

Title: Need to embrace online education

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NEED TO EMBRACE ONLINE EDUCATION

EMPLOYER RECOGNITION AND ACCREDITATION FOR E-LEARNING VITAL



OLIVER CLARKE/Gulf News

Healthy debate
From left: Francis Matthew, Gulf News Editor at Large; Dr Mansour Al Awar, Chancellor of Hamdan Bin Mohammad e-University; Prof Abdullah Al Shamsi, Vice-Chancellor of British University in Dubai; Suha Mardelli, Human Resources Director at Bayt.com; and Raj Kapoor, Director of the University of Phoenix, Dubai Service Centre, at the Dubai International Academic City Education Forum.

BY RANIA MOUSSLY
Staff Reporter

Dubai The higher education option of e-learning needs increased recognition and respect from employers and accrediting bodies to really take off in the UAE and the region, academics argued last week.

Speaking at the Dubai International Academic City (DIAC) Education Forum under the theme 'Does online education deliver?', a panel of academics and recruitment specialists debated the effectiveness of online education. They said public trust of online degrees will be gained through acceptance by employers and ministries, and is important if online education is to succeed in the Arab region.

"E-learning is not a second class citizen when compared to conventional education," said Dr Mansour Al Awar, Chancellor of Hamdan Bin Mohammad e-University. "E-learning is equal to conventional education I think and although that might not be apparent today, it will be in 20 years' time."

Dr Al Awar said the Hamdan Bin Mohammad e-University was the first e-learning institution to receive accreditation by the UAE's Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MOHESR); however, it had not been an easy journey.

"In 2006 the MOHESR didn't allow us to deliver a blended model of virtual and face-to-face education for the first two years of a student's study," said Dr Al Awar. "Instruction had to be face-to-face, but from next year the requirement has been reduced to one year, and so the acceptance is a gradual transition that will take time."

He added the transitional phase of acceptance is due to the educational culture of the Arab world and subsequent views of online education. He said the public's negative view of online degrees in the region may be due to a lack of regulatory standards and quality assurance of content as well as previous encounters with 'education cowboys'.

Influential factor
Employers were said to be an influential factor that hold sway on how e-learning is perceived in the region. Interestingly, Suha Mardelli, Human Resources Director at Bayt.com, said recent studies showed regional employers do not differentiate between an online or conventional degree at entry-level positions.

"It's as you escalate through the corporate hierarchy that the difference becomes more subtle," she said. "The requirements for managerial positions would probably be in favour of traditional graduates, simply because their education encompasses all the elements of institutional reputation and integrity of knowledge."

The panel agreed one of the biggest challenges facing online education in the UAE and the Arab region was it being accepted as a real education.

"There is a reluctance to accept it amongst certain demographics," said Raj Kapoor, Director of the University of Phoenix Dubai Service Centre.

"Ministry accreditation for online universities is vital in this region and if not that, then at least some sort of recognition from DIAC or the Knowledge and Human Development Authority."