

**OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT  
IN THE MIDDLE EAST THROUGH DISTANCE LEARNING**

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Many schools within the United States are using on-line learning, especially for their graduate programs, specifically for their flexibility and convenience. Due to these features, institutions are able to attract a geographically diverse group of students. Typically, these are students who cannot leave their jobs, or for family reasons, cannot re-locate to live near campus. This feature makes it amenable for international students to enroll in such programs. In our own master's program in nursing administration, which is offered in on-line modality, our faculty decided to build campus visits once a month in order to facilitate face-to-face interaction with faculty and among students themselves. To some extent, this limits the enrollment of international students, although we have had students who reside 3000 miles away, whose employers pay for the trip expenses. A number of international students attend this program full time, residing on campus.

In the early days of distance education, the main reason for the trend was the convenience to students. However, as the community has matured and technology has evolved to become more reliable, a clearer philosophy has evolved on how this modality can enrich learning. Teaching strategies have been developed to take advantage of opportunities that on-line learning affords for creating a rich learning environment and using strategies for promoting critical thinking skills.

Rather than discussing the specifics of course delivery and specific strategies, I believe it is more important to focus on the overall trends. When offered at the graduate level, courses that have a clinical component present a challenge; many schools have solved this issue by arranging clinical placements near the location of the student; working with a preceptor in a clinical agency, the faculty member maintains ongoing contact with both the student and the preceptor and provides supervision to the student as needed. Course seminars are conducted on-line with the students enrolled in the clinical course where they share their experiences, and analyze issues as a group that individuals bring to their peers and faculty for discussion. Through this avenue students have the opportunity to learn from each others' experiences that further enriches their learning. We call this vicarious learning when students learn from each others' experiences and ideas, since not everyone can have every experience.

At the doctoral level an increasing number of programs are being offered on line, either partially or completely; requirements vary, with some schools requiring residency periods on campus, ranging monthly, to several times a year, to once a year. Students are assigned campus advisors, but also, have a co-advisor near their locations. For example, one of our own senior faculty members serves as a

mentor to a junior faculty member who is enrolled in an on-line PhD program 1600 miles away.

Thus, if carefully chosen, these types of programs lend themselves to serving the needs of international students very well. A word about international students in this regard: for those students who come from traditional societies where respect for elders or authority figures like teachers is cultivated throughout the educational process and indeed, throughout their upbringing, or where women are not empowered to the extent we see in Western societies, or where students are accustomed to a passive mode of learning, online learning poses special challenges. While being respectful is an admirable quality, within a western learning environment we cultivate independence of thought among our students; they are encouraged to question and challenge and to engage in active learning, and indeed, to direct their own learning under the guidance of faculty. In this type of environment students from traditional societies require special attention from faculty to make sure that they are not lost, and to devote special attention to “bring them out.” They eventually do so and blossom intellectually, with each student achieving this at his/her own pace. [However, I am also aware that these students who have evolved into critical thinkers and leaders in our university environments, ironically, face a reverse problem when they return home, in terms of difficulty in being accepted by their own countrymen for their outspokenness and forthright manner of expressing themselves].

The increasing number of on-line graduate programs in the U.S. and around the world provides an opportunity for schools and faculty members in various countries to take advantage of them in helping to develop the individuals' level of education and expertise, which in turn will help schools develop their own institutional programming. One cautionary note however: Enrolling a faculty member in a distance learning graduate program should be a partnership between the faculty member and his/her institution, so that adequate provision is made to support the individual – in terms of time allocated for study and type of assignment given, sufficient resources, and the like.