Exploring Intranet Use In Higher Education: The Case Of Two Uzbek Universities

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Abstract: The aim of this study was to conduct a comparative study on the use of Intranet by local and international universities and investigate potential uses and misuses of Intranet in providing distance learning support for students. The research was conducted at Westminster International University in Tashkent and at Gulistan State University. The research tools used include the survey and interview methods which helped to collect quantitative and qualitative data from students of both universities. The research findings suggest that Intranet at WIUT has not been used effectively in delivering online learning experience for students. At Gulistan State University, Intranet was not introduced as a distance learning platform at all. However, respondents from Gulistan State University have admitted the potential of Intranet in delivering quality teaching and learning.

Index terms: Intranet, e-learning, distance learning, online socialization, interactive activities, technology.

1 INTRODUCTION

Currently, using information technology (IT) in teaching and learning has become one of the indispensable parts of education all over the world. Besides guaranteeing convenience to students, IT encourages development of critical thinking [2], autonomy in learning [3] and creativity. In the age of technology where there are countless amounts of data on a range of topics, effective use of technology and learning the ethics of using information is becoming urgent. Moreover, preparing professionals who are able to use IT and implement it in working practice has become an urgent task for the higher education institutions. In the past when there were no TV’s and radios, and books were less available, classroom was a heart of learning, classroom was a door to the world of knowledge, where students could learn how ancient civilizations in Egypt had built their pyramids, how electric bulb functions and where the rain came from. With such an excess of mobile phones and devices and availability of internet connection to virtually everyone, classroom is no longer a place where students and learners can feel the joy of learning something new. Surprising students with new information is not an easy job anymore. Thus blending traditional classroom with use of technology seems to be one of the possible solutions of making a classroom the heart of learning again. Only by making formal learning and teaching more interesting and entertaining than mobile devices and apps, productive learning, especially among young learners and teenagers can be ensured. Therefore, combining traditional teaching methods with modern technology has become the task No. 1 of the modern day education. Recently corporate intranets have been gaining popularity in managing education across the globe. Intranets are used to support teaching, learning, managing and administering education institutions. The aim of this study is to examine the possible improvements to the existing Intranet systems, utilized for educational purposes, to show how Intranet provides opportunities for enhancing learning and teaching for universities which has not adopted the Intranet yet.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Universities across the world employing wide range of learning management systems (LMS) in increasing availability of education to all, improving quality of teaching and learning, providing ease of access to information and learning for students. However, not all educational institutions are able to exploit such technologies. Moreover, the higher education institutions, which employ such technologies as Intranet and LMS platforms do not utilize them to their full extent. Since its invention Intranet has been actively used in many organizational contexts ranging from business enterprise, government organizations to educational institutions. The interest in the usability of Intranet has been the object of research of many scholars, who focused on the purpose, availability, convenience and information sharing, interaction promoting, and online socializing functions of Intranet. Smith, Rudd & Coghlan [5] in their Harnessing Technology Schools Survey 2008 found that many school in the context of UK employ their online platforms and intranets mainly as a repository of teaching related documents, multimedia files and resources. Rajalampi [6] in his study which aimed at investigating the usability of Intranet in multinational company revealed that the role of Intranet in multinational companies “was still to act as a top-down information distributing channel” (p211). The participants of the study appreciated the function of the Intranet by which all work related instructions, documents and other materials were placed in one easy to access place. Moreover, the respondents also were keen on availability of company news, information about changes and appointments on the Intranet. As for the information sharing function of the Intranet, Rajalampi [6] found that Intranet in the target company did not have social networking functions as chatting, posting and commenting on news and did not provide access to information sharing among employees within the Intranet. In the context of educational institutions, Intranet was studied in terms of its motivating factors, engagement of students in the Intranet activities and socializing aspect of Intranet. Allebone [1] in her research, conducted among the primary education course students at Goldsmith University of London, found that most of the students in the course highly appreciated the on-line socialization aspect of the Intranet. By on-line socialization students had opportunities to share knowledge and information on the content of conferences created by their tutors, which also positively contributed to their learning within the course. Moreover, according to Allebone’s [1] findings, Intranet has enhanced learning and teaching by enabling students to exchange information about the content of the course. Allebone [1] also found that on-line socializing function of the Intranet, which was realized by discussion forums and conferences, has also contributed to knowledge construction of the course...
participants in a positive way. Usability of Intranet is another major concern of website and intranet developers, as well as researchers, in terms of exploring the user friendliness and effectiveness of Intranet. Masrek, Abdul Karim, & Hussein [4] put forward several hypotheses in designing the tools to measure the usability of Intranet in organizations. According to their studies, computer literacy level of Intranet users has either positive or negative impact on the Intranet adoption within the organization. Moreover, user involvement also contributes either negatively or positively to the successful implementation of the Intranet in an organization.

3 METHODOLOGY
Two universities, one international (WIUT) and one national University (GSU), were chosen in order to conduct the research with the view that the data collected from both universities would then be compared to each other. The study population comprised overall 70 students. From WIUT there were 37 male students and 15 female students overall, 52 students, and 16 students took part in the survey from GSU, 14 being male and 2 females. The level of studies of the WIUT students' population was as follows: 1st and 3rd year students made about 57 % of the participants (each 28.8%) whereas 2nd year students accounted for 21% of the total population, 13% were second year students, post graduate students’ accounted for 4% each from level 1 and level 2. A questionnaire designed employing free online software Google Forms and a semi-structured interview were used as research methods in the study. A questionnaire consisting of 15 questions was utilized in order to receive quantitative data, since at this stage of the research the opinions of multiple students were of importance. Besides, a semi-structured interview was used for a deeper analysis of the respondents’ answers from GSU, since there was a hypothesis that the students of GSU could feel difficulty to understand some of the notions and terms which then could be explained during the process of the interview by the interviewer. Furthermore, extra questions which appeared during the interview process could subsequently be asked. The participation in the poll and interview was anonymous and the respondents were assured that the gathered data would be used only for the research purposes. The first three questions of the questionnaire were aimed at collecting the demographic data. The next two were given to know to what extent the respondent is computer and Internet literate. Furthermore core questions regarding the frequency of using the university Intranet, its quality and related reasons for using and some improvement suggestions were asked in further six questions. The questionnaire consisted of multiple choice, scale and open ended items. There were 7 pre-prepared questions for the interview. However, as it was mentioned above during the interview process new clarifying questions appeared which helped to receive more deliberate answers to the questions.

4 RESULTS
In this section the results of the questionnaire and semi structured interview responses will be presented and compared. The question about computer literacy revealed that the WIUT students rank themselves strong (52%) and medium user (48%). Whereas, during the interview in GSU, 90% of students admitted that they are medium users of computer. The students of WIUT rank themselves as either strong Internet literate or medium; each option accounted for 50%, respectively in GSU students voted for medium more than strong user, 60% against 40%. According to the results the WIUT students use Intranet mostly for downloading study materials (90,4%), uploading courseworks (71,2%), for accessing learning resources centre materials (48,1%) and for watching and listening to study materials (46,2%). When asked the students 85% of interviewed GSU students did not know what the Intranet means. However, after explaining the term, almost all of the respondents replied that Intranet would improve the quality of teaching and learning at the University: “...Intranet will improve the quality of Education because it include[s] all the useful information we need to prepare to the semester, job offers ... for students, work placements or employment opportunities for graduates, all ... events offered at the University, you can also download documents that can prove useful to you.” (student 1, May 2019).

WIUT students expressed following suggestion to improve the available Intranet system at the University:

- Make the Intranet User friendly (interface design, comfortable usage via mobile devices, easy access to WIUT’s regulations, access from all browsers, a better working search engine)
- Notification possibility (coming deadlines, exam notifications, marks publishing, lecturers’ office hours)
- Information exchange (uploading materials in various formats, lectures and seminars need titles, optimization of download system, uploading more related materials – videos, podcasts and etc., access to other modules materials, video recorded lessons, feedback for the completed tasks)
- Interactive activities and tasks (opportunity to test knowledge)
- Communication (chatting option with the group-mates and lecturers)
- LRC optimization (books return deadline and prolongation option)
- Providing feedback on students’ performance.

If the university had a plan to enhance the opportunities of Intranet, the students of GSU suggested the following:

- Options for material exchange (download lectures & other materials, upload of the tasks, getting feedback)
- Socialization functions (with lecturers, teachers and group-mates and other students)
- Online activities and tasks
- News update about the University

To the same question GSU students responded as follows: downloading study materials (100%), doing online activities (100%), watching and listening to study materials, chatting with group mates, communicating with lecturers, keeping updated with the university news received the same amount of responses (50%).

5 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS
The results suggest that students at WIUT see the Intranet as the place where education related documents, study materials can be downloaded and courseworks can be uploaded. This does not add up to the efficient use of the
Intranet as learning and teaching platform. The study also suggests that national universities (in the example of Gulistan State University) do not employ intranet for teaching and learning purposes at all. Another factor that hinders the effective use of the Intranet for educational purposes is the lack of online socializing features. By introducing features as posting, online chatting and online conferencing to the Intranet will enhance the learning and teaching process to a great extent which has been suggested by Allebone [1]. As Allebone [1] states by socializing students construct knowledge which fully coincides with the fundamental idea of online learning. The respondents from GSU who have never used intranet before also mentioned the feature of socializing and chatting with classmates and lecturers as a valuable aspect of Intranet use. Thus it can be concluded that using Intranet as a medium of online socialization may be seen as an advantage for users. Most of the respondents have evaluated their computer and internet competencies being strong or medium. This finding suggests that adding new features to the Intranet in the case of WIUT will significantly enhance the adoption of Intranet at the university. As for national universities as in the case of Gulistan State University where students evaluated their IT and Internet literacy as medium adoption of intranet system may considerably improve quality of teaching and learning, make the adoption of intranet easy and effective. As Masrek, Abdul Karim, & Hussein [4] hypothesized that “user computer efficacy is positively related with effective intranet usage”. In addition most of the students who took part in the interview at Gulistan State University showed a great enthusiasm to be involved in the use of Intranet within the university in learning and teaching process. This also coincides with the hypothesis put forward by Masrek, Abdul Karim, & Hussein [4] which states that “user involvement is positively related with effective intranet usage”. 82% of WIUT students indicated that they use university intranet at least once a day which suggest high rates of user involvement in the Intranet use. Masrek, Abdul Karim, & Hussein [4] hypothesized that the more users are involved in the Intranet the more quality service is provided for users at an organization level.

6 CONCLUSION

The aim of the research was to investigate the extent to which Intranet has been used in two different educational settings and to find possible ways of enhancing the employing the Intranet for teaching and learning purposes. According to our findings the representatives of national universities does not employ intranet system for educational purposes. In contrast, WIUT heavily relies on the Intranet in managing staff as well as students’ teaching and learning. However, WIUT Intranet also has several aspects to improve in order to enhance its use in learning and teaching. The most commonly suggested improvement for the Intranet at WIUT may be the introduction of online communication, forum discussion and the availability of posting online activities by lecturers for students to do on given modules. Introducing these features would noticeably increase the use of Intranet not only for storing, downloading and uploading study materials, but also constructing and sharing knowledge among students. As for the national universities many attempts have been done to introduce online platform. Nevertheless, these platforms were and are mainly used for storing electronic versions of books, manuals, lecture texts, power point presentations and other resources. Moreover, most of the students are not aware of the existence of such platforms. Many national universities have not fully realized the enormous potential of online learning platforms and lagging behind in adopting these platforms in their contexts, which is negatively contributing to the enhancement of education quality. In future, teachers' views on online learning platforms and their potential use in the process of education need careful consideration. Research on factors that hinder the adoption of Intranet in national universities, their potential in improving the quality of education can be studied separately. Another concern is attracting more respondents to take part in the survey research in order to have reliable and consistent results with previous studies on the topic of Intranet use in education.

REFERENCES