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The Quality Of Saudi Accreditation Standards For Distance Learning: Benchmarking And Expert Validation

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THE QUALITY OF SAUDI ACCREDITATION STANDARDS FOR DISTANCE LEARNING: BENCHMARKING AND EXPERT VALIDATION

by

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents, wife and children. I would like to say to my mother and my father that your words of encouragement and prayers inspired me to complete my PhD degree. To my wife, my son, and my daughter, I say without you being with me as supportive family and companions when I started my postgraduate studies journey in England, I would not be able to reach my final destination by receiving my PhD from the US.

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

The availability of distance learning programs is increasing dramatically all over the world. Many universities converted some of their traditional classes into online courses. New virtual, electronic, or open universities have been established all over the globe. According to Mariasingam and Hanna (2006) the number of online learning programs increased dramatically around the globe from the year 2000 to 2005, which call for comprehensive and solid standards or a framework to benchmark and ensure the quality of this remarkably growing instructional approach. This statement indicates the importance of benchmarking to improve the quality of learning based on common standards and a solid framework. Ensuring the quality of online learning proved to be a significant challenge and should be a focus on distance education today (AACSB-International, 2007; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). The emergence of new technology and the affordance of online learning management systems contributed to a dramatic shift to distance learning (Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP), 1999a; Oblinger, Barone, & Hawkins, 2001; Sattem, Reynolds, Berhardt & Burdeshaw, 2000; Beqiri, Chase, & Bishka, 2010; Wang, 2007). Nearly 90% of the US universities that have more than ten thousand students offer distance learning (Clark and Mayer, 2008). In Asia and Pacific region, the number of distance learners is estimated to be 500 million (Jung, 2008). This shift promoted a different mode of learning, which is focused on the students' role in the learning process. Unlike traditional classes, distance learning is student-centered. However, the quality of the distance learning programs offered in traditional and virtual universities is still a question. According to the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP), distance learning courses can be delivered either in a high or poor quality (IHEP, 1999b). Thus, there is a greater need for designing and evaluating distance learning programs based on robust standards or guidelines.

Studies have indicated that employers doubt the quality of online learning programs (Chua & Lam, 2007). Al-Sharidah (2011) found out that employers in Saudi Arabia (KSA) in particular are not willing to employ applicants with online degrees or would prefer conventional learning over the distance learner graduates. Thus, this matter becomes more problematic in many Arabic countries where online learning is not accredited and its degrees are met with suspicion by Ministries of Higher Education. For example, in Saudi Arabia, online learning is not recognized from any public or private university outside the country regardless of the prominence or name recognition of the institution. This indicates a lack of awareness of the accreditation standards for distance learning, which should ensure a quality education.

In 2011 a set of quality standards for distance learning was published in Saudi Arabia to be adopted by all online programs offered in the country. However, universities in Saudi Arabia who were offering online programs for a few years did not apply these standards. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the quality of distance learning accreditation standards in Saudi Arabia. It attempts to find out about the quality of these standards in comparison to literature review and to some countries in the Arabic league, Asia and in the West. It also seeks expert's validation for these standards.

Saudi Arabia and Distance Learning

Saudi Arabia universities have established and offered distance learning programs in their new form (online via Internet) over the last few years. The number of distance learners enrolled in distance learning programs at a Saudi Universities has increased dramatically. For example, King Faisal University (KFU) started offering their online learning programs in 2008 (KFU, 2012) and now have 82,000 (eighty-two thousand) distance learners from different locations in the kingdom and also from Gulf countries. This increase led to launching new online programs at

several universities. Now there are 15 out of 25 public Saudi universities offering distance learning programs (Alkhalifa, 2013). However, all of these universities do not commit to the Ministry of Higher Education's accreditation standards for distance learning. According to the Ministry of Education there are now 25 public universities, 28 private universities and colleges, and 8 technical and industrial colleges in Saudi Arabia (KSA-MOE, 2015). Arab Open University has a branch in Saudi Arabia, which provides its open education mainly via blended learning (ARABOU, 2015) and it is listed among the 28 authorized private institutions. The Saudi Electronic University (SEU) is a public university that has been established by a royal decree in 2011 to offer online learning with 25% face-face classes (SEU, 2012). This means that while these two electronic and open universities cannot deliver purely distance learning programs, 15 traditional public universities offer independent distance learning in addition to their separate traditional face-to-face programs. Alkhalifa (2013) argued that this rapid increase affects the quality of the programs particularly in a country that has a very short history of online learning. In Saudi Arabia, distance learning degrees are accredited if they are only from Saudi Universities. Thus, there are no international competitors in the Saudi market but the local competition is strong.

There are common misconceptions about distance learning in Saudi Arabia not only among the public but also among educators and employers. In a recent study that looked into Saudi employers' perspectives about holders of online degrees, it found that most of the employers were unwilling to hire any potential candidate with such degrees (Al-Sharidah, 2011).

In order to empower people, the government in Saudi Arabia launched a National Plan for Information Technology, which led to the establishment of the National Center for E-Learning and Distance Learning (NCEL) in 2007 to promote online learning at Saudi Universities (Mirza,

2007). NCEL created its own learning management system (LMS) similar to Blackboard and Moodle, which is called *Jasoor* (or *bridges* in English). A deanship for e-learning and distance learning has been established in almost all Saudi Universities to promote and manage this initiative. However, only eight universities signed a contract with NCEL to support their online programs (Alkhalifa, 2013).

In Saudi Arabia, the Ministry of Higher Education is the license provider for higher education institutions. Universities established in Saudi Arabia have to meet the Ministry criteria to be licensed and grant accredited degrees. However, the National Commission for Academic Accreditation & Assessment is responsible for the accreditation process for higher education programs in Saudi Arabia. They have their own standards that qualify programs for accreditation. The case of distance learning programs is exceptional because they were only offered in recent years and they have different approaches that require special expertise to understand its nature and set its criteria. Therefore, creating a set of standards for distance learning programs was left to the National Center for ELearning and Distance Learning (NCEL). These standards were set by NCEL and approved by the Ministry of Higher Education in 2011 (NCEL, 2011).

Research Problem Statement

In a study investigating the quality of distance learning in the Arabic Region, Mohamed (2005) found a shortcoming in the accreditation policies and quality assurance procedures and recommended developing a framework to ensure quality and promoting the accreditation process of this mode in the region. Alsunbul (2002) pointed out that the key issue affecting distance learning quality at universities in the Arabic Region is that national standards to ensure the quality of online courses have not been applied. According to Mohamed (2005) the practices of distance learning programs are skeptical to the majority of Arab societies. A number of countries

in the Arabic region neither recognize distance learning degrees nor grant a license for their practices in their lands (Alsunbul, 2002). Thus, there is suspicion among employers, education decision-makers and the public about the quality of distance learning in some countries. Saudi Arabian students who complete online learning programs face difficulty in finding jobs and cannot have their degrees approved by the Ministry of Higher Education. According to The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) the qualifications for a number of graduates were unrecognized because of the attitude towards online learning in the market place and the non-accreditation of such degrees by the governmental authorities in a number of Arabic countries (UNESCO, 2002). Universities in Saudi Arabia recently started to offer distance learning programs and degrees to meet the educational needs of employed people and those who live in rural areas in order to keep up with developed countries. Alebaikan and Troudi (2010) pointed out that several students in Saudi Arabia have to travel to study at a university because most of the universities are located in the major cities. According to the Central Department of Statistics and Information (2014) the population of Saudi Arabia was 29,994,272 in 2010 with a growth rate 2.7% in 2013. AlKhazim (2003) and Alshehri (2005) mentioned that the capacity of Saudi Universities is very limited and cannot include all learners as full-time students. Mirza & Al-Abdulkareem (2011) stated that among the objectives of a Saudi national project (the Future Plan for University Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) is that online learning has to be implemented within this decade in all universities and colleges. Therefore, online learning programs provide opportunities to enroll more students in Saudi universities (Mirza & Al-Abdulkareem, 2011).

The National Center of E-learning and Distance Learning (NCEL), which was established recently in Saudi Arabia, developed standards for distance learning accreditation in 2011.

However, Saudi universities have not adopted these standards. Thus, the quality of the accreditation process and standards in Saudi Arabia has not been tested yet particularly in comparison to top countries in distance learning as well as peer countries. Also, it is not obvious yet whether accreditation standards created by the NCEL are important, applicable, and relevant to online learning environments. Therefore, it is not clear whether these standards can ensure quality distance learning or not partially because they have not been applied yet. The Saudi standards also have not been studied or validated before. It is essential to look at the evidence supporting the quality of the proposed standards for distance learning programs in Saudi Arabia before fully adopting them. NCEL stated in its standards document that it should be updated every three years to keep up with the evolution of technology and emerging best practices in distance learning (NCEL, 2011). These changes were planned to be based on the experiences of applying these standards at the Universities, but did not happen. Thus, the standards have not been updated since they were published in 2011.

Therefore, as a starting point, this research seeks to generate preliminary evidence about the soundness of the Saudi accreditation standards and their quality indicators. First, a comparative analysis will be conducted between the Saudi standards for distance learning, and what the research literature recommends. Second, these standards will be compared to the accreditation standards of developed countries with an established history of distance learning and will be also compared with peer countries in Asia and Arabic region. Third, the quality indicators of the standards will be validated from experts in distance learners. Experts will rate each indicator in terms of its relevance to the standard it is grouped in. Then, they will rate indicators in terms of their importance to quality online learning.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the official accreditation standards for distance learning in Saudi Arabia. The soundness of these standards will be evaluated against the research literature; best practices of other countries with established history of distance learning in the West, Asia, and Arabic region, and by expert validation. It will investigate how the literature review of quality and accreditation of distance learning may support the Saudi accreditation standards. This will be achieved by identifying frequently cited quality standards, models and frameworks for online learning and by discussing how they may or may not support the Saudi standards. The study will also compare the quality of Saudi standards represented in their key dimensions with accreditation practices in other countries. It will search whether distance learning is accredited or not in each chosen country, if yes how, what are their accreditation standards, and who is the accrediting body in each country. The study investigates the official standards and processes approved by ministries of higher education or accreditation agencies in each country. It also seeks to reveal how each country accreditation standards and processes are different from the top countries in distance education. It will consider U.S., U.K., and Australia as role models. Then these data will be compared with the Saudi accreditation standards and process. Next, experts will rate indicators in terms of their relevance to the standards and sub-dimensions they were grouped in. They will also rate each indicator in terms of its perceived importance to quality distance learning. Experts will provide justification when low rating is given to an indicator. Experts will be also asked to add any quality standard that they think is important but missing form the Saudi framework.

Research Questions

The following questions guide the focus of this research study:

1. How does the research literature support the Saudi accreditation standards?

2. What are the key similarities and differences in accreditation standards and processes for distance learning between Saudi Arabia and other countries?

    A. Peers in Asia and the Arabic region (i.e. South Korea, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Jordan, and United Arab Emirates)?

    B. Aspirational countries (US, UK, and Australia)?

3. How relevant are the Saudi distance learning accreditation indicators to the standards, which they are grouped in from the perspective of experts in online learning?

4. How important are the Saudi accreditation standards for ensuring quality distance learning from the perspective of experts in online learning?

Key Terms and Definitions

Distance Learning. Online learning, distance learning, and web learning are frequently used interchangeably in the literature review and this will be the case in this research. E-learning also is being used in some of the literature as a synonym to distance learning. This is simply because distance learning nowadays is online and electronic. This means that an evaluation of distance learning standards includes e-learning criteria. However, e-learning is also being used as supportive tool for in campus education.

E-learning. E-Learning refers to ''a learner-focused approach to the use of new multimedia technologies and the Internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services, as well as remote exchanges and collaboration*''* (European Commission, 2008, p. 5).

Accreditation standards. Accreditation can be defined as "a process for external peer review of the quality of higher education institutions and programs" (Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), 2002, p. 1). Accreditation is to give an official approval by more than one way; by confirming with standards or recognizing an educational institution as maintaining quality standards (Merriam-Webster online dictionary, 2014). Standards, indicators, criteria, benchmarks and guidelines are used interchangeably in the literature review of distance learning accreditation and this will be the case in this research. The accreditation standards in distance learning include list of best practices under number of dimensions, which aim to ensure quality of online learning programs.

Quality Assurance. According to Merriam-Webster online dictionary (2014) quality assurance is defined as "a program for the systematic monitoring and evaluation of the various aspects of a project, service, or facility to ensure that standards of quality are being met".

Benchmarking. Benchmarking as a noun is defined as "a standard or point of reference against which things may be compared or assessed" (Oxford Online Dictionary, 2014). This explains why it is used interchangeably with standard or indicator. As a verb it is defined as "to study (as a competitor's product or business practices) in order to improve the performance of one's own company" (Merriam-Webster online dictionary, 2014). This definition clarifies the comparative analysis approach, which will be applied in this study. The Oxford definition for the verb stresses the evaluation aspect by stating that benchmarking is to "evaluate or check (something) by comparison with a standard" (Oxford Online Dictionary, 2014). Peischl (1995) defined benchmarking as "a process of measurement using some external standard of quality to measure internal and external tasks, processes, and outputs. Benchmarking can be viewed as a journey of continuous improvement, a systematic search for new ideas, new methods, and new measurement

aimed at improving the quality of product (output) of the organization" (p. 100). This research also aims to improve the quality standards and processes of distance learning in Saudi Arabia by searching for new ideas, methods, and measurement in eight other countries.

Conceptual Framework

This section has two perspectives: a conceptual framework and a theoretical framework. The concepts of accreditation and quality assurance dominate this study. It is focused on the accreditation standards that countries set to ensure the quality of distance learning programs. These standards are implemented to either obtain official recognition from educational authorities in a country or gain a desirable accreditation. It mainly uses the Saudi accreditation standards for distance learning as a framework for this study. It compares this quality framework with the frameworks of eight other countries through benchmarking. It also uses this framework to design the survey for experts to validate the quality of these standards. The concept map below (See figure 1) illustrates the quality framework that governs this study. Masoumi and Lindström (2012) have developed a similar e-quality framework for distance learning based on a comprehensive study of the relevant quality benchmarks, models, or guidelines and based on a validation from teachers and researchers in the authors' university. The eight other countries and accreditation agencies investigated in this study have their own quality frameworks for distance learning, which are illustrated in the chapter five of this study. There are also common quality models in the literature such as IHEP (2000), CHEA (2002), The Online Learning Consortium, (2014), and Quality Matters (2014) that are all discussed in the Literature Review of this study. These models not only have been used for designing, evaluating, and benchmarking online learning programs but they are also used as conceptual frameworks for research studies. For example, CHEA model has been applied as a conceptual framework in study examining the

quality of distance learning at Kenyan Universities (Mayeku and Florence, 2011). The IHEP model also was used to measure the quality of distance learning programs in Hong Kong from the perspective of students (Yeung, 2003). The Saudi model was compared with both countries and literature review models.

Figure 1. Concept map created for the Saudi quality framework for online learning structured this study
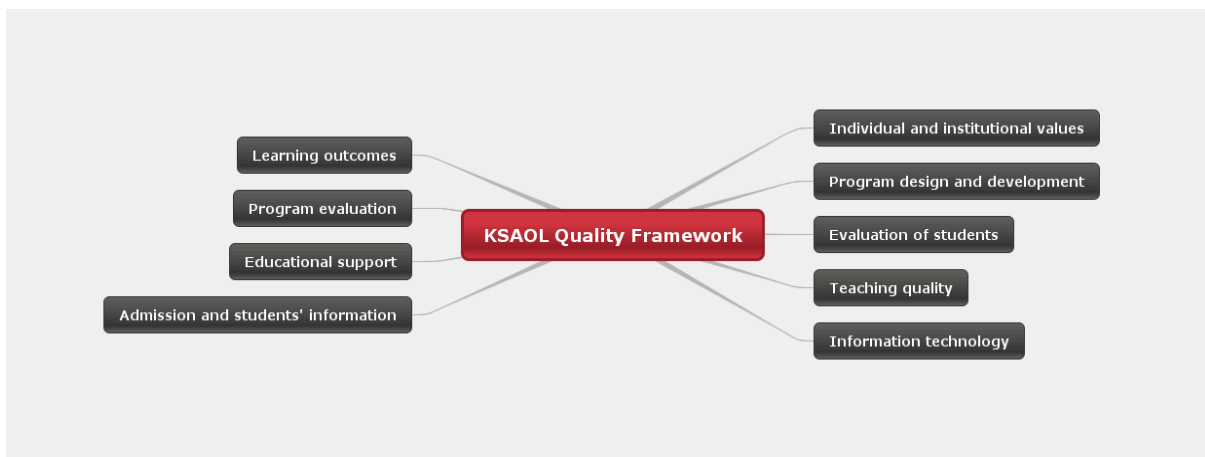
The evolution of technology and its applications in distance learning shifted the paradigm of learning to be learner-centered. This made the constructivist approach particularly sociocultural (social constructivism) as a dominant learning theory in the current mode of distance learning. Bruckman (1997), Dede (1995), and Winn (1997) agreed that most research on the use of new technologies is situated within constructivist approaches to learning. According to Thurmond (2002) constructivism is the theory often cited as framework for studies that evaluate online learning. Gulati (2008) also stated "the emerging online learning literature frequently refers to learning as socially constructivist experience" (p.184). According Driver and Bell, (1986) learning from the constructivist point of view has two dimensions: The personal dimension where learning is an active probing of cognitive models (images) the human holds on

to as its ability to interpret the information that arrives at his/her cognition through his/her interaction with the surrounding environment. The second is socio-cultural dimension where although knowledge is personally constructed, it is socially mediated as a result of the experiences and interaction with others in that social context (So, 2002). Social constructivism is very compatible framework with this study because it examines the quality of online learning standards in an environment where students play the major role in the learning process. In addition, the indicators, which experts will offer ratings of quality, are focused on instructional and pedagogical strategies in online learning environment.

Significance of the Study

Distance learning in The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) universities is still in its very early stages and decision-makers must have a knowledge base from which to improve its quality. It is unknown whether or not distance learning in Saudi Arabia meets the quality standards required by learners and national and international accreditation agencies. Most of the universities in the country were offering distance learning without using the Internet for learning or communication with teachers or other students. Students just read printed materials at home with no sign of using technology to aid learning (Mohamed, 2005). After the increased demands for using the Internet for online learning, universities made a shift and offered distance learning via LMS environments. Abouchedid & Eid (2004), Sultan, Bunt-Kokhuis, Davidson, Sentini, & Weir (2012); Alsunbul (2002), and Guessoum (2009) stated that skepticism about the quality of distance learning and lack of accreditation standards are major obstacles facing the development of distance learning in the Arabic region. Ibrahim, Rwegasira, & Taher (2007), in their study to students at Arab Open University in Saudi Arabia, found out that lack of quality in distance education is an essential factor for students' intention to withdraw from an online program. The

Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia represented in the National Center of E-learning and Distance Learning (NCEL) developed a set of accreditation standards for this new instructional approach. However, it is not obvious yet whether the accreditation process and standards created by the NCEL are important and applicable or not for online learning at Saudi Universities. According to Mariasingam and Hanna (2006) accreditation standards have to be solid and comprehensive in order to ensure their quality. The comparison of theses standards to promote quality or accreditation models and frameworks in the literature review and to their counterparts in other countries, in addition to the experts' perspectives toward the standards quality will be insightful indications of their excellence.

The Saudi online education standards include new practices that have never been applied at Saudi Universities. Thus, students enrolled in online programs at Saudi Universities have not been exposed to accredited practices. This means that their evaluation to the standards will lack the experience factor, which can lead to negative results. Al-Harthi (2006) found out that students from Arab Gulf countries (including Saudi Arabia) do not have the required experience and skills for online learning. On the other hand, experts have experienced and investigated best practices in quality online learning. Yorke (2000) indicated the usefulness of benchmarking standards through perception and experience.

Usually, when a country or an institution develops a project for the first time, it faces several obstacles and shortcomings. So, this research may uncover some of the possible limitations in the online learning standards and indicators and will recommend ways for improvement. Accreditation and recognition of distance learning from all involved parties (government, employers, students, and society) may motivate more people to pursue their studies via distance learning and get their degrees approved. This study is expected to contribute to the

validation of the standards and indicators and it may guide decision makers in Saudi Arabia through the accreditation process and standards update. National Universities can benefit from applying the validated standards to ensure quality in their programs. Universities from other countries may get the chance to enter the Saudi market and offer online educational programs when its accreditation process is developed. Gaining programs' accreditation for traditional learning programs from foreign accreditation agencies is currently a trend among universities in Saudi Arabia, which is, at the same time, an obstacle facing programs' recognition and reputation. So, this research may guide decision makers to the accreditation process for online learning and its requirement nationally and internationally.

The benchmarking for the key dimensions of the Saudi accreditation standards to peer and aspirational countries should provide the decision makers with precise measurement to the quality of their standards. This benchmarking methodology should guide decision makers in the Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia as well as other countries to learn from the best experiences in other countries. According to Alarifi (2008) Saudi Arabia upgrades its higher education system by learning from developed countries' experiences and exchanging best practices. It also should guide them to improvement and bridging any possible gap in the accreditation system for distance learning. Morgan (2000) provided a case study in which a university benchmarked its policies and standards to 11 other universities, which resulted in positive improvement.

The validation and benchmarking processes may lead to some changes in the accreditation process and standards. It may urge the decision makers at these universities to apply them in their programs if the results indicate quality indicators that ensure quality distance learning. Mirza & Al-Abdulkareem (2011) pointed out that distance learning is perceived as a

poor quality learning among the societies in Arabic region. It may also indirectly help increase the awareness of among Saudi educators, employers, and ultimately society about the quality of distance learning and minimize some of the suspicions about this type of learning. This research can also contribute to the development plans for distance learning programs at any university and any country. It might be useful for distance learning program directors and accreditation bodies for distance learning all over the world. Researchers in the quality and accreditation of distance learning might also find this research useful.

Chapter summary

This chapter introduced this study by providing a background about distance learning in general and about its situation in Saudi Arabia in particular. It discussed the research problem and its purpose. It illuminated the research questions and illustrated its conceptual framework. It defined the key terms of this study. The chapter was concluded by shading the light on the significance of this study. Chapter two narrates the literature review relevant to the topic of this research.

CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is to report empirical findings and conceptual discussions related to standards of distance learning quality and their themes. It begins with a background about distance learning, its components, and its advantages. It discusses the educational challenges facing online learning and then explains how online learning may become effective. In the second section, the focus is on the accreditation and quality assurance. It describes the origin and process of this approach, discusses its importance for higher education, and its application to distance learning programs. Next, benchmarking and its application to higher education will be described and the evaluation approaches for the quality of distance learning will be discussed. Finally, several models, frameworks, guidelines, and benchmarks for ensuring the quality distance learning will be reported.

VLE (Virtual Learning Environment)

It is essential to discuss the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) because it is the main channel for distributing distance learning. The VLE can be defined as "a software tool, which brings together in an integrated environment, a range of resources that enable learners and staff to interact online, and includes content delivery and tracking" (BECTA, 2004). Another definition by The Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) described VLE as "the components in which learners and tutors participate in "on-line" interactions of various kinds, including on-line learning" (JISC, 2000). This indicates that there is more than one definition for the VLE, which might cause some confusion as to its specific explanation. This might due to the fact that VLEs vary from one system to another and from one place or level of education to another. For example, a VLE in a higher education institution might provide its users with some

applications, which are not available in a primary school VLE. However, Becta (2004) explained that VLEs should be a combination of a number of features like communication tools, collaboration tools, creating courses and online contents tools, online assessment, integration with the institution management information system (MIS), controlled access curriculum resources and students access to the communication tools and content beyond the school. However, the question is whether these features are agreed upon among educators, researchers, and specialists within different countries and educational systems. Thus, this highlights the importance of investigating the quality of the accreditation standards.

Advantage of Distance Learning

The world now is like a global village; it is possible to study and receive a degree from the United States, while you are in Saudi Arabia and vice versa. Moreover, if you are employed, and wish to continue your education, then distance learning is a solution. In distance learning, there are no time or place constraints; it is very flexible. Furthermore, the cost of distance learning is very low in comparison to traditional learning in schools. Leonard & Guha (2001); Richardson & Swan (2003); Vaughn (2007) stated factors of accessibility, cost, and flexibility among the benefits of distance education. In addition, it teaches students to be more independent, since teacher and classmates are not physically present. Unlike traditional classrooms, students can repeat the same lesson as many times as they want until they understand the lesson perfectly.

Rich and Diverse Content. If there is nothing to look at, learn from or used in teaching, why should students and teachers access and use the VLE? An ideal VLE has rich and diverse learning and teaching resources and should be updated in daily basis. The learning content can include e-books, power point slides, audios and videos and figures. In addition, the content might include a number of learning and teaching software. Such content could be both ready-made

materials and created materials. In a study at the University of British Colombia, students reported that the online resources in the VLE improved their understanding of the course materials (Hunt, Parsons, & Fleming, 2003).

E-Assessment. It is important to make use of the teachers' time and not spend huge amounts of time correcting students' sheets of paper. In addition, in some case studies it has been reported that online assessment increases the students' motivation and builds confidence significantly (Hunt, Parsons, and Fleming, 2003). In another study at the University of Calgary, students reported positive feedback on the flexibility of setting the exam and at the same time accessing the textbook, but they reported difficulty in contacting the teacher during the test (Hunt, Parsons, and Fleming, 2003). However, that means in the e-assessment tests, the questions would be true or false, multiple choice, match and the same which might not give 100% accurate result of the students' abilities. In addition, that means neglecting other types of assessments, such as, open-ended questions, which is impossible to be assessed by a computer, and gives the student a variety of assessment methods and more space for creativity. Therefore, it may be a good idea to apply the e-assessment in the VLE in some modules but not in all in order to facilitate the task of the teachers and enable students to receive immediate feedback of their work.

Educational Challenges

For centuries, human beings used to learn from one traditional method. The lecturer speaks to students watching him or her, and listening. Nowadays, some classrooms have become student-centered where students create their own knowledge and collaborate to achieve their educational goals. Distance learning fits perfectly with this learning approach. In fact, there are currently serious attempts to use distance learning in a professional way. Respectable and prestigious educational institutions now use the Web to conduct their courses and learning either

as a supportive tool for traditional classes or an independent provider for distance learning. The Open University in UK and University of Phoenix in US are good examples, which provide well-recognized independent distance learning.

One of the main challenges facing distance learning is that there is no face-to-face contact between learners and teacher (Stansfield, McLellan, and Connolly, 2004). Hence, teachers cannot note their students' facial expressions to measure their understanding, and cannot capture their attention. Similarly, students cannot ask their teachers directly and receive immediate feedback from their instructor. However, the synchronous virtual classrooms, which allow students and teachers to interact with each other via web cams, limit this issue.

Despite the fact that the role of the learner will change, this might be encouraging because students will take a significant part in the learning process, and will contribute and comment on their lesson (Stansfield, McLellan, and Connolly, 2004). Therefore, learners might sometimes be knowledge providers, instead of always being receivers.

In addition, learning over the Web is not like learning in the traditional classroom. The traditional classroom is usually teacher-centered, whereas online learning is student-cantered. In the classroom, students use their textbooks and teachers as their learning sources, while University's VLEs, e-books, online articles, and web pages are the main knowledge providers in distance learning. Some might say there is a risk in depending only on Web learning to seek knowledge. The answer to this is that in online learning, students learn from sources usually prepared, checked, and presented by educational experts in their own institution. Also, they are still able to contact their teachers with any inquiries through an email or a discussion group. When the teacher gives feedback through a discussion group, this will benefit all the students, since the teacher does not need to answer this question again, and it remains posted as a

permanent reference for the students. In the traditional classroom, the teacher may be asked the same question tens of times and perhaps some shy students still misunderstand, and do not ask again.

One of the critical challenges facing distance learning is establishing robust, solid, and comprehensive frameworks, models, standards, or guidelines to ensure its quality and guarantee its accreditation by governments and employers. It is not only developing the standards but it is also ensuring their quality, applicability, and relevance.

Technical Issues and Online Support. In the Harnessing Technology e-strategy (DfES, 2005) the role of support centers was emphasized. Thus, each university should have a huge professional staff to provide the help and technical support for all VLE users 24 hours a day. Also, new lecturers and students should be given an Information and Communication Technology (ICT) training course to master the skills of using all the functions in the VLE when they first join the university. Moreover, it might be an excellent idea to have some online support such as demos for specific software and a guided ICT tutorial for some functions in the VLE. In addition, teachers and students should be able to easily upload and download materials from the VLE. The success in these issues guarantees making both the practitioners and students depend on the VLE in their teaching and learning and make use of its available facilities.

Accreditation and Quality Assurance

Quality assurance has a long history in manufacturing industry. Several techniques were used to ensure quality and defect-free products that meet customers' need. As an indication for quality assurance in any field, e.g., education or manufacturing, an institution or a company has to adopt quality standards. When a company or a university gains an accreditation from a recognized agency, it means implicitly quality product for customer. As a matter of fact, education is a

product that is provided to customers (students) who have the right to choose the best quality education. Quality assurance in the education framework can be defined as "planned and systematic review process of an institution or program to determine that acceptable standards of education, scholarship and infrastructure are being maintained and enhanced" (Herron, Holsombach-Ebner, Shomate, & Szathmary, 2012, p.21). Several agencies have been established to monitor and accredit different businesses, industries, and education. Every organization has to meet specific standards to get accredited. Some of the accreditation standards are governmental requirements while others are gained to indicate a quality product. The strong competition between businesses and manufacturing industries in market share led to the competition in quality to meet or exceeds the standards and customer expectations. More customers' satisfaction leads to customers' retentions and influences the profits of an organization.

There are several approaches for quality assurance or improvement. Juran's quality control process, Deming's 14 points quality improvement approach, total quality management, ISO9000 quality management systems, and more recently, Six Sigma and Human Performance Improvement (HPI) are popular examples (Alarifi and Alamri, 2014). They all seek producing quality processes and outcomes. Some of these approaches have been used to improve the quality of online learning such as ISO as found in this research in the UK case. Benchmarking is another important quality improvement approach that is applied in this study and discussed in a separate section.

Accreditation and Quality of Higher Education

The number of higher education institutions is growing rapidly. This growth is very noticeable in developing countries in Western Asia such as Saudi Arabia in which the number of universities increased from eight in 2008 to 25 public universities in 2014. In a country like

Saudi Arabia, there is a strong competition between universities inside the country isolated from other parts of the world. To ensure the quality of its higher education program, each country has its unique approaches for quality assurance. "For more than 100 years, the accreditation system in the United States has been used as the primary vehicle for defining and assuring quality in the delivery of higher education services" (Schray, 2006). *"Accreditation is a process of assessment and review of whether an institution (or program) qualifies for a certain status or to be recognized or certified as meeting certain required standards. The result of accreditation is whether an institution or program either receives or does not receive accreditation"* (Jung, 2011a). In Saudi Arabia, there is a national accreditation agency that is under the umbrella of Ministry of Higher Education, which monitors and accredits Saudi Universities programs. There is also a trend that some programs have been accredited by some of the US accreditation agencies. So, in some countries the Ministry of Higher Education governs the process while in other countries accreditation is by independent agencies.

Accreditation and Quality of Distance Learning

There is a debate of what identifies quality in distance learning. For some, it is to achieve the same performance level of face-to-face learning (Perraton, 2000) while others believe that it is unique and cannot be evaluated with the same methods as traditional learning (Stella and Gnanam, 2004). Others' blend these opinions by noting its quality should be judged with similar traditional learning standards with the addition of the distinguish features of distance learning (Koul, 2006).

Quality and accreditation become more of concern when it comes to distance learning programs. Online learning "holds greater promise and is subject to more suspicion than any other instructional mode in the 21st century" (Casey, 2008, p. 45). Learners, teachers, employers,

decision makers, and society were only familiar with traditional learning that entrusted and experienced by everyone everywhere. It is not uncommon to have quality concerns with any new trend in any field. Probably, it was obvious that distance learning was not a competent alternative for conventional learning when it was first offered to students. However, after the technology revolution in the last decade and its integration into learning, the idea about the quality of distance learning has changed. The current technology infrastructure and Learning Management Systems (LMS) with their virtual environments, which are available in many universities in the world today, have the potential to provide an equivalent or superior learning from distance than face to face. However, the dilemma is how to harness these emerging technologies to improve the quality of learning and whether education should have similar instructional strategies to traditional ones or seek for unique methods that match the capability and potential of new technology and meet the special needs for distance learners. Ibrahim, Rwegasira, & Taher (2007) found out that the quality of distance education is an essential factor for students' intention to join an online program. Other stakeholders are also interested in ensuring the distance education quality to refute the criticism of this mode of learning and improve its outcomes.

With the wide spread of distance learning programs, the competition now can become international crossing physical boundaries of countries. However, in order to have fair competition, distance learning programs need to be accredited nationally and internationally. This can motivate universities in developing countries to improve the quality of their education by benchmarking their programs to developed universities in countries such as US, UK, and Australia.

Since higher education is now a service provided for a fee, it can be described as a business. Therefore, students will have their own criteria for choosing a university to study in. It

is expected that students will consider employers and societal attitudes toward a specific program or a university; therefore, employer and societal perceptions of the credibility of distance learning programs may impact a student's decision. Students are expected to choose a program that is fully accredited and recognized by employers in order to be qualified for the best jobs. This urged several accreditation agencies in different countries to create standards for distance learning to ensure its quality. Middlehurst and Woodfield (2006) divided the accreditation and quality review of distance learning into six categories: (1) not recognized, (2) not visible or ignored, (3) visible and subject to specific accreditation, (4) subject to general accreditation arrangements, (5) same accreditation status, but special review mechanisms, and (6) specialist agencies and approaches.

Benchmarking in Higher Education as a Quality Improvement Approach

Benchmarking can be defined as "an approach for self-evaluation through comparative analysis for the purpose of self-improvement" (Jackson and Lund, 2000). Another definition for benchmarking is "a process to facilitate the systematic comparison and evaluation of practice, process, and performance to aid improvement and self-regulation" (Jackson, 1998 as cited in Jackson and Lund, 2000). Benchmarking is a common approach for quality improvement in business and manufacturing for decades. To improve the quality of educational inputs, processes, and outputs, educational institutions adopted benchmarking over the last two decades. Jackson (2000) stated that UK universities have applied benchmarking to improve the quality of education and academic standards. For example, Morgan (2000) described how a university applied benchmarking to learn from the policies and practices of other 11 universities. Similarly, this research looks into other countries policies, standards, and practices as benchmarks for the

Saudi case of distance education. Yorke (2000) discussed the effectiveness of benchmarking experiences for quality improvement.

Evaluating the Quality of Distance Learning

There are several methods for evaluating distance learning programs. When it emerged, online learning was heavily criticized as a low mode of learning and was compared to traditional learning (Shelton, 2011). The reason for this critique might be because it was compared to traditional learning while distance learning uses and conceptualizes on different instructional approaches and learning theories. Educators were used to specific methods for teaching and learning and it was not easy to shift the paradigm. Another reason could be that distance learning did not have the advanced technology and was immature in its early stages. The evolution of technology in the last two decades provided distance learning with several tools and may have changed its image. The main concern was and still is on the quality of online learning. Therefore, different approaches for evaluating distance learning have emerged and quality frameworks have been suggested. These models or frameworks were established not only as an evaluation benchmarks but also as standards for ensuring quality of online learning and guidelines for designing learning in this environment.

Models, Frameworks, Guidelines, and Benchmarks for Quality Distance Learning

One of the common approaches for evaluating online learning is creating a model, scale, benchmarks, or framework for evaluation. The quality concerns and the different nature of distance learning may lead to the growth of these evaluation frameworks. Thus, guidelines or standards have been incorporated into distance learning to ensure quality and effectiveness of online educational programs. In 2001, the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET) developed a framework for distance learning quality assurance in

cooperation with the eight regional accrediting bodies to have a common approach. It identified five standards, which are: institutional context and commitment, curriculum and instruction, faculty support, student support, and evaluation and assessment. Role and mission, resources for learning, and student services are considered sub-dimensions in the institutional context and commitment category (Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications, 2001). Quality Matters identified the following indicators for quality distance learning: 1) learning objectives, 2) assessment and measurement, 3) learning resources, 4) learner interaction, and 5) course technology (Kane, 2004). The Quality Matters rubric standards have been updated several times and the fifth edition was issued in 2014 to include the following eight standards: 1) course overview and introduction, 2) learning objectives (competencies), 3) assessment and measurement, 4) instructional materials, 5) course activities and learner interaction, 6) course technology, 7) learner support, and 8) accessibility and usability (Quality Matters, 2014).

Khan (2001) found out that there are eight dimensions required for ensuring the quality of distance learning. These dimensions are: institutional, management, technological, pedagogical, ethical, interface design, resource support, and evaluation. These eight dimensions can be used for program planning, evaluation, and improvement particularly when applying the quality indicators presented as sub-dimensions (Khan, 2001). In 2014, The Online Learning Consortium (OLC) updated its scorecard to include eight standards (institutional support, technology support, course development / instructional design, course structure, teaching and learning, social and student engagement, student support, and evaluations & assessment) which have 75 indicators for evaluating distance learning programs (The Online Learning Consortium, 2014). The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) (2002) identified seven standards for high quality distance learning that are: institutional mission, institutional organizational structure, institutional

resources, curriculum and instruction, faculty support, student support, and student learning outcomes. The significance of these standards is in the way they were produced which was based on the review to the standards of nine national accrediting organizations that accredit distance learning programs (CHEA, 2002).

In 2000 the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP, 2000) identified 24 indicators or benchmarks for measuring and ensuring the quality of distance learning. The 24 quality indicators were categorized into seven themes: (1) institutional support, (2) course development, (3) teaching and learning, (4) course structure, (5) student support, (6) faculty support, and (7) evaluation and assessment. This work was based on 45 benchmarks developed from extensive research but it was reduced to 24 after validation from instructors, students, and administrators in distance learning programs at number of institutions. Blackboard and the National Education Association supported this project. The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (SNAHE) (2008) suggested a model with ten quality dimensions for evaluating online learning based on extensive review for the literature: material/content; structure/ virtual environment; communication, cooperation and interactivity; student assessment; flexibility and adaptability; support (for students and staff); staff qualifications and experience; vision and institutional leadership; resource allocation; and the holistic and process aspect.

Chapter summary

This chapter reported the literature review areas that are relevant to this study. It provided an overview for distance learning including virtual learning environments, and advantages and challenges of distance education. It discussed the quality assurance and accreditation in general and in higher education and distance learning in particular. It explained benchmarking as a quality improvement approach and described the methods of evaluating distance learning with

emphasis on quality models, guidelines, frameworks, and benchmarks. Next, the methodology of this research will be presented.

CHAPTER THREE: Methodology

Introduction

According to Crotty (1998, p. 3) methodology is "the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes". Ernest (1994, p. 21) defines it as "a theory of which methods and techniques are appropriate and valid to use to generate and justify knowledge, given the epistemology".

Research Design

This mixed method study consists of a systematic literature review and analysis, as well as survey methodology. According to Inglis (2008), there are three approaches for validating a quality framework for online learning: validating against the research literature, validating against the knowledge of experts' panel, and validating by combining the first and the second approach. This study used the third approach by combining the knowledge of experts with the research literature analysis. The systematic analysis includes a benchmarking approach, which typically helps to bridge a gap between low and high performers. It is an approach for continuous improvement. It has been widely adopted by companies but it is growing recently in higher education context. According to Ellis and Moore (2006) "Benchmarking is an increasingly important approach to QA as universities wish to demonstrate their quality against external standards. External comparisons can be used to strengthen claims for verifiable standards of quality" (p. 355). This method was also applied for improving the quality of distance learning standards in particular. For example, the IHEP (2000) standards for distance learning have been developed after benchmarking online learning programs in six higher education institutions. In this research, it is applied to find out how the Saudi accreditation process and standards for

distance learning are similar or different from some Western educational systems (US, UK, and Australia), which have been offering distance learning programs successfully for decades. It also compares the Saudi distance learning accreditation system with its counterparts in Asia and Arabic region to find out how it is performing in comparison to its peers. This is also important because the cultural and environmental success factors in the region are similar. The focus of the benchmark is on the key dimensions (standards) and processes for distance learning accreditation.

After the systematic literature review and benchmarking process, the quantitative approach of this research is validating Saudi accreditation indicators for online learning from the perspective of experts. First, experts rated indicators in terms of their relevance to the standard they were grouped in. Secondly, they rated each indicator in terms of its perceived importance to quality distance learning. They also justified their answers when low ratings (1 or 2 out of 5) were provided. This validation process used survey design, which is widely applied in research that seeks the perspective, attitude, or evaluation.

The applied methodology of this study can also be categorized within the development research. According to Richey and Klein (2014), development research methodology uses both quantitative and qualitative approaches to validate or ensure effectiveness of an instructional design model, to demonstrate critical success factors to implement a model or a process of instructional design, or to improve an existing process or model or generate a new one. This is compatible with the inquiry of this study. According to Oncu and Cakir (2011), survey, expert review, and document analysis are frequently used data collection methods in development research. These are the same methods used to collect data for this study.

Participants

This study does not employ research subjects but rather makes use of panel of experts to validate a list of quality indicators based on their significant experience in the field. The selection of the experts for this study cannot be random because there are number of criteria required to be an expert qualified for this research. So, purposive sampling is chosen as an approach in this study. This method is used because the researcher is interested in a specific group and in a specific topic (Trochim and Donnelly, 2007). The criteria for experts' inclusion are as follows:

- The expert must have at least five years experience in online learning (required).

- The expert must have at least 2 published studies in peer-reviewed journals or as book chapters, or a book editor in the area of accreditation or quality of online learning (required).

- The expert can be a researcher, instructor, developer, designer, program director, practitioner, administrator, consultant, or other role or position in online learning (required).

- The expert is an award holder or has received recognition for his or her work in online learning (desired).

Eight experts, who met all the criteria for selection, participated in this study. All the participated experts are not only experts in distance learning but also they are specialized in the quality or accreditation of online learning in particular. The participating experts are comprised of: frequently cited researchers, administrators and other practitioners (e.g., president of an Open University), and three faculty members from three different open universities.

Data Collection Methods (Procedure)

With regard to methods, according to Crotty (1998) methods are "the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyze data related to some research question or hypothesis" (p.

3). Therefore, there are methods for data collection and methods for data analysis. The nature of examination determines the appropriate methods.

All relevant library databases were searched to establish a robust body of evidence about what is "quality online learning" in order to respond to the first research question, *How does the research literature support the Saudi accreditation standards?*. The widely cited quality frameworks, benchmarks, models, or indicators were the key sources for this research question. The benchmarking data has been collected from various sources. The official documents, regulations, and decrees have been searched via the ministries of higher education and relevant accreditation agencies websites in different countries. There was also an investigation into the published reports and research relevant to the accreditation process and its standards in general and about chosen countries in particular.

The survey was the method to obtain experts' rating to Saudi accreditation indicators for distance learning in terms of their relevance to their standards and sub-dimensions groups and in terms of their perceived importance for quality online learning. A justification has been provided when a low rating (1 or 2 out of 5-point scale) was given. This questionnaire was available online via Qualtrics (the university official survey service provider, see appendix A). Experts were invited to participate in the validation of the these standards via individualized emails based on the their standing as experts in the area (see appendix C). An explanation about the purpose of the study and the required expertise and role from the participants with an information sheet (see appendix B) were provided to invited experts. The study was targeting from five to ten experts for the validation process.

After an extensive research of the relevant literature, a list of 23 experts was created based on the set of inclusion criteria. The list included presidents and faculties at open universities,

faculties at traditional universities, researchers, designers, developers, instructors, administrators, program directors, and practitioners with strong experiences in online learning. Another search was conducted for their contact information (emails). After finding the contact information for all selected experts, an individualized invitation was sent to all of the 23 experts. They were asked to participate in the study as experts and to suggest names for other experts based on the inclusion criteria. 4 experts accepted the invitation. Another email was sent after a week to all experts who did not reply and one more expert accepted the invitation. Despite the fact the minimum target number of expert was five, the researcher was interested in recruiting a few more experts to increase the validity of the data. So, five more experts' names have been added to the list after an extra search and reading was made. Out of these 5 experts, two have accepted the invitation and one of them suggested 4 additional experts. The researcher searched the work of the suggested names and confirmed their qualification for participation in the study. Although seven experts accepted the invitation and agreed to participate, the researcher decided to send invitations to all four additional experts as a precaution for any possible drop outs. One of the four accepted to participate in the research. Therefore, out of the 32 invited experts, eight accepted the invitation and participated in the study.

Instrumentation

The survey instrument was developed using the Saudi accreditation standards and its quality indicators. The standards are only available in Arabic language and it was translated into English by the researcher who is bilingual (Arabic as mother tongue and English as second language) and has a BA degree in translation. So, the survey was administrated in the English language, and was professionally edited to assure accurate communication of the standards. It included a list of indicators for each standard. The questions are in five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) as

strongly irrelevant, (2) irrelevant, (3) somewhat relevant, (4) relevant, and (5) strongly relevant for relevance scale. This scale determines the relevance of each quality indicator to the standard it is grouped in from the perspective of experts in online learning. For importance scale, the ranking is (1) unimportant, (2) little importance, (3) moderately important, (4) important, and (5) very important. This scale determines the importance of the Saudi indicators for quality distance learning from the perspective of experts. In the event of giving a low rating (1 or 2 out of 5) for any indicator either in relevance or importance scale, a justification was required in the open-ended part in the survey. There were nine demographic questions asking experts about their educational level (bachelor, master, or doctorate), discipline, role or position in online learning, years of experience in online learning, the number of publications in online learning, any award or received recognition related to an online learning achievement, country of work, country of highest academic degree achieved, and age. This online survey took an average of one hour and 16 minutes for an individual expert to complete.

Validity

The face validity of the instrument was tested before it was administrated to experts. It was sent to two faculty members in English Linguistics and Translation (who are bilingual in Arabic and English and studied in UK and USA) and three faculty members in Instructional Technology (IT) (who are native speakers in English) to review it. The linguistics members matched the English translation to the original Arabic text. They also checked the clarity of the statements. The two IT members checked the clarity of items and wordings. Their feedback was incorporated and some items were modified based on the reviewers' recommendations.

Data Analysis

Both interpretative analysis (qualitative) and statistical analysis (quantitative) methods were applied in this study. Qualitative comparative analysis was used to analyze data for the first and second questions. This qualitative data was analyzed thematically. The nine Saudi accreditation standards for distance learning were the framework for the comparison with the literature quality models and with the eight other country accreditation standards. Qualitative analysis was also used to analyze the open-ended questions from the survey. Descriptive statistics were used for the survey quantitative analysis to answer the third and fourth questions. Survey data was transferred to SPSS software for the purposes of data analysis. Central tendency and dispersion are provided. The mean of the indicators' means is calculated for each expert's ratings for every standard. This represents the mean of individual ratings by calculating the sum of the responses of each individual for a given set of items and dividing by the number of items summed. Then to get the mean summed individual rating, the means of each individual was added and divided by the number of individuals (individuals = 8). Nineteen variables, including the 9 standards for relevance and importance, were created in SPSS for this process. This demonstrated the agreement among the eight experts on the relevance of the indicators to their standards and on the importance of the indicators for ensuring quality distance learning. High mean indicated high agreement among the expert and low agreement for a low mean. The standard deviation is provided to demonstrate the degree of variance among experts on their ratings. The minimum and maximum means are included to show to difference between the highest and smallest experts' ratings. This method of analysis shows the level of agreement among experts on a single standard but might not clarify if one single item under the standard was rated poorly. Thus, when a single item has a low rating (M<3) or rated (1 or 2 out of 5) by half or more of experts, it is

clarified by showing the mean of the particular indicator and the number of low ratings as another supportive method of analysis. In addition, all the 75 items were ranked in terms of their relevance and importance. This means that each item is ranked by highest mean based on the experts' ratings on each of the 75 items. This ranking is illustrated in Tables 17 and 18. Experts' qualitative justification for low rating of a single item is explained when appropriate.

Chapter summary

This chapter discussed the research design including methods of data collection and data analysis. It described the participants of this study and the criteria for their selection. It explained the phases of developing the instrument and its validation. Table 1 below summarizes the methodology of this study. The findings of this research will be revealed in the next chapter.

Research Design Summary Table

A summary of the research design applied to guide the study is described in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Summary of the methodology

Research Question	Data Sources	Data Analysis
1. How does the research literature support the Saudi accreditation standards?	All relevant library databases including books, articles, dissertations, reports, and other research papers.	Qualitative (comparative analysis)
2. What are the key similarities and differences in accreditation standards and processes for distance learning between Saudi Arabia and other countries? A. Peers in Asia and the Arabic region (i.e. South Korea, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Jordan, and United Arab Emirates)? B. Aspirational countries (US, UK, and	All relevant library databases including books, articles, dissertations, reports, and other research papers. Official websites and documents were searched for distance learning accreditation standards and processes in chosen countries.	Qualitative: Benchmarking (comparative analysis)

Australia)?

3. How relevant are the Saudi distance learning accreditation indicators to the standards, which they are grouped in from the perspective of experts in online learning?	Survey: collecting data from experts about their perceptions via an online questionnaire	Quantitative (descriptive statistics): Frequency, mean, and standard deviation
4. How important are the Saudi accreditation indicators for ensuring quality distance learning from the perspective of experts in online learning?	Survey: collecting data from experts about their perceptions via an online questionnaire	Quantitative (descriptive statistics): Frequency, mean, and standard deviation

CHAPTER FOUR: Findings and Results

Introduction

This chapter has two main sections that cover the qualitative and quantitative findings. The first part has data that have been collected from several different sources including documents, reports, decrees, and information from ministries of higher education and accreditation agencies, and regulation bodies, research papers, dissertations, book chapters, and other library sources. The second section is focused on the data collected from experts via an online questionnaire. The second part data are mainly quantitative but it also includes some qualitative data collected from experts.

Accreditation of Distance Learning in Saudi Arabia and Aspirations and Peer Countries

This section has data about the accreditation systems, process, and standards in nine different countries. US, UK, and Australia are considered aspirational countries for Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, South Korea, Jordan, and UAE are categorized as peer countries for Saudi Arabia. In relation to distance learning, this section explores the standards, regulations, rules, regulating bodies, accreditation agencies in the nine countries. It finds out whether distance learning is accredited or not in these countries. If it is accredited, it explains how it is accredited and what the conditions are. This includes the requirements for licensing institutions and programs in the country. It also investigates whether accreditation of distance learning is voluntarily or mandatory and the consequences of obtaining or not obtaining accreditation in different countries. This section ends with three important tables. The first (Table 2) compares the nine cases in terms of rules and regulations of distance learning accreditation, the second (Table 3) seeks to find the Saudi standards in the standards of all other eight countries, and the

third (Table 4) seeks to find the Saudi standards in the widely cited quality frameworks that are mentioned in the literature review of this study.

Accreditation of Distance Learning in Saudi Arabia

Detailed background about Saudi Arabia and the situation of distance education in the country was provided in the first chapter. The accreditation standards have also been illustrated in the conceptual framework and in the experts' survey. In addition to these standards, NCEL has also listed six separate standards for maintaining programs' academic quality that should be used along with the nine accreditation standards. These academic quality standards are: mission and objectives, program management, learning and teaching, management of students' services and supporting services, learning resources, and facilities and equipment (NCEL, 2011).

In this section, the conditions for accrediting distance learning programs will be provided. In 2011, the National Center for E-Learning and Distance Learning (NCEL) has published the rules and regulations for licensing distance learning programs in Saudi Arabia, which include the following major conditions (NCEL, 2011):

1. The institution must be licensed with physical presence in the country

2. There must be equivalent traditional learning program in the same institution

3. There must be at least one class graduated from the equivalent traditional learning program to be eligible for offering the program from distance.

4. The equivalent traditional learning program has to be accredited from the National Commission for Academic Accreditation & Assessment

5. The institution has to apply for a separate licensing request to offer the distance learning programs after

6. The institution has to provide proofs for the availability of the facilities, infrastructure and technology that are required for offering distance learning programs.

7. The institution has to meet all the accreditation standards published by the National Center for E-Learning and Distance Learning (NCEL), which are the themes of this study.

8. The courses credits and the learning outcomes of distance learning programs have to be similar to the equivalent traditional learning program

9. The institution must have a system for identity detection and identity theft prevention

10. There must be 25% of learning for each synchronous learning and interactive learning

Accreditation of Distance Learning in USA

In 2002, approximately 56% of regionally accredited US universities were offering online courses or degree programs (CHEA, 2002). In fall term 2008 in the U.S. Universities, 4.6 million students had at least one online class (Allen and Seaman, 2010). Unlike most of the countries, the U.S. Department of Education does not directly accredit or monitor the quality of higher education institutions. This role is left to accrediting agencies that monitor the quality of the programs.

According to Schray (2006) there are three types of these agencies: regional, national, and specialized. There are six regional agencies that accredit universities in their regions while the national ones accredit institutions everywhere in the country. Specialized agencies accredit only special programs or specific fields. According to the CHEA (2002) there are 5,655 institutions accredited by 17 institutional accreditors (national and regional). Of those, 1,979 have some form of online programs or courses. However, only accreditations agencies that gained the recognition from the US Department of Education based on sets of standards are able to accredit universities and their programs making them eligible for federal funds and students' federal assistance. On

the other hand, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) recognizes and promotes both governmental and non- governmental accreditation to improve the quality of Education (Schray, 2006). The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is a non-profit organization that is a chief representative and coordinator of all higher education accreditation bodies (Zhao and Li, 2009). In other words, CHEA is considered a connection point between the accreditation agencies and the State (Damme, 2002). CHEA is the only non-governmental higher education organization that conducts certification of the quality of regional accrediting organizations (SNAHE, 2008). In order to establish a level of standards for learning and benchmark institutional performance against others, universities in the U.S. have to provide the federal government with evidence for their performance and students achievements (Eaton, 2007). Although accreditation is voluntary in the US, institutions have to be licensed by individual states to award degrees (Middlehurst and Campbell, 2003).

The accreditation bodies in US are: eight regional, 11 national including Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC)- previously known as Distance Education and Training Council- DETC, and 66 specialized bodies. This makes the total eighty-five accreditation bodies that have been recognized by the US Department of Education and/or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC) has been approved by both of them (Zhao and Li, 2009). These agencies give accreditations for both conventional education and distance learning. According to Howell, Baker, Zuehl, and Johansen (2007) all the regional accreditation bodies have standards for distance learning program evaluation. Regional accreditation is the most common form of quality assurance in the US and it is also being obtained for distance learning accreditation (Eaton, 2001). The reason for the high numbers of accreditation agencies is the country size, but, in turn,

might create inconsistent quality approach (Middlehurst and Campbell, 2003). The large population and the high number of the higher education institutions may also have played a role in this. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2014) the number of degree granting colleges and universities, as of 2012-2013, is 4,726 including 3,026 four years institutions and 1,700 two years colleges. These numbers do not exist in any other country in the world. As of April 30, 2015, the US total population is 320,785,000 (Census Bureau, 2015).

Since accreditation is voluntary and there are about 90 accrediting agencies, it is expected to have different standards for online learning. Three different sets of standards have been frequently cited in the literature review. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) (2002), that included (1) institutional mission, (2) institutional organizational structure, (3) institutional resources, (4) curriculum and instruction, (5) faculty support, (6) student support, and (7) student learning outcomes, is popular because it was presented by the CHEA and was based on nine national agencies standards (CHEA, 2002). The Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET), that included (1) institutional context and (2) commitment, curriculum and instruction, (3) faculty support, (4) student support, and (5) evaluation and assessment, is the second one because it was developed in cooperation with all the eight regional accreditation agencies (WCET, 2001). The DEAC (previously DETC) is the only specialized national agency that is recognized by the Department of Education and CHEA for distance learning with a history of almost 90 years leading accreditation for distance learning (DEAC, 2015). The DEAC (previously DETC) accreditation is not only obtained by US institutions, but also it is being sought by overseas universities to market their distance learning programs globally. For example, the University of Southern Queensland, one of the oldest and

well known distance learning providers in Australia, obtained the DEAC accreditation (Jung, 2007). The DEAC's standards are divided into 12 areas as the followings (DEAC, 2015):

1. Institution mission, goals and objectives

2. Educational program objectives, curricula and materials

3. Educational services

4. Student support services

5. Student achievement and satisfaction

6. Qualifications and duties of owners, governing board members, officials, administrators, instructors/faculty and staff and reputation of the institution

7. Admission practices and enrolment agreements

8. Advertising, promotional literature and recruitment personnel

9. Financial responsibility

10. Required disclosures for cancelation, refunds, and discounts

11. Facilities, equipment, supplies and record protection

12. Research and self-improvement.

Accreditation of Distance Learning in UK

One of the most internationally well-known distance education institutions is the Open University, UK. The Open University, which was established 1969, is the UK's largest higher education institution, teaches 33% of all part-time undergraduate students in the country each year (Wancai, 2004). Open University is also the only Untied Kingdom's institution solely dedicated to distance education. It has around 150,000 undergraduate students and more than 30,000 postgraduate students (Mills, 2006). Ninety percent of the UK universities also have developed distance learning courses (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2004). White, Warren,

Faughnan and Manton (2010) found out there are over 2,600 online courses delivered by or on behalf of UK universities or further education institutions. The Open University offered 952 of these courses while 1,528 were divided between 113 higher and further education institutions. Although the Open University provides only distance learning, it is subject to the same quality assurance process as conventional institutions (Middlehurst and Campbell, 2003).

In the United Kingdom (UK), there are four main agencies for accreditation and quality assurance (QA) for higher education: Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education, the British Accreditation Council (BAC), the British Standards Institute (BSI), and the Open and Distance Learning Quality Council (ODLQC) (Kirkpatrick, 2012). The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), an independent body, was established to ensure the quality and encourage improvement of higher education in the UK, which is now partly funded by the Government through universities' contracts (SNAHE, 2008; Kirkpatrick, 2012; Dondi and Moretti, 2007). Although the British public higher education institutions are autonomous (self-accrediting) and internally responsible for the quality of their programs, the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) conducts a regular external audit to ensure the academic quality of the institutions (Kirkpatrick, 2012; Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2006). So, QAA does its role through a regular cycle of reviewing, auditing, and identifying good practices for higher education institutions (Kirkpatrick, 2012). However, it is illegal in the UK to award a degree without a governmental authorization (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2004). QAA uses the same system to accredit both traditional and online learning programs but it has a section in its standards to support the provision of distance learning (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2006). Distance learning programs are subject to the QAA inspection using the guidelines for the development and provision of distance learning courses but these guidelines do not assume that

distance learning is separate from the traditional learning (Kirkpatrick, 2012). The are 6 guidelines for distance learning according to QAA quality standards as the followings (Dondi and Moretti, 2007; Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2004; Rekkedal, 2006):

1. System design

2. Program design, approval and review

3. The management of program delivery

4. Student development and support

5. Student communication and representation

6. Student assessment

Private or independent institutions that offer solely online learning programs, they usually seek accreditation from the Open and Distance Quality Council (ODLQC), which is the only UK agency recognized by the government for distance learning accreditation (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2006). The Open and Distance Learning Quality Council (ODLQC) was founded in 1969 by the UK government, however, it is now an independent body benefiting from the governmental cooperation and support. ODLQC have set of standards for distance learning that was first adopted in 1998 and was updated in 2005 and came into force in 2006. The standards are divided into six areas: (1) outcome, (2) resources, (3) support, (4) selling, (5) providers, and (6) collaborative provision (ODLQC, 2012).

In 2012, British Accreditation Council (BAC), which is voluntary QA for independent further and higher education providers, developed standards for online and blended learning. It includes the following areas: (1) management, staffing and administration, (2) teaching, learning and achievement, (3) learner support, (4) management of quality, (5) premises and facilities (face-to-face components) (BAC, 2012). However, the inclusion of face-to-face components

indicates that these standards are designed for both of and on-campus courses and it is probably not exclusive for distance education. According to (Kirkpatrick, 2012) some of the online learning providers refer to the standards developed by British Standards Institute (BSI) or the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) as an evidence for their program quality. However, both BSI and ISO are business oriented and work closely with manufacturing and service industry, which might make it inappropriate choice for quality assurance of educational programs.

Accreditation of Distance Learning in Australia

Australia is the sixth largest country with an area size of (7,686,850 sq. km) with only 39 universities (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2004). Because of the very large geographical land, distance learning played a significant role in Australia for 80 years. With the evolution of technology, most of the Australian universities have developed online learning courses (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2006). Distance education was offered in 1980s by the main provider for DE, the college of advanced education (CAEs), which was divided later into universities with a strong reputation in distance learning such as University of Southern Queensland (Ryan and Brown, 2012). Distance education is growing annually in Australia. For example, in 2009 there were 108,000 distance learners in Australian public universities comprising 12% of all students with an increase of 3% over 2008 (Ryan and Brown, 2012).

As part of its accountability to the government, Australian universities have to develop an annual plan for quality assurance and improvement (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2006). Although the Australian higher education institutions are autonomous (self-accrediting), the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), established in 1991, conducts audits of all Australian higher education institutions in five-year cycles starting from 2003 (Ryan and Brown,

2012). The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) is an independent national agency that promotes, audits, and reports on quality assurance in Australian higher education (SNAHE, 2008). The newly established Tertiary Education, Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) taking the same role in auditing universities and their programs (Booth, 2013) recently replaced the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). Also, in Australia, there is no distinction between different forms of learning in terms of quality review (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2006). "Australian regulation and quality assurance systems have never distinguished between methods of teaching and learning employed to deliver a program. … Students studying via distance education at Australian universities receive the same degrees as their on-campus counterparts and degrees obtained following study in this mode receive the same level of recognition by employers and from other universities as the basis of admission to further study" (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2004, p. 44)

The concern about the quality of distance education led to the establishment of National Council for Open and Distance Education (NCODE), later became Australasian Council on Open, Distance and e-Learning (ACODE), to enhance policy and practice of online learning in Australasian Higher Education (Ryan and Brown, 2012). The Australasian Council on Open, Distance and E-learning (ACODE) is an Australasian organization for universities that are engaged or interested in open, distance, flexible and e- learning. Its mission is to enhance policy and practice in these areas (ACODE, 2013). ACODE does not accredit or monitor the programs but it sets benchmarks to ensure quality online learning. In 2010, 36 of Australia's 38 public universities were subscribed to ACODE and using its benchmarks despite the fact adopting these standards in the programs policy and practice is voluntary (Ryan and Brown, 2012). ACODE has developed its benchmarks specifically to assist institutions in delivering quality online learning

and to enhance the experience of students and staff (Sankey et al., 2014). These benchmarks have undergone a major review to ensure their currency and they are divided into the following eight standards or benchmarks (Sankey et al., 2014):

1. Institution-wide policy and governance

2. Planning for institution-wide quality improvement

3. Information technology systems, services and support

4. Pedagogical application of technology enhanced learning services

5. Staff professional development

6. Staff support

7. Student training

8. Student support

Accreditation of Distance Learning in Malaysia

Malaysia is a fast developing country in Southeast Asia with a national vision of achieving developed nation status by 2020 (Wong & Hanafi, 2007). The literacy rate in Malaysia is high 97% (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2004). According to Ayub, Hamid, and Nawawi (2014) the Internet users in Malaysia increased dramatically from only 3,700,000 in 2000 to 17,723,000 in 2010. According to Middlehurst and Woodfield (2006) Malaysia benefited from Australia, New Zealand, and UK in their accreditation system. There are 20 public universities

and 48 private universities including branches of foreign universities (Wong, 2011). Malaysia's initiation into distance learning was in early 1970s with an off-campus program by the University of Science Malaysia (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2004). Three open or virtual universities (Open University Malaysia, Wawasan Open University, and Asian e-University) have been established in the years from 2000 to 2008, which were offering distance learning programs for 90,000 students in 2010 (Jung, Wong, Li, Baigaltugs, and Belawati, 2011). The number of distance learners increased dramatically in Malaysia. In 1996, 17,756 distance learners were studying in more than one public university and by 1998 nine of the eleven Malaysian public universities were offering distance education programs (Ali, Fadzil, and Kaur, 2006). The Open University Malaysia also has witnessed a phenomenal growth from 753 students in 2001 to 75,000 distance learners in 2008 (Kaur and Wati, 2009).

Since 1996, distance learning degrees were accredited in Malaysia using the same standards for face-to-face education but foreign universities programs must first seek the recognition from the Malaysian Public Service Department (JPS) and the local accreditation agency (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2004). In December 2003, the Malaysian Education Minister announced that all distance learning programs from foreign universities would not be recognized unless they are accredited by the Malaysian national accreditation agency (The Observatory, 2003). Although public universities are considered self-accrediting, they require the Ministry's approval to offer a new program and both local and foreign universities qualifications are subject to recognition by Public Service Department (JPS) (Suleiman, 2002). The Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) is the only governmental-recognized agency to monitor QA practices and to accredit the programs of both conventional and open universities (Jung, Wong, Li, Baigaltugs, and Belawati, 2011). New universities in Malaysia have to apply for provisional

accreditation from the MQA before getting the permission from the Ministry of Higher Education to start their programs. Full accreditation has to be gained before the first group of students graduate from the university (Jung, Wong, Li, Baigaltugs, and Belawati, 2011).

Licensing is different than accreditation in Malaysia. Licensing is giving permission to operate while accreditation is recognition to the institution and its programs (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2006). All higher education institutions require approval from the Ministry of Higher Education to operate in Malaysia. All the programs in both private and public universities need to be accredited by the Malaysian Qualification Agency to be offered (Wong and Liew, 2013). To verify the quality, there is a regular academic audit by the governmental regulatory authority in Malaysia but it is not linked to the governments' funding decisions (Jung, Wong, Li, Baigaltugs, and Belawati, 2011). MQA accredits both traditional and open universities and conducts a regular audit to all higher education providers (Wong, 2011). Before 2011 Open Universities and distance learning programs were reviewed and audited using the same accreditation standards established for face-to-face learning. In 2011, a separate list of quality standards was developed particularly for open and distance learning accreditation (Wong and Liew, 2013).

The Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) set nine areas for quality assurance, accreditation, program audit, and evaluation of distance learning programs. Each area has number of benchmarks. These areas with their indicators serve as guidelines for several parties namely Open and Distance Learning Institutions, dual-mode universities, faculties, departments, and units offering online learning courses. These areas are (MQA, 2011):

1. Vision, mission, educational goals and learning outcomes

2. Curriculum design and delivery

3. Assessment of students

4. Student selection and support services

5. Academic staff

6. Educational resources

7. Program monitoring and review

8. Leadership, governance and administration

9. Continual quality improvement (CQI)

Accreditation of Distance Learning in Sri Lanka

According to Liyanagunawardena, Adams, Rassool, and Williams (2014) the literacy rate in Sri Lanka is over 91%, which is higher than the average in South Asia. However, just 3% had completed above secondary education (Riboud, Savchenko, & Tan, 2007). This is because there are only few places for admission at public universities and there is strong competition among students to win one of these available places (Liyanagunawardena, Adams, Rassool, and Williams, 2014). This explains why the Education Modernization Project (DEMP) was commenced to improve the technology infrastructure to offer a quality distance learning for all students to complete their higher education (Liyanagunawardena, Adams, Rassool, and Williams, 2014). Sri Lanka was one of the first countries in Asia to adopt distance education by establishing The Open University of Sri Lanka, as a distance learning institution in 1980 with similar academic and legal status to traditional universities (Coomaraswamy and Abeywardena, 2007). The Open University Sri Lanka (OUSL) has been the sole provider for distance education in Sri Lanka with 25,000 students in 2010. However, several universities have launched distance learning programs in the recent years after the Asian Development Bank-funded Distance Education Modernization Project (DEMP) (Jung, Wong, Li, Baigaltugs, and Belawati, 2011).

The Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council (QAAC) of the Ministry of Higher Education accredits both face-to-face and distance learning programs and it also conducts a regular academic quality audit, which is directly linked to the government's funding decision (Jung, Wong, Li, Baigaltugs, and Belawati, 2011). In order to ensure quality of education in Sri Lanka, the ministry's Distance Education Modernization Project (DEMP) collaborated with the commonwealth to develop a list of quality standards with performance indicators for distance learning systems (institutions) and programs. The indicators for distance learning institutions are divided into ten areas or criteria as follows (Kondapalli, Hope & Coomaraswamy, 2009):

1. Vision, mission and planning

2. Management, leadership and organizational culture

3. The learners

4. Human resource development

5. Program design and development

6. Course design and development

7. Learner support

8. Learner assessment

9. Infrastructure and learning resources

10. Research consultancy and extension services

The indicators for distance learning programs are divided into six areas or criteria as follows (Kondapalli, Hope & Coomaraswamy, 2009):

1. Institutional planning and Management

2. Program design and development

3. Course design and development

4. Infrastructure and learning resources

5. Learner support and Progression

6. Learner assessment and Evaluation

Accreditation of Distance Learning in South Korea

South Korea ("Korea" hereafter) has a population of 49,044,790 (2007 estimate) and it has 330 institutions of higher education with annual enrollment of 3.2 million students (Choi and Ahn, 2010). Online learning commenced in Korea in the late 1990s when several universities started their online courses (Choi and Ahn, 2010). However, in 1972 the Korea National Open University (KNOU) was launched in response to the high demand for higher education, which today attracts more than 270,000 students for its undergraduate online programs (Latchem, Jung, Aoki, and Ozkul, 2007). KNOU is considered Korea's mega-university for open and distance learning (ODL) with more than half a million graduates to date (LEE, 2011). In 2003, Korea was ranked fifth in online learning readiness out of 60 countries surveyed by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU, 2003). Today, not only there are several virtual universities in Korea but also 85% of public and private universities offer some online courses (Latchem, Jung, Aoki, and Ozkul, 2007). By 2010, there were 18 virtual (cyber) universities and colleges, which were offering bachelor's and master's degrees for more than 30,000 distance learners (Jung, Wong, Li, Baigaltugs, and Belawati, 2011)

In Korea, there is a regular academic quality audit by the governmental regulatory authority, which is directly linked to the government's funding decision (Jung, Wong, Li, Baigaltugs, and Belawati, 2011). All the universities have to conduct self-evaluation once every two years and submit their results to the Korean Council for the University Education (KCUE), which is the only agency allowed to accredit conventional universities. On the other hand, the Korea

Education and Research Information Service (KERIS) monitors the quality of cyber or open universities programs based on KERIS special guidelines for cyber universities education (Jung, Wong, Li, Baigaltugs, and Belawati, 2011). To ensure quality of education and accountability and eligibility for public funds, the Korean government represented in the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) presented a list of quality assurance measures including accreditation processes (Im, 2013). MEST in South Korea developed a quality model for virtual (cyber) universities that has 95 indicators in six dimensions: (1) educational planning (clear mission and its integration in institutional policies); (2) instruction (instructional design, content development, delivery and evaluation); (3) human resources (students, academic faculty and administrative staff); (4) physical resources (facilities, hardware and software/network system); (5) management and administration; and (6) educational results (stakeholder satisfaction and social recognition) (MEST, 2008 as cited in Jung, 2011b).

Accreditation of Distance Learning in Jordan

According to IWS (2014) there are 5,700,000 Internet users in Jordan as of June, 2014 comprising 87.3% of the total population (6,528,061) whereas in 2000 there was only 127,300 users. According to Middlehurst and Woodfield (2004) the literacy in Jordan is estimated around 87%. Jordan allowed Arab Open University to have presence in the country, which launched its first academic programs in 2002 (Dirani and Yoon, 2009). "In Jordan, distance courses are seen as of questionable quality offered by overseas providers" (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2004, p.53). Most of the distance learning courses available in Jordan are originated abroad or have been developed in collaboration with American and British universities. The Jordanian government did not recognize these programs (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2006).

Licensing is different than accreditation in Jordan. Licensing is giving permission to operate while accreditation is recognition to the institution and its programs (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2006; Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2004). Higher Education Accreditation Commission (HEAC) is responsible for quality assurance in Jordanian higher education by developing quality standards and monitoring the institutions to ensure their commitment to the quality standards (HEAC, 2015). According to the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MOHE) there are 31 universities including 10 public and 21 private universities in Jordan excluding community colleges (J-MOHE, 2015). All these universities and colleges are subject to the Higher Education Accreditation Commission (HEAC) review.

The new accreditation system for non-Jordanian universities launched in 2010 considered online programs degrees from foreign universities to be accredited under some conditions. The key conditions for accrediting online program degrees from institution outside the country are as follows (J-MOHE, 2011):

1. The University should be ranked in one of the following universities' ranking: Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), Times Higher Education World University Rankings, or QS World University Rankings (J-MOHE, 2014). Before late 2014, top 500 universities in Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) were the only eligible for accreditation (J-MOHE, 2009).

2. Specialization that requires practicum or scientific experiments such as medicine, nursing, and chemistry cannot be accredited when studied online (J-MOHE, 2011).

3. The institution has to be accredited from the recognized agencies in the country of origin (J-MOHE, 2011).

4. The minimum completion period should be not less than on-campus completion period (J-MOHE, 2011).

The Higher Education Accreditation Commission (HEAC) in Jordan developed nine standards to ensure the quality of distance learning programs. These standards are as followings (HEAC, 2015):

1. Vision, mission, objectives, and planning

2. Financial resources

3. Program design

4. Managing online learning systems and programs

5. Students services

6. Instructional design, course development and evaluation

7. Online learning infrastructure

8. Accessibility and management of learning

9. Learning experiences evaluation

Accreditation of Distance Learning in United Arab Emirates (UAE)

According to IWS (2014) there are 8,807,226 Internet users in UAE as of June, 2014 composing 95.7% of the total population 9,206,000 whereas in 2000 the users were only 735,000. In a study that investigated the accreditation standards of distance learning in UAE and interviewed officials from the UAE Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, the author stated "it should be noted that distance programming is at the present time limited in the UAE. Again there was no literature on the specific situation in the UAE with regard to distance education" (Fawwaz, 2008). Accreditation for all higher education programs is mandatory in the UAE but the UAE Ministry of Education did not recognize degrees obtained through online

learning before 2004 due to the lack of accreditation standards and skepticism about the quality of such mode of learning. The first version of the accreditation standards for distance learning was published in 2004, which was found that they were mainly taken from different standards in the US and UK and they were comparable to the Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC)- previously known as Distance Education and Training Council- DETC (Fawwaz, 2008). However, this study will use the latest version of the standards, which was published in 2007 (CAA, 2007).

The Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA) in the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research is Government's Quality Assurance Agency in the UAE, which is responsible for both licensure for higher education institutions and accreditation for individual programs including distance learning programs (CAA, 2011). As of May 2015, there are 78 licensed higher education institutions including private and public universities and two and four year colleges (CAA, 2015). According to the Ministry of Higher Education 2014 statistics, there are only two public universities, 25 private universities, and six licensed foreign universities (UAE-MOHE, 2014).

In September 2013, the Minister of Higher Education approved conditions for accrediting online programs degrees in UAE. The key conditions in that ministerial decree are as follows (UAE-MOHE, 2013):

1. Specialization that requires practicum or scientific experiments such as medicine, nursing, and chemistry cannot be accredited when studied online.

2. The institution has to be accredited from the recognized agencies in the country of origin.

3. The minimum completion period should be not less than on-campus completion period.

4. The number of course credits required for graduation from an online program should not be

less than the credits for the on-campus program.

The Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA) in the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in UAE has the authority to license non-national educational institutions and accredit the academic programs. The CAA developed distance learning standards for licensure and accreditation. It includes ten standards as follows (CAA, 2007):

1. Mission and Institutional Effectiveness

2. Organization, Governance, and Leadership

3. The Academic Program

4. Faculty and Professional Staff

5. Students

6. Library and Other Information Resources

7. Physical and Technology Resources

8. Fiscal Resources

9. Public Disclosure and Integrity

10. Research

A summary of the distance learning accreditation for the nine countries in this study is provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Summary of distance learning accreditation by country

Country	Is online learning accredited?	Accrediting body (AB) or Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)	Regulating or specialized agency for distance learning if different than AB and QAA
Saudi Arabia	Yes- from institutions inside the country only- excluding	National Commission for Academic Accreditation and	The National Center for E-learning and Distance Learning

	specialization that requires practicum or scientific experiments	Assessment (NCAA)-Ministry of Higher Education (renamed as Ministry of Education in 2015)	(NCEL)-Ministry of Higher Education (renamed as Ministry of Education in 2015)
USA	Yes	Regional and national accreditation agencies recognized by US Department of Education and/or Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)	Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC)- previously known as Distance Education and Training Council-DETC
UK	Yes	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)*1, the British Accreditation Council (BAC), and the British Standards Institute (BSI)	Open and Distance Learning Quality Council (ODLQC)
Australia	Yes	Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA)-recently replaced by the Tertiary Education, Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA)	Australasian Council on Open, Distance and e-Learning (ACODE)*2
South Korea	Yes	Korean Council for the University Education (KCUE) for conventional universities including Korean National Open University (KNOU)	Korea Education and Research Information Service (KERIS) for cyber universities only
Sri Lanka	Yes	Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council (QAAC)- Ministry of Higher Education	
Malaysia	Yes	The Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA)- Ministry of Higher Education	

UAE	Yes- excluding specialization that requires practicum or scientific experiments	Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA)-Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research	
Jordan	Yes- excluding specialization that requires practicum or scientific experiments	Higher Education Accreditation Committee (HEAC)-Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research	

1. Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is the only UK QA that its regular audit is mandatory
2. Australasian Council on Open, Distance and e-Learning (ACODE) benchmarks have been adopted by almost all Australian universities voluntarily

A summary of the availability of the Saudi standards in peer and aspirational countries is depicted in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Availability of the Saudi standards in peer and aspirational countries*

Saudi Arabia's Standards	Peer and aspirational countries							
	USA	UK	Australia	South Korea	Sri Lanka	Malaysia	UAE	Jordan
Individual and institutional values	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Learning outcomes	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Program design and development	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Program evaluation	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Evaluation of students	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Educational support	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Teaching quality	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	
Admission and students' information	✔				✔	✔	✔	✔
Information technology	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔

* Some of the standards have different names in different countries' standards or included as sub-dimensions, so the researcher completed this table based on reading the details and performance indicators under each standard in every country.

The availability of the Saudi standards in widely cited quality models and frameworks mentioned in the literature review section of this study are noted in Table 4 below.

Table 4. The availability of the Saudi Standards in widely cited quality models and frameworks mentioned in the literature review of this study

Saudi Arabia Standards	Availability in the literature review models
Individual and institutional values	✔
Learning outcomes	✔
Program design and development	✔
Program evaluation	✔
Evaluation of students	✔
Educational support	✔
Teaching quality	✔
Admission and students' information	
Information technology	✔

Description of the Respondents and Their Demographics

Although selecting experts for this study was mainly based on the criteria of selection stated in the methodology chapter, it is worth mentioning that the chosen 32 experts are from 15 different countries with the eight experts who participated representing six different countries (See Table 5). The participants received their highest academic degrees from four different countries (See Table 6).

Table 5. Countries of invited and participated experts

NO	Country	Number of Invitations Sent	Number of Participants
1	USA	8	3
2	Australia	5	0
3	Canada	5	1
4	UK	1	1
5	New Zealand	1	0
6	Turkey	1	1
7	Germany	1	0
8	Sweden	1	0
9	Indonesia	3	1
10	Malaysia	1	0

11	Sri Lanka	1	0
12	Japan	1	0
13	South Korea	1	0
14	South Africa	1	0
15	Trinidad and Tobago	1	1

Table 6. Countries of experts' highest academic degree

NO	Country of Highest Academic Degree	Number of Participants
1	USA	3
2	Canada	2
3	UK	2
4	Turkey	1

Seven out of eight experts received doctorate degrees and one expert received a master's and also received an honorary doctorate from the Open University, UK. The participated experts are six females and two males. The academic disciplines for the eight experts are as follows: (1) Quality on Open and Distance Learning, (2) Linguistics and ESL, (3) Educational Psychology, (4) Educational Leadership-Higher Education, (5) Adult Education, (6) Biology and Education, (7) Educational Leadership, (8) Distance Education. Experts have various roles in online learning. There were seven roles available to choose from and experts were able to choose more than one role as applicable (see Table 7).

Table 7. Experts' roles in online learning

#	Answer		Response
1	Researcher		2
2	Designer		3
3	Developer		2
4	Instructor		5
5	Administrator		5
6	Practitioner		3
7	Program director		3
8	Other		0

Three experts have ten to 15 years while four have from 16 to 20 years of experience in online learning. Only one expert has 21 years or more of experience. In terms of number of publications, two of the participants have published from two to three, one has from four to five, two have from six to seven, and three have eight or more published research studies in online learning (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Experts' number of publications in online learning
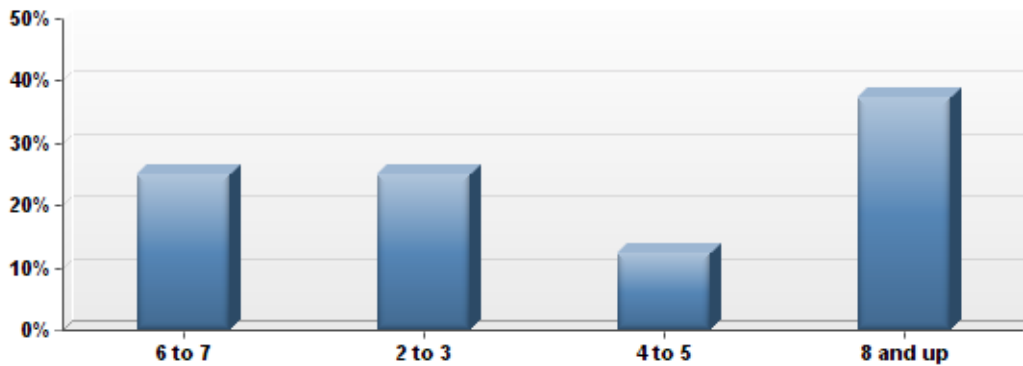
Six of the experts have received awards or other recognition related to online learning. Five of the six experts have received more than one award or recognition. Experts' recognition and awards have been received from various institutions, agencies, companies and associations such as Open Universities in more than one country, Commonwealth of Learning, AECT, Online Learning Consortium (OLC)- previously Sloan C John Bourne, Blackboard, colleges, and States.

The Quality of the Saudi Accreditation Standards for Distance Learning from the Perspective of Experts

In this section, the relevance of Saudi accreditation indicators to their standards and sub-dimensions will be illustrated based on experts' ratings. The data collected from experts about

the importance of the 75 indicators will be exemplified. Each group of indicators was analyzed for relevance to their standards, importance to ensuring quality online learning, and justification when applicable. Therefore, this section is divided into nine sub-sections covering the nine standards. The number of indicators rated by experts is 75, which means that each expert gave 150 judgments. Only 13 out of 150 items have seven ratings out of eight. This means out of 1,200 ratings from the eight experts, there are only 13 ratings missing. In addition, the vast majority of the experts rated these 13 items important and relevant with high scores for the mean. Therefore, the missed values have minimal, if any, impact on the findings. However, the missed values are clarified when discussing the relevant standard.

Standard 1: Individual and Institutional Values. The first standard of individual and institutional values includes 4 indicators rated for both relevance and importance. These indicators were not rated by one of the participants, which compose 8 of the 13 missed values. The indicators focus on commitment to the integrity standards and ethical practices in research, teaching, and evaluation such as *provides a remote proctoring system to prevent cheating* and *providing its students with a tool to ensure the originality of their work before submission.* Generally, there is a high rating on the relevance and importance of these indicators by experts. In both relevance and importance ratings, there is no item rated below 3 except for one item from 1 expert out 7 and for relevance only. Means and standard deviations of the first standard relevance and importance based on all experts' ratings are summarized in Table 8. The depicted high means (M= 4.14 for relevance and M= 4.29 for importance) are evidence of high relevance and importance of this standard for online learning.

Table 8. Experts' ratings to standard 1

Standard	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Standard 1 Relevance	7	3.25	4.75	4.1429	.51755
Standard 1 Importance	7	3.75	5.00	4.2857	.44320

Standard 2: Learning Outcomes. The learning outcomes standard has 8 indicators divided into two sub-dimensions. The first part is relevant to identifying the courses learning outcomes and showing the grades with justifications in the Learning Management System (LMS). The second part is about using instructional strategies, and learning and evaluation activities that are appropriate for learning outcomes. All of the items were rated twice by each of the 8 experts except only one indicator for importance was rated by 7 experts. The high means (4.25 for relevance and 4.62 for importance) indicate that experts found standard 2 highly relevant and important for online learning. The low standard deviations and small range of scores (.401 for relevance and .276 for importance) explicate that there is only a slight discrepancy among experts. Table 9 summarizes the experts' degree of agreement on standard 2.

Table 9. Experts' ratings to standard 2

Standard	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Standard 2 Relevance	8	3.63	4.88	4.2500	.40089
Standard 2 Importance	8	4.25	5.00	4.6183	.27614

Standard 3: Program Design and Development: This standard has 11 items divided into 3 sub-dimensions. The first sub-dimension is centered on having synchronous and asynchronous tools in the LMS and providing interactive learning style between students and their instructors and between students and their classmates. The second part of this standard is about designing digital learning content for the online courses according to an instructional design (ID) model that meets students' needs, and educational and technical standards. The third sub-dimension is about the design of instructional strategies for online courses to be based on standards and specifications for online courses. The result shows that experts rated this standard the lowest for relevance and importance for online learning (M=3.86 for relevance and M=3.85 for importance). Table 10 summarizes the experts' ratings on standard 3.

Table 10. Experts' ratings to standard 3

Standard	N	Mini mum	Maxi mum	Mean	Std. Deviatio n
Standard 3 Relevance	8	2.82	4.73	3.8636	.53673
Standard 3 Importance	8	3.09	4.36	3.8523	.37305

However, there is one item (IN 16) in standard 3 that states "the percentage of synchronous learning is 25% of the total course's credit hours," which was rated poorly by the majority of experts for both relevance and importance. 5 out of 8 experts gave this item either 1 or 2, resulting in low means (M=2.38 for relevance and M=2.25 for importance). Experts justified their low ratings for this item by explaining that the percentage of synchronous learning cannot be defined and it depends on the nature of a course. Another expert thinks that not all courses

require synchronous learning. Another reason provided by experts was related to the different time zones and flexible nature of online learning. Half of the experts also commented on another item despite the majority agreement on its relevance and importance (M=3.50 for relevance and M=3.25 for importance). This indicator (IN 17) states "the percentage of interactive learning is 25% of the learning process for each course". Similar to the previous item, those experts think specific percentage of interactivity cannot be similar for all different courses. Another item has 3 ratings of 2 for importance and 2 ratings of 2 for relevance. This indicator (IN 22) states "both students and teachers participate in supplying the digital learning content". Although there is a minority low rating on this item (M=3.13 for both relevance and importance) it might be useful to include the common comments provided by the experts who gave the low ratings. Mainly, the reason was that it might "not be realistic in some cases to have students participate in supplying digital content…" as stated by one expert and supported by two others in different comments. One expert rated indicator (20) poorly for importance and three others gave it 3 out of 5. This indicator states "the university apply technical quality specifications for digital learning contents that include a minimum of 80% compatibility with SCORM standard, compatibility with the used operating system, easy to update and modify, easy to read text and view pictures". The justification provided by one expert is that "SCORM is so yesterday".

Standard 4: Program Evaluation. The standard of program evaluation has 6 indicators divided into two sub-dimensions. The first sub-dimension is about the utilization of an effective evaluation system to enable students to evaluate their programs and courses and to allow comparing the online program to its counterpart in the classroom. The second is concentrated on tracking online learning processes, archiving and analyzing their data for program evaluation. Based on experts' ratings, this standard is very relevant and very important for online learning

(M= 4.46 for the relevance and M= 4.42 for importance). Table 11 summarizes standard 4 result

of analysis. Two experts commented on indicator (26) with only one low rating for importance. It

states "there is a commitment to evaluating the on campus program and to comparing its results

with the online program evaluation". They think online learning should not be compared with the

face-to-face classes but we should look at them "…on their own merit with regard to their value

to the student and achievement of outcomes" as stated by on of the experts.

Table 11. Experts' ratings to standard 4

Standard	N	Mini mum	Maxi mum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Standard 4 Relevance	8	3.67	5.00	4.4583	.46076
Standard 4 Importance	8	3.67	4.83	4.4167	.35635

Standard 5: Evaluation of Students. There are 11 items under this standard divided into three

sub-dimensions. The first part is about applying several evaluation methods those are appropriate

for the learning outcomes with rubrics consistent with the traditional programs on campus. The

second sub-dimension is about having various tools and methods in the Learning Management

System (LMS) to evaluate students and having question banks that meet learning outcomes and

program's needs. The third part is about having tools in the LMS that ensure immediate and

continuous feedback on students' performance. All of the 11 items were rated twice by each of

the 8 experts except one indicator, which, largely has received high ratings. Mostly, experts

judged standard 5 highly on the relevance (M= 4.26) and importance (M= 4.38) for online

learning. Table 12 summarizes the experts' rating for this standard including maximum and minimum means among individual raters.

Although there is no single item in this standard that has 4 out of 8 or more ratings under 3 out of 5, there is 1 item out of 11 that has a low mean (M<3) for both relevance (M= 2.88) and importance (M= 2.50). This indicator (IN 33) states "to meet the learning outcomes, the LMS has easily-accessed question bank for each course consisting of not less than 250 categorized questions". The reason for low ratings is that it is very specific and the number should depend on the field of study as justified by two experts. Only two experts also rated indicator (31) poorly but provided a justification that might be useful for policy makers to report. This indicator states "the online courses commit to the same level of workload as the face-to-face classes on campus". The two experts think that there is no need to compare the two different modes of learning in terms of workload, instead similar quality should be maintained.

Table 12. Experts' ratings to standard 5

Standard	N	Mini mum	Maxi mum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Standard 5 Relevance	8	3.73	5.00	4.2261	.45676
Standard 5 Importance	8	3.82	4.91	4.3784	.37369

Standard 6: Educational Support. This standard has 21 indicators divided into nine sub-dimensions. The first four sub-dimensions are about providing academic support, students' electronic evaluation to this support, students' services for learners with different needs, and monitoring and organizing students' academic progress and courses credit load. The remaining

five sub-dimensions are focused on the digital library access, content of publications and references, training on using, assistance on searching, and notifications of update on information sources. It also includes indicators offering a virtual lab for students and employees who need it. There are high ratings by experts on the relevance (M= 4.24) and importance (M= 4.29) of this standard for online learning. Table 13 summarizes the experts' ratings on standard 6.

Table 13. Experts' ratings to standard 6

Standard	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Standard 6 Relevance	8	3.76	5.00	4.2440	.43453
Standard 6 Importance	8	3.71	4.90	4.2857	.36444

Standard 7: Teaching Quality. The standard of teaching quality has 5 indicators under two sub-dimensions. The first part is about using the instructional strategies stated in the course syllabus with flexibility in meeting the need of students from different groups. The second is about applying effective online teaching skills for online courses by instructors. All of the 5 indicators were rated twice by each of the 8 experts except one importance item, which was rated by 7 experts. Mainly, experts rated standard 7 highly relevant (M= 4.47) and important (M= 4.53) for online learning. Table 14 summarizes the experts' ratings on standard 7.

Table 14. Experts' ratings to standard 7

Standard	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation

Standard 7 Relevance	8	3.40	5.00	4.4750	.52304
Standard 7 Importance	8	3.40	5.00	4.5313	.55093

Standard 8: Admission and Students' Information. The standard of "admission and students' information" has 3 indicators under two sub-dimensions. The first is about applying an electronic system for students' admission into the programs that offer the specializations, admission requirements, and online application. The second is about an independent Student Information System (SIS) that supports registration and dropping classes, viewing schedules, grades, and getting transcripts. All of the 3 indicators were rated twice by each of the 8 experts except one importance item, which was rated either 4 or 5 by 7 experts. The mean of all individuals' means is extremely high (M= 4.67) for relevance and (M= 4.75) for importance. Table 15 summarizes the result of standard 8 ratings.

Table 15. Experts' ratings to standard 8

Standard	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Standard 8 Relevance	8	3.67	5.00	4.6667	.53452
Standard 8 Importance	8	3.67	5.00	4.7500	.46291

Standard 9: Information Technology. The standard of "information technology" has 6 indicators that all are under one sub-dimension. It is centered on the utilization of an online portal that works as an electronic gate for all distance-learning systems. The analysis of the result

exemplifies that this standard has received the highest rating by the experts (M= 4.75 for relevance and M= 4.87 for importance). The variance of this standard (SD= .252 for relevance and SD= .231 for importance) is noticeably smaller than all other standards. Table 16 summarizes the results of standard 9 ratings.

Table 16. Experts' ratings to standard 9

Standard	N	Mini mum	Maxi mum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Standard 9 Relevance	8	4.33	5.00	4.7500	.25198
Standard 9 Importance	8	4.33	5.00	4.8750	.23146

The lowly rated items among the 75 indicators for relevance have been discussed earlier. Table 17 below shows all the items ranked by the highest mean score for their relevance to their standards. 5 indicators that are higher than the rest of the items will be highlighted in this paragraph. Indicator 74 is ranked the first and it states *the university legally uses all the systems, applications, and services owned by others and provides its students with the required licenses that help them meet their needs from such educational services*. This first item with indicator 72, which is ranked second and narrated next, are both in standard 9 (information technology). Indicator 72 states *the online portal is compatible with the operating systems (Windows, Mac, and Linux) and with the most common web browsers (Internet Explorer, Firefox, Safari, and Chrome)*. They both have 5 mean scores. Indicator 66, which is in standard 7 (teaching quality), has also a mean score of 5 and is ranked 3rd. It states *the university provides training to instructors in their role in an online teaching and effective online teaching skills*. Indicator 54

which is in standard 6 (educational support), is ranked 4th with 4.88 mean score. This item states *students can easily access educational sources such as digital library, multimedia, experiments, studies, and digital books in different forms using basic or advanced search for an online view or download.* The first indicator of the first standard (individual and institutional values) is ranked 5th with 4.86 mean score. It states that *students and instructors at the university produce original work, avoid plagiarism, protect authors' intellectual property, abandon conflicts of interest, and commit to academic integrity standards.*

Table 17. Ratings of single indicators for the relevance by the highest mean score

Rank	Indicator and standard #	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	IN74 Standard 9.1R	8	5	5	5.00	.000
2	IN72 Standard 9.1R	8	5	5	5.00	.000
3	IN66 Standard 7.2R	8	5	5	5.00	.000
4	IN54 Standard 6.6R	8	4	5	4.88	.354
5	IN1 Standard 1.1R	7	4	5	4.86	.378
6	IN73 Standard 9.1R	8	4	5	4.75	.463
7	IN71 Standard 9.1R	8	4	5	4.75	.463
8	IN68 Standard 8.2R	8	4	5	4.75	.463

9	IN65 Standard 7.2R	8	4	5	4.75	.463
10	IN38 Standard 5.3R	8	4	5	4.75	.463
11	IN30 Standard 5.1R	8	4	5	4.75	.463
12	IN29 Standard 4.2R	8	4	5	4.75	.463
13	IN25 Standard 4.1R	8	4	5	4.75	.463
14	IN12 Standard 2.2R	8	4	5	4.75	.463
15	IN36 Standard 5.3R	7	4	5	4.71	.488
16	IN2 Standard 1.1R	7	4	5	4.71	.488
17	IN69 Standard 8.2R	8	3	5	4.63	.744
18	IN67 Standard 8.1R	8	4	5	4.63	.518
19	IN56 Standard 6.6R	8	4	5	4.63	.518
20	IN55 Standard 6.6R	8	4	5	4.63	.518
21	IN53 Standard 6.5R	8	3	5	4.63	.744

22	IN44 Standard 6.2R	8	3	5	4.63	.744
23	IN43 Standard 6.1R	8	3	5	4.63	.744
24	IN41 Standard 6.1R	8	3	5	4.63	.744
25	IN27 Standard 4.2R	8	3	5	4.63	.744
26	IN11 Standard 2.2R	8	3	5	4.63	.744
27	IN75 Standard 9.1R	8	4	5	4.50	.535
28	IN70 Standard 9.1R	8	3	5	4.50	.756
29	IN57 Standard 6.7R	8	4	5	4.50	.535
30	IN34 Standard 5.3R	8	4	5	4.50	.535
31	IN32 Standard 5.2R	8	4	5	4.50	.535
32	IN26 Standard 4.1R	8	3	5	4.50	.756
33	IN63 Standard 7.1R	8	3	5	4.38	.744

34	IN59 Standard 6.8R	8	3	5	4.38	.916
35	IN45 Standard 6.2R	8	3	5	4.38	.744
36	IN35 Standard 5.3R	8	3	5	4.38	.744
37	IN23 Standard 3.3R	8	3	5	4.38	.744
38	IN18 Standard 3.2R	8	4	5	4.38	.518
39	IN15 Standard 3.1R	8	1	5	4.38	1.408
40	IN10 Standard 2.2R	8	3	5	4.38	.744
41	IN62 Standard 7.1R	8	1	5	4.25	1.389
42	IN60 Standard 6.8R	8	3	5	4.25	.707
43	IN46 Standard 6.2R	8	3	5	4.25	.886
44	IN39 Standard 5.3R	8	3	5	4.25	.886
45	IN31 Standard 5.1R	8	2	5	4.25	1.165

46	IN21 Standard 3.2R	8	3	5	4.25	.886
47	IN19 Standard 3.2R	8	3	5	4.25	.886
48	IN13 Standard 3.1R	8	2	5	4.25	1.035
49	IN9 Standard 2.1R	8	3	5	4.25	.707
50	IN7 Standard 2.1R	8	3	5	4.25	.707
51	IN5 Standard 2.1R	8	3	5	4.25	.707
52	IN51 Standard 6.4R	8	3	5	4.13	.835
53	IN47 Standard 6.2R	8	3	5	4.13	.991
54	IN24 Standard 4.1R	8	3	5	4.13	.835
55	IN42 Standard 6.1R	8	2	5	4.00	1.069
56	IN37 Standard 5.3R	8	2	5	4.00	1.069
57	IN64 Standard 7.1R	8	1	5	4.00	1.309
58	IN28 Standard 4.2R	8	3	5	4.00	.756

59	IN52 Standard 6.4R	8	3	5	3.88	.991
60	IN14 Standard 3.1R	8	1	5	3.88	1.356
61	IN6 Standard 2.1R	8	3	5	3.88	.991
62	IN61 Standard 6.9R	8	1	5	3.87	1.356
63	IN58 Standard 6.8R	8	2	5	3.75	.886
64	IN50 Standard 6.4R	8	3	5	3.75	.886
65	IN20 Standard 3.2R	8	1	5	3.75	1.282
66	IN49 Standard 6.3R	8	1	5	3.63	1.302
67	IN48 Standard 6.3R	8	2	5	3.63	1.061
68	IN40 Standard 5.3R	8	1	5	3.63	1.302
69	IN8 Standard 2.1R	8	2	5	3.63	1.061
70	IN4 Standard 1.1R	7	3	4	3.57	.535
71	IN17 Standard 3.1R	8	1	5	3.50	1.604
72	IN3 Standard 1.1R	7	1	5	3.43	1.397

73	IN22 Standard 3.2R	8	2	5	3.13	.991
74	IN33 Standard 5.2R	8	1	5	2.88	1.356
75	IN16 Standard 3.1R	8	1	5	2.38	1.302

Indicators that received lowest rating by experts have been discussed earlier. Table 18 reveals all the items ranked by the highest mean score for their importance for quality online learning. Since the top ten indicators all received a perfect mean score (5), they all will be highlighted in this paragraph. Similar to the relevance rating, items 74 and 72 from standard 9 (information technology), item 66 from standard 7 (teaching quality), and item 1 from standard 1 (individual and institutional values) are also in the top important indicators for online learning. Indicator 41, which is in standard 6 (educational support), is also among the top ten items. It states that *the Learning Management System (LMS) has asynchronous (email, forum) and synchronous tools (voice and text chatting) through which the students communicate with their instructors and academic advisors to obtain the needed academic support.* Indicators 30, 36, and 38, which are all in standard 5 (evaluation of students) received also the same perfect mean score. Item 30 states that *the courses offer evaluation methods with the following characteristics: (A) diversity such as exams, projects, reports, and essays; (B) clarity in describing the expected student's performance through a rubric; (C) continuity of evaluation during the semester; (D) sufficiency of the evaluation methods for determining the student mastery level of the learning outcome.* The indicator 36 states *students receive feedback easily in a way that secures their privacy and confidentiality.* The indicator 38 states that *the LMS allows teachers to write comments on the*

students' performance in learning activities and in the course in general and make them available online so student can see them. Indicators 11 and 12 are both from standard 2 (learning outcomes) with the highest mean score. Item 11 states that *instructional strategies and learning activities are appropriate for the course content.* Indicator 12 is the last to mention here among the top ten. It states that *selected evaluation methods are appropriate for learning outcomes, which can be in various forms such as an essay or research paper, multiple choice exam questions, student work portfolio, reports, and projects.*

Table 18. Ranking of single indicators for the importance by the highest mean score

Rank	Indicator and standard #	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	IN74 Standard 9.1IM	8	5	5	5.00	.000
2	IN72 Standard 9.1IM	8	5	5	5.00	.000
3	IN66 Standard 7.2IM	8	5	5	5.00	.000
4	IN41 Standard 6.1IM	8	5	5	5.00	.000
5	IN38 Standard 5.3IM	8	5	5	5.00	.000
6	IN36 Standard 5.3IM	7	5	5	5.00	.000
7	IN30 Standard 5.1IM	8	5	5	5.00	.000

8	IN12 Standard 2.2IM	8	5	5	5.00	.000
9	IN11 Standard 2.2IM	8	5	5	5.00	.000
10	IN1 Standard 1.1IM	7	5	5	5.00	.000
11	IN73 Standard 9.1IM	8	4	5	4.88	.354
12	IN71 Standard 9.1IM	8	4	5	4.88	.354
13	IN70 Standard 9.1IM	8	4	5	4.88	.354
14	IN68 Standard 8.2IM	8	4	5	4.88	.354
15	IN65 Standard 7.2IM	8	4	5	4.88	.354
16	IN54 Standard 6.6IM	8	4	5	4.88	.354
17	IN29 Standard 4.2IM	8	4	5	4.88	.354
18	IN10 Standard 2.2IM	8	4	5	4.88	.354
19	IN9 Standard 2.1IM	8	4	5	4.88	.354
20	IN53 Standard 6.5IM	8	3	5	4.75	.707

21	IN69 Standard 8.2IM	8	3	5	4.75	.707
22	IN56 Standard 6.6IM	8	4	5	4.75	.463
23	IN55 Standard 6.6IM	8	4	5	4.75	.463
24	IN39 Standard 5.3IM	8	4	5	4.75	.463
25	IN34 Standard 5.3IM	8	4	5	4.75	.463
26	IN32 Standard 5.2IM	8	4	5	4.75	.463
27	IN27 Standard 4.2IM	8	3	5	4.75	.707
28	IN25 Standard 4.1IM	8	4	5	4.75	.463
29	IN18 Standard 3.2IM	8	4	5	4.75	.463
30	IN13 Standard 3.1IM	8	4	5	4.75	.463
31	IN75 Standard 9.1IM	8	4	5	4.63	.518
32	IN43 Standard 6.1IM	8	3	5	4.63	.744

33	IN21 Standard 3.2IM	8	3	5	4.63	.744
34	IN5 Standard 2.1IM	8	4	5	4.63	.518
35	IN67 Standard 8.1IM	7	4	5	4.57	.535
36	IN6 Standard 2.1IM	7	4	5	4.57	.535
37	IN2 Standard 1.1IM	7	4	5	4.57	.535
38	IN63 Standard 7.1IM	8	3	5	4.50	.756
39	IN37 Standard 5.3IM	8	3	5	4.50	.756
40	IN15 Standard 3.1IM	8	1	5	4.50	1.414
41	IN59 Standard 6.8IM	8	3	5	4.38	.916
42	IN46 Standard 6.2IM	8	3	5	4.38	.744
43	IN45 Standard 6.2IM	8	3	5	4.38	.744
44	IN23 Standard 3.3IM	8	3	5	4.38	.916
45	IN62 Standard 7.1IM	8	1	5	4.25	1.389

46	IN60 Standard 6.8IM	8	3	5	4.25	.707
47	IN47 Standard 6.2IM	8	3	5	4.25	1.035
48	IN42 Standard 6.1IM	8	3	5	4.25	.886
49	IN35 Standard 5.3IM	8	3	5	4.25	.707
50	IN24 Standard 4.1IM	8	3	5	4.25	.886
51	IN61 Standard 6.9IM	8	1	5	4.13	1.458
52	IN57 Standard 6.7IM	8	1	5	4.13	1.356
53	IN44 Standard 6.2IM	8	3	5	4.13	.835
54	IN28 Standard 4.2IM	8	3	5	4.13	.835
55	IN7 Standard 2.1IM	8	3	5	4.13	.835
56	IN64 Standard 7.1IM	7	1	5	4.00	1.528
57	IN50 Standard 6.4IM	8	3	5	4.00	.756
58	IN58 Standard 6.8IM	8	3	5	4.00	.756

59	IN31 Standard 5.1IM	8	1	5	3.88	1.642
60	IN19 Standard 3.2IM	8	3	5	3.88	.835
61	IN51 Standard 6.4IM	8	3	5	3.87	.835
62	IN40 Standard 5.3IM	8	1	5	3.87	1.356
63	IN8 Standard 2.1IM	8	3	5	3.87	.835
64	IN3 Standard 1.1IM	7	3	5	3.86	.900
65	IN26 Standard 4.1IM	8	1	5	3.75	1.488
66	IN49 Standard 6.3IM	8	1	5	3.75	1.282
67	IN48 Standard 6.3IM	8	2	5	3.75	1.035
68	IN4 Standard 1.1IM	7	3	5	3.71	.756
69	IN52 Standard 6.4IM	8	3	5	3.63	.916
70	IN14 Standard 3.1IM	8	1	5	3.50	1.309
71	IN20 Standard 3.2IM	8	1	5	3.38	1.188

72	IN17 Standard 3.1IM	8	1	5	3.25	1.488
73	IN22 Standard 3.2IM	8	2	5	3.13	1.126
74	IN33 Standard 5.2IM	8	1	4	2.50	1.309
75	IN16 Standard 3.1IM	8	1	3	2.25	.707

Additional Standards Recommended by Experts

Generally, it seems that experts were very satisfied with the 9 standards. However, one of the experts suggested that the standard of "educational support" should be divided into two standards (faculty support and student support). Another expert indicated that the standard of "individual and institutional values" can be extended to include policies on course development copyrights and appropriate policies for staff recruitment that must be based on competencies for online teaching.

Summary of the survey result. The analysis of the results demonstrated that experts rated all 9 standards highly relevant and important. These findings imply the soundness of the Saudi accreditation standards for ensuring quality distance learning. Out of the 75 indicators, there was only 1 item that received low ratings by majority of experts (IN 16 in standard 3). The experts' justification was reported and also applied to indicator 17 as explained. There is another item (IN 33 in standard 5) that received a low score (M<3) despite having the majority of experts rating on 3 and up out of a 5 point scale. All other items received high ratings (3 or more out of 5) by the majority of experts and have high mean scores (M>3). However, the qualitative

analysis showed that some of the experts (not the majority) did not support very few other indicators (IN 17, 20 & 22 in standard 3, IN 26 in standard 4, and IN 31 in standard 5). The comments were provided for their expected usefulness for policy makers. This indicates a consistency between the individual item analysis and the total standard analysis based on total experts' ratings. It affirms why standard 3 was ranked the last among the 9 standards as illustrated in Tables 19 and 20. These tables show the ranking of all 9 standards by the highest mean score and they also demonstrate which standards have lowest variance based on experts' ratings.

Table 19. Ranking of standards for relevance by the highest mean score

Rank	Standard	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Standard 9 Relevance	8	4.33	5.00	4.7500	.25198
2	Standard 8 Relevance	8	3.67	5.00	4.6667	.53452
3	Standard 7 Relevance	8	3.40	5.00	4.4750	.52304
4	Standard 4 Relevance	8	3.67	5.00	4.4583	.46076
5	Standard 2 Relevance	8	3.63	4.88	4.2500	.40089
6	Standard 6 Relevance	8	3.76	5.00	4.2440	.43453
7	Standard 5 Relevance	8	3.73	5.00	4.2261	.45676

| 8 | Standard 1 Relevance | 7 | 3.25 | 4.75 | 4.1429 | .51755 |
| 9 | Standard 3 Relevance | 8 | 2.82 | 4.73 | 3.8636 | .53673 |

Table 20. Ranking of standards for importance by the highest mean score

Rank	Standard	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Standard 9 Importance	8	4.33	5.00	4.8750	.23146
2	Standard 8 Importance	8	3.67	5.00	4.7500	.46291
3	Standard 2 Importance	8	4.25	5.00	4.6183	.27614
4	Standard 7 Importance	8	3.40	5.00	4.5313	.55093
5	Standard 4 Importance	8	3.67	4.83	4.4167	.35635
6	Standard 5 Importance	8	3.82	4.91	4.3784	.37369
7	Standard 6 Importance	8	3.71	4.90	4.2857	.36444
8	Standard 1 Importance	7	3.75	5.00	4.2857	.44320
9	Standard 3 Importance	8	3.09	4.36	3.8523	.37305

Chapter summary

This chapter examined the regulations, rules, and conditions for accrediting distance learning in 9 countries including Saudi Arabia. It validated the Saudi standards for distance learning against aspirational and peer countries' standards as well as widely cited models in the literature review. The second part of the findings reported the experts' ratings to the Saudi quality indicators in terms of their relevance to their standards and in terms of their importance to distance learning. Next, the findings will be discussed and recommendations, implications, and future research will be proposed.

CHAPTER FIVE: Discussion

Introduction

This study investigated the quality of the Saudi Arabia's distance learning accreditation standards. It explored standards of quality by comparing them to quality models frequently cited in the literature review. It also benchmarked these standards to aspirational and peer countries. A panel of experts also validated the standards.

Discussion

These findings suggest that accreditation of online learning degrees is an issue in Arabic countries in general and in Saudi Arabia in particular. According to Gani (2009) there is still an ambiguity in the quality assurance policies for distance learning in Arabic countries. Distance learning degrees are still not recognized from the Saudi Ministry of Education if they are gained from outside the country. This was also the case in Jordan and UAE a few years ago. These three Arabic countries still have restrictions and conditions for accrediting distance learning degrees, which are neither available in the other Asian countries nor in the aspirational countries in the west. Based on the Saudi Arabian conditions for distance learning accreditation, no distance learning program is accredited unless it is from a licensed institution with a physical presence in the country. The institution must have the same distance learning program offered traditionally on-campus. This means virtual universities or programs that exclusively offered via distance either locally or internationally are not recognized. Jordan requires that the institution being ranked by any of three well-known universities' rankings. In Malaysia, foreign university distance learning programs are recognized only when accredited by the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA). In Australia and UK, there is no difference in the quality review between face-to-face and online degree as revealed in the findings. The distance learning degrees are also very

recognized in these countries by government authorities, employers, other institutions for further studies, and the society. This is absolutely not the case in Saudi Arabia and partly some other Arabic countries.

The method of review and accreditation of distance education in Saudi Arabia is different from some of the studied countries and similar to others. Saudi Arabia has to provide a license to the institution to operate and then accredit its programs. This is the same case in Malaysia, Korea, Sri Lanka, UAE, and Jordan. On the other hand, accreditation is voluntarily in the US, UK and Australia. Generally, universities in these three countries are self-accrediting. This shows a distinctive feature only in aspirational countries. However, there is a mandatory regular audit by the regulating authorities to institutions in the UK and Australia. The existence of tens of accreditation agencies in the US is a unique situation compared to all other cases in this study. This might bring in varieties and flexibilities in accreditation but, at the same time, it might bring in inconstancy for the accreditation standards for one country. The accreditation of some of these agencies are being obtained by overseas universities such as the DEAC accreditation that has been gained by the University of Southern Queensland in Australia.

Similar to Saudi Arabia, Australia, UK, US, Korea, have a specialized agency, which set only online learning standards. However, in Saudi Arabia, the National Center for E-learning and Distance Learning (NCEL) is a governmental regulating body that monitors the performance of distance learning programs but only the National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment is the sole authority that provides the accreditation in Saudi Arabia. The Korean case is identical to the Saudi system. Conversely, in Australia, UK, and US, these specialized agencies provide a voluntarily accreditation and they are not governmental regulating bodies or authorities. UAE, Jordan, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka, on the other hand, have the same regulating

body for both face-to-face and online learning, which is a governmental authority that must accredit any new programs in their countries to be recognized. Programs and institutions cannot receive public funds until they are accredited in Korea and Sri Lanka. It is the same case with programs in the US but it is only linked to the institution's eligibility for students' loans funds.

All the 9 Saudi accreditation standards for distance learning except one exist in the frequently cited quality models mentioned in the second chapter of this study. The standard of admission and students' information is the only standard that is not available in the literature review quality models that mentioned in this study. However, there is no standard that has been mentioned in these different models and it is not available in the Saudi framework.

When Saudi quality standards for distance learning compared to the 8 countries of this study, number of similarities and differences have been found. All the Saudi 9 standards are available in the US, Sri Lank, Malaysia, and UAE accreditation standards. There are 6 of these standards, which exist in UK standards and 7 are available in the Australian framework. Jordanian and Korean standards have only one standard missing from them. The 4 standards of program design and development, evaluation of students, educational support, and information technology are available in all the studied cases. The 4 standards of individual and institutional values, learning outcomes, program evaluation, and teaching quality exist in all the 9 countries except one. The standards of individual and institutional values and program evaluation do not exit in the UK framework. Learning outcomes standard is not available in the Australian standards and teaching quality does not exist in the Jordanian framework. Only one standard (i.e., admission and students' information) does not exit in more than one country (UK, Australia, and Korea). This means it is available in 6 countries' standards including Saudi Arabia. Surprisingly, it is the same standard that does not exit in the literature review models mentioned in this study (see tables 2

and 3). This might be because "admission and students' information" exist by default in educational institutions regardless of the learning mode. However, the inclusion of this standard in 6 countries' frameworks out of 9 indicates its overall importance. Also, it's ranking, based on experts' ratings, as the second standard for both relevance and importance confirms its high value.

There are some standards that are available in more than one country framework but they are not available in the Saudi standards. The standard of financial resources is essential in the accreditation standards of US, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Jordan, and UAE but it is not part of the Saudi framework. The standard of human resources development included the development of administrators in two peer countries. In Saudi Arabia and in the rest of the other countries, students and instructors are only the focus of the development. Three countries including one aspirational country have continual quality improvement as an independent standard but it is available in the Saudi case under program evaluation. Two peer countries have a standard for research strategy and productivity, which does not exist in the Saudi case. Selling (marketing) and collaborative provision are two unique standards in the UK case only. This may be because the UK universities work with other partners to provide learning overseas such as the case of British programs in Jordan. Program mission, objectives, management, and facilities are standards that almost exist in all countries including Saudi Arabia. However, these standards are clearly indicated as separate standards for academic quality in the Saudi case.

The overall high ratings from experts to the Saudi accreditation standards indicate their overall quality. Low mean scores or negative qualitative justification were provided for only very few statements. Standard 9 (information technology) has, more than all other standards, indicators ranked among the top ten items. This explains why it was also ranked the highest

among the 9 standards. In contrast, standard 3 (program design and development) was ranked the lowest standard with highest number of low score items. However, the overall mean score for the standard was not low (3,86 for relevance and 3.85 for importance). In addition, this standard exists in all the 9 countries' quality framework and in the literature review quality models (see tables 2 and 3). Thus, it indicates its high importance for online learning. However, as explained earlier few items under this standard have an issue particularly with determining specific percentages for specific learning activities. Educational support standard has a significantly high number of indicators (21) in comparison to other standards. There is no justification or note provided by the standards developers for such observation. However, it is expected that distance learners would need more educational and technical support than on-campus students. Also, this standard is divided into 3 or more standards in other countries frameworks such as student support, faculty support, and students' services.

Implications

Applying the accreditation standards for distance learning programs in Saudi Arabia is expected to improve the quality of these programs. This may improve the learning inputs and outcomes from these programs. It also can change the skepticism about its quality among different stakeholders. Thus, more students may join distance learning programs and more job opportunities might be offered for online degrees holders. The distorted image among the society about this learning mode might change. Decision makers in Saudi Arabia and other countries may benefit from this study findings to review and improve their accreditation standards. Some of the different regulations regarding accreditation of distance learning that are available in the aspirational and peer countries might be adopted in the Saudi system in the future.

Recommendations

This research studied the quality of the Saudi accreditation standards for distance learning. Thus, the findings can recommend number of suggestions for policy makers in Saudi Arabia particularly the Ministry of Education and National Center for E-Learning and Distance Learning (NCEL) that developed the standards and regulate the distance learning programs in the country. Although the study revealed an overall quality of the Saudi standards based on the experts' rating and benchmarking other countries frameworks, the study recommends a minor revision to the standards. Some of the 75 indicators have issues as suggested by the participated experts. For example, two indicators determined 25% as required percentage for each of interactive learning and synchronous learning, which experts rated poorly for specifying percentages regardless of the nature of the course and the characteristic of flexibility in distance learning. Oddly, these two items are not only available as indicators in the standards but they are also mentioned again as major conditions for licensing an institution to deliver online learning programs. These percentages have not been found in other countries' frameworks. The standard of educational support was found to have significantly high quality indicators. Some other countries' standards and an expert's feedback suggest dividing this standard into two or three standards such as faculty's support, students' support, and students' services. The benchmarking of the Saudi model showed that the standards are common in other countries' accreditation standards. The standard of financial resources and the sub-dimension of administrators' development might need to be added to the Saudi model similar to other countries explored in this study. As indicated in this study some Saudi universities distance learning programs have students from other countries, so the standards of selling (marketing) and collaborative provision found in the UK case might be useful to be adopted in the Saudi model. This should increase

students' numbers at Saudi universities particularly in Arabic Language and Islamic Studies where Saudi universities are internationally well known. The Ministry of Education also should consider the possibility of recognizing distance learning degrees from outside the country since it is the only country in the study that still does not recognize such degrees. This can be recognized using conditions, for instance, similar to Jordanian or UAE cases particularly both share similar geographic location, language, and culture with Saudi Arabia. Both UAE and Jordan recognize distance learning from foreign providers with some conditions. Saudi Arabia is also the only country in the study that requires an availability of equivalent accredited traditional program that has at least one class of graduation. This precludes establishing virtual universities, which solely depend on distance education, in the country and discourages Saudi citizens from joining such universities located in other countries. Saudi Arabia is the only case that has strict conditions for licensing foreign universities. The UAE case, which is a neighbor to Saudi Arabia and among the Gulf countries, has branch campuses for foreign universities inside the country. Thus, the findings also recommend a change to the regulation and ruling for licensing and accreditation of distance learning programs and institutions in Saudi Arabia. As indicated in the literature review that some Saudi universities have distance students from other countries, Saudi Arabia might consider benefiting from the British collaborative provision experience to deliver their online programs with overseas partners. This should also lead to updating the regulations and add some additional standards like selling and collaborative provision similar to UK case.

The findings of this study then can be also used to recommend the following suggestions:

1. Designers of distance education should design the programs according to the quality framework and accreditation standards required by the regulating and accrediting bodies in the institutions' countries. Also, instructional designers should analyze the target group; e.g.

their age, nationality, gender, previous experiences and any important social factor in their life should be known clearly in order to personalize the learning, and design the course accordingly. The design should be based on the collected information about the learning environment, learners, the topics to be covered, the number of the modules to be delivered, and the deadlines for these courses. Moreover, the method of approaching the learning tasks should be planned carefully.

2. Program directors should incorporate the accreditation standards in their programs to ensure quality and to be eligible for accreditation if it is required or desired.

3. Higher education institutions owners or boards should be aware of the licensing requirement for any country in which they are planning to open a branch. This also applies to those who plan to establish new private universities.

4. Universities can benchmark their online programs to successful institutions' programs to ensure quality of their courses and review if needed.

5. Since the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia have been integrated this year, NCEL might consider designing separate quality standards that fit the K-12 educational system. However, this requires studying the K-12 learning environment and its needs. When developed and applied, these standards can improve the quality of both supportive online learning and sole distance learning. During my teaching in K-12 in Saudi Arabia, I found out that we have students who get their high and middle schools through home schooling system without receiving any formal teaching. They come to our school just for their final examination after reading their books independently. Provision of quality distance learning should be very useful to those students.

Limitations of the Study

This study did not evaluate the application of the Saudi accreditation standards in the universities as institutions in the country have not yet incorporated the standards. Evaluating its application might recommend other changes. The study focused on the Saudi standards, so the survey findings cannot be generalized to other countries' standards. However, the result of the qualitative analysis and benchmarking might be useful for other countries particularly those included in this study. Another limitation is that this study did not collect data from stakeholders in Saudi Arabia particularly faculty and students. However, since online learning is new in the country and Saudi universities have not applied the standards of this study yet, this goal was unachievable. The quality standards in this study are in the context of higher education, so they cannot be generalized to include K-12 education. The standards are also designed particularly for distance learning, so the findings do not include face-to-face quality assurance.

Future Research

This study found that there are concerns in Arabic countries including Saudi Arabia about the quality of distance learning. There is more than one possible reason for this concern. It might be because countries in the West typically export the knowledge while Arab countries import it. Distance education also has been in these countries for decades while Arabic countries have not been introduced to online programs degrees until the last few years. However, real causes need to be investigated in further research. This can be achieved by collecting data from different stakeholders including students, teachers, program directors, and society. Another study can collect data from employers to find out what are the attributes they think traditional learners have and distance learners do not have to be qualified for their jobs.

A study can be piloted to measure the readiness of the Saudi universities and their infrastructure to adopt the accreditation standards. After universities apply the standards on their courses, research can be conducted to evaluate the quality of these standards after their implementation. The methodology of this study can be replicated to benchmark the accreditation standards of other countries, accreditation agencies, and universities. Another study might seek developing quality standards for K-12 online education in Saudi Arabia.

Conclusion

This research investigated the quality of distance learning accreditation standards in Saudi Arabia by comparing them to widely cited quality models. It also benchmarked the Saudi standards against 3 aspirational countries and 5 peer countries. In addition, the regulations and conditions for accrediting distance learning in these countries have been explored to find out how they are similar or different from the Saudi system. Group of international experts, in a survey design, validated the Saudi quality indicators for distance learning. The findings of the study indicated an overall soundness of the Saudi accreditation standards with recommendation for minor revision and improvement. It also suggested adopting some of other countries' regulations for distance learning accreditation in Saudi Arabia.

APPENDIX A – The Survey

This section includes demographic information. Please choose the answer that best describes you.

Gender:

○ Male

○ Female

Level of Education:

○ Bachelors

○ Masters

○ Doctorate

Your academic discipline or field of study:

[   ]

Your role in online learning (you may have more than one choice for this answer):

☐ Researcher

☐ Designer

☐ Developer

☐ Instructor

☐ Administrator

☐ Practitioner

☐ Program director

☐ Other

[   ]

Years of experience in online learning:

○ 5-9

○ 10-15

○ 16-20

○ 21 and up

Number of publication in online learning:

○ 2 to 3

○ 4 to 5

○ 6 to 7

○ 8 and up

Have you received any award or other recognition related to Online Learning?

○ Yes. Please specify below

○ No

Country of work:

Country where you received your highest academic degree:

>>

This section includes questions regarding your perception of the quality of online learning indicators by rating them in terms of their relevance to the standard (dimension) and sub-dimension from 1 to 5 by having (1) as "strongly irrelevant", (2) "irrelevant", (3) "somewhat relevant", (4) "relevant", and (5) "strongly relevant" in the first column. You will also rate the indicators in terms of their importance to quality online learning by having (1) as "unimportant" (2) "little importance", (3) "moderately important", (4) "important", and (5) "very important" in the second column. If low rating is given (1 or 2 out of 5 points in likert-scale) for relevance, importance, or both, please justify this very briefly in column 3. There is one short open ended question by the end of this survey.

Standard 1: Individual and Institutional Values:

Sub-dimension 1.1: students and instructors are committed to the ethical practices in research, teaching, and evaluation

	Relevance					Importance					Justification
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	If 1 or 2 given
1-Students and instructors at the university produce original work, avoid plagiarism, protect authors' intellectual property, abandon conflicts of interest, and commit to academic integrity standards.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	[ ]
2- The university uses plagiarism detection system.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	[ ]
3- The university provides a remote proctoring system such as Securexam to prevent cheating in online exams and activities.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	[ ]
4- The University provides its students with a tool (e.g. WriteCheck) to ensure the originality of their work before submission.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	[ ]

Standard 2: Learning Outcomes:

Sub-dimension 2.1: The program and courses' learning outcomes are determined and written in an online Learning Management System (LMS)

	Relevance					Importance					Justification
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	If 1 or 2 given
5-Students in the program can easily access their courses ' learning outcomes and goals via the LMS before and after registration.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	[ ]
6- Students receive justification for their given grades for specific learning outcomes via LMS.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	[ ]

	Relevance	Importance	Justification
7- The learning outcomes in LMS can be modified, removed, or added and connected with learning activities and evaluation tools.	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	
8- Each student is provided with a "student portfolio", which shows his or her personal information, achieved learning outcomes, evaluation of knowledge and skills, and the participation level in learning activities.	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	
9- The LMS has clear instructions and examples that make it user-friendly to build courses and set the learning outcomes by instructors.	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	

Standard 2: Learning Outcomes:
Sub-dimension 2.2: Identifying and using instructional strategies, and learning and evaluation activities that are appropriate for learning outcomes

	Relevance					Importance					Justification
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	If 1 or 2 given
10- Instructional strategies and learning activities are appropriate for the students' characteristics and distance learning.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
11- Instructional strategies and learning activities are appropriate for the course content.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
12- Selected evaluation methods are appropriate for learning outcomes, which can be in various forms such as an essay or research paper, multiple choice exam questions, student work portfolio, reports, and projects.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	

Standard 3: Design and development of programs:
Sub-dimension 3.1: The Learning Management System (LMS) provides an interactive learning style in which students can interact with their teachers throughout the learning process.

	Relevance					Importance					Justification
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	If 1 or 2 given
13- The learning management system (LMS) supports both synchronous and asynchronous activities and communication in the following forms: learner to learners, learner to teacher, learner to content, collaborative learning, and feedback.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
14-The LMS provides the necessary tools for synchronous learning such as virtual classrooms, shared virtual white board, audio/video conferencing, and chatting.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
15-The LMS provides the necessary tools for asynchronous learning such as educational forums, assignments and activities, social networks, emailing, interactive e-books, blogs, and wikis.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
16- The percentage of synchronous learning is 25% of the total course's credit hours.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
17- The percentage of interactive learning is 25% of the learning process for each course.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	

Standard 3: Design and development of programs:
Sub-dimension 3.2: Designing digital learning content for the online courses according to an instructional design (ID) model that meets students' needs, and educational and technical standards

	Relevance					Importance					Justification
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	If 1 or 2 given
18-The university applies educational quality specifications to the digital and interactive learning content which offer ease of use, flexibility in design, interactivity, learning objectives, authenticity of content, motivation, and relevance to learning outcome. It also meets learners' need, organizes the instructional materials into topics and units, and connects the previous knowledge to the new knowledge.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
19-The university provides evidence that its digital content was developed by professional specialists.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
20- The university apply technical quality specifications for digital learning contents that include a minimum of 80% compatibility with SCORM standard, compatibility with the used operating system, easy to update and modify, easy to read text and view pictures.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
21-The digital learning content supports all the different learning styles and abilities.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
22- Both students and teachers participate in supplying the digital learning content.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	

Standard 3: Design and development of programs:
Sub-dimension 3.3: The design of instructional strategies for online courses is based on standards and specifications for online courses. The strategies are integrated with the learning outcomes.

	Relevance					Importance					Justification
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	If 1 or 2 given
23- The online courses are designed according to an Instructional Design (ID) model such as (ADDIE) by taking into consideration the following: (A) analyzing learning objectives (cognitive, affective, and psychomotor), learning environment and learners; (B) determining learning activities, instructional strategies, communication tools, learning content, and evaluation and feedback methods.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	

Standard 4: Program evaluation:
Sub-dimension 4.1: The utilization of an effective evaluation system to enable students to evaluate their programs and courses and to allow comparing the online program to its counterpart in the classroom

	Relevance					Importance					Justification
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	If 1 or 2 given
24- The online program provides various evaluation tools within the LMS that are appropriate for distance											

	Relevance					Importance					Justification
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	If 1 or 2 given
tools within the LMS that are appropriate for distance learning. The tools include online questionnaires, features of writing comments, ensuring anonymity of participated students, and viewing evaluation results in numbers and in visuals.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
25-The evaluation includes questions about the course content, instructional strategies, exams, assessment, and the teacher's performance.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
26- There is a commitment to evaluating the on campus program and to comparing its results with the online program evaluation.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	

Standard 4: Programs evaluation:

Sub-dimension 4.2: The Learning Management System (LMS) allows for tracking learning processes for both the courses and the programs, archiving and analyzing their data in order to make use of these information for the course and program evaluation.

	Relevance					Importance					Justification
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	If 1 or 2 given
27- The LMS allows for tracking the performance and online processes for students and instructors so that it can be used for program and courses evaluation. The system tracks and records all processes in the content, virtual classroom, exams, and assignments including learner's progress, number of visits, time spent, and date and time of visit.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
28- The LMS provides tools for quantitative and qualitative analysis of student learning.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
29- The university establishes a clear approach for making use of the tracked and recorded data for program and courses evaluation.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	

Standard 5: Evaluation of students:

Sub-dimension 5.1: The implementation of several evaluation methods those are appropriate for the learning outcomes and the nature of the course. These methods are sufficient to determine the students' mastery level for the learning and to measure their performance. Its design is based on the quality standards for online learning programs, which makes its requirements and rubrics consistent with the traditional programs on campus.

	Relevance					Importance					Justification
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	If 1 or 2 given
30- The courses offer evaluation methods with the following characteristics: (A) diversity such as exams, projects, reports, and essays; (B) clarity in describing the expected student's performance through a rubric; (C) continuity of evaluation during the semester; (D) sufficiency of the evaluation methods for determining the student mastery level of the learning outcome.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
31-The online courses commit to the same level of workload as the face-to-face classes on campus.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	

Standard 5: Evaluation of students:
Sub-dimension 5.2: The Learning Management System (LMS) has various tools and methods to evaluate students and also has questions banks that meet learning outcomes and program's needs.

	Relevance					Importance					Justification
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	If 1 or 2 given
32-The Learning Management System (LMS) has various tools and methods to evaluate students' learning including methods that allow self-assessment, e-assessment, and traditional assessment.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
33-To meet the learning outcomes, the LMS has easily-accessed questions bank for each course consisting of not less than 250 categorized questions.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	

Standard 5: Evaluation of students:
Sub-dimension 5.3: The LMS has tools that ensure immediate and continuous feedback on students' performance

	Relevance					Importance					Justification
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	If 1 or 2 given
34- The LMS has tools that provide feedback for assignments, activities, exams, and progress in the courses and in the program.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
35- Students can get feedback and scores via email, text messages, and student portfolio.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
36-Students receive feedback easily in a way that secures their privacy and confidentiality.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
37-The LMS allows students to identify areas of weakness and strengths, achieved and non-achieved learning outcomes, course progress, and grade. Students can compare grades to the class average.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
38- The LMS allows teachers to write comments on the students' performance in learning activities and in the course in general and make them available online so student can see them.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
39-The LMS has a student portfolio for tasks and achievements. Teachers can write grades, notes, comments, and all kinds of feedback on each student collection of work in the portfolio.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
40-The LMS creates a learning prescription for non-achieved goals, areas of weakness with recommendations for improvement in forms of web-links, documents, activities, and readings.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	

Standard 6: Educational support :
Sub-dimension 6.1: Academic support is available online 7 days a week. Sufficient instructors are available in scheduled times to offer consultation and guidance to students.

	Relevance					Importance					Justification
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	If 1 or 2 given
41-The Learning Management System (LMS) has											

	Relevance	Importance	Justification
asynchronous (email, forum) and synchronous tools (voice and text chatting) through which the students communicate with their instructors and academic advisors to obtain the needed academic support.	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	
42- Ample communication methods are available (e.g. phone lines), for students who need academic support 7 days a week and 24 hours a day.	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	
43- The university is committed to having sufficient instructors in scheduled times announced online to provide guidance to students.	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	

Standard 6: Educational support:
Sub-dimension 6.2: The students' ability to evaluate electronically and periodically the effectiveness of students' academic support

	Relevance					Importance					Justification
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	If 1 or 2 given
44- There is a plan for students to evaluate academic support based on identified quality indicators such as response time, number of topics for each instructor, numbers of students' help requests, and etc. The evaluation includes all means and tools of support.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
45- Students are allowed to evaluate academic support in different ways such evaluation form and program forum.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
46- Academic support evaluation questions are embedded in the courses evaluation electronic questionnaires.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
47- The LMS allows students to give their opinion about the system and the different aspects of the learning process.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	

Standard 6: Educational support:
Sub-dimension 6.3: Effective students services are available for those who face administrative, logistics, and learning difficulties taking into consideration their individual differences.

	Relevance					Importance					Justification
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	If 1 or 2 given
48- The Learning Management System (LMS) and the students information system include information about students' social, health, educational, and geographic situations. It clarifies whether they need any support or not.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
49- The LMS presents rules and regulations suiting different types of services for students from all categories including special needs students.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	

Standard 6: Educational support:
Sub-dimension 6.4: Techniques are provided to monitor and organize students' academic progress and courses credit load to avoid any learning difficulties or obstacles.

	Relevance					Importance					Justification
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	If 1 or 2 given
50- The students' information system helps to determine the appropriate credit load for each student based on his or her level and GPA.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
51- Based on the course credit hours, the program determines the minimum and maximum of assignments, projects, and exams required from every student in each course. Their timing is scheduled in a way that enables students to do them without any obstacles.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
52- The LMS provides students with follow-up reports that show their performance in comparison to their classmates and to the rubrics.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	

Standard 6: Educational support:
Sub-dimension 6.5: The program offers a digital library that includes the newly published and required references, books, and research papers.

	Relevance					Importance					Justification
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	If 1 or 2 given
53-There is a digital library that meets the program's needs by providing enough books, journals, researches and other types of references in all available specializations and in required languages.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	

Standard 6: Educational support:
Sub-dimension 6.6: The program provides an easy access for various educational sources such as the digital library and similar services. It also offers virtual labs for some programs that require them.

	Relevance					Importance					Justification
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	If 1 or 2 given
54- Students can easily access educational sources such as digital library, multimedia, experiments, studies, and digital books in different forms using basic or advanced search for an online view or download.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
55- The availability of a virtual lab for all the students if courses require it.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	
56- Lab experiments are available to students at any time.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	

Standard 6: Educational support:
Sub-dimension 6.7 Training programs in using the digital library and virtual lab are available for new students and new employees.

	Relevance					Importance					Justification
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	If 1 or 2 given

| 57-The LMS and the University website have a schedule of training courses that are accessible to new students and instructors to join either virtually or on campus so that they can learn how to use the digital library and virtual lab. | ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ | ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ | [   ] |

Standard 6: Educational support:

Sub-dimension 6.8: The digital library user can get assistance in searching and accessing information sources.

	Relevance					Importance					Justification
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	If 1 or 2 given
58-In order to receive help in using the digital library, students and instructors can book a consultation appointment via the university LMS to meet with a library support personnel within two days.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	[ ]
59-The university system allows students to chat online with the library support personnel to answer their questions.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	[ ]
60-The University provides a telephone line that is available for students to call 24 hours and seven days a week if they need technical support for digital library.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	[ ]

Standard 6: Educational support:

Sub-dimension 6.9: Students and instructors are aware of any update or addition in the educational sources, digital library, and virtual lab.

	Relevance					Importance					Justification
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	If 1 or 2 given
61-The LMS offers an automated announcement system to notify students and instructors about any updates or news related to educational sources, digital library, or virtual lab.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	[ ]

Standard 7: Teaching Quality:

Sub-dimension 7.1: Faculty members abide by the instructional strategies stated in the course syllabus and have flexibility to meet the needs of students from different groups.

	Relevance					Importance					Justification
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	If 1 or 2 given
62- The Learning Management System (LMS) supports appropriate instructional strategies that are stated in the syllabus such as group discussion, problem solving, exercise and practice, collaboration, discussion, case study, live and recorded lectures, games, simulations, self learning, peers learning, and projects.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	[ ]
63- The course design reflects a plan to use various instructional strategies that are appropriate for different learning outcomes.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	[ ]
64- Instructors are abided by the instructional											

strategies identified in the course syllabus.

○ ○ ○ ○ ○ | ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ |

Standard 7: Teaching Quality:
Sub-dimension 7.2: Instructors teach their online courses effectively by applying effective online teaching skills.

	Relevance	Importance	Justification
	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	If 1 or 2 given
65- The university provides instructors with a document in "teaching quality in an online learning environment" prepared or approved by specialist in online learning. This document includes instructors' role in online teaching and effective online teaching skills.	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	
66- The university provides training to instructors in their role in an online teaching and effective online teaching skills.	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	

Standard 8: Admission and Students' Information:
Sub-dimension 8.1: The university applies an electronic system for students' admission in the programs.

	Relevance	Importance	Justification
	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	If 1 or 2 given
67- The university provides an electronic system that has information about all offered specialization, admission requirements, and an online application.	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	

Standard 8: Admission and Students' Information:
Sub-dimension 8.2: There is an independent Student Information System (SIS).

	Relevance	Importance	Justification
	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	If 1 or 2 given
68- There is a Student Information System (SIS) that supports registration, dropping classes, and viewing classes' schedule, and programs' plans.	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	
69-The SIS provides every student with an academic transcript that includes the grades and progress has been made in the program.	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○ ○ ○	

Standard 9: Information Technology:
Sub-dimension 9.1: The utilization of an online portal that works as an electronic gate for all distance learning systems

	Relevance	Importance	Justification
	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	If 1 or 2 given

70- There is an integration of the online portal with all the other learning systems, viewing all information needed by students and instructors in one page, and allowing access of all learning systems through this portal.

71-The online portal is secure including its systems and applications for all users. User name and password will be required for access and can be used for single sign-in to all systems. The system will automatically sign out when not used for a pre-determined period of time.

72-The online portal is compatible with the operating systems (Windows, Mac, and Linux) and with the most common web browsers (Internet Explorer, Firefox, Safari, and Chrome).

73-The online portal and LMS support mobile devices operating systems (Android, IPhone, and Windows) and can show the portal content in shorter form that is compatible with these systems for mobile devices.

74- The university legally uses all the systems, applications, and services owned by others and provides its students with the required licenses that help them meet their needs from such educational services.

75-The University portal provides online training courses with self-assessment for applicants, freshmen students, and recently employed instructors to teach them how to use the portal, LMS, and their tools. It demonstrates what will be required from them during their studies or teaching.

The 9 standards listed above are (1) Individual and institutional values, (2) Learning outcomes, (3) Design and development of the programs, (4) Program evaluation, (5) Evaluation of students, (6) Educational support, (7) Teaching quality, (8) Admission and students' information, and (9) Information technology.
Are there any standards that you think should be added to this list? If yes, please list them very briefly and clearly below

Please press the arrow below to end the survey and submit your response

>>

APPENDIX B – Research Information Sheet

Information Sheet
Title of Study: The Quality of Saudi Accreditation Standards for Distance Learning: Benchmarking and Expert Validation

Principal Investigator (PI):   Sultan Alarifi
                                    Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Instructional Technology
                                    Wayne State University
                                    313-421-9088

Purpose:
You are being asked to be in a research study on the quality of online learning because you have been identified as an expert based on the following criteria:
- The expert must have at least five years experience in online learning (required).
- The expert must have a record of publication in online learning (at least 2 published studies in peer reviewed journals, or book chapters/ or have served as a book editor in the area of accreditation or quality of online learning. (required).
- The expert can be a researcher, instructor, developer, designer, program director, practitioner, administrator, consultant, or other role or position in online learning (required).
- The expert is an award holder or has received recognition for his or her work in online learning (desired but not required).

This study is being conducted online at Wayne State University. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. In this research, we want to validate the Saudi accreditation standards for online learning.

Study Procedures:
If you take part in this study, you will be asked to complete one survey, which may take from 30 to 60 minutes. You will be asked few and very general demographic questions but there will be no identifiable information requested. This means no identifier will be used to connect you to your responses. You will not be asked to give your name or email address. Your role will be rating a list of quality indicators for distance learning in terms of their importance to online learning quality and in terms of their relevance to the standard (dimension) and sub-dimension they were grouped in. In case of low rating (1 or 2 out of 5 points in likert-scale) is given, you will be kindly asked to provide a very brief justification. There will be one short open ended question by the end of the survey.

Benefits:
As a participant in this research study, there will be no direct benefit for you; however, information from this study may benefit other people now or in the future.

Risks:
There are no known risks at this time to participation in this study.

Costs:
There will be no costs to you for participation in this research study.

Compensation:
You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

Confidentiality:
All information collected about you during the course of this study will be kept without any identifiers.

Voluntary Participation /Withdrawal:
Taking part in this study is voluntary. You are free to not answer any questions or withdraw at any time.

Questions:
If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact Sultan Alarifi (researcher) at Salarifi@wayne.edu or at the following phone number: +1 (313)-421-9088. You may also contact the researcher's advisor (Dr. Ingrid Guerra-Lopez) at ingrid.guerra-lopez@wayne.edu.

Participation:
By completing the online survey questions you are agreeing to participate in this study. Please press the arrow below to start the survey.

>>

APPENDIX C – Experts' Invitation

From: Principle researcher (me)

To: An expert

Cc: My advisor

Subject: Invitation for participation as an expert in quality of online learning

Dear Dr. (Expert name added),

My name is Sultan Alarifi. I am currently a PhD candidate in Instructional Technology at Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan. I am conducting a study for my doctoral dissertation titled "The Quality of Saudi Accreditation Standards for Distance Learning: Benchmarking and Expert Validation". I will be grateful if you could spare some of your valuable time to participate in my study. You are being asked to be in this research because you have been identified as an expert in online learning. I am asking your participation to validate a set of distance learning quality indicators for the Saudi Accreditation Standards for Distance Learning. Specifically, you would be asked to rate a list of indicators in terms of their (a) relevance to the standards and sub-dimensions they were grouped in and (b) importance to quality online learning. In case of low rating (1 or 2 out of 5 points in Likert-scale) is given, you will be kindly asked to provide a very brief justification.

This validation process may take approximately 30 to 60 minutes to complete. If you are willing to share your expertise for this study, please let me know by (day and date) and I would be very pleased to send you the link for the validation package and instructions available online in Qualtrics. Attached to this email is also a copy of the research information sheet for your consideration. The sheet has the criteria for expert selection and I will be grateful if you could suggest some names to me. As appreciation for your participation, I would be more than happy to share the findings of my study with you.

Please feel free to contact me or my advisor, Dr. Ingrid Guerra-Lopez (ingrid.guerra-lopez@wayne.edu), at any time regarding this study.

I look forward to hearing from you

Thank you so much in advance for your consideration.

Sultan Alarifi
PhD Candidate in Instructional Technology
Wayne State University
Email: ……
Phone No: ……

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ABSTRACT

THE QUALITY OF SAUDI ACCREDITATION STANDARDS FOR DISTANCE LEARNING: BENCHMARKING AND EXPERT VALIDATION

by

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The quality of distance learning is a concern among different stakeholders. An online learning degree is recognized in some countries while it is not accredited in others. Saudi Arabia is one of these countries that have skepticism in the quality of distance learning. It also has specific conditions for accrediting distance learning programs. Saudi Arabia recently has developed accreditation standards to ensure the quality of this learning mode but Saudi universities have not adopted the standards yet. Thus, the quality of these standards has not been tested yet. Therefore, this study investigates the quality of these standards by applying the methodology of benchmarking to compare their quality to frequently cited quality models for online learning and to aspirational countries in the West (US, UK, and Australia) and to peer countries in Asia (South Korea, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka) and Arabic Region (Jordan and United Arab Emirates (UAE)). It also explores the differences and similarities in the regulations of distance learning accreditation between these 8 countries and Saudi Arabia. The study also validates the standards in a survey design using experts' rating to the relevance and importance of the Saudi standards for quality distance learning. The findings revealed an overall quality of the Saudi standards based on benchmarking and experts'

rating. Suggestions have been made to improve or change very few quality indicators. The regulations and rules for accrediting distance learning in Saudi Arabia are found to be strict in comparison to other countries. Therefore, the study also recommended policy makers in Saudi Arabia to adopt some of the regulations and standards of distance learning accreditation available in some of the aspirational and peer countries. Other recommendations have been suggested to different stakeholders including higher education institutions, instructional designers, and program directors.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

SULTAN A. ALARIFI is an assistant professor in the Instructional Technology Department in the College of Education at the University of Tabuk, Saudi Arabia. He received his PhD in Instructional Technology from Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan. He earned an MA in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Education from the University of Nottingham and an MSc in Educational Research from the University of Exeter, England. He received his BA in English Language and Translation from the College of Languages and Translation, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. His previous research was focused on higher education virtual campuses (3D) in massively multi users environments. His current academic research is focused on the evaluation and development of distance, online and virtual learning environments. He also is researching in quality assurance and accreditation standards, processes, and systems in Higher Education in different countries in America, Europe, Australia, Asia, and Arabic countries. His area of specialization is performance improvement and training and his professional interests include need assessment and evaluation. He attended several meetings for the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI)-Michigan chapter. He also presented in the ISPI 2014 conference in Indianapolis. He has co-authored an article published in the *Performance Improvement* (PI) journal titled "Six Sigma and HPT: is there a difference that matters?. He volunteered during summer of 2013 in data analysis for a Red Cross project in Detroit K-12 schools. He is interested in participating in good cause projects that benefit societies and countries all over the world. His previous professional experiences include working as translator and an interpreter in an American company, teaching English in K-12 schools, and working as an analyst in the Sector of Strategic Planning and Development in the Saudi Telecom Company (STC). He may be reached at Salarifi@ut.edu.sa or Sarifi@gmail.com.