Managing Change in Higher Education: An Exploration of the Role of Training in ICT Enabled Institutions in the United Arab Emirates

Kasim Randeree, The University of Oxford, Saïd Business School, BT Centre for Major Programme Management, Oxford, UK
Anjli Narwani, University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

Abstract: The increasing presence of web-based educational technologies is continually pressing demands on teaching-learning environments. With Information Communications Technology (ICT) perceived as a strong facilitator in achieving the goal of building a knowledge-based economy in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the drive towards this end has brought with it several challenges, many associated directly with higher education management. Higher education institutions are increasingly adopting world-class ICT systems, particularly Learning Management Systems (LMS), most commonly the Blackboard learning system. There is substantial research on the educationist's perspective of using ICT in education in the form of LMS. However, this paper bases its theoretical reflection in the context of the UAE from the perspective of knowledge management in technology-adopting educational institutions.

Keywords: Web-Based Technology, Knowledge-Based Economy, Blackboard, Middle East, United Arab Emirates, UAE

Introduction

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT (KM) and Knowledge Economy (KE) are terms driving institutions towards fostering continuous-learning workforce, with Information Communication Technology (ICT) being perceived as a strong facilitator for this goal. The influences of this drive have brought with it subsequent significant propagative changes in the way that institutions manage their resources. Instilling the readiness for a higher performance workforce becomes a responsibility of the function of education, which is, among other reasons, driving educational institutions to adopt ICT in the form of educational technology. This paper is a theoretical reflection of contextual research studies on the visibility of ICT in higher education (HE) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and applicability of existing training models to facilitate adoption of such technologies. There is evidence of a strong link between knowledge reproduction and the intrinsic use of ICT within a rapidly changing environment.

The study is set in the context of the UAE higher education environment, with evidence of advent of KE based practices and initiatives propelling the inculcation of educational technology. Led by the need of the environment, accreditation requirements include the use of Learning Management Systems (LMS). In the UAE, LMS, more commonly the Blackboard learning system has visibly spread across the emirates' higher educational bodies. Over 50 percent of the Universities operating in the UAE are Blackboard enabled.

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COMMON GROUND

With the increasing adoption of educational technology intended to support academic work in higher educational institutions in the UAE, there is an increasing demand on academic users to quickly learn and make effective use of the technology at their disposal (Randeree 2006). It is not expected for the LMS to intelligently evolve and adapt to the changing human learning needs, however, it can be desired to customize the system to adjust itself to procedures and requirements of the learning environment (Narwani and Arif 2007).

There is limited research published on approaches for Blackboard User-Training. The research which does exist, discusses the challenges and success factors for conducting Blackboard User-training and generally focuses on higher educational institutions outside the Middle East region. In this context, from the conceptual and theoretical research, it is evident, that there is a strong need for building knowledge related to LMS, encompassing implementation and training, for the UAE-based higher educational context.

The approaches to generic training are multiple; however, there are characteristic elements, which go into the planning of training oriented towards Blackboard users. The manner in which the training is evaluated has a close relationship with the effectiveness of the training itself. There is a need for a working framework to guide the process of devising such Blackboard user trainings and its absence in the current UAE-based locale is visible (Clark 2006, Leusure and Brookes 2006, Narwani and Arif 2007).

There is substantial research on the educationist's perspective of using ICT in the form learning management systems within educational settings, however this paper bases its theoretical reflection in the context of from the perspective of knowledge management in technology-adopting educational institutions concerned about addressing the challenges parcelled with the adoption of such technologies.

The Promotion of ICT in the UAE

David and Foray (2002) conclude that knowledge-based communities are agents of economic change. The characteristic function of a knowledge-based community is knowledge-reproduction. Their study further states that knowledge reproduction will occur through training, practice and simulation techniques. Knowledge-based activities emerge when people, supported by ICT, interact in concerted efforts to co-produce (i.e. create and exchange) new knowledge. To this effect information technology tools are increasingly parcelled with learning and training environments. From simple document processing to web-based training to learning management and evaluation systems, the role of ICT has evolved to support the knowledge reproduction needs of communities. According to the ICT Use Index 2006, the UAE ranks the highest among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) is pursuant for integrating Human Resource Development (HRD) and training objectives as a tool for promoting the knowledge-based economy. The impact of ILO's intentions propagates to the Middle East region. In the UAE, specifically in the city of Dubai, the move towards organizational training and development has been visibly felt since the 1990s, and this has gained pace with the turn of the century. Research has been conducted imperative to identifying human capital enrichment factors, which influence the development of knowledge economies. Research investigating relationships between Human Resource Management (HRM) and Knowledge Management (KM) also provide a useful reference point.

There is an evident endeavour in Dubai towards building a knowledge economy. The role of the political leadership has been very strong in promoting the economic and social progress of the UAE as a whole. In their Global Information Technology Report 2002-2003, researchers for the World Economic Forum (WEF), for instance, gave the UAE a full score on the role of its leaders in creating an environment that is conducive to the development of ICT. The country's goal to establish a framework for an economy encompassing a wide range of knowledge-based industries has gathered momentum due to the UAE's active participation, and adherence to, international treaties that govern the user and protection of intellectual property – the knowledge economy's primary currency (Kamali 2003). The ability to invent and innovate, that is to create new knowledge and new ideas that are then embodied in products, processes and organizations, has always served to fuel development. ICT enables this form of knowledge creation in an effective manner. The emirate of Dubai has been at the helm of developments relating to economic diversification within the UAE. The Madar research group studies echo the massive efforts devoted by Dubai to the creation of a world class ICT sector and the promotion of stronger ICT use across all aspects including government, industries and education within the emirate. In the last decade, the UAE, especially driven by initiatives in Dubai, have witnessed a boom in the ICT sector and supporting services. The visionary establishment of Dubai Internet City, Dubai Media City, Knowledge Village and the upcoming Silicon Oasis zones are all laurels to the growth of ICT in Dubai and the UAE overall. The establishment of University City in Sharjah and Dubai Academic City are significant milestones in the development of a KE. The impact of the intra-Dubai initiatives has seen its way to the industrial environments of the other emirates and to the other GCC nations as well.

A study by Dr Omar Bin Sulaiman (2003), CEO of Dubai Internet City of the Dubai Vision 2010, shows that among the growth of value added industries between 1985 and 1999, the annual average growth of Knowledge Based Industries was the highest. The highlighted elements of a Knowledge Economy prescribed in his study include, Core Technological competencies and Educated Workforce, as well as intellectual property and talent management within the environment. Dubai Vision 2010 articulates having world class companies with core knowledge based competencies which can compete effectively globally (Sulaiman 2003). According to the Dubai Vision 2010 master plan envisaged in the year 2000 by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, are identified three major sectors, which are believed will play a pivotal role in the prosperity of the local economy in the future. These are tourism, IT and media - in addition to traditional industries such as trade and services, which underpinned the emirate's prosperity over the past few decades. As part of the 3-Horizon Growth Strategy of the Dubai Vision 2010, the goal to apply core competencies to new areas is meant to be achieved through the Technology enabled services including Financial, Media, Information technology (IT) and Telecommunications.

The development of E-Governance, E-Banking and E-Business are all visible outcomes, in addition to the creation of Tejari.com, a Middle East business-to-business online procurement company. The vision upon which E-Government was launched involved interlinking economy with government management. Such a link is based on the fact that modern infrastructure required for E-Government is the same on which E-Commerce is based and through which it will flourish.

Providers of E-Learning and integrators of E-Learning, E-Business and E-Government solutions are converging in Dubai. The opportunities that GITEX, the annual Gulf Information

Technology Exhibition hosted by Dubai, provides are ample and deeply tapped into by E-Learning solution providers. Towards Knowledge reproduction, retention and engineering, ICT is being capitalized on as the backbone to earn effectiveness, improve efficiency, provide consistency, measure quality and reduce expense.

The technological forces being created within the Emirates, has a special influence on the local environments. The spread of information technology and communications technology in the mainstream of business process is strongly linking business excellence to knowledge engineering. With the adoption of new technologies and adaptation of industrial and academic activities to engage in the use of ICT, there is an evident need for support services, including training and a visible rise in the available modes of training at individual, organization and industry levels. The ICT sector of the UAE has evolved, and in the course of this evolution, drawn with it multiple facets of ICT application and training. With the goal towards building a knowledge-based economy supported by ICT, higher educational institutions are being driven to adopt instructional technology and adapt the teaching pedagogy to this effect by socio-economic and technological forces.

David and Foray (2002) highlight the importance of IT as a facilitator of the change in learning, teaching and as a whole knowledge creation. Information technologies can affect knowledge creation in a number of different ways. The mere fact that one has the capacity to create such a wealth of information is truly revolutionary. They draw on the developments as an abstraction and fundamentally the codification of tacit knowledge. Codification eliminates the factors of loss of knowledge owing to memory limitations, however, the codification of tacit knowledge is claimed to *partially* replace the person who holds and teaches knowledge. Codification helps form a sound basis for the creation of new 'knowledge objects'.

Donald Clark (2006) draws on Blended Learning as a positive and learner-centric approach that is more sensitive to the real needs of both learner and the context in which learning has to take place. Clark examines the established beliefs and practices models and uncovers some key components to the design of blended learning programmes. The components include, but are not limited to Media and Content, Online Collaborative Learning, Online Knowledge Management, Coaching and E-coaching.

A study by Harrison (2006) extends into practice and the fundamentals laid by Clark on Blended Learning. His examination derives a Blend Matrix from the analysis of Content Analysis, Target Audience analysis and Organizational requirements and constraints.

Several academic and practitioners have expressed research into the converging area of knowledge management and project management in management-oriented literature. Chase 1997 puts forward "in its simplest form, knowledge management is about encouraging people to share knowledge and ideas to create value-adding products and services".

According to Soderlund and Bredin (2006), the application project-based structures in organizations in intensifying. Project work holds particular importance for both mature and growth industries in which firms are adhocratic, knowledge-intensive and project based.

Knowledge management is seen as a metaphorical perspective on management where the managerial focus depends on the epistemological standpoint taken. An identification of three epistemological perspectives accommodates the main body of literature on knowledge management: an artefact oriented epistemology that focuses on explicit knowledge, a process oriented epistemology focusing on both tacit and explicit knowledge and the interaction of these types of knowledge and an antipoetic epistemology where knowledge basically always has a tacit dimension (Skowang et. al 2003).

Leseure and Brookes (2004) ran a study to identify knowledge management benchmarks for project management. It is interesting to note from their findings a key distinction made between generic project knowledge (kernel knowledge) and specific project knowledge (ephemeral knowledge).

In addition to the need for instilling high-performance workforce as a function of education, economic, social and technological forces are pressing demands on UAE-based educational institutions and calling for sophisticated yet flexible electronic learning management systems to cater to the ever-changing learning needs. With the ever-growing emphasis on knowledge, intelligence and management of intellect, there is growing pressure on the UAE-based educational system to provide sustainability and preparedness in the generation for the future evolution of competent development. An example is the ongoing achievement of the Dubai Vision 2010 and the endeavoured Dubai Strategic Plan 2007 to 2015, for the emirate of Dubai puts increasing demands on the supporting system.

The UAE saw the establishment of the International Computer Driving License (ICDL) in 2003. According to Dr. Khalifa Mohammed Ahmed, Chairman, Dubai Ruler's Court (AME Info 2003), 'In a drive to make Dubai a Knowledge-based economy and the region's digital hub, Dubai Government is sparing no effort to ensure that government and citizens are conversant with deploying eServices in all spheres of life. The two new programs 'eCitizen' and 'eEmployee' are in line with the directives to Government Departments to enhance public services through the delivery of eServices of which ICDL certification is a part'.

Instilling the readiness for higher performance workforce has become a responsibility of the function of education, which is driving educational institutions to adopt ICT in many forms of educational technology. ICT supports each component of the Knowledge Economy concept. The information age phased into what we have today as a Knowledge led age. The Use of IT helps reduce the costs of Knowledge reproduction. Armed with continuously improved educational technology, teaching ought to change from the traditional teacher-centred, lecture-based instruction to a student-centred, computer-based instruction and to achieve this end, successful technology-supported teacher education programs should be designed and implemented (recommended by UNESCO as cited by Kadijevich 2002).

The recognition and growing awareness of educational technology usage has been supported by formal standards development, like Educational Technology (ET) standards developed by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE).

ICT Driven Change Management and Training

"Change is good for us, …. But there's a tremendous amount of energy – physical, mental and emotional – that goes on when we adapt. We're firing on all cylinders, which is a peak. Ideally, at the end of every peak we will have a plateau, a period of rest during which we can review what we've done, get accustomed to it and replenish our energies. What tends to happen in the information professions is that the plateaux have become shorter and shorter to the point where there aren't any. Its just peak followed by peak. In fact in many cases we don't even reach the end of one peak before we start another one" – Mendelsohn (1994)

According to Farrow (1997) change brings with it packaged fears, and in her study set in the information and library sector, it soon became apparent that the best way to manage these

fears is through communication and training. Research is ample across ICT and non-ICT industries on the constructive role of training as a change management tool. The process of learning and knowledge sharing in managing change often takes shape in forms of training and development. Research by Spacey et. al. (2003) in the space of UK based Libraries affected by developments affecting the growth of ICT in public libraries , highlight that resistance can arise because of the way new technology was introduced and that training is an appropriate means of enabling staff to cope with technological change. The study by Kempton (1996) reports the importance of the training strategy, which was required to facilitate the important organizational change and establish it as a new culture at Kingston Hospital. The evidence provided by study by Kempton (1996) strongly suggests that training made an important contribution to facilitating major organizational change. The concept of training for organizational success can be extended to cater to the needs of academic institutions faced by the challenges of ICT triggered changes.

The management of change needs to be approached in a logical and structured manner (Farrow 1997). An in-depth study on the role of training needs analysis in organizational change by Reed and Vakola (2006) draws light on the challenges faced by organizations in transition. Fears among the ICT users, resistance to adoption, and misunderstanding of technology support are some of the visible obstacles that change management is expected to handle. Schein (1999) states that his thinking on change has evolved from a model of planned changes to a concept of managed learning. For ICT systems to be successful, it is suggested staff need positive attitudes to ICT (Evald 1996). Applying this understanding to an individual's acceptance of information systems, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis 1989) suggested attitude influences behavioural intention to use, and subsequent actual use. TAM also includes the constructs of perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. Studies utilizing the TAM to consider the effect of variables such as training on the use of computers and information systems have found that training does exert an influence.

Research indicates that training has a positive role to play in acclimatizing people to changes taking place around them. It can assist in the process of demystifying technology, although it is important to note that technophobes – those with an extreme fear or anxiety of computers – may need specialized training prior to general ICT training (Randeree 2008). The relationship between training and attitudes is less controversial and training is seen as an appropriate technique to change attitudes towards ICT (Spacey et. al. 2003).

UAE University was the earliest adopter of the Blackboard LMS in early 2002, which now caters to more than 18,000 students. The next to follow was Zayed University (ZU), the American University of Sharjah (AUS) and the University of Sharjah (UOS). More recently several other universities, colleges, institutions have acquired the Blackboard LMS. Accreditation requirements, laid out by the Ministry of Higher Education, deeming the necessity of a learning management system for higher education delivery, have been driving many of the UAE-based higher education bodies to accrue a technology-aided learning environment in the last decade or so. Moreover the influx of ICT and KM competition in the UAE has added to this end. UOS has the first successful Arabized implementation of the Blackboard LMS. These are considered among the more successful implementations of Blackboard LMS in the UAE-based higher education space, commended by the measurable benefits to academic and institutional performance. Institutions invest large amounts towards the learning management systems. Assuring return on investment is however a challenge. Level of adoption of the LMS, determined by the extent of its utilization and the adaptation

of the users' teaching and learning methods to incorporate its functions, is the target for those interested in the value for money of the LMS.

One of the tools for addressing Institutional Effectiveness expectations from the LMS implementation investments, is Blackboard end-user training. As is true for any Information and communication technology implementation, its success is determined by the extent of utilization and degree of effectiveness in the function it was developed to serve. End-user Training is a facilitator of improving the level of utilization of the LMS and for enabling end-users to gain more by the effective use of the system. The end-users of the LMS are part of the academia and administrative functions of the Educational Institution. Institutions are faced with the challenge of defining their dynamic training needs and developing training strategy that are aligned to the business objectives, environment and organizational culture.

There exists a gap with respect to IT skills and LMS expertise which a Blackboard user-training would intend to bridge. The absence of proficient IT skills among academic users poses a significant challenge for the Blackboard-user training. Cooper (2006) in his paper examines the evidence for the digital divide based on gender. An overview of research published in the last 20 years draws to the conclusion that females are at a disadvantage relative to men when learning about computers or learning other material with the aid of computer-assisted software. The evidence shows that the digital divide affects people of all ages and across international boundaries.

The spurred increase of the presence on E-learning tools in the teaching-learning cycle influences and challenges the prevalent teaching and learning practices to adopt new means of achieving already set objectives. Consequently teaching pedagogies are being recalled to adapt towards achieving of learning objectives using LMS and related educational technology. It is strongly evident that the drive towards Knowledge engineering, management and reproduction and the intrinsic use of ICT, is inculcating educational technology in the UAE-based educational system. One of its variant of the subsequent developments is the adoption of Blackboard LMS by Higher educational institutions which now have a significant need for making effective use of educational technology and provisioning return on investment, producing an ever-increasing demand for effective Blackboard User-training. As it is true for any other IT system, it is true for the Blackboard LMS also, that effective user-training is a key to the successful implementation of the system. The approaches to training users are multiple, yet there are key common elements which are characteristic of Blackboard end-user oriented training plan, which lacks description in published research.

Although published research provides a vast body of knowledge for Training IT-end user, planning, processes, evaluation and project management, because of the special nature of the UAE based Higher educational Blackboard training needs, no particular model alone can satisfy the training planners concerns. There is an evident vacuum of working principles and best-practice guidelines for planning Blackboard user-training. There is very limited research published on approaches for Blackboard User-Training especially for the Middle East region. Existing research discusses the challenges and success factors for conducting Blackboard User-trainings and generally focuses on higher educational institutions outside the Middle East region.

Research does show that Blackboard User Training in general is a need of UAE-based teaching bodies; however the methodology to conduct such training programs cannot be derived based on any single available training model. The training needs associated with the Blackboard end-user in UAE and other GCC region based university and Higher educational

institutions as special to their placing, and training programs require to be tailored to address the characteristic Blackboard user learning needs and institutional learning objectives.

Conclusion

The research provides evidence of a strong drive towards knowledge reproduction and the intrinsic use of ICT, as educational technology in the UAE higher educational system and the need for training as a tool for ICT triggered change management. Higher educational institutions, specifically universities, are being driven by environmental and internal factors towards the adoption of learning management systems (LMS), most commonly in the form of Blackboard learning system products. The need for smooth change management in terms of making effective use of educational technology, and provisioning return on investment produces a demand for effective Blackboard User-training in the context. This need is visible in the UAE-based higher education space, in part because of the spurred momentum of LMS adoption and partly because of the absence of a body of knowledge catering to the contextual needs. Educators require methods to acquire technical-skills in order to blend it with their knowledge expertise in order to leverage the benefits of ICT enabled learning systems to impart education effectively. There is substantial research on IT user-training conduct (Davis 1989, Harrison 2006, Kempton 1996, Reed 2006) however such training models cannot be directly applied towards training faculty members and academic staff in higher education institutions on using Blackboard and other learning systems, because of their characteristic qualities. Yet there are key elements, which go into the planning of generic user-training, common to training oriented towards Blackboard users (Narwani and Arif 2007). The manner in which the training is evaluated has a close relationship with the effectiveness of the training itself.

The congregation of E-Learning experts towards addressing the user training needs is visible from the various initiatives made by both educational technology providers and by training and development institutions. Blackboard, along with its regional partners, organized the Blackboard E-Learning day in November of 2006, aimed at developing a body of knowledge for the Middle East region's Blackboard user community. Following this, Blackboard Inc. had the first Middle East summit, BBSummit Middle East 2007 (Blackboard Inc. 2008). Blackboard chose Dubai as the location of this second BBSummit as a consequence of the broad and deep commitment of the UAE to develop an education hub. The fact that UAE-based Blackboard clientele are catered to by a single distributor makes it easier to comprehend the overall situation. Situational analysis of Higher educational institutions spells out clearly the need for an insight to the Blackboard Users' Training needs.

This paper highlights the importance of training as a goal facilitator from the perspective of institutions thriving in aspiring knowledge economies such as the UAE, interested in effective adoption of technology-enabled solutions.

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About the Authors

Dr. Kasim Randeree

Dr. Kasim Randeree is an Oxford University Research Fellow in Saïd Business School, at the BT Centre for Major Programme Management, University of Oxford in England. His research interests are in leadership, organisation studies, project and programme management, corporate reputation, multiculturalism and diversity in the Arabian Gulf region and Islamic perspectives on leadership and management. Academic career includes Visiting Lecturer in

Project Management at The University of Manchester (UK); Lecturer in Project Management at The British University in Dubai (UAE), United Arab Emirates University (UAE) and University of Lincoln (UK); Adjunct Professor at the American University in Dubai (UAE) and Assistant Lecturer at the University of Hull (UK). He has published over 100 articles in international journals and conferences and has editorial responsibilities with a number of international publications. Dr Randeree is a Member of the Association of Project Managers and the Institute for Leadership and Management.

Anjli Narwani
Anjli Narwani as Instructional Technologies Administrator is driving the eLearning wing of the Academic Service Unit at the University of Sharjah. Seasoned by experience in ICT enabled learning solutions and service implementations across Banking, Education, Government she has proven Training and Project management capacities in addition to academic research. Her interests lie in Knowledge Management-its constituents, and Project management. She has presented at International Conferences in Instructional Technologies and eLearning.