focusing local students across the country, it cannot build, in every town and city of the country, its campuses or study centres. At the result of that, for complying the set objectives, the university that is, imparting distance education has to hire privately managed institutions or formal institutions for the establishment of study centres, as it wants to facilitate its learners. However, the distance between the study centre and the university can cause some issues because management and teachers do not visit in this centre if the distance is long. Thus, it creates the lack of coordination and interaction and other related problems.

3.5 Assignment Related Problems

According to Simpson (2013), within the open distance education system, an essential factor is the component of assignment. Because of its importance and significance, its compulsion is mandatory. Moreover, these assignments must be planned and developed carefully and the instructors must guide the students or learners adequately. In addition, the tutor must provide the written feedback on every students' performance regarding the assignments and this type of feedback improves the standard of education. Nevertheless, in distance education, the preparation of the assignments and teachers' feedback has been criticized greatly by observers.

3.6 Inappropriate use of technology

Noor-Ul-Amin (2013) stated that the costs of every technology that is used in distance environment are generally high; however, the main issue is technology's improper use but this happens because of attitudes of instructors towards technology and their lack of training. Furthermore, the hardware is another problem, in this regard.

4.0 Suggestions for resolving these issues

Distance education programmes can be improved by applying the following suggestions:

- Most importantly, before the introduction of any distance education course, preparation regarding syllabus, preparation of methodology of instructional materials must be focused seriously

- Among different departments, a robust coordination is essential because these departments may involve in preparing instructional materials, TV and radio broadcasting, study centres establishment and conduction of contact programmes

- Apart from the availability of sufficient funds, the financial resources must be used effectively by employing effective measures

- Technology awareness and training must be mandatory for instructors and other staff

- All the model study centres must have the library facility and students should have access to online to these resources

5.0 Conclusion

It is assumed that with the passage of time technology would improve more and this would reduce the costs of distance learning significantly. Though students and instructors along with organisations have been facing the above-mentioned issues, yet most of the students are satisfied with distance education system. Moreover, by understanding trends, a virtual university can overcome many mentioned issues. For instance, the first trend knowledge's advanced forms suggest that everyone is interested in improving knowledge. Similarly, the second trend shows that the evaluation of learning achievement is crucial but it has been facing the problem. Likewise, the third trend exhibits that ease of accessibility and convenience of

learning are the essential factor of distance education, the fourth trend is related to the third. However, the fifth trend is different and very important; actually, it is proposing the effective usage of technology to enhance the distance learning experiences.

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