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## **Perceived Communal Benefits, Conceivable Risks and Potential Implications: Opinion of e-Educators**

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### **Abstract**

*Modern revolution of information technologies has drastically changed the landscape of education around the globe. In the developed as well as developing countries, Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) are being exploited to achieve the goal of 'education for all'. In this regard, e-learning has been doing wonders for more than two decades. Though the West has explored it to a great extent, the South Asian region still needs to come up with new implications of e-learning in the social sector. Keeping in mind this context, the present study aims at exploring the social sector implications of e-learning in Pakistan. The study explores the communal benefits, conceivable risks and potential implications of e-learning in the social sector of Pakistan. The methodology adopted for this research was quantitative; a 4 point scale (Chronbach Alpha=0.76) was administered. The sample included e-educators (80) of one public sector university and one private sector university having at least five years of e-moderating experience. For analysis purpose, descriptive statistics and independent sample t-test was used. The results of the study revealed that e-learning was perceived to be a very important tool to develop social networks around the world. Digital divide, increase in cybercrimes, initiation of new type of ideological wars and racial and ethnic promotions were identified as conceivable risks by the respondents. The study, opens a discussion for social and educational planners to adopt e-learning as a medium to achieve social sector development goals.*

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### **Key words:**

e-Learning, Social Sector, e-Educators, Social Implications, Communal Benefits

## Introduction

E-learning is nowadays a buzzword in higher education institutes around the globe. A few consider it a fashion to talk about while others take it as an interactive tool to be implemented in learning practices. In the latter case, it is being used as an important innovation for learning (Nawaz & Kundi, 2010) and investigated about its potential for communal use through higher education as well (Tinio, 2002). E-learning is not restricted to the concept of education and learning, it has also extended towards non-educational domains such as political, cultural, social and economic (Sife et al., 2007).

The studies on the integration of educational technologies have developed a caveat that ICTs based tutoring is an important tool to intervene in the developing countries as per their contextual needs (Ezer, 2006; Baumeister, 2005; Stephenson, 2006; Hameed, 2007). However, the construct 'context' is important to identify and operationalize as it covers multivariate angles i.e. culture, development, community welfare and capacity building etc. But it is even more important to identify and correlate any context with ICTs based education (Nyvang, 2003). This correlation can either be positive or negative but the way e-learning is implemented will determine possible results. (Sasseville, 2004).

But at the same time potential implementation of e-learning in the developing countries has to address the challenges such as governance, infrastructure, economic and educational system problems themselves. In this regard, many developing countries are initiating human capital initiatives with a strategic framework so that social inclusion, girls' education, health issues and up-gradation of the education system can be improved and ensured. (Olson et al., 2011).

A number of fields/areas need to be explored such as e-commerce/business, women empowerment, health education, secondary and primary education, vocational training etc. For instance, efficiency and effectiveness of ICTs can be examined in economic activities like e-commerce i.e., an efficient market place. This mode of business strings up new and closer relationships between customers, firms and organizations (Coppel, 2000). Friedman (2005) in his book *The World is Flat*, argues that expansion of business and distribution of goods and services for anyone are the outcomes of interaction between people and it is the result of active involvement of ICTs in business sector. Interrelationship between education sector and industry is required in this regard. A caveat has been developed by social researchers that in the changing world scenario, the role of higher education is getting crucial in the context of social and economic development. Therefore, skill development along with employability should be the focus of education in future. There are several direct and indirect influences online universities can exert at community level as their scope can be extended to the economic development of a specific region (Lester, 2006), therefore, the role of ICTs based education in this regard should not be negligible.

Similarly, the potential role of ICTs based education/e-learning is remarkable in eliminating gender disparity as supported by Anand (2002) and Gurusurthy (2004). Nath (2001) reported that a large number of women having basic knowledge of information technology is employed in big organizations. It is supporting women all over the world by giving opportunities for employment. Moreover, many get opportunities to get home based employment such as data entry and software skills jobs.

ICT sector has been expanding steadily. It facilitates individuals into groups and develops socio-political and democratic growth to facilitate good governance (Mercer, 2004). For efficient public participation in the democratic process, ICTs provide new tools in the form of e-democracy and e-voting. Brinkerhoff (2005) stated that the ICTs enable the freedom of speech, individualism, and liberal values. Further, Ferdinand (2000) reported that ICTs provide a mechanism of world-wide democratization as they have legitimated the rapid democratization in many regions of the world.

Diffusion of ICTs in education sector consequently creates productivity gains, distinctiveness of jobs, business activities and professions. Due to ICTs revolution, structures of labor market and firms have also been changed. The instrumentality of ICTs can also be observed in the wide-reaching economic incorporation via electronic trade and business activities into the global market (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005; Pohjola, 2001; Norris, 2000; Keohane and Nye, 2000).

In education sector, especially in the developing countries, e-learning is a successful alternative tool to deliver education. These countries have limited access to resources to provide education to all and in such situations e-learning serves the purpose by providing alternative source of delivering/getting education without geographical boundaries. Students in these countries have been provided with the opportunity to access education at low cost and as per their ease with reference to time management (Naidu, 2003). In order to overcome the issue of social marginalization, the use of e-learning is an important strategic tool to work with pro-poor development strategies. E-learning modalities by recent use of ICTs have also increased the possibility of catering the issue of capacity building of marginalized groups in the developing countries (UNESCO, 2004). Purposefulness of education in e-learning systems is highlighted at various platforms, in this scenario in developing countries of Africa a project titled “Southern African Development Community -Open and Distance Learning & Higher education Project” suggested to improve capacity building in terms of research and inquiry and emphasized on enhancing decision making skills of students’ learning in e-learning institutes (Southern African Development Community, 2014).

E-learning proves to be a successful experience in the developing countries like Pakistan where this initiative was taken in the year 2002 by Virtual University of Pakistan and in a short span of time, the pioneer institute successfully crossed more than 10,000 enrollments and offered a variety of

programs in Computer Sciences, Management Sciences, Social Sciences, Biological Sciences, and Humanities. The success of these programs is evident as the majority graduates have successfully got employment and are working in renowned organizations (Din & Jabeen, 2014). But this is not enough in the context of the developing world. E-learning needs to explore new avenues and accept new challenges to find out the maximum benefits of ICTs.

In Pakistan, e-learning has successfully played a significant role to bring marginalized and under privileged people to the mainstream education and has been successful as a learning mode, but at the same time this successful ICTs based education has given rise to different challenges for e-educators (Jabeen, Din, & Sadiq, 2012). The most important among them is the social sector development in the developing countries like Pakistan. Though e-education has made access to higher education possible, its implication in other social sectors such as health, gender, disparity, social exclusion is still questionable. Keeping in mind the question of social sector implications of e-learning, this paper intends to quantify the e-educators perspective regarding ICTs and its social implications. The study aims at finding out the communal benefits, conceivable risks and potential implications of e-learning in the social sector of Pakistan. In this regard, both, public and private sector educators were approached.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The main objectives of the study are to:

- Find out the perceived communal benefits of e-learning in Pakistan
- Discover the conceivable risks that may lead towards adverse social implications of e-learning
- Explore the e-educators' perspective regarding potential implications of e-learning in Pakistan
- Determine the difference between the opinion of e-educators in public and private organizations regarding communal benefits, conceivable risks and potential implications of e-learning in Pakistan

### **Hypotheses**

- H<sub>1</sub>:** It was hypothesized that there would be significant mean difference in the opinion of e-educators in public and private sector organizations regarding perceived communal benefits of e-learning.
- H<sub>2</sub>:** It was hypothesized that there would be significant mean difference in the opinion of e-educators in public and private sector organizations regarding conceivable risks of e-learning.

**H<sub>3</sub>:** It was hypothesized that there would be significant mean difference in the opinions of e-educators in public and private sector organizations regarding potential implications of e-learning.

### **Scope of the Study**

This study is based on the opinion of e-educators working in public and private sector universities in Pakistan. E-educators of both types of organizations have been selected for the current research as they are well familiar and equipped with ICT skills and they better understand the scope of e-learning in changing world and the way it can be used for social sector development.

### **Method and Procedure**

The study is descriptive in nature. The methodology adopted for the current research is quantitative; A 4 point Likert scale (Chronbach Alpha= 0.76) was administered through web-survey to know the social implications of ICTs from e-educators perspective. Sample includes the e-educators (80) of one public sector university and one private sector university having at least five years of e-teaching experience. As the purpose of the current paper was to explore e-educators' perceptive regarding the social implications of ICTs so, those educators were approached who were involved in teaching the courses through online learning method. Questionnaires were shared with the faculty members through online link via e-mail and the response rate remained 62%. The tool for data collection was taken from Okoye (2012) study "Social Implications of ICT". A 4 point Likert scale (i.e. Strongly Agree 4, Agree 3, Disagree 2 and Strongly disagree 1.) was used to collect information. Chronbach Alpha of the scale was 0.76. In order to analyze the data, descriptive statistics were used and the researcher followed the criteria used in Okoye (2012) study in which mean value of 2.50 was considered as favorable and means scores less than 2.5 were considered as unfavorable. Descriptive statistics and independent sample t-test were used to find out the difference between the opinions of e-educators in the public and private sector organizations.

### **Results**

Data was obtained from 80 e-educators: 40 working in public sector organization and 40 in private sector organization. Out of the total 80 respondents, 33 were male and 47 were females. The age range of respondents was 24-50 and means age was 30 years. Table 1 explains the perception of e-educators teaching in public and private sector regarding the perceived communal benefits, reported conceivable risks and social implications of e-learning in Pakistan.

**Table 1:**  
***Descriptive Statistics***

Indicators	Mean Values
<b>Perceived Communal Benefits of e-Learning</b>	
Quest for recent information	3.26
Foster inquisitiveness	3.11
Search engine for employment	3.28
Facilitates the communication process	2.73
Essential for research purposes	3.46
Foster creativity among youth	3.23
<b>Conceivable Risks of e-Learning</b>	
Supportive tool of cultural neo-colonialism	3.03
Created the digital divide	3.58
Open up the new ways for breakdown of law and order	2.68
Ideological war between nations	2.88
Promotes racism and ethnicity	1.55
Mass unemployment in developing countries	1.53
<b>Potential Social Implications of e-Learning</b>	
Expand existing social networks	3.41
Promote social exclusion	2.64
Promote social justice	2.04
Poverty alleviation	2.26
Facilitate women empowerment	3.30
Employment in developed countries	3.19
Social development in developing countries	2.98
Cultural pollution	3.14
Foster social inclusion	2.55
Reduce illiteracy	2.94
Motivational tool to reduce gender disparity	2.69
Facilitate social transformation	3.09

Total six dimensions regarding perceived communal benefits were asked to rate on Likert scale by e-educators. Responses of the teachers narrate the highly favorable results on the variables of ‘quest for the latest information’, ‘search engine for employment’, ‘essential use of e-learning for research purpose’ and ‘inquisitiveness among youth’. Only in one dimension that relates to the improvement

in communication process, responses give little unfavorable result whereas on the rest of the dimensions more than 3 mean value shows good response from the respondents.

Results of the respondents for both types of organizations regarding conceivable risks of the use of e-learning in Pakistan show that e-educators perceive ICTs based education as potential risk as a new type of colonization, digital division in the developing world, opening of debate on cultural war and an anticipated tool to facilitate cybercrimes. E-learning as an instrument of mass unemployment and increasing race and ethnicity was not favored by the respondents indicating means value of  $M=1.55$ ,  $M=1.53$  respectively.

Data also shows a mixed result regarding social implications of e-learning. The major areas where potential social implication is identified are the expansion of social networks ( $M=3.41$ ), women empowerment ( $M=3.30$ ), employment provision ( $M=3.19$ ), and social transformation (3.09). And the areas in which e-educators perceive e-learning less suitable for social sector development are social justice ( $M=2.04$ ) and poverty alleviation ( $M=2.26$ ).

### Hypotheses Testing

Three hypotheses were tested by using Independent Sample *t*-test, the type of organization was taken as independent variable and perceived communal benefits, reported conceivable risks and social implications of e-learning was taken as dependent variables. Table 2 shows that there is a significant difference between the opinion of public and private institutes e-educators regarding perceived communal benefits of e-learning. It indicates that e-educators in public educational institutes are significantly different from private educational institutes' educators in their opinion towards e-learning and its perceived public welfare.

**Table 2:**

#### *Independent Sample t-test*

Variables	Organization	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Sig</i>
Communal Benefits	Public	17.93	2.34	-2.900	.005
	Private	19.60	2.79		
Conceivable Risks	Public	15.73	2.14	1.106	.272
	Private	15.23	1.88		
Potential Implications	Public	37.13	3.34	-.994	.323
	Private	37.85	3.17		

$p < 0.05$

The second hypothesis was tested by using Independent Sample *t*-test, and results showed that there is not a significant difference between both types of organizations which was clearly visible in the mean scores as well. The third hypothesis was also tested and Table 2 shows that there is not a

significant difference between the opinion of public and private institutes' e-educators regarding potential implications of e-learning in Pakistan. It indicates that teachers in both types of institutes anticipate the same areas of e-learning useful for social sector implications such as women empowerment, employment provision, social transformation etc.

### **Discussion**

With rapidly changing educational scenario, the role of e-learning is getting dynamic. It has now been associated with various dimensions ranging from students learning to employability and capacity building to community and socio-economic development. Such versatility is derived and ascertained through many types of indigenous experiments held by different institutes in different regions and countries. Approaches towards the use of e-learning vary as per the context of each country. In each and every situation, role, barriers, opportunities and challenges faced by e-learning are discussed by various researchers with different domains. This study also documents a new dimension of e-learning i.e. social sector implications that are considered as a challenge too.

As this study was conducted to find out the communal benefits, conceivable risks and potential implications of e-learning, the results show that e-learning is considered an explorative tool in the entire sector. It is also associated with the fast growing communication process that has broken the barrier of access and every type of information is now at door step of the learners. In the realm of globalization, it provides a proper way to inquisitiveness. Further, its role can be seen with reference to extended e-communities and social networks which ultimately expand the social capital of friends and social grids.

Moreover, this study explores that e-learning has also been perceived beneficial in order to search employment opportunities, information sharing, business development, women empowerment and poverty alleviation by including a large group of marginalized people in the mainstream economy. The most distinct function identified by the respondents regarding favorable social implications of e-learning is facilitation in research process. Research is an inevitable part of all social sectors development. ICTs through education has facilitated this process in many ways such as exploration of information, social statistics, demographic and geographical data as well as cultural variations.

Though, most of the uses of e-learning are perceived productive, there are certain areas which restrict its use and potential implications that lead to certain risks as well. The respondents of this study were concerned about e-learning's potential of neo-colonialism. Nevertheless, that e-learning has overcome the issue of geographic boundaries but at the same time it has created risks for individuality and cultural identity of the consumers. The respondents also report that they conceive digital divide another risk associated with e-learning.



With reference to the potential implications of e-learning, the areas which are observed as positive enhancement in literacy are social transformation of knowledge and skills, catering the issue of mass unemployment and social inclusion of individuals in all the sectors. A few areas are found less effective to bring social reforms and in this regard respondents identified poverty, social justice and social development unattainable.

An important objective of the study was to see whether there existed any difference in the opinion of public and private sector employees regarding e-learning usability, risks and potential implications. Independent sample t-test was carried out to measure the results and it was found that the respondents in two different groups see benefits and implications in the same manner. The only difference (of moderate level) was found with reference to research and innovation. One of the reasons could be that in public sector sometimes institutional policies restricted the scope of innovation as compared to the private sector organizations where innovative experiments were usually encouraged and supported by the leadership.

### **Conclusion**

As the concept of e-learning is changing because of the access to employability and development in the developing countries so its potential implications in multiple sectors other than education are also anticipated (Heeks, 2002; Rajesh, 2003). In the developing countries like Pakistan, its prospective usability is important to measure since the poor socio-economic indicators indicate the dire need to intrude some innovative method to introduce for the community development as well as social welfare. The perceived benefits have large scale implications for social and economic development of the country. It can also be concluded that in future e-learning can serve to tap those areas as well which appear impossible at the moment as identified in results.

### **Study Implications**

This study, by focusing on the social sector implications of e-learning in all fields of life in the developing countries like Pakistan, opens a discussion for social and educational planners to adopt e-learning as a medium to achieve social sector development. Further, it has initiated a debate to find out the possible solution for the dark side of ICTs. Perceived positive social implications as explored by this study have further supported the fact that e-learning is the possible solution to redress the plight of the developing world. In this regard, it is suggested that it must be used for the service of humanity in general.

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